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TUESDAY JUNE 11, 2013

## Q+A: Golden Gate composer Conrad Cummings

By [Molly Vorwerck](#) May 30, 2013

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The Golden Gate, a new opera based on the 1986 lyric novel of the same name by critically acclaimed poet Vikram Seth, came to Stanford on May 30 during a [multimedia presentation](#) at the Bing Concert Hall Studio that showcased the work. The piece, an opera in two acts inspired by sonnets Seth wrote while a graduate student at Stanford, is set to the music of composer Conrad Cummings, and is considered by some to be [one of the greatest operas of the 21<sup>st</sup> century](#). Cummings, whose ties to the Bay Area extend beyond Golden Gate, sat down with The Daily to discuss his collaboration with Seth, the innovative style of his composition and the opera's "natural" home on the Farm.

**The Stanford Daily (TSD): You have an extensive background in classical music, in addition to being a professional composer and a professor at the Julliard School. What have been some key experiences and influences that led you to devote your life to music?**

Conrad Cummings (CC): I grew up in San Francisco and my stepfather was a dancer and a choreographer, so I heard an awful lot of contemporary music and kind of got used to the life of a working artist so it didn't seem so foreign to me, [and as a kid,] I played the piano really seriously. But it really wasn't until I finished college that it dawned on me that I had been studying everything I needed to study to be a composer — it was really what I wanted to do.

There was a tree on Yale Campus on a street halfway between the music building and my dorm — it's called Residential College Route. I walked by it three or four times a day, every day for four years. During my final year, I looked up at it and I had this little revelation — wait a minute: I'm a composer, aren't I? That's...how it kind of came to me. And then I continued to study it seriously.

It matters a lot to have a formative teacher. The person I had for Freshman Harmony at Yale ended up being a really formative teacher for the next seven years [of my life]. It's very important to have someone doing the thing you're doing and...is willing to share all his feelings about it, not just the skills and experiences but [also] some of the emotional side of it. I remember asking him once, 'how do you know whether something you've written is any good?' And he said — he's Turkish and he had a funny accent — 'your compositions are your children, you must love them even when they're ugly.' That [comment] left a big impression on me.

**TSD: Do you think that your heritage in the Bay Area has influenced your compositions at all?**

CC: I'm sure it has. It was so strange to go East for college [after] never having been east of Denver before I went to Yale for my first day of freshman year.

[In terms of musical influence], the east coast looks to Europe an awful lot, but I heard a lot of Asian and Pacific Rim music just in the course of growing up in San Francisco...There's kind of a California maverick tradition — a kind of freedom. Maybe this was just completely naïve of me, but even traditional

ethnic divisions just didn't seem to play seemed to play that much in my junior high or high school [experiences], and everything kind of seemed to mush together. If there was a Jewish neighborhood or an Italian neighborhood or a German neighborhood, I wasn't really aware of it — there was a kind of sense of cultural freedom.

**TSD: Describe your first encounter with Vikram Seth's Golden Gate sonnets. When did you first read them and what was your initial response?**

CC: Someone had alerted me that I should keep my eyes open for the book because they had seen the manuscript, and I read a review in the Times and said "woah, this must be what they're talking about," and so I ran to a bookstore and got it. It was kind of uncanny, I just kind of opened it to the first page and started reading. I got to the end of the first stanza and I was just kind of giggling with delight at just how much I loved it, and I took it home and I read the whole thing almost in one sitting. And the way it just drew me along, that each stanza seemed to plunge into the next and the play [fluctuated] between really funny and really serious and how it seems like it's so lighthearted but then you realize it's taking you to some really devastatingly sad place and you don't know how you got there...that was my experience of it.

**TSD: What do you think differentiates his writing from that of other writers from that time period?**

CC: That's an interesting question because if you take all of his work — his work in prose as well — you get a kind of picture, but the bottom line is, who else do we know who has written a whole entire novel in verse? I don't think anyone has done that in a hundred years. So for me, that immediately [is] what makes it its own thing. The way that the music, the sounds of the language, is so intrinsically a part of its meaning. And I am such a sucker for rhyme and rhythm. I just love it. I love the thing that happens in my brain when two completely disconnected ideas on one side of my brain are linked [with] the other side of the brain because the words sound alike. I love that play between the musical side of my brain — which is catching all the rhythm and all the sonic patterning — and the abstract side which is seeing how the meanings...unfold, in this rich, rich counterpoint with this world of sound, and that is all just in the words.

**TSD: When you initially read these sonnets, was your first response to write an opera or did this idea develop over the years? How did the idea to compose something based on these sonnets come about?**

CC: The desire was there from the beginning. I absolutely couldn't figure out how I could make an opera out of it, but I did take portions of it and made them into vocal duets. Vikram Seth liked them a lot and based on that was very open when I finally figured out how to do an opera with it.

There's a theater piece that an experimental theater company developed in New York City that I saw in 1999. When I found out they were doing a full-length version in 2004 [or] 2005, I ran to it. The theater company is called Elevator Repair Service and the piece that they do is called Gatz. And what it is is a verbatim reading of the entire Great Gatsby. It takes seven and a half hours — you start at about 4, take a dinner break around 6:30 or 7 and then you're done around 10 or 10:30. It's set in a grungy office and a guy comes in and he can't make his computer start, and he picks up a tattered copy of The Great Gatsby and just starts reading it aloud. And bit by bit, other people who work in the office straggle in. And in a way that you absolutely can't tell that it's happening, they take on all the roles of the characters. However, every single he said she said are all there, so you have characters who are speaking dialogue but [who] are also narrating themselves or narrating someone else or describing what they're seeing. And it works so seamlessly that I was like "AHA! I can do this with the Golden Gate."

They were certainly the inspiration. They've since toured all over the world with this production and it received like every award it could possibly receive in New York and it's played Seattle and San Francisco and LA in the last couple of years. I really have them to thank, because in order to maintain that beauty, that gorgeous interplay between the meaning of the words and their sound, I couldn't just strip dialogue out of the novel and have people singling. I needed to have everything. So what you have is five characters and it's them talking, but often enough they'll narrate their own emotion in the third person or they'll be describing what another character is doing while he's doing it, or they'll be describing what another character is thinking.

This for me just turned out to be a marvelous challenge, because once you accept that these characters move out of these roles, how do you make it all cohere? There were two scenes that were really in favor

of it. One is a group of five people in their early to mid twenties. Their lives are all intricately interrelated. Everyone has multiple connections, so it just makes sense that they would all be tied up in each other's lives, you know in the same way that sometimes you're sitting down with a friend and you're talking about a third person in common — "can you believe what he did last night?" Any time a character in the opera is describing someone else, it has to matter in some way to the character doing the describing. It has to be emotionally loaded for the person describing it. So one person can be looking at another and describing how they're walking across the room, and what you realize in the way that the person is describing the other person is that the person talking is still in love with them.

**TSD: How exactly do you make the music compliment the verse, and vice versa?**

CC: Well I guess I have to say that's something people should come to the show to find out! That's the entire thrust of the show we're putting on. Because we have three Stegner fellows and two Stanford students reading excerpts from the novel and the text will be displayed on the screen behind them and you can read it along with them at the same time silently, juxtaposed with parallel scenes from the opera with me just kind of charting a path. How does one thing become the other? What decision did I make in this spot to make it work here? What did I have to do differently in this other spot? That's kind of the idea. Yeah, it was an incredibly fascinating and rich process.

**TSD: When did the project take off?**

CC: [The] book was published in 1986. That year, I wrote some vocal music using fragments out of it which was commissioned by [the] San Francisco Opera Center and [which] was presented — it was a very nice, successful experience. But it really wasn't until 2005...after I had seen the Elevator Repair Service Gatz that I really could make an opera out of this novel. And it had been an idea sort of sitting in the back of my mind like a puzzle, like a math problem that I couldn't quite find the answer to. It was an amazing experience when I finally said "wait a minute! That's the way to do it." And then I've been barreling away since then.

[There's been] very very wonderful support from several different organizations that have funded and supported workshops. You know, it's been a luxurious process because I've had a chance to try out every portion of it multiple times — Revision after revision after actually hearing people sing it and play it and sometimes seeing portions of it staged. I've had an incredible bunch of advisors, a brain trust.

**TSD: How closely did you work with Seth when you were composing the music for the opera?**

**Were you guys constantly on the phone? Did you guys work together or was it like he did his thing and you did yours?**

CC: The most important thing that Vikram gave me was freedom. He liked what I did with Golden Gate enough to give me a final unpublished poem that he hadn't put in his collection and said "use it, I think you can make a beautiful song out of it." So he had a lot of confidence [in me] early on. Our agreement is that I can extract and arrange the text of the novel The Golden Gate in order to create a libretto. So, basically each time I had finished a draft I would show it to him. He would have very very helpful comments on it and usually the comments were "this thing could be different, that thing could be different, I'm not sure I agree with you about that but it's great — keep going."

And then we had some really interesting back and forths about dealing with the end of the opera. I did a first version that he had some really good, dramatic reasons for objecting to and I saw his point, and then we typed in another version and another version and another version...until I was able to arrive at quite a different way to end the opera than the novel ends and we worked on it back and forth enough that Vikram was able to say, "yeah, that's exactly the right way to do it."

**TSD: Why perform Golden Gate on Stanford's campus, of all universities? Who chose the Farm?**

CC: Like they say, it feels like the piece is coming home. Vikram wrote it while he was a student at Stanford, and so a significant amount of action in the actual novel takes place on Stanford's campus and in the area around the campus. If [the opera is] going to be done anywhere, it should be done there.

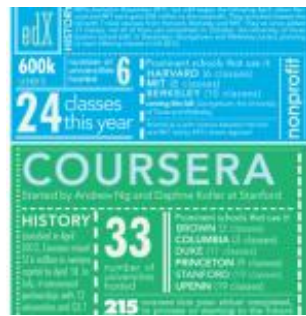
And Shelley Fisher Fishkin [professor of English and American Studies] has been a wonderful advocate for the piece for a long time. She saw a workshop that we did in New York and she said “Conrad, this would be a fun thing to do.” I was like “Yeah, oh yeah, absolutely.” And we’ve known each other forever — we were in college together — so the chance to work with her has been wonderful. She has been moving mountains like you wouldn’t believe.

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