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Light in the Darkness

Baritone Joshua Hopkins collaborated with composer Jake Heggie and author Margaret Atwood on a tribute to his sister.

By Eloise Giegerich



Joshua Hopkins at the filming of *Songs for Murdered Sisters* at Oakland's 16th Street Station

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ON SEPTEMBER 22, 2015, Canadian baritone Joshua Hopkins was on his way to a rehearsal at Ottawa's National Arts Centre when he received a devastating call: his sister, Nathalie, had been murdered in her home in Canada's Renfrew County in a rampage by her ex-boyfriend, Basil Borutski. The murders of Nathalie and two other women are among the worst cases of domestic violence in Canadian history.

This tragedy inspired Hopkins to act—to honor Nathalie and the two others whose lives had been senselessly cut short, and to honor all women—“sisters”—who have suffered as a result of pervasive and often unnamed domestic abuse. With the support of Daphne Burt, manager of artistic planning at the National Arts Centre Orchestra, and Patrick Summers, artistic and music director of Houston Grand Opera, Hopkins spent five years conceiving and developing *Songs for Murdered Sisters*, a song cycle co-commissioned by the two companies, with new music by Jake Heggie and original poems by Margaret Atwood. The work will have its virtual world premiere on Houston's digital channel on February 19, and the cycle will be released on Pentatone on March 5.

When I spoke with Hopkins in November, he had just returned from a series of intense recording sessions. The first was held over the course of a week at George Lucas's Skywalker Ranch in California's Marin County; the second, in the Bay Area, included a fifteen-hour-day film shoot at Oakland's Sixteenth Street Train Station. When Hopkins and Heggie recorded the audio, in an intimate recording space at the ranch, Hopkins was singing to happy images of Nathalie, projected on a screen across from him.

“In terms of the way projects come together, it feels like everything—the forces of fate and the forces of knowing that this project was just the right thing happening at the right time—continued to infuse this energy, this forward-moving energy,” says Hopkins. “It's hard to describe, but you know something's working when it seems like everything's kind of falling into place very naturally.”

Having already established a close relationship with NACO, Hopkins, with the help of his wife, mezzo Zoe Tarshis, presented the initial idea to Burt, who offered the Centre's resources. When Hopkins returned to Houston, where he was living at the time, he received condolences from Summers and then HGO's enthusiastic support. While working on Heggie's *It's a Wonderful Life* in Houston, in 2016, Hopkins approached the composer. “Jake encouraged me to think big in terms of a writing partner,” he says. “And it was important to us, number one, to have a female voice. And we really wanted to have a Canadian female voice, since the co-commissioners were on [the other side] of the border.” Then came a serendipitous encounter: at the Canadian Opera Company opening of *Die Zauberflöte*, in which Hopkins was singing Papageno, Zoe spotted Margaret Atwood, a regular operagoer, in the audience. “It was a very clear connection.... In terms of writing this type of subject matter, Margaret was just a clear, clear choice,” says Hopkins. “We didn't even approach anyone else.”



Composer Jake Heggie with Hopkins at the Skywalker Ranch
© Zoe Tarshis

Songs for Murdered Sisters is the first project in which Hopkins has been part of the nitty-gritty back end, and he hopes to take on another project, from conception to fruition, in the future. While working, Hopkins has found himself increasingly interested in the technical process, as well as in his role as a social activist. He has met with social worker Deborah Sinclair, who specializes in working with women who are victims of intimate-partner violence, and Joanne Brooks, head of the Renfrew County Women's Sexual Assault Centre in Pembroke, where Hopkins grew up. He has also done research into the White Ribbon Campaign, a global network that works with boys and men to end violence against girls and women. "I was hesitant to speak out [following the murder], but since then, and since the development of this project, I feel much more strongly now about becoming an ally and educating and immersing myself in what I can do in society to really support the cause and hopefully change the minds of men who have been raised a certain way and have certain ideas about how to treat women. I think I've surprised myself." In a follow-up conversation, Hopkins reemphasizes his commitment. "It is time for men to take the responsibility to speak out about gender-based violence," he says. "I encourage everyone reading, especially men and boys, to look up the White Ribbon Campaign and take the pledge, as I have, to never commit, condone or stay silent about violence against women."



Hopkins at Oakland's 16th Street Station
© Zoe Tarshis

Asked how music and social activism can overlap and be a healing force, Hopkins is quick to respond. “There isn’t a person on the planet that doesn’t appreciate and feel deeply the emotional power and connection that music can have,” he says. “I think music has the power to reach people who, if they were just hearing words spoken, or reading a story, might not feel the same type of impact.” Referring to the beautiful interweaving of images in Atwood’s poems, Hopkins describes how the song cycle might reflect the listener’s own cycles of grief and understanding. “There’s an arc to the cycle itself that she created, and a healing journey,” he says. “In the beginning of the cycle, one of the images that Margaret [uses] is that my sister is no longer here, she is an empty chair. But then at the end of the cycle, I’ve gone through such an incredibly deep emotional pathway. Once I’ve gone through that journey, which gets very dark, the imagery is, you know, I was wrong. You are not an empty chair. You are here with me. Your soul and your spirit remain.”

At the end of our conversation, I return to this idea and ask whether or not we can find joy in that spirit—whether in the cycle there can be a celebration of Nathalie’s life, and of the lives of other women. We sit in silence as Hopkins carefully parses his thoughts. “To me it seems as though every time my mourning, or my grieving, is finding a very heavy emotional

response to something, the poetry—and the way that I see my sister in the cycle—is being guided back to reason,” he says, “to a certain amount of peace—finding peace within the huge emotional reactions I have to the tragedy itself, finding a balance with the anger and hatred and rage that I have towards the man that killed her, and killed them, and bringing my emotional compass back to center. And in many ways feeling guided by that emotional compass through the darkness and into the light.

“If anything,” he adds, “it’s like my hand is being held, through this dark path of emotion that I take, by my sister, and by the thousands of sisters that we’ve lost, and recognizing that it’s not that they’re no longer here with us—of course they are no longer physically here—but spiritually, in our memories, in their energy, those victims are still with us. We remember them. And they are the lights that guide us through this dark path.” ■