

# MUSICAL Opinion

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## Tarik O'Regan

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# Tarik O'Regan

## Ömer Egecioğlu

Santa Barbara, CA, USA – omer@cs.ucsb.edu

The British American composer talks about his personal musical journey, his current projects and his opera *The Phoenix*

Tarik O'Regan's music incorporates a number of stylistic influences ranging from Renaissance music to rock, minimalism to North African rhythms. He has been named the composer in residence of the early-music ensemble Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra and Chorale of San Francisco.

After the successful premiere of his opera *The Phoenix* by the Houston Grand Opera in 2019, he is now undertaking a Saxophone concerto and an Oud concerto, commissioned by the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra.

**Ömer Egecioğlu: Do you at present live in San Francisco?**

**Tarik O'Regan:** Yes. I used to live in New York, from 2004 to 2017. And then we moved to a small country in Africa called Eswatini, though when we moved there it was called Swaziland. It is the place where my wife grew up and where my son was born in 2017. We ended up moving here to take up jobs at Stanford. By that time the country had changed its name to Eswatini. I have been in the United States for quite a long time, but in San Francisco only since 2019.

**ÖE: Are you a British citizen or an American citizen?**

**TO'R:** I was born in London, and my ethnic background is mixed. I have British nationality and also I am a naturalised American citizen.

**ÖE: Please tell us about the process of the creation of *The Phoenix*.**

**TO'R:** I have always been interested in Da Ponte, ever since realising that he came to America and spent most of his life here. I guess it is because he lived so long and he lived in the USA in a very interesting time, the time of mass expansion in terms of the union of the country. I used to do a lot of radio broadcasts with the BBC and I made a couple of documentaries about the emigres to the USA, one about New York and one about Los Angeles. As part of the discussion on emigres to the East Coast, looking at people like Bartók and short term visitors such as Britten, Rachmaninov and Mahler, I also considered Da Ponte. I visited his grave in the Calvary cemetery in Queens in New York. It felt weirdly operatic being out there thinking about his life in connection to the operatic world in general. That's when I really began



Photo: Peter Greig

thinking about an opera about him. That must have been around 2008. Then I met John Caird the librettist, who really came up with a vehicle to turn the biography of Da Ponte into an opera, which was this idea of an opera within an opera. Then Houston Grand Opera approached me about various ideas that I had and they had. I just remember mentioning this idea about Da Ponte, they got very excited and ran with it. That's how the opera came into being.

**ÖE: What kind of documentaries did you do for the BBC?**

**TO'R:** I did radio documentaries for BBC Radio 4. One was called "Composing New York" and the other "Composing Los Angeles". They were really focused on the European composers like Max Steiner and Erich Wolfgang Korngold who worked in the film industry and also Stravinsky and Schönberg who lived in Los Angeles. The documentaries considered the body of musical work created in these cities.

**ÖE: Is the libretto of *The Phoenix* in Italian?**

**TO'R:** It is in many languages. Some of it is in Italian, some in English. These are the two main languages but occasionally it goes into German or Latin. In the opera Da Ponte talks to the opera singers that he invites to New York sometimes in English, sometimes in Italian. The fictional aspect of it is that he is staging an opera about himself, and the person he picks to star in his own opera is his son, to play him when he is young. To play him when he is old, he chooses himself. When he converses with his son in the opera, it is



Photo: Frances Marshall



The Phoenix, Houston Grand Opera, 2019: Lorenzo Da Ponte arrives in Philadelphia

in Italian. By the time we see him America, he is of course conversing in English.

**ÖE:** Can you tell us about the musical language you decided to use?

**TO'R:** The musical language of the opera is broadly tonal. With a few exceptions, it is not really based on his work with Mozart. There is a couple of influences, but not much. I think what happens is that there is a definitive textual feel to the opera which is somehow magical because what we see in the first half of the opera is that we are in a 1830s New York opera watching Da Ponte put on an opera based on his own life. So we see him show scenes from his youth, we see him show scenes from Ceneda where he was born, from Venice, and from Vienna. We also see the discussions between him and his singers and his family. This allows us to see the presented truth and then the actual truth side-by-side. So you can see a scene playing on the stage meanwhile he is commenting that it wasn't quite like that.

**ÖE:** How are the two acts of the opera structured?

**TO'R:** The end of Act 1 is his leaving for America. It ends with him getting on a boat. In Act 2, you are no longer within an opera within an opera. You are really observing his life in America. So there are two very distinct sound worlds and orchestrations. In Act 1, very tight, clean orchestration, with a magical sense to the music. In Act 2 it is a much richer orchestration as we are now really inside

his head. It is in Act 2 that Da Ponte plays Da Ponte.

**ÖE:** Are you mainly interested in vocal writing? Can you tell us about your musical beginnings?

**TO'R:** Originally, I started music at Oxford and I did my post graduate work in Cambridge. We are talking about 1996 to 1999 for my undergraduate work and then 1999 to 2000 for my Masters, which was all you could do back then in composition. I suspect its changed now. But by far the strongest performing groups in the university were the choirs that were really part of the foundation of these various colleges. They go back to the founding of the college, perhaps eight hundred years ago. This is all to say that the best practical music making there really was vocal and choral. That's when I began to write music seriously and I learned pretty quickly that – the irony of the way that our world, the world of composition works is that normally, as you progress through your career, you are rewarded with better and better performances of your work. So as you develop a career, finally a professional symphony orchestra may perform your work. But actually, it should be the reverse because when you start, you do not have a very good ear necessarily, and it is very hard if you have a bad performance of your work to know whose fault it is. If the performance is bad, and if you are just beginning, you know it does not sound right, but it's very hard to tell – are they performing it exactly as I have written, therefore it does not sound good because

I am not writing precisely what I want to hear, or are they just not performing it correctly? So after a few not so great instrumental performances, I realised that if I write for the choirs, who were amazing professionals, I could always get a first rate performance from day one. I learned so much writing choir music this way. In a sense it was a wonderful composition lesson to have very good performers performing exactly what you have written. This is the reason why I started with choral music.

**ÖE:** Who were you influenced by from the Renaissance or earlier?

**TO'R:** Certainly, in that sort of Oxbridge choral scene, there is always a very strong English Tudor tradition, perhaps earlier. There is a strong influence of Byrd and Tallis. I think one of the interesting things about those chapels in the college is that their entire history is the commissioning of music. So the music of the 16th and the 17th century was commissioned in the same way for these organisations as they are commissioning composers today. It was always contemporary music, say Judith Weir or James MacMillan or Herbert Howells or the Victorian composers. Increasingly that was a time when everyone was interested in Baltic composers, suddenly there was a lot of Arvo Pärt. Also there was always a lot of new music around, much more than the average symphony concert. Choral music world works very rapidly, it works by word of mouth, so very quickly I had a lot of commissions. Then slowly I expanded from that and wrote chamber music and music for symphony orchestras, followed by a chamber opera. The next big project after that was a ballet for the Dutch National Ballet. Probably before *The Phoenix*, those are the two large scale projects I worked on.

**ÖE:** Are you still writing liturgical music by commission?

**TO'R:** Yes I am. I only work for commissions. Right now I am writing a saxophone concerto and a concerto for the Oud.

**ÖE:** I want to ask you about your teachers and the composers who influenced you. Who were the people who inspired and helped you the most?

**TO'R:** In terms of actual instruction, I was very lucky to have a series of good teachers, beginning with Jeremy Dale Roberts, who really taught me privately. He was a professor of composition at the Royal College of Music. He taught me also during my undergraduate years. Then I studied with Robin Holloway. Then there are composers who believed in me and gave me an opportunity at a young age, composers like Jonathan Dove. Probably his most popular work is the opera *Flight*, I don't know if you have ever seen that.

**ÖE:** Unfortunately I have not had the chance.

**TO'R:** Also people like John Rutter, who really helped me by acting as a record producer for my early album called *Voices*. And then I learned a lot from conductors, like Paul Hellier, with whom I had a very long working relationship. These are the people I met in my life. I was lucky enough to write a piece for the counter-tenor James Bowman when I was very young. It just sort of opened my eyes to what you could do with the voice and what it meant to write music for the voice.

**ÖE:** What were some other influences?

**TO'R:** There is the personal connection to all these other composers. Then there were people who were not really in my orbit but whose work I sort of admired and could see were doing interesting things. People a little bit older than me like Thomas Adès. I always liked Judith Weir and Kaija Saariaho. Even from Harrison Birtwistle I learned a lot, how he handled drama and pacing in his work. These are composers whose music is different from mine but I could learn a lot by looking at their scores. There was also Oliver Nelson. It is very hard to escape the influence of people like John Adams and Steve Reich and Philip Glass. I remember feeling very connected with earlier American composers such as Samuel Barber and Aaron Copland. People who were trying to define a sound, I suppose. Treading this path of an individual sound and also a national one. I would think about Bartók and Kodály and the concepts of national identity and how that relates to music.

**ÖE:** How about earlier composers?

**TO'R:** I was always fascinated by Renaissance composers. For instance the Flemish composer Gombert.



Photo: Lynn Lane

*The Phoenix, Houston Grand Opera, 2019: Young Lorenzo Da Ponte in Vienna*

**ÖE:** I wanted to ask you about your childhood and how you got interested in music.

**TO'R:** I am an only child. My family is quite varied, in many different ways. My mother's family is Algerian. She was born in Morocco, however, and she spent her life between Morocco and Algeria and then ended up coming to work in the UK. in the 60s and met my dad in the 70's in London. The result of that was that to this day a huge part of my family is in North Africa. A long period of my life, up until the age of 15 was spent in Rabat in Morocco or in Algiers in Algeria with my family. My mother, coming from that part of the world – she was a translator and interpreter – for her, the exotic music was British rock music, not North African music. For her it was the Who, the Stones, Led Zeppelin. These are the records she collected. In the way that one discovers one's parents' record collection – through her I discovered a lot of this rock music – really quite heavy rock music that I still love. But it was the music she had acquired as the exotic; the "other" to her was Jimmy Page or whatever. It was actually only through going to visit my family that I really began to hear more of Moroccan and Algerian folk music. I loved the long car journeys with the radio playing all this music – lots of Raï music, Chaabi music – back then, 80's and early 90s, wherever you went, there were always these tiny music stores selling cassette tapes. People listened in cars or at home. So I remember thousand and

thousands of cassettes from the floor to the ceiling. I remember discovering that I liked hearing the oud for example, going to one of these shops and asking silly questions like 'Do you have any oud music?'

**ÖE:** How about your father's side of the family?

**TO'R:** My father was born in Sri Lanka when it was Ceylon. He grew up all over the place – Ceylon, Jamaica, Uganda – because his father was a diplomat at the tail end of the British empire. I always had this very strange dynamic in my house because both my parents had very complicated relationships with their colonial backgrounds. Certainly my mother had a very complicated relationship being born under French occupation, and she has to this day, I would say. As you know it is not possible to oversimplify the association between North Africans and France. It is very complicated. Also my grandfather, my father's father, was a big believer in ending the empire and his job was to oversee transitions to independence in various countries. But my great grandfather, my grandmother's father, was a true colonial administrator, he was the governor of Hong Kong and the governor of Ceylon. My grandfather's first job was in Ceylon in the 1930s, and he was sent there to oversee the transition of power, which was delayed because of the Second World War. He fell in love with the daughter of the governor, who became my grandmother. So both have these complicated relationships with colonial



*Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra & Chorus, 2020*

legacies. That was always in my house.

**ÖE:** Was your father musical?

**TO'R:** My dad listened to a lot of jazz. Again, I discovered a lot of jazz music through my dad's record collection. But neither of them was, I would say, outwardly musical in that they were not practicing musicians. They did not sing in choirs. As I got older, I realized that they are inherently musical in that I've noticed when they sing songs, they are remarkably accurate. They are certainly lovers of a great variety of music. I started music as a drummer in my band at school. From that I got into orchestral percussion, and started quite late, probably 12 or 13, to get into music seriously. I started going to the Royal School of Music, the junior department, which is a Saturday school. I felt very lucky that my parents were not outwardly and explicitly musical, because what I remember is going up to the Royal College of Music in South Kensington on Saturdays, and seeing these other 12-13 year olds with extremely pushy parents. I witnessed the anxiety and the stress that these kids were suffering. I really didn't have any of that.

**ÖE:** You have had a very colourful and multi cultural upbringing. How much of this is in your music?

**TO'R:** I started exploring both heritages somewhat late. From the name O'Regan, the background is Irish, really from my grandfather's father, who was the last proper Irish generation in my family. But relatively late in my compositional life I began exploring, particularly in orchestral music, both the North African side and the Irish side. Little by little. Sometimes it is very subtle things. I often will use darboukas or dumbeks in the orchestra. I use these in *The Phoenix* because I like the sound. Also definitely certain rhythmic aspects. On the Irish side, I began working with choruses to look at medieval Irish language and narratives. Not speaking that language at all, I became very interested in the sounds and what that language feels like on the voice. I had to work with an expert in medieval Irish to recite for me ancient poetry, which I would record and then I would set it for singers.

**ÖE:** So currently you are working on a saxophone concerto and a work for the Oud?

**TO'R:** Yes, the Oud concerto is for the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra here. I am interested in the Oud because the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra is a period instrument orchestra. They are playing on 17th and 18th century instruments, primarily baroque and early romantic music. In Europe and in America the cousin of the Oud, the Lute is well known. It is an old instrument you associate with the earlier repertoire. Interestingly, the Oud is still a contemporary instrument in many cultures so it is as contemporary as it is old. I am interested in connecting these two ways of thinking about historical instruments and contemporary instruments.

**ÖE:** Are there not difficulties in being able to play certain maqams on some orchestra instruments?

**TO'R:** Yes, there are some tuning issues. But then a baroque orchestra is familiar with a more nuanced attitude to intonation in a world of music that existed before the invention of the piano. I am

interested in exploring that.

**ÖE:** I believe Jordi Savall has recorded some excellent music of this type.

**TO'R:** Yes, though he was mostly using early music. What I am interested in is writing something new that conjures the sound. I am not trying to reconstruct anything.

**ÖE:** Which operas would you say you were influenced by?

**TO'R:** If I think back on my personal journey, probably the first opera that I felt very compelled by was *Peter Grimes*. I felt gripped by it the first time I saw it in a way that I did not realise that I could be captivated in this heightened place. It was sort of like 'the ball dropping'. The suspension of disbelief was so empowering. In the entirety of the opera I was in an heightened experience. Then I saw the Schönberg melodrama *Erwartung* staged as an opera and I remember finding it similarly absolutely captivating. And there is only a single voice there. Just this idea of being drawn in without a way of escape. *Erwartung* did that to me as well as *Lulu*. In terms of more contemporary works, I have always liked *L'Amour de loin* by Kaija Saariaho.

**ÖE:** Have you been approached by Hollywood?

**TO'R:** Not the big Hollywood, but certainly I had my existing music used in movies. One day I would love to write for film. That is a very different thing, when you are fulfilling someone else's artistic vision. The closest I came to this was working on a ballet but I must say I felt very liberated and enjoyed working on it. I love working with choreographers, and I suspect I will enjoy writing for film. Right now my business is primarily non-commercial.

**ÖE:** Do we have that kind of music any more?

**TO'R:** The classical music world is no longer commercially viable, it relies on commissions. You do not make money by selling CDs, for example. In my mind it is a different kind of commercialism where you are paid up front. I think there has always been and always will be a commercial side to music. I have been remarkably lucky to have plenty of commissions to keep me busy for the next few years. ■

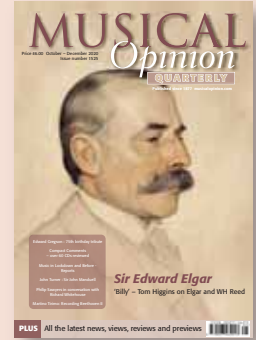
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