Mezzo Sasha Cooke, who sings in The Wreckers at HGO, loves new music—and old music.

By Maria Mazzaro

As Eduige in Handel’s *Rodelinda* at the Met in 2022
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**SASHA COOKE HAS**

*Sung* world premieres by **more than thirty composers,**
but it wasn’t always her intent to champion new

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music. As an undergraduate at Rice University and in her graduate studies at Juilliard, Cooke was trained for the standard lyric-mezzo repertoire, but her voice wasn’t easily “boxed,” as she puts it, and that led to disagreement about her voice type after her stint in the Met’s Lindemann Young Artist Development Program. “When I was coming out of the Met program, I had one manager who said, ‘You’re a contralto.’ I had another manager who said, ‘You’re a soprano.’ That’s been the story of my life,” Cooke says. “People say, ‘Oh, but you have chocolate in your voice.’ ‘Oh but you can sing this high stuff.’ Well—I’d like to do it all, you know?”

With a voice that has beauty and power from top to bottom, a consistently golden sound and an astounding ability to make complex musical patterns sing, it’s no wonder Cooke attracted attention as a young artist. During her Met debut season, in 2007–08, when she was contracted to sing comprimario roles in *Iphigénie en Tauride*, *Hänsel und Gretel* and *Manon Lescaut*, Cooke was selected by John Adams to sing the role of Kitty Oppenheimer in the Met premiere of his *Doctor Atomic* the following season. Cooke’s casting in that role would shape the trajectory of her career and come to define her repertoire.

As a musician who loves the challenge of complex rhythms and intervals—she had trained as a pianist and also played viola before discovering singing—Cooke embraced her new reputation as a performer of technically exacting new works, or what she calls “special projects.” She has few qualms about the subsequent direction of her career. “I say to young singers, be open to doors they didn’t expect. If you’re having a career in music, you’re lucky. So the fact that my door happened to be contemporary music, I’m so happy—because I’m here.”

Fourteen years after her Kitty Oppenheimer at the Met, Cooke balances her work in new music with more standard roles. She sang her first Cherubinos at the Met in spring 2022, offering a representation of love-struck boyishness considerably richer and more nuanced than that of many other mezzos. She also continues to thrive in concert repertoire, especially
in the music of Mahler. “More than anyone else I’m grateful to sing, it’s Mahler,” she says. “I feel very philosophically fitted—my sensibility, my artistic self, vocal too. I think that match has been central—every year, several Mahler engagements. They start to give back to one another, because I know that language so well, and I get more and more grounded in the expressivity of it, that I become even more liberated.”

As Cherubino to Ying Fang’s Susanna in the Met’s 2022 Nozze © Ken Howard/Met Opera

Besides feeling like she has “grown as a person by singing Mahler,” Cooke notes that concert repertoire has given her schedule a degree of flexibility in prioritizing the needs of her family. Now based in Texas, Cooke and her husband, bass-baritone Kelly Markgraf, have two young daughters. Asked about being married to a singer, Cooke says, “He gets it—he often will encourage me to rest more than I will encourage me to rest. I also lucked out, because he’s a really wonderful dad. Single parenting is no joke. That’s why this symphony piece [of my career]—ten years ago, I wouldn’t have mentioned it in an interview. But now, I’m a mom and looking at my life, and I’m like, that’s actually kept things in balance.”

Throughout her career, Cooke has been interested in music that is female-focused—her 2022 album for Pentatone, how do I find you, features newly commissioned songs by Missy Mazzoli, Caroline Shaw and others. This month, Cooke sings Thirza in Houston Grand Opera’s company premiere of The Wreckers, a 1906 work by English composer Ethel Smyth.
It’s Cooke’s second engagement in a work by a female composer in Texas this year: in February, she sang Lili Boulanger’s *Scenes from Faust and Hélène* with the Houston Symphony. Cooke attributes the infrequent performances of works by Boulanger and Smyth to persisting stigmas about female composers. “It’s almost hard to see [all the areas] where they were oppressed. We know that women were not encouraged. I assume that’s the case with *The Wreckers*, because it’s really fascinating—interesting score, beautiful opera, dramatic,” she says. “A big part of the reason *The Wreckers* is happening is because of Khori Dastoor, the new general director of HGO. There’s a lot of female strength around that project.”

While many mezzos begin their careers singing classic and traditional lyrical repertoire, Cooke celebrates her counterclockwise movement. “I feel like, in a way, contemporary and concert [repertoire] kept me cooking without having to be so exposed in the rep that I’m eventually going to sing,” she says. “I feel like when I was younger, I just didn’t have the vocal prowess to do the repertoire that probably I’ll become more known for later. I’m turning forty soon, and for my type of voice, waiting for [roles] a little bit longer is probably fine. I got thrust into the career pretty young, and vocally I feel like I’m now finally getting into my juicy good years.”

*Maria Mazzaro* is a writer, editor and singer.