



Marnie Breckenridge as Jacqueline de Pré and Matt Haimovitz as her cello in Tapestry Opera's *Jacqueline* (photo: Dahlia Katz)

TAPESTRY OPERA *JACQUELINE* “THE PRIVILEGE TO WITNESS THE PERFORMANCES”

by Jane Forner | Feb 25, 2025 | Featured, Reviews

We are not currently short of contemporary operas focused on larger-than-life individuals, with the modern stage becoming a popular venue for biopics – especially those of “great artists.” Unlike many such pieces, however, the representation of the life of the phenomenal musician **Jacqueline du Pré** that we experience in **Tapestry Opera's *Jacqueline*** is anything but a predictable biography.

In just under two hours, we traverse the development of the eponymous cellist's finely-honed talent, ephemeral impressions of childhood, marriage to conductor **Daniel Barenboim**, loneliness, devastating illness and, of course, the vast depths of her relationship with her instrument. But the opera traces these paths through du Pré's life while resisting conventional modes of biographic storytelling, making its pathos and drama far more impactful. **Royce Vavrek's** compassionate, incisive libretto and **Luna Pearl Woolf's** expansive score present a remarkable and wide-ranging emotional portrait of the inner life of a musician's relationship to her craft – and what happens when the body stops working as she needs it to.

Even with just two performers, *Jacqueline* is, however, far from minimalist. **Matt**

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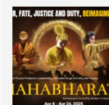


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Cello and cellist are positioned as the stable force, emotionally and physically. When Haimovitz moves from his rostrum, it is at moments of great dramatic poignancy and significance. Jacqueline, however, is everywhere, constantly morphing into different versions of herself, and Breckenridge is so at ease in the space that even chaotic transitions, wild swings of emotion and of time, feel handled with great care.

As the progression of du Pré's multiple sclerosis deepens, the cello makes bids for connection as the relationship comes to a head, fractiously, with the metaphors of a marriage shifting from cheeky *double entendres* to the agony of disconnection. Much of the opera's third "movement" dwells in the frustration of loneliness amid her worsening illness, bursting out of the torpor in final passages brimming with intense emotions, dominated by the fear of loss. Much like contemplating that a spouse will survive you, Jacqueline grapples with the life of her cello after her, of its body being touched by another's hands. After a duet expressing deep love, her subsequent rejection of the cello presents as a rejection of her very self. When Breckenridge actually seizes her instrument for the first time, it is a powerfully arresting moment – strangely, the absence of the cello's sound leads to a suffocating silence, no relief.



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dramaturg as well as Tapestry's general director, constructs a subtle staging that allows for the warmth of intimate moments and is filled with clever symbolic touches. Empty chairs and music stands sit curved in near-darkness behind the performers, ghosts of orchestras and audiences past. Objects suspended on strings function as understated indicators of important moments for du Pré, such as a bridal veil, a turntable and vinyl record. At other times, many of the chairs and stands ascend, clattering and colliding midair, an overlap of sonic and physical that evokes the precarity and instability of her experience of disability.

Even as it eschews a fully linear narrative, the opera's dramatic arc leads, inevitably, towards an end-of-life apotheosis. Having avoided referencing Elgar explicitly, the opening passages of the Cello Concerto are finally delivered to us as the opera's climax, played with a ferociously raw urgency by Haimovitz. The opera ends on the leading note of the scale, a deliberate lack of musical resolution that mirrors the complexity of the emotions of this ending, both an acceptance and a vehement sense of injustice at a life gone too soon.

It's impossible to overstate the privilege to witness the performances from Breckenridge and Haimovitz. The depth of emotional energy that pours out over just under two hours is such that I can only be astounded at how the two of them can summon the fortitude for repeated performances.

It's always impressive when a contemporary opera gets mounted more than once, especially internationally, so seeing *Jacqueline* return to Toronto – and after a successful run at **West Edge Opera** in San Francisco last year – is certainly something Tapestry and Mori can be proud of. With future productions already in the works, more audiences will, hopefully, have the opportunity to experience this emotionally rich and fascinating work.

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Jane Forner

Jane Forner is a musicologist whose research focuses on contemporary opera in Europe and North America at the intersection of politics, race, and gender.

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