Adam Lau flexes his vocal cords in *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs*

By Roxanne Ray
IE Contributor

Apple has long been an enigma of a company, complete with devoted customers and diehard fans, as well as the notoriety of Steve Jobs, former chairman, CEO, and co-founder. And now Seattle Opera is presenting a new opera focusing on Jobs's fascinating persona: The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs is making its West Coast debut, and features music by Mason Bates and a libretto by Mark Campbell.

Included in this opera is the character of Kobun Chino Otogawa, portrayed by opera performer Adam Lau. Described by Lau as one of Jobs's many "surrogate father figures," Otogawa played an influential role in Jobs's development. "Kobun provides Steve with a moral compass," said Lau.

But Otogawa did more than that. "Digging deeper into this character, I actually discovered that without Kobun we might have been living in a world void of all Apple products," Lau said. "In fact, it was Kobun who dissuaded Steve from becoming a monk."

Lau believes that Otogawa helped provide the balance that made Jobs successful. "Along his path, Kobun helped Steve excel into the world of everything Apple," Lau said, "while still maintaining the tenants of Zen Buddhism and its very minimalistic, pure ways."

Lau's path into opera performance was circuitous. "I'm one of those musical theater kids that resisted opera," he said. "I had this false impression of it being a very boring art form."

Then Lau was offered a scholarship to study classical music at Whitman College. "As I became more educated about what opera really represented, I realized that opera and musical theatre is really one and the same," he said. "They are just in different languages."

Lau doesn't regret his late start in training for opera. "In hindsight, that's great for a bass because our voices take the longest to fully physically maturate," he said. "By the time I entered a graduate program, I was in my mid-twenties."

He feels gratitude at the opportunities he has had to perfect opera performance at its root. "Looking back, I've been very fortunate to have had some incredible training at places such as Music Academy of the West, the Aspen Opera Theatre Center, San Francisco Opera's Merola program, Florida Grand Opera, and Rice University's Shepherd School of Music," Lau said. "Besides being in those programs, I've had fairly extensive study in languages and spent some time in Italy!"

The biggest challenge in building his opera career has been time and the slowness of the bass vocal quality to develop. "This doesn't mean that you can't be gainfully employed singing while your voice is growing," he said. "It just means that the voice will not be singing the fully mature bass repertoire until later in life, your forties and fifties."

Lau tries to focus on the upside to this challenge. "Waiting to sing that type of rep can definitely be frustrating when you see colleagues of similar age ranges singing their full tenor, baritone, mezzo-soprano and or soprano repertoire," he said. "However, you learn a lot along the way."

This slow development also leads to better vocal sustainability. "If you go too big too soon, you will cut your voice's life in half," Lau said. "It's simply too much pressure on the vocal cords."

Lau finds that a more varied performance repertoire yields better results. "Like with everything else in life, the voice needs balance and moderation," he said. "Concert and recital rep provide that balance for me. It keeps the voice in shape by working out the instrument in more agile, flexible ways. Just like as we age, maintaining pliability in the voice is very important to the longevity of a vocal career."

Another challenge faced by most opera performers is constant touring and travel, but Lau is happy to be performing at Seattle Opera for a full three months. "Seattle has become a sort of home away from home for me," he said. "Knowing that I'd be up here for three months meant first and foremost stability. Staying in Seattle for a quarter of the year means that I don't have to live out of a suitcase every few weeks."

Lau advises that the best way to combat these challenges is to focus on the work. "Have patience and just focus on singing well," he said. "Don't compare with other singers because it's easy to let insecurities take hold."

Keeping a positive attitude is important to Lau. "Celebrate other's successes and don't feed into jealousy," he said. "If you start to feel jealous or insecure, click 'unfollow' on their profile page. You all know what I'm talking about!"



Adam Lau. **Courtesy photo.**

Mostly, he recommends that aspiring performers just keep going. "Careers are not built off of luck," he said. "They're built off of people who have prepared for when opportunities come knocking."

And Lau's excitement about this new opportunity is palpable. "I love new operas!" he said. "It's so exciting being a part of something for the very first time."

Being selected to sing the role of Kobun Chino Otogawa is a highlight of Lau's career. "Because Steve Jobs is such an icon, there is an instant immediacy with this piece!" Lau added. "It's hard to imagine a world without Steve Jobs and Apple."

The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs runs February 23 to March 9 at Seattle Opera, McCaw Hall, 321 Mercer Street, Seattle. ■

In *One Child Nation*, director Nanfu Wang examines a dark chapter of China's history through a personal lens

By Misa Shikuma
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Documentary filmmakers Nanfu Wang (whose 2016 debut *Hooligan Sparrow* made the Oscar shortlist for Feature Length Documentary) and Jialing Zhang return with a searing look at China's One Child Policy. A recent mother now based in New York, Wang returns to her provincial hometown to interview members of the community—including her own family—about how the policy shaped their lives and continues to affect them.

In 1979, the Chinese government, terrified of impending overpopulation and consequent threat of starvation, enacted the infamous policy limiting families to one child. (Families in rural areas, such as Wang's hometown, were allowed to have two provided that the siblings were five years apart). Three years later, the policy was written into the Chinese constitution, where it remained until its abolishment in 2015.

Born in 1985, Wang recalls being inundated with propaganda supporting single child families; indoctrination began early, and only as an adult who has spent considerable time outside China does she realize now how pervasive and corrosive the party's agenda could be. Starting with her close family—mother, brother, grandfather and aunts, Wang's probing questions and the candid responses they elicit (sometimes reluctantly) paint a bleak, almost apocalyptic portrait of what life was like at the height of the policy's enforcement. Multiple relatives speak of seeing abandoned babies (always girls, who are valued less in patriarchal Chinese society) in public areas, dead from starvation and sun exposure, maggots crawling over their bodies.

It becomes even more nightmarish when the filmmakers shift focus to those who worked directly for the government. The town's former party leader and the midwife who helped birth Wang and her brother both attest to the thousands of forced sterilizations and abortions that occurred, as well as the confiscation of property and demolition of homes when families refused to comply. Regarding forced sterilization, the midwife recalls how women were abducted, tied up and "brought to us like pigs."

One Child Nation is not for the faint of heart, containing graphic images and accounts of gross human rights abuses. As harrowing as it is for the average audience member, one can only imagine how fraught the creative process must have been for Wang, examining this dark chapter of China's history through the personal lens of her own family.



The directors broaden their scope as the film progresses, taking time to examine the ramifications of China's implementation of international adoption in the early 1990s, which led to human trafficking and considerable fraud and corruption on the government's part. Not to mention the toll it has taken on the children affected and their birth and adoptive families.

Two themes persist throughout, one being generational differences. The filmmakers and the entire Chinese crew were all born under the policy, yet have a much different view of it than their elders. Across the board, we hear variations of "I had no choice," in reference to unsavory actions taken in decades past; it's practically Orwellian. Wang's own mother says that without the one-child policy China would have resorted to cannibalism by now. The other, more unfortunate, theme is the value of girls versus boys, and by proxy women versus men, in Chinese society. The policy may not exist anymore but the patriarchy remains. ■