





Lucia Lucas



# ‘I’m fine playing men on stage – and my private life is my private life’

THE BBC MUSIC MAGAZINE INTERVIEW

## Lucia Lucas



In May 2019, as Don Giovanni for Tulsa Opera, Lucia Lucas became the first transgender artist to take a leading role with an American company. She tells her story to **George Hall**

PHOTOGRAPHY: RICHARD CANNON

American baritone Lucia Lucas may not be the only transgender singer on today’s operatic stage, but she was among the very first to transition while maintaining what is an increasingly busy career. And she is certainly the most prominent: for some years she has been based in Germany, but her work involves major productions with the Metropolitan Opera in New York, Lyric Opera of Chicago and London’s English National Opera.

At these and other venues, audiences are by now used to seeing her play male roles on stage – including last autumn the Sacristan in Christof Loy’s production of *Tosca* at ENO, and at the beginning of 2023 Grech in David McVicar’s staging of Giordano’s *Fedora* at the Met. Managements, audiences and the singer herself all take this in their

stride as no big deal. ‘I guess the whole thing that I’m always fighting against is that I’m fine playing men on stage, and my private life is my private life.’

Lucas comes from Sacramento – ‘a beautiful place,’ she tells me, ‘situated between San Francisco and Lake Tahoe’. Was her family interested in music, theatre or opera? ‘Not really. My dad’s a civil engineer and my mom is an electrical engineer, and my interest still puzzles them.’ Growing up there, she had a tough time expressing herself ‘until I got into music, partly because it allowed me to express myself without words. So being able to send the energy of what I felt to somebody else was powerful for me.’

When did her move towards gender reassignment begin? Was there a certain point at which she began to reconsider who she was? ‘As soon as I knew that there were boys and girls, I knew that when I was being told that I was one thing, that wasn’t right.’

The decision to transition came much later. ‘In 2013 I was in South Korea doing Biterolf in *Tannhäuser*. My wife was in Germany, and we were discussing things and she said, “You know, maybe when

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**Fame with a brush: (right) Lucia Lucas as the Sacristan in English National Opera's 2022 production of Puccini's *Tosca*, with tenor Adam Smith as the doomed painter Cavaradossi**

you're back, you can talk to somebody about this." So I started talking to doctors.'

The reason she decided to come out in 2014 is because she had a psychologist who would not allow her access to medication until she came out at work. 'That's not the rule in most places: depending on where you are, the rule for a long time has been that you must live as your target gender for a year, or two or three. I was on contract in Karlsruhe, so I came out at work, and the Intendant said, "OK, so how does all this work?" I told him that nobody had ever done this before as a stage performer in an opera house. So he said, "Then there's one thing I must ask. What happens with the voice? Because we hired you as a baritone."'

Lucas explained to him that, for better or worse, the voice doesn't change. 'If I could wake up tomorrow and sing Brünnhilde, then I could figure it out – but that's not how it works. I can still sing baritone – just glue a beard on me, and then we're fine – and that's what we did.'

Our meeting comes near the end of a long run of *Tosca* at the London Coliseum. 'In 2011-12 I did the Sacristan in Germany in Italian, so it's familiar. I also know the people at ENO' – Lucas sang the role of Public Opinion in the company's Offenbach *Orpheus in the Underworld* in 2018 – 'so it was like coming home.'

Going right back to her start, her musical development began around the fourth grade when she joined a school band. 'I really wanted to play saxophone. But you had to learn to play clarinet first, so eventually I played a bunch of different instruments – clarinet, trumpet, all sorts of saxophones.' While still in high school, she also started playing French horn, 'and that was my instrument when I went to college at California State University Sacramento with music as my major.'

It was at college that her singing really took off. 'As an undergraduate, I got seven roles in college productions: first Bartolo in *Figaro*, then later I did things like Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and Seneca in *Poppea* – a little low, but you know, that's fine.' In fact, her versatility means that she has been able to take on bass-baritone and even bass repertoire as well. 'When I had a contract in Germany, it didn't say "bass", but I did a lot of bass stuff there, too. If you are young and have a little bit of comedic



**'People are saying "This is a new thing," but it wasn't even a new thing in 1930'**

talent, there are so many little roles that you can get plugged into. If they're putting on *Tosca*, and maybe your dream role is Scarpia – someday, when you're ready for it – in the meantime there are four other smaller roles you can do: Angelotti, the Sacristan, Sciarrone and the Gaoler. I did Don Giovanni, but I've also done Leporello, the Commendatore and Masetto.'

After college she went on to do a graduate degree and an artist's diploma

at the College of Performing Arts at Roosevelt University in Chicago where she studied voice with Richard Stilwell, acquiring a masters and an arts diploma in conjunction with Chicago Opera Theatre.

Her first professional engagement was Tom in Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera* for Opera Santa Barbara in 2007; then she moved on to cover Leporello and Spencer Coyle in Britten's *Owen Wingrave* for the Chicago company. After a couple of seasons doing small roles and covering larger ones at Santa Fe Opera, she moved to the Deutsche Oper, Berlin. Why this step? 'As my voice had a more dramatic quality, people told me I should go to Germany because I'd do well in the German repertoire. So I tried some out – Wotan's 'Abendlich strahl', for instance, became one of my main audition arias. I





Moving to centre stage: (left) Lucas as Public Opinion in ENO's *Orpheus in the Underworld*, 2019; (below) Danish painter Lili Elbe, who is celebrated in a new opera by Tobias Picker Lucas is to star in

sang it for Christoph Seufferle in New York in 2009 and he hired me for 46 performances at the Deutsche Oper, which is where I made my European debut later that same year.' That was a busy period, with lots of words and lots of productions both in Berlin and Turin (a further 18 performances) to learn. 'I was on stage all the time. It really was a trial by fire!'

Germany has been home ever since, these days in Karlsruhe, 'because I spent five years there, and my wife also spent five years there – though not at the same time.' (She is married to the contralto Ariana Lucas.)

After several successful years on the European stage, her initial return to the US came with the title role of Don Giovanni at Tulsa Opera in 2019 – not only her first appearance in the US as a transgender artist, but also the first occasion when a transgender artist had taken a leading role with an American company. Her planned debut at the New York Met in May 2021 – as the Bosun in Britten's *Billy Budd* – was, she explains, wiped out by Covid; but she subsequently took on Angelotti in *Tosca* there in March 2022. Earlier this year she took part in the world premiere of *Proximity* at Chicago's Lyric Opera Chicago – 'three operas telling contemporary stories, mostly American and sort of Chicago specific, but I think relatable for everyone.' Three different composers – Daniel Bernard Roumain, Caroline Shaw and John Luther Adams – were involved.

Upcoming in London is a show to be performed (and livestreamed) from Milton Court at London's Barbican Centre on



2 May. First staged in 2017, *The World's Wife* is a chamber opera by Glasgow-based Tom W Green that draws on the eponymous anthology by the Scottish writer and former Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy: Green's score quotes music by distinguished women composers of various periods. Originally the piece was written for soprano and string quartet, 'but we have curated that a little bit more'.

First staged in Holland in April 2022, Jorinde Keesmaat's production involves Lucas joining the all-female Ragazze Quartet. 'We are all acting and moving together, so it's a wild piece, and tricky, but I think it's exciting. It's a mix of historical women and fictional women, so we have people like Shakespeare's wife Anne Hathaway, but also Little Red Cap [alias Red Riding Hood], Medusa and Queen Herod. It is the most energy I have ever spent on an opera production!'

Another future project promises to be even more ground-breaking. At the time of Lucas's return to the United States as Don Giovanni in Tulsa, the company's artistic director was composer Tobias Picker; Lucas is to be the star of Picker's new opera *Lili Elbe*, to be premiered in St Gallen in Switzerland in October. The Danish painter Lili Elbe (born Einar Wegener, 1882-1931) was one of the first people to undergo gender realignment surgery. 'These days, people are saying, "This is a new thing," but it wasn't even a new thing in 1930. It's something that has always existed, and different civilizations have had different takes on it.'

With this production, Lucas decided that she wanted to have a voice in the room officially. 'I asked if I could be the dramaturg, and so I've spent a lot of time with Tobias and with librettist Aryeh Lev Stollman.' The result draws as a source on Elbe's own semi-autobiography, published posthumously as *Man into Woman: An Authentic Record of a Change of Sex*. 'Of course, it's a story from that time – but there are so many parallels between Lily's journey and my journey.' 🌈



The journey of life: 'Everything, good or bad, led me to this moment'

## Leading the way

### A positive example

It's perhaps inevitable that a trailblazing, high-profile artist such as Lucia Lucas will be seen as a role model for fellow transgender singers. But the mantle is not necessarily an easy one to bear. 'Just to be frank about it – I'm not trying to be a role model for transgender artists, because that's too much pressure,' she says. 'I hope that I can be a positive influence. I hope that I can be a positive person. I hope that the way in which I act and live can help somebody – and if it does, that's wonderful.'

She is, however, open to speaking to artists forging similar paths as her own. 'My email address is public, and if people want to message me – especially people going through a similar journey – I'm always open to that,' she shares. 'I hope that I could be a test case where somebody can say, "Lucia did this, so maybe I can do it." But I don't want to be held up as something, because we're all human and make mistakes. If you're held up too high, the fall is greater.'

'My philosophy is, if I'm happy where I am right now, then everything that has happened – good and bad – led me to this moment,' she continues. 'Have positive things happened? Yes. Have negative things happened? Yes, of course! But without the negative things, I wouldn't necessarily be where I am right now.'