



# MEET *Sarah* HICKS

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*Sarah Hicks joined the North Carolina Symphony as Associate Conductor in the 2009-10 season, bringing to the orchestra her sharp and vibrant musicianship, extensive conducting experience and eclectic musical taste. Blair Tindall at The New York Times noticed her talent in 2005, acknowledging her place in “the next generation of up-and-coming American conductors.” With additional posts as Principal Conductor of Pops and Presentations for the Minnesota Orchestra and Staff Conductor at the Curtis Institute of Music, Sarah’s schedule couldn’t be busier, but she still manages to have a fascinating life.*

LISTEN IN WITH OPUS AS WE GET TO KNOW OUR NEWEST CONDUCTOR.

**BORN IN:**

Tokyo. We moved to Hawaii when I was two years old. I tell people it's because my dad was from California, my mom from Japan and Hawaii is right in the middle. I went to a French school and I spoke Japanese, but apparently at four or five I didn't speak English so they thought there was something wrong with me.

**THE PATH TO THE PODIUM:**

I started on piano at about five. I was one of those serious kids, so I was practicing a lot and playing with orchestras by the time I was twelve. I have tiny hands, so I overused them and I started having arm and hand problems. By the time I was 17, they told me I would have to quit and do physical therapy. I was so depressed because piano had been my focus for twelve years, but my dad said, "Stop feeling sorry for yourself. You can still hold a baton."

**THE AUDITION:**

I went to my orchestra teacher and asked him if he thought I could try conducting. He said sure, handed me his baton and left to take a half-hour phone call. The piece was Dvořák's 8th Symphony (yes, I went to a really good high school). And that was when I decided I wanted to be a conductor.

**BEYOND HAWAII:**

There was no performance degree at Harvard – they are much too serious and academic – so I got a composition degree. But I performed a lot – there were three opera companies and five orchestras. After that, I spent a year studying in Prague. I didn't know anyone and I could not speak Czech except to order beer and cheese or ask, "When is the last train?" Then I went to the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia and got my advanced conducting degree. I got my first job while I was still in school as assistant conductor of the Reading Symphony and I've been working ever since.

**IS CONDUCTING A MAN'S WORLD?:**

At Curtis, I studied with a very old-school German teacher. He would say very provocative things about women – I don't know if he was trying to toughen me up or if he meant what he said. He didn't have a lot of female students. I went to Korea years ago where they had literally never even thought of a woman conductor, but if you

know what you are doing, musicians will follow you and respect you even if they feel uncomfortable with a gender they aren't used to working with. It should not be an issue if you can work together.

**BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING:**

There have been instances in which I felt I was being patronized a little – maybe that a younger, male colleague was being treated in a slightly different way. To some degree, conducting is an old boys' club. You just have to learn to speak the language and to prove that you won't take guff from anyone. I'm a very straightforward person and I can't be anything but a woman. There was a time that I presented myself in a bit more masculinized way – I had short hair and I wore suits, but I realized that was disingenuous. So now I have long hair and I like to wear sparkly outfits and totally high heels because, why not? That's part of the fun of being this gender.

**BEST THING ABOUT THE JOB:**

The sense that there is a symbiotic relationship among everyone on stage. The best musical moments happen when everyone is feeling it – the capital "I," existential, mystical, big It. When it happens we all know it and the audience knows it and those are the connections that make the world go around and make life worth living.

**WORST THING ABOUT THE JOB:**

Two things. Traveling is hard. I love going to new places and meeting new people but it takes a toll on you, on your physical well-being and your personal life. The second thing is that music is so personal. More than any job, musicians tend to take criticism personally. It's hard to remove yourself from the personal investment you have as a musician to create something larger than yourself, which is an orchestral performance.

**PERSONAL YODA:**

My old-school German teacher. He is one of the finest musical minds I've ever known. His way of analyzing music so you can parse it down to its smallest component and then build it up again is extraordinary. I studied with him for three years. As a result I'm not afraid of any piece of music. I know how to learn music in a way very few people understand. I'm grateful to him for that.

**FIRST LOVE:**

I was seven when I heard Chopin's F minor Ballad. It's the densest of the ballads and maybe the most impenetrable. I don't know why that affected me but it was so dense and complicated. When you're a kid and starting to become a person you feel all dense and conflicted, and it really resonated with me. I eventually learned to play it. It won me a piano competition when I was 14.

**GREATEST MISCONCEPTION ABOUT CLASSICAL MUSIC:**

That it's elitist. Most musicians that I know are really open and enjoy lots of different types of music. They are focused on their craft, but they go to clubs and listen to all kinds of things. Music exists in every culture and is important in every culture and we are just performing a particular kind of music. I wish there were better ways to break down those barriers.

**ON HER IPOD:**

It could be anything – it could be Broadway, it could be Eminem – I have several thousand things on my iPod. I like to put it on shuffle and see what pops up. It could be Tom Waits and then Schoenberg, how cool is that? I like to keep up on the current culture end of rock – like the Dirty Projectors or Grizzly Bear. I need to know what people listen to and where are we going culturally. I listen to Top 40 too, because I want to see which Britney Spears song is up there now at number two. It's irresponsible not to keep up with popular culture – movies, TV shows, all of it.

**ALWAYS IN THE FRIDGE:**

Lots of things – Greek yogurt, asparagus, a bottle of white wine and sriracha – spicy thai red pepper sauce which goes on anything and everything. Those are the staples. And bacon, because bacon goes with everything.

**FANTASY CAREER:**

I would want to be a Food Network chef. I'd love to be Anthony Bourdain, for instance, and do a traveling cooking show.

**TECHNOLOGY ITEM SHE CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT:**

My laptop. My schedule is there, all my scripts are there. It's how I keep in touch with people. I have composing software so when I'm arranging I have everything I need. I can't imagine what I did before.

**I NEED TO KNOW WHAT PEOPLE LISTEN TO****AND WHERE WE ARE GOING**

*culturally.*

**GUILTY PLEASURE:**

MTV and reality shows. *The Hills*, *The City*, it's bad. I've even watched Tila Tequila. I just think sometimes your brain needs to have a whole bucketful of candy and I love that.

**PERFECT DAY:**

Preferably some place beautiful – on a beach or in the Alps somewhere. There would be great food. There would be a hike or a swim or dive – just being with my husband and our dogs Bamsa and Sieglinde. My favorite thing in the world, though, is going out after a concert, so my perfect day would have to involve a concert. I like to bring people back to my place where I'll have a huge spread, or go out to a lovely restaurant that serves late and have a great meal and some drinks. There's something about that period when you're done with this very intensive work that you just feel an incredible sense of release. And it doesn't last until the next morning so you have to take advantage of it.

**PERSON IN HISTORY SHE WOULD LOVE TO BE ABLE TO MEET:**

Lady Murasaki, who wrote *The Tale of Genji* which I think was not just the first Japanese novel, but the first novel in history. And it's written by a woman! What prompted her to do this? I'd love to get into someone's head who is from a very different era where it was unthought of to do something like that. And also to ask how she came up with this incredibly racy story!

**MOST UNDERRATED COMPOSERS:**

Haydn and Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn wrote some of the most extraordinary and exquisite music and it's well-constructed too. I think he's not given credit where it's

due. The level of creativity and the quirky humor in Haydn – it's incredibly sophisticated, especially from an aesthetic and a music theory standpoint.

**OBSESSION:**

I am obsessed with cows. I know I'm anthropomorphizing, but they are so big and dumb and there's an innocence about them that is lacking in the world right now. I have a cow flashlight, a cow shoulder massager, cow creamers, cow humidifier, stuffed cows and even a cow-b-que – a barbeque in the shape of a cow. I admit there's something really wrong about that.

**JUGGLING ACT:**

I couldn't do it without having a husband who, at least for now, stays at home. He quit his job with the Richmond Symphony in order to move with me to Minnesota. You have to have a support system and he's a great support system.

**RECURRING NIGHTMARE:**

There is a concert, and I have to sing. This is an operatic concert and I don't understand why I am singing but the funny thing is that I get on the stage and I take a deep breath and I can sing. So it's not really a nightmare. I usually wake up about a minute into the singing and think wow, I'm such a great singer. But I never get to enjoy it – the time leading up to the singing feels like hours and hours of agonizing.

**GARAGE BAND DIVA:**

I did sing in a garage band a few years ago with a bunch of classical musicians. We all played different instruments – there was a keyboard, electric cello, electric violin, drum set, bass. I wrote

songs with my husband. He played the guitar and I sang – we just had fun with it. It came from the idea that it would be easy to write a pop song. You have four chords, some words about love or breaking up and you can write a pretty decent pop song. We were Cow Path 40 – after a rural road in Vermont where we all met one summer.

**PERFORMANCE RITUALS:**

After a performance, I have to take off my shoes. I wear four-inch heels so I take them off right away. But I'm not one of those people that has to shut the door and focus. When I get to the hall, I'm ready to go.

**WAVES OF THE FUTURE:**

I'm very much a Pops person, which is why I got this job in Minnesota. I think it's a large part of the future of orchestras, deciding what to do with that part of their offerings, figuring out which artists cross over in an interesting way, and developing new audiences. There is a lot of potential there so that's an area I'm really interested in.

**ANYTHING YOU'VE ALWAYS WISHED SOMEONE WOULD ASK YOU IN AN INTERVIEW BUT THEY NEVER HAVE?**

You have to find a way to keep some things for yourself, Conductors lead, more than other types of musicians, very public lives. It's nice to be anonymous, sometimes. So they should ask, "What's the one thing we shouldn't know about you?" And I would say, "Well, you'll never find out!"

