

SCHERZO

Interviews with the notable musicians & fascinating personalities of our day

with WESLEY FERREIRA

JESSICA PHILLIPS

Jessica Phillips has been a member of the famed Metropolitan Opera Orchestra since 2001. Beyond her numerous impressive musical accolades, she is also a powerful arts advocate, entrepreneur, and skilled educator. She takes time out of her busy schedule to sit down and answer some questions.

What's the best part about your job? Making music at the highest level has always been a thrill and a joy. Sometimes I have to keep pinching myself that it's not a dream.

What's the hardest part about your job? Opera is very LONG! It can take a physical toll on your body. I have been battling some shoulder injuries for the past few years, but I'm hopeful that with physical therapy, acupuncture, and time off, I have turned a corner.

What country have you yet to visit and would love to? Somewhere in Africa – I'd love to do an (ethical) safari journey.

What motivates you? Making a difference motivates me. I think the business of nonprofits and the arts are changing, and we need to be prepared as musicians/artists to deal with them, preferably collaboratively.

Do you have a superhuman or fun trick? I can whistle with my two fingers EXTREMELY loud. Like, rock concert loud.

What was the hardest part of 2020 for you? Not making music and doing the thing I'm good at. When I played my first performance back in April 2021, it was like "omigosh, I am competent!!!"

What's the one thing that people would be surprised to find out about you? I once saved a man's life in Riverside Park. I was out late at night walking my dogs, and this man had been beaten badly by a group of boys who then stole his computer. I helped him find his way home and then eventually got him in an ambulance. The police later told me that if he had fallen asleep in the park he would have died because his brain had suffered such severe contusions.

What is your favorite form of exercise? Yoga, and I used to run, but it's no bueno for my knees anymore.

When you get home from a trip, do you unpack right away or leave that for a little while?

I unpack IMMEDIATELY. My husband is the opposite. I also take an agonizingly long time to pack and have a ton of anxiety about how many shoes to bring. He packs like two minutes before we leave. I have discovered packing lists on Pinterest which I find VERY helpful.

What's one thing you wish you had known when you began your career? That people would say sexually derogatory things about me and how I got my job — all because I'm a woman. The Met audition is completely blind and anonymous every round, so that was kind of shocking to me and still punches me in the gut. I'm fairly certain no one would say the same things if I were a man.

If you could play in any orchestra which would it be? It's a tie. I had an amazing time subbing in the Philadelphia Orchestra — I went on tour with them and also did some recordings. I also played Guest Principal with the Chicago Symphony and absolutely loved playing in that clarinet section.

Have you ever been starstruck? Bradley Cooper sat next to me in a performance once. He was there to observe for his upcoming film on Leonard Bernstein. Having him sit THAT close to me was intense, but he couldn't have been nicer. He was completely in awe of what we do. There's a photo of us laughing that, honestly, I will treasure forever! I played it cool the whole time, but inside I was screaming.



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If you weren't a clarinetist, what instrument would you want to play? Probably the flute. But most likely, I'd be a lawyer.

If you could give your 10-year-old self one piece of advice, what would it be? You are loved, even if you are in trouble. And boundaries are a good thing.

If you had to choose a first name other than your own, what would that be?

For some reason, probably because I was a bit of a tomboy when I was a kid, I've always wanted a non-gendered name, like Max and Sascha.

If you could rid yourself of one personal fear, what would that be? I have a slight fear of "rocking the boat" that I have to constantly work to overcome.

If you could meet any one living person in the world tomorrow, who would it be? Barack Obama.