He’s everywhere, indispensable. Every time we communicate on a smart phone, laptop or tablet, Steve Jobs is with us. It’s difficult to think of a figure in recent history who pervades our culture more thoroughly. His larger-than-life presence is mirrored by the intensely polarised reactions of fans and foes who deify or demonise him. What could be more suitable as a subject for the opera stage?

Yet it was not only the revolution inspired by the tech genius but his all-too-human struggles that convinced the creators of _The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs_ that here was a story ripe for operatic treatment. ‘What I was drawn to in his story is the role Steve Jobs played in transforming human communication,’ says Mason Bates from his home in the Bay Area of San Francisco,
where Jobs himself grew up. ’Having him as the subject of an opera underlines what opera does best, since this is an art where everyone can have their own sound world – and those worlds can be happening simultaneously and collide in a beautiful and rich way.’

Director Kevin Newbury, who has won acclaim for his vibrant stagings of such contemporary operas as Bel Canto and Fellow Travelers, points out that ’opera can do something that film and TV can’t. While those media and written biographies are wedded to naturalism, with music you can go into a much more imaginative, heightened place. Especially when you’re dealing with someone like Steve Jobs, who changed the way we think, it’s important to transcend the traditional biopic. Through opera and its theatricality, you can get inside the mind.’

When Santa Fe Opera first publicly announced its commission of The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs (RSJ) two years ago, the choice of Mason Bates as composer seemed almost inevitable. Although this is his first full-length opera, over the past decade Bates has solidified his reputation as a brilliant innovator in the concert hall. Many of his works expand the palette of the traditional orchestra with a sophisticated, high-tech spectrum of electronic sounds (ranging from dance club beats to sources sampled from nature, industry, or carnival recordings).

Far from forbiddingly avant-garde, Bates, now 40, ranks among the most frequently performed living American composers, not far behind John Adams. He has succeeded in updating the narrative dramaturgy of programme music to a 21st-century sensibility. With singular imagination, and with an equally unusual command of large-scale architecture, he addresses such themes as mass communication, climate change, and even the history of energy technologies.

’en It was the chance to work with Mason that made me immediately say yes to this project,’ remarks Mark Campbell, one of the most prolific and versatile librettists active today. ’I always look to hear if a prospective collaborator has a strong narrative quality in their music. I tend to like a style that is expansive and not cramped, above all, that allows basic emotions room to resonate. Mason’s orchestral music has a wonderful kinetic energy, and I love how playful his compositions can be. I was also intrigued by the idea of introducing electronic music into opera.’

Mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke, who will create the role of Jobs’ widow Laurene Powell Jobs, agrees that one of Bates’ key strengths as a composer is ’to write music that is clear and communicative. Nothing gets in the way of the story that he illuminates. This is music that speaks to the soul directly and conveys the kernel of Steve’s relationships.’

Cooke played Kitty Oppenheimer in the Metropolitan Opera’s production of John Adams’ Doctor Atomic, and RSJ likewise gives her a prominent role as a counterpart who challenges the failings of her partner. ’Laurene’s role is about humanising Steve, bringing him to the moment where he remembers what matters in life. What I especially love about the opera is that it finds a way of presenting the humanity in technology and the struggle of this man who can seem so machine-like and cold at first.’ Bates concurs: ’You can’t talk about Steve Jobs’ life without considering Laurene as the woman who grounded him. It’s like a negative and a positive charge.’

Entrusted with creating the title character, baritone Edward Parks says the prospect is exciting precisely because ’I get to play a person and not an icon. The opera is written in a way that brings out his contradictions.’ As a contrast to Jobs’ controlling personality and overbearing characteristics, Bates has found a way ’to also bring out his emotional and sensitive side. The story is presented as a rise and a fall and a rise, in a way I think works very well as opera.’

Campbell, whose credits include the libretto for Kevin Puts’ Pulitzer Prize-winning Silent Night, admits that he was ’also terrified of the fact that the audience already knows so much about this guy.’ He gradually found his way into the operatic lifeblood of his story, ’starting with Steve’s recognition of his mortality.’ Jobs’ statement in a commencement speech provided guidance for the nonlinear narrative approach: ’You can’t connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backward. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future.’
Campbell says what ultimately interested him was the chance ‘to tell a human story about a man who found himself late in life. The stories I chose from his life do not defy him and in fact are often critical. But they don’t demonise him either, as those who see him as an evil capitalist force would do. In every way they humanise him, sometimes in a comical way.’

Steve Jobs’ life was one that engaged with altered states – a quest to piece together an identity from an extraordinarily fractured history: he was born out of wedlock to a wealthy Syrian Muslim father and a Catholic mother from the American Midwest. The couple reluctantly gave up their child to blue-collar adoptive parents, Paul and Clara Jobs. A short stay with a guru in India followed by a diligent adherence to Zen Buddhism is a central part of the Steve Jobs story, full of spiritual and intellectual questing. Like the opera’s title, Campbell’s elegantly structured libretto – 18 scenes, without intermission, framed by a prologue and epilogue – was inspired by the Zen symbolism of the circular *enso* from Japanese calligraphy.

Along with Laurene, Jobs’ Buddhist spiritual advisor Kōbun Chino Otogawa (a bass role) plays an essential role. These figures interact in brief scenes which, Bates explains, are part of a new storytelling model ‘that Kevin and Mark and I are trying to bring to opera. It’s a pixelated narrative: tiny scenes that are spread out like pixels and whose meaning accumulates over the course of the opera.’

‘Through opera and its theatricality, you can get inside the mind.’

Pushing the limits of stage technology: Vita Tzykun’s set design for Steve Jobs’ office
Apple’s aesthetic of pared-down simplicity and ‘seamless design’ informs not only the score and libretto but the staging as well. ‘The design elements [by 59 Productions, Victoria Tzykun and Japhy Weideman] are incredibly innovative and complex,’ explains Newbury. ‘Santa Fe is taking a lot of chances to use techniques like projection mapping, so the video panels move with the scenery – the sort of high-tech you see in stadium rock concerts – and is and pushing limits of what can be done theatrically.’

What about the music itself? Like the story and the staging, Bates combines old and new technology in his score, reserving a prominent role for a variety of electronic sounds. Some of these he has built from actual recordings of early Mac gear ‘to give the soundworld a kind of authenticity’. Along with ‘whirring’ electronic sonorities whenever Steve Jobs is onstage, he imagined a ‘Nirvana-esque’ soundscape of processed prayer bowls and wind chimes for Kōbun Chino Otogawa. ‘I thought it would be an interesting way to expand on the trope of the mystical bass like Sarastro, over this eerily beautifully electronic sound world.’

Conductor Michael Christie, who has collaborated with Campbell on Silent Night and The Shining, describes the score as having ‘a lot of motor-driven music – not Minimalist, but it will feel like it shares something of that space and groove.’ Bates uses the guitar as an emblem for Jobs, playing on ‘both its lyrical and slightly percussive aspects’. Overall, says Christie, ‘Mason is completely about the dramatic experience. It takes a certain sensibility to step back and do that musically. The moments of poignancy and conflict feel organic. His musical palette allows us to shift through the opera’s emotional journey.’

Christie also mentions a radical approach to a challenge in setting English that has caused many an opera composer to run aground – call it the ‘parlando problem’ of setting text in faster-paced, recitative-like stretches in a way that doesn’t sound like a pallid, mechanical imitation of speech. Christie suggested that Bates write down the melodic arch he had in mind, leaving the rhythmic elements open ‘so that the singers can set the pulse based on the dramatic moment. I think we have actually broken ground here when it comes to the constraints around setting English text.’

As he looks ahead to the premiere, Bates says he hopes that the audience, as they leave the opera house, will ‘think twice about reaching into their pockets and turning on their iPhones. Life is much richer because of the technology we have, which connects us, but ultimately there is no substitute for engaging directly with people. That is a lesson Steve Jobs did learn at the end of his too-short life, with the help of his wife, who tells him: “There isn’t one button that switches us on and switches us off”.’

The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs receives its world premiere at this summer’s Santa Fe Opera festival, from 22 July to 25 August. www.santafeopera.org