

An Oral History of Central Pennsylvania Opera Singers, Their Role Preparation, Performance Technique, and Local Influences

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Abstract

Oral history collections and personal stories of opera singers who are involved in Opera Lancaster were found and recorded with the ultimate goals of preserving the methods, performance techniques and influences of central Pennsylvania performers. In this research, both personal and performance histories, as well as the techniques and preparation methods of each performer, were documented. A particular emphasis was placed on how performance has shaped performers' lives. Before interpreting the interviews, a general understanding of musical knowledge in regards to preparation was needed. Since each performer belongs to a local opera company (Opera Lancaster), an understanding of the latter and their role was critical in formulating three sets of interview questions. The first set focused on early career, influences, and education. The next set of questions focused on "Performance Practices Versus Performance Analysis" and "Singing style." Lastly, a set of questions was geared towards reflection of their lives and choices.

To begin, opera preparation techniques, various musical techniques, and the role of local opera companies was researched. The findings from the research were used to develop the interview questions. After the development of the questions, the next step was to contact professional opera performers, some still performing and some retired. The singers were all found through the company Opera Lancaster and were reached out to by email. All four contacts that were emailed responded positively.

Interviewees

Three of the four participants were interviewed live; the fourth was recorded via Skype. Gwynne Geyer, the first interviewee, is a retired international opera star. Miss Geyer was born in Gilbertsville, Pennsylvania, and had exposure to music from a young age through voice and French horn lessons. Geyer, after receiving both her Bachelor of Music and her Masters of Music for vocal performance at Indiana University, made her opera debut, performing in locations all over the United States, as well as in Paris, Spain, Italy, and Austria. After performing for over twenty-five years, Miss

Geyer retired and now resides in Lancaster where she teaches lessons at Franklin and Marshall College and also privately.

The second interviewee, Dr. Debra Lenssen, is a retired conductor, singer, and violinist. Though born in and now a current resident in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Lenssen lived in Germany with her family during her adolescence where she learned to speak German fluently. She continued her language education with advanced French and Italian studies at university level. She earned her BA in music, winning the Billings Performance Award her senior year. Dr. Lenssen earned her MM in voice from Northwestern University, where she was a graduate assistant to Margaret Hillis, the then Choral Director for the Chicago Symphony Chorus. She received her DMA in choral conducting from the University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music. Lenssen has taught and performed at Millersville University, Bluffton University (OH), and Ohio Northern University, and now at the Lancaster Conservatory of Music. More recently, she is active as a singer with the Lancaster Symphony Chorus, a director, and a creative staff member of Opera Lancaster.

John Darrenkamp, a retired Metropolitan star, was born and raised in Lancaster County. Darrenkamp sang as a boy-soprano before temporarily giving up music to join the Marine Corps. He returned to music after leaving the military at age 21, and performed locally at venues around Lancaster County. Darrenkamp received formal music training at the Academy of Vocal Arts in Philadelphia after winning a four-year scholarship. After graduating, Darrenkamp performed in Barcelona, Spain, before returning to the States to perform at City Opera in New York, as well as the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

Darrenkamp has performed all over the world, including places such as Hong Kong and Mexico City, and was cast in over 70 operas while at the Metropolitan Opera. Now retired, Darrenkamp teaches private voice lessons in Lancaster County, performs occasionally, and directs operas at Opera Lancaster.

The fourth and final person to be interviewed was Robert "Bobby" Brubaker. Brubaker, originally from Manheim, Pennsylvania, discovered opera as a teenager when he stumbled upon it on the radio. Intrigued, he began to research opera and discovered his talent for it. He attended the Hartt College of Music before traveling to New York and performing in the City Opera for many years. His Metropolitan debut was in 1992, which was before he began an international career. Brubaker performed in over fifty countries. His most noted role was Mime from the opera Siegfried. Brubaker, while currently staying at home with his wife, continues to perform today, with requests for performances coming from around the world.

Themes

After reviewing the interviews, several common themes were found. As it was a main criterion, each of the interviewees is or was an opera performer. One common theme found with each interviewee is a lack of musical analysis of a new piece. With some, this was due to a lack of education in the subject, while with others, harmonies were understood and generally looked at, but other music theory analyses were not seen as important to the ending production. This supports the text, "Rethinking Music," which states that over-analysis could lead to a robotic sounding performance. Another common theme is the viewpoint on the importance of staying true to oneself and to the character when performing in a role,

rather than attempting to mimic an idol or other singers. This supports “Rethinking Music” as well, in that rather than focusing on performing a song theoretically accurately, a performer should focus on performing a piece accurately to their own ability and personal experience.

Commonalities

All four interviewees found that when learning a new piece, they relied at least partially on listening to the song performed by others through video and audio recordings, as well as hearing the part on the piano. “Performance Practice Versus Performance Analysis” describes this phenomenon, stating that “with one hundred years of recorded sound now available, many musicologists and theorists have begun to add sound and film recordings to the list of available documents for study” (Bowen 1996). While all four of them had varying levels of understanding foreign languages, all agreed that understanding the translation of the text word for word of both their role and the other characters was vital to understanding the character and the meaning of the music. This finding supports the arguments that both “Singing in Style” and “Rethinking Music” make, that understanding the translation is a necessity for an accurate and well-sung performance. Finally, all four performers found the lifestyle of an opera performer to be difficult, resulting in major life sacrifices, such as not spending as much time with family or having a restricted lifestyle.

Differences

Along with the many similarities found with each interviewee, several differences among the four can be found as well. For instance, each interviewee represents a different level of performance, as well as a different level of education. The interviewee with the highest level of education also had

the shortest opera career, having had one major role at a university before turning to perform faculty recitals at various universities and singing in choirs. The interviewee with the least amount of formal training, had a longer performance career, spanning over a lifetime and including a Middle-Eastern and Eastern tour, performances in Mexico, Canada, and across the United States, as well as a solid career at the Metropolitan Opera. The interviewees with formal educations in between these extremes had the most expansive and international careers, performing all over Europe and in the Middle East, all across the United States, and at the Metropolitan Opera. A major difference between them is what emphasis was put on preparing a new role analytically: looking at time period, composer, and character analysis. Some agreed that it is important to understand the time period and the conditions that the character in the song faced to portray a character accurately and felt strongly that it betrayed the audience and the characters to do otherwise, while others disagreed, arguing that the audience does not want to see a performance based upon accuracy, but rather a performance based upon the performer’s interpretation and talent without doing intensive research, as the former did to prepare for a role.

Future Research Opportunities

There are several ways in which this research could be expanded in the future. For this research, the four interviewees pulled upon were all older and mostly retired performers due to availability and the general demographic of the company Opera Lancaster, which was used as the main contact point for each interviewee. To expand, a larger demographic could be used. A performer who is younger and not as experienced would offer new insights to this research. Another area of expansion could

possibly be that of a larger geographic area. This project specifically focused on singers living in the Lancaster area who were originally from the South-Central Pennsylvania area. Further research could be done including singers from larger areas, resulting in a larger pool of participants.

Conclusion

From these interviews, one can learn not only about the lifestyle of the performer, but also the difficulty of sustaining a career in opera performance. All of those who chose to pursue opera performance as a career struggled financially at times, resulting in strains in their personal relationships. At the same time, the amount of passion behind all four performers cannot be denied, as each of them centered their life choices on their musical careers. It was surprising to learn how little, if at all, each of them depended upon music theory when looking at a new piece, and that some knew very little about the subject to begin with. The biggest take away from these interviews is that the lifestyle chosen by each person interviewed is a serious matter; a career as a musician of any caliber requires thick skin, confidence, and most importantly, according to Darrenkamp, luck.

Despite what some might consider a lack of opportunities for opera in Lancaster, it is

still possible to have a strong and fulfilling career as an opera performer both from and in Lancaster. All of the interviewees had great talent in their professions, as each of them had been very successful at what they chose to do musically, whether it be perform nationally and/or internationally, conduct, or teach. When asked whether or not each of the members of the interview process were happy with the career choices they made, few of them had regrets; the only one who did have a regret only regretted that he had not started sooner in his career. Each participant is deeply passionate about the music they perform, both in the height of their career and the music they are currently pursuing through smaller performances, church choirs, and teaching. The interviews strongly suggest that while education is important, it is not the deciding factor to success in music; instead, talent, a strong drive, and a deep passion are the main requirements, as well as a significant amount of luck. As Brubaker said in his interview, "Inevitably, things get related to your own life. You just never know when it's going to happen. That's kind of the weird thing about being an actor, or an actress, is that you just never know when something is going to trigger a very powerful and passionate moment or response from your own life."

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