

Singers and Directors: Taking the Plunge

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Director Rhoda Levine hard at work at New York City Opera.

Did you hear about the director who told his leading soprano to jump off the top of a building? While opera aficionados love hearing stories about warring egos in the rehearsal room, many of the singer's most challenging moments are not born of some over-the-top director's concept—after all, Tosca wouldn't be Tosca if she didn't take the plunge.

Still, directors do challenge singers in ways they might not expect, from suggesting they explore a darker side of a character to asking them to don roller skates. With each production, singers are responsible for fitting their personal artistry into the larger picture. According to tenor Bill Burden, "We're entering a period where directors are the focal point. Knowing that going in—being prepared for anything—gives you a better edge."

While the rehearsal process may involve working through some conflicting ideas about character, movement, etc., the relationship between director and singer needn't be adversarial. "Directing, like teaching, is an act of friendship, and it's a two-way street," says director Rhoda Levine. She worries that there is growing lack of trust among performers. "Singers must be willing to place trust in a director. If singers approach the process in a fearful and threatened way, no one's vision will be realized," she says. "The director has been hired to be responsible for the clarity of the production. If you commit to a role, you must lay aside your fears, trust the director, and make the journey."

Why are some singers reluctant to trust directors? Director Mark Lamos thinks that some of the difficulty



Anne Ewers (Utah Opera) surrounded by the cast of *The Marriage of Figaro*. Photo by Kent Miles.

stems from differing processes. He notes that, for singers, “learning a role requires months of preparation and study before rehearsals begin. Stage direction *does* require advance preparation, but so much of my work is based on what I see in the rehearsal hall. When a singer has spent six months learning a role, it’s frustrating when the director is changing his mind from moment to moment. When I say, ‘That was wonderful, now let’s try it sitting down,’ I can seem very fickle.” For Lamos, the real creative work begins when he meets the singer. He is inspired by how they look, their physicality, how they sound singing the music, their comfort with movement, etc. For this kind of process, it’s essential that singers “keep a part of themselves open and free, ready to play in the room.”

In order to make the rehearsal period as fruitful as possible, singers must balance preparation and flexibility, according to mezzo-soprano Joyce Castle. “I come with a role thoroughly prepared. I see it from my vantage point,” she says, “but I don’t come to a first rehearsal printed. That’s death. You can do that with a recital, but if you’re going to be a collaborative singer, if you’re going to be an actor in the drama, you have to come ready to listen. You have to come with ideas about your own character, but you also have to listen to the other characters: You can’t make them be how you want them to be. Rehearsal is a very exciting time. I’m as open as I can be, because the director may have a very good idea that I hadn’t thought of.”

Openness is not the same as ignorance: Singers shouldn’t expect a director to do all of their character

work for them. “Come prepared,” says Castle. “Read the libretto—and not just your own lines. How do you fit into the whole story? Prepare like an actor prepares for a play. If you can, read other things about the piece, things about the period. Sometimes you come with things the director hasn’t thought of, and the good ones are very interested in that.”

Director Anne Ewers says she comes in “with a clear idea of where I’m headed,” but says that collaboration is critical to a production’s

success. “Singers should come in with a reservoir of information about the piece—a word-for-word translation and a sense of the composer, the style, the social milieu in which it’s set.”

Solid musical preparation is essential. “It is the singer’s responsibility to arrive prepared with a sense of how to sing a role technically, in order to be free to explore,” says tenor William Burden. “Some of the most uncomfortable situations I’ve been in are when a singer comes into rehearsals saying, ‘I have to stand this way to sing this.’ A singer has to be prepared to do almost anything.”

Burden finds that singers who come into a new situation with too many demands—from needing certain foods to needing to stand a certain way—unnecessarily limit their own experience. “You have to know what you need, but you have to know how *you* can get it,” he says. “If you make too many demands on other people, eventually they’ll lose interest in you. The bottom line is flexibility.” He thinks that universities sometimes encourage singers to be too needy and credits his touring experience with Western Opera Theater with helping him to be a more flexible performer.

Baritone James Maddalena enjoys the challenge of working with directors who have strong opinions and unusual ideas. “The greatest thing about this business is that you’re always learning something. Sometimes I’ll work with directors who don’t give me a lot of direction because they think I don’t want it or don’t need it, but I like hearing their ideas and fitting them in with mine.

It's frustrating for me to see singers who are so insecure that they want to do what they've always done. You don't get to explore a character that way."

Inevitably, there will be times when the collaborative process stalls. How should a singer handle a direction that is "not working," whether it's causing a musical problem or simply feels silly?

According to Burden, diplomacy is important. "I tend to be diplomatic by being funny," he says. "If I don't understand the direction, or if something's not clear to me, I try to find lighthearted, respectful ways to question, without causing undue stress. Diplomacy is the key. Find a noncombative way of saying, 'Is there another way to look at this?'"

"No director wants you to look bad," Maddalena points out. "I try anything, even if it sounds crazy. I always give it my best. If it doesn't work, everyone sees it—there are very few directors who insist on keeping something that's obviously not working."

Castle has also found that, in her experience, most directors are astute enough to notice when something's not working. However, she says, "If something is upsetting for me, I'll talk to the director about it. If you've come to the rehearsal with an open attitude, people will usually listen to what you have to say."

In an instance where singers experience continuing difficulty with a director, they may need to seek the assistance of an appropriate person within the company (the general director, the artistic director, artistic administrator, etc.). Ewers, who is also general director of Utah Opera, says singers should come forward in instances when they feel they're being mishandled. "The thing I respect is an artist who can be an adult. Singers who bitch and moan to their colleagues but not to the powers that be don't serve anyone."

Though members of a cast can be tempted to discuss their frustrations among themselves, this can feed

negative attitudes. "It's nice to have people outside of a production you can vent to," says Burden. "It's valuable to have that, so you don't have to get too involved in the inner politics of a cast. It's great to be able to blow off steam in another direction and come back ready to work."

The conductor is another key part of the collaborative process, from rehearsal to performance, and tension can arise when singers feel they are getting conflicting messages from conductor and director. Ewers says clear communication is important. "Say to them, 'You're asking me for one thing, and you're asking for something else—can you get together on this?'" If singers aren't comfortable with such a direct approach, she suggests they sit down with one or the other.

Lamos points out that singers can't necessarily expect that director and conductor will come into rehearsal with the same ideas about a piece. "Often, the conductor and director are also meeting on the first day of rehearsal. Each one comes with his or her own vision." Singers need to understand that director/conductor conflicts are a given."

Being open to different approaches can help singers keep their "signature roles" fresh. "If you can come without too many preconceived notions, you allow yourself to have a better experience, particularly if you're doing operas over and over," says Burden. "You can't get stuck, saying 'This is my Tamino.' That attitude worked in other generations, but it doesn't work now. In one season, I did three different productions of *The Rake's Progress* back-to-back. If you can only do it one way, your experience is going to be pretty dull."

Coming into rehearsal with the right attitude is key. "I don't expect trouble," says Castle. "I think of it as a challenge: Let's see if I can work with all kinds of directors and still bring something of myself. I really believe in the process, and I enjoy it. If you're working with a director who also enjoys it, that's wonderful." ♦