

## Technique Meets Technology: The Modern Opera Singer

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(This article originally appeared in OPERA America's Singer Career Network newsletter, *Voices*, Volume 4. Number 2. Fall 2000)

“Opera diva becomes Esther Williams performing in Cirque de Soleil!” That’s how mezzo-soprano **Mary Phillips** describes her Rhinemaiden experience in Seattle Opera’s recent *Ring Cycle*. As opera companies make greater use of technology in live productions, singers often find themselves learning techniques they never imagined during basic training—in Phillips’s case, diving and flipping high above the stage floor.

Technology has been a hot topic among opera lovers lately. When New York City Opera announced a new sound enhancement system last season, the public response ranged from optimistic to ornery. And Los Angeles Opera’s 2003 *Ring Cycle*, designed by George Lucas’s Industrial Light and Magic (best known for *Star Wars*, *Jurassic Park* and *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*) is bound to inspire lively discussion. At OPERA America’s 30th Annual Conference, professionals from across the field gathered to discuss how technology is changing the demands on the singer. The discussion was less a philosophical debate than an attempt to ascertain how we can best prepare singers for the future—whatever that future may bring. The panel included **Christopher Hahn**, then artistic administrator at Los Angeles Opera, now artistic director at Pittsburgh Opera; **Kathleen Kaun**, professor of voice at Rice University, **John J. Miller**, artist manager; **Phyllis Pancella**, mezzo-soprano; and **Joel Silberman**, director/record producer. The panel was moderated by **Gayletha Nichols**, then director of Houston Grand Opera Studio, now director of the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions.



One of the “flying” Rhinemaidens, Lisa Saffer is being fitted for her harness by assistant stage carpenter John Turner.



Richard Paul Fink as Alberich (below, right) and Mary Phillips as Wellgunde, Laura Tucker as Flosshilde, and Lisa Saffer as Woglinde in Seattle Opera's 2000 production of *Das Rheingold*.

Pancella's advice to young singers was simple: "Find your best technique for your voice, and carry that with you wherever you go," she said. "I have had to learn how to not be too precious about the sound that comes out of my head. I'm part of an opera, for crying out loud. It's not the Phyllis show—not that I wouldn't like it to be. I've had to learn to trust people who are out there listening. I have always had to rely on the conductor to tell me what the balance is. I have to rely on the conductor, the people who run the company, and now, potentially, the sound engineers to represent me and the piece as well as possible."

Amplification may be receiving the lion's share of attention these days, but technology has played a part in opera throughout its history—from the development of mechanized scenic panels in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the introduction of projected translations in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Advanced effects can be used to create realistic illusions in service of a story, as when lighting and flight technology transformed Seattle's stage into the depths of the Rhine. And some recent works, like Tod Machover's *Brain Opera* and Louis Andriessen's *Writing to Vermeer*, use a collage of media effects to create an entirely new theatrical experience.

How do singers learn to accommodate technology (and vice versa)? Seattle Opera made sure each of its Rhinemaidens was well-prepared for her airborne star turn. As soprano Lisa Saffer, who sang Woglinde, pointed out, dangling in midair could present certain

problems. "As a functioning classical singer, you need a way to support yourself." The harnesses for this production, developed in consultation with a local voice teacher, were constructed with stirrups ending in fiberglass soles, giving the singers something to push against. Phillips and Laura Tucker (who sang the roles of Wellgunde and Flosshilde, respectively) spent a week in the harnesses, a year before rehearsals began. Stephen Wadsworth (the production's director) attended their working sessions to learn what would and would not be possible. For instance, they discovered that it was easy to do somersaults and back flips, but difficult to hold a dive.

In the end, the stagehands, not the singers, were responsible for executing most of the choreography. "There were two guys for each one of us: One does the vertical bar, the other does the horizontal and pivoting. All we had to do was not be afraid, and not do things that would make us spin out of control," said Saffer. They also had to maintain an awareness of their colleagues' flight patterns. "Even if the other person was 10 or 12 feet below us, we were passing their wires. You had to think in several dimensions at once," she says.

By the time rehearsals began, "We were pretty much puppets," said Phillips. "It's freeing, in a way. If I could do all my roles flying now, it would be fine with me." The success of the stunts had much to do with advance work with Seattle's technical team. "Usually when you're working on a piece, you develop friendships with other



A scene from Piedmont Opera's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, directed by Ken Cazan.

performers, or the director, but our closest interactions were with the fly guys," said Saffer. "They really made us feel secure." (The crew included Charles T. Buck, Eric Stenehjem, John Morgan, Scott Allison, Justin Loyd, and Jeff Mosher.)

Did the singers worry about their vocal artistry being overshadowed by their aerial acrobatics? "Anything that serves the piece as a whole is important," said Phillips. "I think this is what Wagner would have wanted. We have this amazing technology; why not use it? People still heard the music, sung beautifully, sung as an ensemble—with moves that made it even better. In this case, it worked well. Of course, a flying Despina might be something else."

Technology can be used to create a "natural" illusion, or it can be employed in a more obvious way. Tod Machover, whose works include *VALIS*, *Brain Opera*, and *Resurrection*, uses computer-generated sounds in combination with voices and traditional instruments. Singer **Karol Bennett**, who has worked with Machover on a number of projects, enjoys combining her own artistry with technology. "The voice adds a human quality," she says. "To have the human voice amidst the technology is a positive and powerful statement.... The human being can lead technology instead of being led by technology."

The technology used in Machover's *Brain Opera* combines prerecorded sounds (including Bennett's own voice) with sounds derived from interactive "hyperinstruments." Bennett has worked with Machover on numerous projects over the years and has found that experiments with new technology add depth to her more traditional performances. "Singers need mental flexibility," she says. "The more you can expose yourself to new music, the more flexible you can be in any performance."

Opera is a multimedia art form by definition, and some of today's creators continue to push its boundaries. In *Writing to Vermeer*, singers shared the stage with video images, dancers, several tons of flowing water, and a cow. Soprano **Susan Narucki**, who sang the role of Vermeer's wife both at the Amsterdam premiere and at the Lincoln Center Festival revival, finds that such groundbreaking productions require an equal measure of flexibility and firmness. For instance, some of the staging, combined with the ambient noise from the technology, made subtle amplification necessary, but Narucki did not adjust her technique as a result. "I just did my thing," she said. "I tell them from the get go that I can't change the way my instrument sounds. The stronger you are about what you do, the easier it is for the sound engineer to get a picture of what you sound like."

As for some of the other production elements, Narucki initially had some concerns about the torrential down-

pours from the flies: Would wet costumes, combined with Amsterdam's frigid climate, lead to a debilitating cold? She recommends that singers in challenging situations "Put preconceived notions aside.... Try it once." However, she went on to note that it's important to look after your own health actively, so that you're able to fulfill the terms of your contract. In this case, the issue took care of itself; because the costumes were bulky and hot, the water was a relief, not a health hazard.

Modern singers must weigh a number of things when accepting a role, not just whether the role lies in their *Fach*. (Each of Seattle's Rhinemaidens was asked about fear of heights.) Singers should consider "their own range of adaptability," said Miller at OPERA America's conference. "One of my clients, Ken Cazan, recently directed a production of *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* where he actually had a cameraman in costume running around the stage, and the different images were being projected on a screen while the artist was working. It took people who were extraordinarily adaptable.... That's not for everyone."

Richard Troxell, who sang the title role in that production, had previous experiences with film, including an appearance as Pinkerton in Frédéric Mitterrand's *Madama Butterfly*. Troxell said he enjoyed having the opportunity to use a more naturalistic acting style than would be possible in a large opera house. Paradoxically, film technology allowed him to do some of his most nuanced acting in a gargantuan space; he appeared in *La traviata* in a New Zealand stadium, where video projections made intimate gestures visible to some 12,000 audience members.

Of course, cameras trained on the opera stage are nothing new, but the combination can present certain problems. "It seems that we've had a video truck parked out behind the theater this entire spring," remarked Bradley Blunt, program manager for Houston Grand Opera Studio (in attendance at the OPERA America conference). "Now that videos are becoming part of the way to get opera out to the public, particularly with streaming on the Internet, the camera is becoming more present in the theater. Where, then, is the priority? We have a camera that is getting closeups that will allow for much more nuance in acting, but in our 2,400 seat theater, that nuance won't read."

Silberman responded that singers and directors alike to define their goals with a given production. "What is the production that they're in? Are they in a television production or an opera? If they're in an opera that's being captured, then they need an awareness of the

camera; they need to understand that it's there, but they're not performing for the camera, as they would be in a studio."

As we hurtle into the new century, flexibility and curiosity seem to be the most important tools for success. "We no longer educate people with a single set of operating principles that they then use for their whole lives," said Miller. "Whether you're a physician or a lawyer, you are constantly reeducating yourself, because times are changing so rapidly. It is left up to us—the producers, the agents, the people who are putting this together, to pick and choose from what we want, instead of demanding or expecting a certain kind of conformity."

Troxell thinks that tomorrow's singers will need to learn to work in different environments, as a practical matter. "Unless you have one of the great voices of the century, you are going to have to be more versatile," he said.

How can singers begin to prepare for the unpredictable future? "It's useful to see films—independent and experimental, as well as more mainstream Hollywood productions," said Narucki. "And try to be aware of what's going on in theater. The days of the idea that opera is always going to be the way we traditionally conceive it are over. The art form is looking for a new way."

This "new way" can comprise both groundbreaking new ideas and a fresh approach to the standards. "One of the first things I noticed was that singing music of living composers made music of nonliving composers come alive," said Bennett. "I am even more sensitive to harmonic changes in older music because of my experience with new music, to how brave and original some of these composers were."

As opera moves into the new century, singers will undoubtedly face new challenges, but Kaun does not see much change ahead in the basic work of being a singer. "Opera is about the singing voice in a drama," she said. "Technology has done a lot to increase audiences, but my job—training young singers—is not going to change all that much. It's about producing your best sound, integrating that with your personality and the personality the composer gave you to work with. A voice is a voice, and we will continue to train it in that very narrow, specific way that is expected for classical singers. It's all about getting our wonderful product to the people who want to hear it. At the center of that is a human being. The human being has to stay intact, and the voice has to stay intact. I don't think you can separate them." ♦