



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

SESSION 1: Slavic Sensibilities

SPANNING THE DECADES: Chorus Edition, pt. 1

Featuring: Ian Robertson (SF Opera former chorus director) and Kip Cranna (SF Opera dramaturg emeritus)

(transcript read time ~ 22 minutes; audio run time ~ 27 minutes)

[BEGIN AUDIO]

NARRATOR: Welcome to San Francisco Opera's Centennial celebration.

KIP CRANNA: Hello everyone. This is Kip Cranna. I'm Dramaturg Emeritus at San Francisco Opera, and I'm here today -- this is July 13, 2022 -- to chat with Ian Robertson, who until recently was chorus master at San Francisco Opera, having retired after 35 years in that role. Ian, it's great to be with you. How are you?

IAN ROBERTSON: Thank you, Kip. I'm fine. I'm having a nice retirement, but I remember fondly all the years I worked with the Opera Company and of course with you, Kip.

KC: Well, there's so much to talk about, but before we get to how a Scot got to San Francisco to become chorus master, let's talk about what happened before all that. You are from Scotland, obviously. How did you get into the music business in the first place?

IR: Well, I was keen to play the piano at an early age, apparently, and so I was given piano lessons, and that developed through high school. I became accompanist to many choruses in Scotland, the Royal Scottish National Orchestra Chorus, the Edinburgh International Festival Chorus, and eventually there was an opening for a junior position at Scottish Opera, which was the national opera company of Scotland. I had gone into a teaching career at that point, but I took a half cut in salary and went to work for opera, which I never regretted.

Then I went to University of Glasgow, trained at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music, and then got this job at Scottish Opera and worked a lot with directors. Some directors like John Cox, who also worked at San Francisco Opera; and apparently San Francisco Opera was looking for a new chorus director, succeeding Richard Bradshaw. Richard showed up one rainy night in Edinburgh at a performance of *Manon Lescaut*, which I had prepared, and he took me for a drink and said, "How would you feel about going to San Francisco?," and I said, "Yeah, that sounds like a good idea.

A few months after that, I was asked to go and audition for John Pritchard, who was the music director, and I went over to Brussels and did a couple of rehearsals with a pickup chorus from London who were rehearsing *The Messiah* in German for Pritchard's performances, so I did a couple of rehearsals with

them, which was a huge delight because they were so good and so malleable. You just tell them once, and they would do everything, so great. Thereafter I was appointed. Sarah Billingham contacted me and arranged contracts, and I came over for nine months, brought the family over for the nine months, and then started.

Funny, in that first year, '87, I was about to prepare a spring season and a fall season, and I got here, and the spring season was cancelled. Terry McEwen had cancelled it for various financial reasons, which gave me more time than I ever hoped to prepare for the fall season, so we had a great time in the first fall season. That's how it all started, Kip.

KC: When you were getting this invitation to come to San Francisco, what did you know about the Company? Did you have any idea?

IR: Well, my dear old mentor, who founded Scottish Opera -- he was called Sir Alexander Gibson -- as soon as I started talking to him about that, about San Francisco, he proffered all sorts of juicy tales about Kurt Herbert Adler, and how San Francisco, the city, was based upon little hills, just like Glasgow, where we were at the time. We talked a long time about that, and he urged me, when I came over for an interview week early in '87, he said, "You really need to go and make an appointment and see Kurt Herbert Adler," which I did.

I drove out, on the wrong side of the road, to Ross, where he lived, and we had a lovely chat all afternoon. He met me on the doorstep, and he said, "You're the new chorus master at the San Francisco Opera." I said, "Yes, maestro," and he said, "Would you have the bass' sing the low D at the end of *The Magic Flute* chorus, the priest's chorus?" and I said to him, "I'm not quite sure because I haven't heard this chorus yet." He looked at me and he said, "Good answer."

KC: We should point out that Kurt Adler was retired at this point from being general director of San Francisco Opera, but still did conduct here occasionally. He died shortly after that.

IR: He died within the year. I worked with him. He was conducting a concert at Stern Grove, and we were doing a new piece with a libretto by Herb Caen and music by Conrad Susa.

KC: Conrad Susa, yes.

IR: That was kind of how I got to know him, and he and I talked a lot on the phone. He was a regular phone caller at 10 a.m. in the morning. I just enjoyed conversing with him, and the concert went off very well.

KC: I remember the piece well because I was involved in the commissioning of it. I think it was for an anniversary of Stern Grove, if I'm not mistaken.

IR: It was called *Baghdad-by-the-Bay*.

KC: *Baghdad-by-the-Bay*, text by Herb Caen, the famous San Francisco columnist who always waxed poetic about San Francisco in his Sunday columns.

IR: Even though he was from Sacramento.

KC: Right. (laughter) Backing up a little bit, before you moved over here, what did your family think about pulling up stakes and coming to Wild West California?

IR: It didn't take much thought at all because I felt, after 10 years at Scottish Opera, when I'd been conducting, I'd also been chorus director, that Scotland was a little bit limited as far as what I could do and how I could develop. One of the things, a long time ago, I used to think you know, I'd really like to visit or work in the United States, and here was this opportunity coming up.

Eleanor, my wife, and I discussed it -- our daughter was eight at the time -- and we thought it was a great idea. It would mean moving out of a baronial mansion that we just bought and had spent a lot of money resurrecting, but we kept it on for a while, eventually sold it. But we felt it was a really good move. I was a little wary about coming for nine months to uplift the whole family and come for nine months, but I was pretty sure it would succeed.

KC: It turned out to be 35 years.

IR: Thirty-five years. (laughs)

KC: Your daughter, Elaine, what did she think about all this?

IR: Well, I think she was a bit nonplussed on the Friday afternoon. She was in her posh private school in Glasgow with her uniform, and on Monday morning she was in some elementary school in the Sunset District. It was a bit of a shock. I still think she holds it against me.

KC: One of the things that occurred to me, as I was looking over all the pieces you've worked on, some 360, I believe, in your career here. You worked with not only, I think, five different general directors but four music directors, including, you mentioned, Sir John Pritchard. There's a British connection about your starting here because your predecessor, Richard Bradshaw, was English. John Pritchard, our music director, was English, so we were combing the British Isles for talent for San Francisco.

IR: Coming from the British Isles, there's a great choral tradition there, so it was kind of no surprise that I went into that business, although I initially started as a pianist and was giving recitals, but that was a little bit too lonely a life for me, and really I didn't think I was going to make it.

KC: I think I read somewhere in a bio of yours that you had planned to do a dissertation on, what was it, romantic piano music or something like that?

IR: Oh yeah. My university PhD, which was never completed, was initially entitled *Piano Music of the 20th Century*, which was fine. That was a huge subject, and I did a lot of research on the Europeans, and then I discovered the American composers, and that was another complete new hole to dig into. It was just getting a little too much for me. Actually, during my PhD period, I was playing a lot of the contemporary piano pieces that were being written by Scottish composers and English composers, and I really enjoyed playing them. I was even into performing Stockhausen piano pieces and Messiaen, *Catalogue d'oiseaux*. I had such great fun doing all of those things.

I came from a background that still had a choral aspect to it because I was playing rehearsals. I played rehearsals for Sir Adrian Boult, conducting the Edinburgh Festival Chorus in Vaughan Williams' *Sea*

Symphony. I played for Daniel Barenboim. I played for a lot of these people who came to the Edinburgh Festival. I was working with choruses, and it was a logical conclusion because I preferred a more gregarious lifestyle.

KC: Rather than a lonely practice room.

IR: Well, I had already done that, you know. At college I was practicing eight hours a day to prepare Brahms' *First Piano Concerto*, and I enjoyed that, and I enjoyed especially working with my piano teacher because he was more of an all-rounder and talked about many other aspects of music. For instance, he advised me, when I went to university, I had talked to him about string quartets, how I loved string quartets, and he advised me to go and ask for that for my PhD. But my university professor said, "No, you're playing all this piano music. You've got to do 20th century piano music."

KC: My dissertation advisor told me, "You shouldn't do a dissertation on a subject that interests you because you'll never finish. You'll keep discovering new material." Which is what you did!

IR: Well, I wish I had known that then. (laughter)

KC: Among the music directors, we mentioned John Pritchard, he was succeeded by another Brit, Scot, Donald Runnicles. Then came an Italian, Nicola Luisotti, and now we have a South Korean, Eun Sun Kim, so you've had a variety of people working within that.

IR: And all styles. It's been quite remarkable. I mean, one of the things I enjoy about being chorus director all these years in opera is how you can help the conductors and directors, if it's a true collaborative relationship, to get the best out of the chorus. Most of these conductors, in fact all of them, were really in that vein. I think John Pritchard was a little bit more remote, but certainly Donald Runnicles was always very interested in collaborating, both in production values, how you would use the chorus, how you would position the chorus, and musical values.

I worked with him 17 years here, so I really had a wonderful relationship working with him. His fluidity and his way of working with the chorus was quite unusual. It was so flexible and so understanding, and he could do things with the chorus that I had never seen anybody do, other than when I worked with Claudio Abbado at the Edinburgh Festival. There was no fuss, but it was all there. In the midst of the heat, of the rushing around of a chorus on stage, there was guidance. There was help. There was help to start putting things together when they hinting at moving in a wrong direction, and he would do it instinctively and naturally, with humor and with an understanding of what they needed, absolutely what they needed.

Then with Maestro Luisotti, there was a whole influx that was like a new gale of Italianate, heart on your sleeve, inspiration that perhaps was not always in pure clarity, but my god, if you followed the body language and followed the arms, you knew where you were. They brought that.

And now Eun Sun, I've only done a couple of things with her, but it was spectacular with her. I did *Rusalka* and just did *Fidelio* last year, and that was a revelation to me. She worked so beautifully with the chorus. The future looks good there.

KC: One of the things I think is underappreciated in the world of opera choruses is the fact that they have to memorize all this stuff in a variety of languages and styles while they're doing incredible things on stage, being shot from guns almost, hanging upside down sometimes, fighting, dancing, all kinds of stage activity. Do you find yourself ever in a position of having to go to bat for the chorus with the stage director?

IR: Well, yes. I don't feel like it's going to bat for them, but I like to have a collaborative relationship with the stage director to make sure they understand what they're asking the chorus to do. I think the memory aspect is actually a huge advantage for the chorus because they are drilled in memory.

Memorization in various languages can take quite some time, but it is the repetition and the going over again and the intimate knowledge, because of that repetition, that puts them in a great position for their musical strength and their musical flexibility when it comes to not only what the conductor wants to change or make his own or her own, but it's what the stage director is asking them to try to do. The first instinct in their body is the musical instinct. It's not, "Oh my god, I've got to move my foot now, or I've got to be over there." Their first instinct, because it's been inculcated in them, is the music. That is the saving grace, and that is what it needs. In fact, I often think that the symphony chorus world could benefit from memorization.

When I worked at the Edinburgh Festival Chorus, to go back to that, they would rehearse all year for the three-week festival. We would start the August before, the September before, and we would rehearse more than once a week right through until the next summer, and they were memorized. They were memorized, so that when they came across the Adrian Boult, the John Pritchard, all of these great conductors coming in, they weren't standing with the music. Their eyes were glued on the conductor. I always felt that made a huge difference.

KC: They would be attuned to the slightest nuance in interpretation.

IR: Slightest nuance. Their ears were open. Their eyes were alert. They were not looking at the score. Anyway, that's what I feel about symphonic choruses. I think they should be memorized. Oh, I'm going to get criticized for that.

KC: We did a lot of Russian opera during your time, particularly during the Lotfi Mansouri period as general director in the '80s, going into the '90s. That must have been a huge challenge. We did a lot of unusual pieces, Prokofiev's *War and Peace*, for example, and *The Fiery Angel*, *Ruslan and Lyudmila* of Glinka, lots of Russian stuff. Did the chorus take to that fairly well?

IR: Yeah. I mean, this chorus had done Russian before I came. I was the newbie. I had done *Onegin* in Scotland but in English, so this is my first Russian experience. I battled myself with the Cyrillic and the alphabet for a while. But we had a good language coach, Susanna Lemberskaya, and she helped us a lot with our transliteration, which is a way of writing the words that sound like Russian, but look like more understandable, more speakable words.

Again, I was concerned about, first of all, my learning curve that I had to try to be ahead of the chorus, as far as what this Russian meant, how we were going to express it. Our language coaches would clean up the pronunciation and the diction, but I had to try to understand. I think one of the first things I did was *Boris*, way back in '89 or something like that, and *Boris* was a huge undertaking, *Boris Godunov*.

KC: The chorus is actually sort of a character.

IR: A character in it, absolutely. Then that went on to *War and Peace* with Gergiev conducting, and that was my first time with a chorus trained in Russian by me and language coaches and a Russian conductor. He and I had a good chat. *War and Peace* was not huge for the chorus, but they did have that big epigraph choral section which is in the middle of it or beginning of the second half, I think, in the middle of it. That was very important for me to try to emulate the Russian sound.

I spoke to him, and I said, “Maestro, what would you like to change?,” and he said, “Well, your chorus is very, very good, but they pronounce Russian far too well.” (laughter) I was taken a little aback, but then I really realized what he meant, and that was the quality of sound that a group of Russian choristers would make would be dark and covered and less clear and would work in a different way. We tried to get the chorus to emulate that a little bit, and he seemed to be happy with it. But in the end, it was a huge chorus of, I don’t know, 90 choristers. If I had been able to go out into the Bay Area and pick up 90 Russian-speaking choristers, I would have achieved more than I achieved.

KC: I have not studied Russian, but just having heard it sung many times, it’s obvious that there are consonants that are very far back in the throat, and there’s a deep melancholy in the sound often.

IR: That’s a wonderful way of putting it. There was something else Gergiev said, and he said it to me several times. “Do not confuse the consonant. Russian singers sing on the vowels.” He wanted more vowels and less of the gutturalness or shadowiness.

KC: There’s an L sound that’s way back in the throat.

IR: Then we did *Eugene Onegin* with Temirkanov, the Russian conductor, who also directed it. He directed it. He was always in the pit or on the conducting podium, and he would direct his assistants to move people around and create the direction.

Yeah. We haven’t talked about the Czech operas and Janacek. They were very important to me because I loved that music. A lot of Janacek’s music for voice copies the word patterns of the Czech language, which tend to be short and a little abrupt. It was quite engaging to be able to work with a language coach again and match the choral music with the kind of sound that the Czechs would understand and would convey the image of this folk music-ness, but completely individual in the way the phrases were written and the little outbursts. It was good to work with Eun Sun Kim, who knew the *Rusalka* so well, to be able to hone that and to get the language because I remember Carol Isaac was the language coach, great language coach, on Janáček.

KC: That Dvořák opera was actually Eun Sun Kim’s first piece that she did here, before we decided she was the ideal music director, which she turned out to be.

IR: Right.

KC: But in the Janáček rep, we’ve done not only the standards, *Jenůfa* and *Kát’a Kabanová*, but also *Cunning Little Vixen*.

IR: I love *Cunning Little Vixen*. Not much for the chorus, but lots for little kids. The frog and get them to speak Czech properly, that's a nightmare.

KC: You did a lot of contemporary works here because we've commissioned pieces and done recently composed pieces that weren't necessarily our own commissions. I'd love to talk a bit about that.

We've had a long association with John Adams, whose latest opera, *Antony and Cleopatra*, will be the opening production of the 22/23 season. We basically have done all his pieces, and they all have big challenges for the chorus, starting with *Death of Klinghoffer*, and his earliest opera, which we got to do fairly late, which was *Nixon in China*, and then came our commission of *Doctor Atomic* and more recently *Girls of the Golden West*. What can you tell about working with John Adams and about getting the chorus to sing his music?

IR: Well, with my interest, as I explained before, in contemporary music -- I was playing a lot of contemporary piano music -- I always fascinated and wanted to work on new stuff. It was a joy that all of these new commissions, the Jake Heggie *Moby-Dick* and all of these pieces, and then John Adams, of course, the first thing we did, as you mentioned, was that *Klinghoffer*?

KC: Yes. That was, I think, the first. We were co-commissioners of that piece with a number of other companies, but we did it again, I believe, after you came. Am I right, or am I wrong?

IR: I'm trying to remember whether John Adams conducted that *Klinghoffer*. Anyway, it doesn't matter. John, he's a fascinating mind. He's a fascinating musician. He's a fascinating composer. He comes across with things which, a little like Berlioz, go in the direction that you don't expect. He lays things out. He was initially classified as a minimalist composer. I don't find that quite the case. There's more than mere minimalism going on there.

I remember the choruses in *Klinghoffer*, the choruses of the Arabs and the choruses of the Jews, two separate choruses, and they were meandering choruses which were practically impossible to memorize because you never knew. They were long, slow things, and you never knew. There was no logic or seeming logic as to where the next note was, and there were long choruses. We needed the conductor's help to guide us, but not only that, myself and Ernest Knell, in those days, who was my assistant, we would be in the wings, just pointing things. This next bit goes up. This next bit goes down.

In fact, during *Girls of the Golden West*, he presented us with this male chorus of miners, with this music which was repetitive, but not repetitive. It would follow along certain repetitive steps and then go completely in a different direction, and then it would do the same thing several times, each time going in a different direction.

KC: What seemed to be a pattern was not.

IR: Yeah, was no longer a pattern, and so it was, again, impossible to memorize. Not impossible. We did it, but it was very long, arduous, hard work. Those choruses are imprinted on my brain like a brand. I can still hear that chorus because we rehearsed it so much. At one casual moment, I said to John, "John, have you ever thought about how, when you write for the chorus, that you make it so difficult to memorize?" He said, "No, I've never thought about that."

- KC: (laughs) I bet he has, but he probably wouldn't want to admit that.
- IR: But it's interesting. In the transition in *Girls of the Golden West*, you could tell in early listening, and he would record everything on his synthesizer and electronic equipment, and we would listen to it, and it sounded like electronic music. (sings) Part of my challenge and what I enjoyed doing about it was to make it sound human and not electronic and not mechanical. But some of the music was so rhythmically jagged that it's very hard to make it not sound mechanical, but I think we achieved a lot.
- KC: I have lots of memories of the chorus sounding very impressive in these John Adams pieces. I'm thinking particularly of the Vishnu chorus in *Doctor Atomic*, invoking Hindu gods with the idea of destruction of the earth and so forth.
- IR: There was choruses that I think maybe John didn't write on a computer and was more actively involved in creating sounds of human voices. The meaning of the text and the referrals to doomsday and the destruction of the earth and all of these wonderful poems from that era, from that period, and from that region was easy to translate into heart-breaking terror. That was very easy to bring forward, in contrast to some of the later music.
- KC: I remember it being very frightening, this vision of total destruction.
- IR: And it's still there. (laughter)
- KC: What are some of the other newer pieces that you particularly recall working on?
- IR: Well, not so much newer, but I'd never done *Nixon in China*, and I was 35 years old at the time. But there it was on the schedule, and I thought I'm so looking forward to that. That had a certain satisfaction. Although it was difficult to memorize and rhythmically jagged, it still had a certain flow of the words that made it easier to sing and to express the meaning because the words are repetitive, but you've got to find John's paragraph into where he's going. What is his mental intent or his dramatic intent as he goes through the repetitions? I find that particularly engaging and challenging. There was a lot in *Klinghoffer* like that, no, *Nixon*.
- KC: *Nixon* and *Klinghoffer*, of course, both with libretti by Alice Goodman, very poetic and evocative, wonderful pictorial language that the chorus brought about, I thought, very well in those scenes.
- KC: Ian Robertson, what a pleasure to talk with you, recently retired chorus director of the San Francisco Opera. Thanks so much for being here.
- IR: My pleasure, Kip. Thank you very much.
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