



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

MEMORIES PROJECT: SF Opera Western Opera Theater (WOT), vocal artist

Featuring: Shigemi Matsumoto in conversation with Ann Farris (former SF Opera administrative and archives staff, 1969-1971 and 2014-17) and Richard Sparks (former SF Opera box office and subscription manager, 1974-1993)
(transcript read time ~ 10 minutes)

SF Opera Archives: Memories Project

The San Francisco Opera Archives has, since 2009, been interviewing leading participants in, or well-placed witnesses to, major events in the development of the San Francisco Opera Association.

In 2009, Ann Farris, former administrative staff, began typing notes as former staff and others shared their experiences with SF Opera and/or its affiliates. In 2013, Richard Sparks, former season ticket manager, joined the Archives volunteer team and has accompanied Farris as they interview former staff, artists and others. Later, they began audio recording interviews. Beginning in 2017, interview questions are included in subsequent Memories, as part of the interview reports. Most recently, Mary Seastrand, Marianne Welmers, Stan Dufford, and Richard Balthazar joined the Archives volunteer team assisting in the editing and electronic organization of these materials.

Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is held by the Archives of the San Francisco Opera Association for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

Interview conducted on: 09/29/2013

Shigemi Matsumoto Memories

1968 - 1971	Vocal Artist, Western Opera Theater
1968	Shigemi Matsumoto won the Merola Opera Program Auditions
1968/69	Western Opera Theater
1969/70	Western Opera Theater
1970/71	Western Opera Theater

Operas/Roles performed in WOT:

1968/69	<i>La Boheme</i>	Mimi and Musetta
	<i>Così fan tutte</i>	Despina
1969/70	<i>Old Maid and The Thief</i>	Letitia
	<i>Gianni Schicchi</i>	Lauretta and La Ciesca
	<i>The Medium</i>	Mrs. Gobineau
1970/71	<i>Le Nozze di Figaro</i>	Susanna (<i>sung in Italian and performed in Sacramento with orchestra</i>)
	<i>L'Elisir d'Amore</i>	Adina (<i>in Palm Springs with orchestra</i>)

San Francisco Opera Roles:

1968-1969	<i>Christopher Columbus</i>	Soprano Voice
1968-1969	<i>Die Walküre</i>	Gerhilde
1968-1969	<i>Salome</i>	A slave
1968-1969	<i>Turandot</i>	Lady-in-Waiting
1969	<i>Die Walküre</i>	Gerhilde
1969	<i>Turandot</i>	First Lady-in-Waiting
1969-1970	<i>Ariadne auf Naxos</i>	Echo
1969-1970	<i>Die Zauberflöte</i>	Papagena
1969-1970	<i>Jenufa</i>	Karolka
1969-1970	<i>L'Elisir d'Amore</i>	Gianetta
1969-1970 **SPOT	<i>La Rondine</i>	Yvette
1969-1970 **SPOT	<i>Le Nozze di Figaro</i>	Barbarina
1970-1971	<i>Carmen</i>	Frasquita
1970-1971	<i>Carmen</i>	Micaela
1970-1971	<i>Salome</i>	A slave
1971-1972	<i>Carmina Burana</i>	A Burgundian Lady
1971-1972 **SPOT	<i>Don Pasquale</i>	Norina
1972-1973 **SPOT	<i>Il Barbiere di Siviglia</i>	Rosina
1973-1974	<i>Boris Godunov</i>	Xenia
1973-1974	<i>La Boheme</i>	Mimi (<i>student</i>)
1974-1975	<i>Parsifal</i>	First Esquire
1974-1975	<i>Parsifal</i>	First Flower Maiden
1974-1975 **SPOT	<i>Don Pasquale</i>	Norina
1975-1976	<i>L'Elisir d'Amore</i>	Adina

[BEGIN TRANSCRIPTION]

Touring:

Richard Weitach was the conductor. And Richard Parinello occasionally conducted, as did Paulette Haupt. At one performance in Palm Springs, Lily Pons was in attendance also with Kurt Herbert Adler (SF Opera general director).

We toured to Alaska 1969-1970, in the Spring. Saw glaciers which were quite formidable. The terrain was amazing. Earthquake Park had a chasm created by the earthquake. Ed Corn (WOT manager) had everything organized. On this tour, Joyce Castle, Bruce Brewer, Tim Nolen, Alan Monk, David Hall Sundquist, Philip Booth, Dan Sullivan, Carolyn Lewis and others were with us.

Many Farms, Arizona 1969-1970. Housed in dorms and were given ceremonial "fire bread" baked by the tribe. We toured on a bus with a bus driver who got us through many a perilous road and into the Grand Canyon.

In San Francisco we were always doing small performances around the city - in lobbies of bank buildings or in a courtyard with people who could walk around as we sang. Philip Eisenberg played for us sometimes. This activity was different from Brown Bag. (Brown Bag performances were lunchtime entertainments, an idea Adler had as a result of seeing Brown Bag Performances in London. WOT singers performed Brown Bag.)

I learned much when touring. It was a hard way of life. Simple things like packing were difficult. I didn't know how to pack lightly. I had Samsonite luggage—red. My family came from Japan as immigrants and had steamer trunks. I brought along a steamer trunk when I first came to San Francisco. I was staying at the Evangeline Residence. It was \$25 a week including two meals daily. You had to share a bathroom. This was all new to me. It took two men to get my steamer trunk into the residence. For touring with WOT, I had two red, hard-surfaced Samsonite suitcases. And I took up space in my suitcase with a water pick. And I needed lots of clothes. Reri Grist once said to Lotfi Mansouri (SF Opera stage director and general director), “Miss Matsumoto has changed her outfit three times today.” She was correct. I would go back to the Evangeline Residence and change often.

Rehearsal Process:

Often both casts rehearsed together. It was Ghita's (Hager, stage director) preference. She taught us to respect the music and the process.

On the road, we were assigned to work with a cast and generally that casting remained during the season. We were all there as a team. And seldom did anyone get sick. Most of the time the WOT family was collegial. Yes, there were exceptions. Tim Nolen commented to me years later that the WOT years were amongst the most memorable of his career.

Stage Director Ghita Hager:

Hager was a formidable stage director and taught me a lot. Cast lists came out, and I was assigned to sing Despina (in *Cosi fan tutte*). All the cast members had sung their roles before. At the end of each rehearsal, she would give all the other cast members notes, and then they were dismissed. Then she put her attention to me. She was very direct and told me that my physical gestures were mannered. I was relying on my ballet training to support me instead of understanding the dramatic beats of the story. She was very intense, and at times she would make me cry.

In Hager's rehearsals, you couldn't sit down. If you sat, she would call you out. There was no talking, and if a janitor would come in when we were rehearsing in the Veterans Building, she would tell them with her eyes to leave the room. They knew this director was very stern. However, when Paul Hager, her former husband came in, she was subservient. You had to toe the line with both Gita and Paul Hager.

It was such a contrast between Hager and the other directors. Her productions were very formulaic. That is why I enjoyed her rehearsal process. I learned so much. While directing, she could portray any character. She said you don't know a role until you have performed it 25 times. Rehearsals were very disciplined. You had to know your cues. And, if you left the Hall for the bathroom, you better be back for your cue. I would never consider leaving a rehearsal.

One day in rehearsal in the Veterans Building, Hager asked me to verbalize Mimi's aria. I was so choked up I was in tears and couldn't get through it. Speaking our parts was one of the greatest acting lessons I have had. Richard Parinello commented: “It is good for you, without skin, just bones.”

Some people were resistant to Hager, I wasn't. I felt like clay. Whenever she asked for something I hadn't done before, my automatic reaction was to say "I have never done this before." She would respond: "I know, you always say that."

During *Ariadne auf Naxos* rehearsal, Hager and Reri Grist got into it. Both of them saw Reri's character differently. They went at it for a half an hour after which Reri prevailed.

One time, David Ward came to sing Wotan in *Die Walküre*. We were rehearsing in the Armory. Ghita Hager was being GHITA by making many directorial comments to the cast. But, when she heard Ward singing, her eyes dropped. I had never seen her like that. She was a puddle. And, yes, Ward was amazing.

When I came to SF Opera, I was married—my mother didn't like my husband. She thought he would be a distraction for my career, so I kept it a secret. One day my husband Marty came when we were all eating in the old Russian restaurant on Hayes Street. I wanted Hager to meet him. So, I took him up to her. He said hello, and she stood to shake his hand. She responded "Aha, now I understand. I knew there was something." She immediately liked Marty. She liked his strength and always greeted him with warmth and friendship. However, I was still afraid of her for quite a few years.

Later I worked with Hager in Houston, Portland, and somewhere in the Upper Mid-West. She always used the same blocking for her operas. We needed to fit into that. She had a good feeling about what was the shape of each operatic piece.

Rehearsing with Richard Weitach (conductor) was a pleasure. He was a fabulous pianist and very witty. Once, he broke a light bulb and commented: "Don't tell Adler because I will end up owing him money." Richard Parinello was equally enjoyable, as were Monroe Kanouse and Paulette Haupt.

Other Touring Personnel:

Craig Hampton was in charge of wardrobe. He really knew his job and was a rock. If something happened with our costume during a performance, he always had his stapler to secure a hem or whatever. Richard Stead was a fabulous make-up artist. Ivan van Perre also traveled with us as props manager.

One time Hampton wore a Nehru Jacket and took on a different persona. He looked like someone very important. Hampton had a crazy night life. Each year, he would enter the San Francisco Halloween parade. He made his costumes in the costume department and would win because he had access to all the jewelry and finery.

One that I truly adored was the late Larry Cannon who was a very talented make-up artist.

Personal Memories:

Adler was so generous to me. He cast me in productions where I was able to stand next to Regine Crespin and in the same season with Leontyne Price.

The greatest improvement I made was during fall season.

One time during our tour of *La bohème*, while performing Musetta, I made a broad gesture during an exit down a staircase. This caused Jim Monk (Marcello) to fall down the staircase. He simply looked at me and said, “that was not the right time to do that.”

Jim Monk was the funniest guy. One remembers the people who have a sense of humor. You learn about being a good colleague in a program like WOT. It makes a huge impact, if you work hard, are a nice person and fun to be around.

I decided to stay in the US to expand my career. Nelly Walter, my manager, said I should not bother going to Europe at this time considering the number of opera and recital engagements I already had on the books in the United States. I did sing in Europe later though.

Adler introduced me to Wolfgang Windgassen, who was Director at the Stuttgart Opera, commenting that “she was raised on my milk.” I was not engaged but was so grateful that Mr. Adler put me forth in that manner.

Speaking of Adler, he was a man of great vision beyond most. He had both business and artistic acumen. His standards were so high. He was so involved with virtually every aspect of the San Francisco Opera. He was loving and very kind to me. He could also be very demanding. One day I watched as Richard Rodzinski was yelled at by Adler. Richard left Adler’s office, walked away for a bit, shook off the dust, and went right back in for more.

Comments about others:

Margaret Norton: (1970-72—associate publicity director and photographer) I miss not seeing Margaret Norton. She was a wonderful person. She was kind and supportive and direct. I admired the way she got things done.

Matthew Farruggio: (company coordinator) was extremely warm and supportive of all of us. He really respected Adler. He never revealed the stress of working on the 4th floor. He was always upbeat.

Ed Corn: (manager of WOT) was a wonderful man and very organized. Richard Woitach said that Ed had formerly been a journalist and writer. When Ed spoke, he spoke in a rapid cadence as if he were typing.

Otto Guth: (vocal coach) had a great wit. He was a comforting soul for any singer at any level in the Company. A demonstration of his wit was evident when there was one beginning artist who was cast in a small role. For this beginner, and his performance the first night, and his first entrance, he missed his cue and didn’t sing. Then, came his second entrance, and he was so focused that he forgot to sing. Finally, for his third entrance, he fell over some cables backstage and stumbled on stage and did not sing. At the cast curtain call, this beginner fell into the prompter’s box—broke Philip Eisenberg’s glasses and the TV monitor. The next day at my coaching with Otto, he commented on the beginner’s performance the night before, “You know, he has absolutely no rhythmic accuracy.”