



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

MEMORIES PROJECT: SF Opera administrative history

Featuring: Willie Anthony Waters (conductor and SF Opera administrative staff) 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 ~ 13 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: 07/17/2017

Willie Anthony Waters Memories
1975 - 1979 Musical Assistant to the General Director (Kurt Herbert Adler)
Conductor
Musical Administrator

[BEGIN TRANSCRIPTION]

I was in Graduate School at Memphis State University (now, the University of Memphis) in Memphis, TN. The National Endowment for the Arts Opera Program sent Ed Corn to do an onsite review of Memphis Opera Theater in Memphis. Rebecca Roberts, who had been an undergraduate classmate of mine, was

performing with Western Opera Theater, of which Corn was manager. Corn was helping Kurt Herbert Adler look for a replacement for Richard (Riki) Rodzinski who was leaving Adler as his Artistic Assistant to join the Artistic Staff at the Metropolitan Opera. Rebecca asked Corn to give me her regards. Corn did so, and also observed me in rehearsal with some of the singers who were a part of Memphis Opera's touring company (Southern Opera Theater).

When Corn returned to San Francisco, he told Adler about me. Adler called and asked if I would be interested. Initially, I said no, because I hadn't finished my Masters – I still had two months to go. A couple of weeks later Adler called again to see if he could interest me. During this time, I had been thinking about the position when I received a copy of Francis Ford Coppola's magazine, *City Magazine*. On the magazine cover was a photo of Leontyne Price, my idol, and the person responsible for my intense interest in opera. I had recently worked with Beverly Sills and Martina Arroyo at Memphis Opera and called them for advice. They told me to take the job.

Adler was like a god in my mind – I knew that he had been responsible for Leontyne's American opera debut, as well as her respect and admiration for him. I also knew that San Francisco Opera was considered one of the top three opera companies in America. I called him and said yes.

Adler said: "I need you now because Rodzinski is leaving shortly, and I want you have time to work with him so you can assume his responsibilities." I explained I needed to finish my Masters. Adler invited me to come for a weekend. I arrived on Friday around noon and immediately went to the Opera. I sat waiting for hours. He came out at one point and said I will see you later. I was so amazed how friendly everybody was. I was 23 years old and very impressed.

Around dinner time, he came out and we met for three hours. He told me to come back at 10 am the next morning.

On Saturday, I spent the entire day with him in his office. I was amazed that everyone worked on Saturday! I remember Sally Billinghamurst showing me what volunteers were doing to keep track of current singers. They had created cards with details about the roles the singers had performed, and where they would be during SFO's fall season. At the time Adler was looking for a Senta for the new Ponnelle production of *The Flying Dutchman* that would be presented in the fall.

Adler asked me "How much do you know about Wagner?" I was young and my repertoire interests were mostly Verdi and Puccini and some Mozart (primarily because of my knowledge of Leontyne and her career). Not much Wagner, however. My response to his question was "It is loud."

He asked me "How much do you know about singers?" He gave me the box of artists and asked that I go through and see who was listed as having sung Senta. I came up with Gwyneth Jones.

Adler responded: "You are right."

Adler knew from my résumé that my primary instrument was piano, but that I was concentrating on conducting in graduate school.

Adler said: "I want to see what your musicianship is like." Whether or not this was preplanned I do not know, but soprano Sharon Daniels suddenly showed up. He asked me to accompany her in Anne Trulove's aria from *The Rake's Progress*. I had only ever played the cabaletta ("I Go to Him") once (ironically enough, for Rebecca Roberts when we were in undergraduate school), and did not know the recitative and cavatina ("No Word from Tom") So basically, I sight read much of the aria.

Adler then said "Go to dinner and come back."

Upon return I walked into his office. He offered me the job. I immediately accepted.

Then I had to deal with Memphis State. Immediately upon my return, I informed my boss and the head of Memphis Opera, George Osborne, that I had an offer to work for San Francisco Opera, and that it would start almost immediately. He was very upset because we had an opera in four weeks that I was to conduct.

I went to the Dean of the School of Music and his reaction was “...obviously this is what you must do.”

Two weeks later, I moved to San Francisco and began work as Adler’s “musical assistant” (the title I was given). I spent about a month with Rodzinski. The 1975 Spring Opera Theater (SPOT) season was already in rehearsal. The repertoire and casting were:

- *Death in Venice* with Ken Remo, Ronald Hedlund; John Mauceri, conductor.
- *The Pearl Fishers* with Aaron Bergell, Alan Monk, Sung-Sook Lee; Richard Dufallo, conductor.
- *The Abduction from the Seraglio* with Christine Weidinger, Maria Spacagna, David Britton, Joseph Frank, Willard White; George Cleve, conductor.
- *Viva la Mamma* with John Ferrante, Ariel Bybee, Sharon Daniels, Frederick Burchinal; Richard Parinello, conductor.

I took copious notes. Fortunately, I have a very good memory. Richard Rodzinski showed me around: Rehearsal Department, John Priest, Matt Farruggio, and the Heads of Departments on the stage. I think Richard Rodzinski stayed through opening night.

The repertoire ideas for Spring Opera Theater’s 1976, 1977, 1978, & 1979 came in a variety of ways. Among my responsibilities was to make repertoire recommendations to Adler. One idea that was already “on the books” was a theater piece featuring the music of Charles Ives for the bicentennials of both the United States and the city of San Francisco. The work was put together by conductor Richard Dufallo. It was entitled “*Meeting Mr. Ives.*”

Adler wanted to highlight Leona Mitchell, who had impressed many when she was in the Merola Opera Program and was beginning a very successful career. I suggested *L’amico Fritz* by Mascagni. Adler remembered that the *Saint Matthew Passion* was a big hit two years earlier and brought that back in 1976. *Viva la Mamma* had been a big success in 1975, so Adler wanted to repeat it in 1977.

Adler was in Europe and had dinner with Hans Werner Henze who interested him in presenting *Elegy for Young Lovers*. Originally, Adler thought seriously about presenting Henze’s *Boulevard Solitude*, but decided on *Elegy*. This was, musically, a very “contemporary” piece, and rather hard on the ears. I learned that the SPOT audience was amenable to a variety of repertoire and musical styles, and that the audience was as interested in the theatrical aspects of a work as it was with the music. Adler had often been willing to engage theater directors for productions in the main season, and felt SPOT was an even better platform for theater directors, especially young up-and-coming directors.

During this time, I discovered that Adler sometimes waited a long time before making decisions, particularly about casting. We would have auditions in New York in December and agents were always complaining about how late Adler was on this issue. We would often lose singers whom we really wanted because they would not wait for him to finally commit to hiring them.

And many a time he was proven correct. In 1976 Adler heard Carol Vaness (when she auditioned for the Merola Opera Program) and decided to mount a production of *Julius Caesar* for her (SPOT 1977). Sometimes the reason was waiting for a singer, for a vehicle for a singer, suggestions that came to him or just wanting to do the new and unusual.

Re: Fall Opera

Before talking about Fall opera let me digress and add a bit about my education. My undergraduate studies at the University of Miami began in piano. After the first year, I realized a career as a concert pianist was not really what I desired, I became interested in conducting. Since there was no conducting program *per se* at the University, I changed my major to music education with emphasis in piano, choral conducting and voice.

Then I was accepted into a new degree program offered by Memphis State University (now University of Memphis), which was a master's degree in Operatic Coaching and Conducting. My conducting teacher was Kurt Klippstatter, the late husband of Metropolitan Opera mezzo-soprano Mignon Dunn. Kurt had been an assistant to Karl Böhm in Salzburg, Vienna and Graz, among others. Memphis Opera Theater at Memphis State University had a touring arm, Southern Opera Theater (SOT), based on the concept of Western Opera Theater (WOT.) I was music director and principal conductor of SOT. We did everything – help build costumes, sets. In addition, I was chorus master, rehearsal pianist, and was teaching music appreciation and one other course at the University. However, I had never done any administrative work, but was interested in doing so.

As the Fall Opera season approached just the idea of being on staff at SFO, the # 2 opera company in the country with a huge reputation was a terrifying proposition. I took copious notes from Richard and realized that what I learned from SPOT four months earlier could apply to my responsibilities with Fall Opera. I was in charge of the rehearsal department, and had to compile and make all schedules for principal artists, orchestra, chorus, etc. At that point, I would often call Richard Rodzinski at the Met for advice. But everybody: the Department Heads, the Secretaries, Sally Billinghamurst (who was invaluable in her knowledge of what Richard did), Matt Farruggio, John Priest, Ruth Felt – were all very supportive. They knew how difficult the job was, and how crucial it was to *their* work that I get *mine* right. In my first Fall season (1975) there were many small roles that had not been cast or contracted when I arrived in March. Rodzinski had outlined who they would be. I had to make sure the artists were available. Artistic Administrator John Ludwig then negotiated the contracts.

Luckily, I was a workaholic, and working for and with Adler, this was essential. I usually came in at 10 am – and had no problem being there until after major rehearsals or performances ended (often 10:30/11:00 pm). Basically, I had to attend every rehearsal onstage and most performances – the only time I could count on NOT having to attend a performance was on Tuesday night – “dress night” for the audience. Since, during the season I was either working or had to be on call on weekends, it was great to have at least *one* evening of the week on which I could “do” something other than opera! There is no question I couldn't have paid for the lessons I learned at SFO and working for Adler.

I was with Greater Miami Opera for 14 years, seven of those as Artistic Director. When I went to Greater Miami Opera (now Florida Grand Opera) in 1981 first as Music Administrator and eventually as Artistic Director, I set up some of the operating systems and used some of the ideas we employed at SFO. Our goal was that Miami be recognized as a major opera company, and to achieve that goal, we had to operate like the “majors.” One big difference between SFO and Miami was that Miami had a second cast for each of the four operas presented during the season (called the “National Series” since it utilized ONLY young American opera singers), who performed in English, and covered the “International Cast” (in the original language).

As at SFO, I was responsible for all the artistic schedules (including rehearsals and performances of the chorus and orchestra) and coordinated those with the technical/production department and the theater. I auditioned the chorus and orchestra and generated their contracts.

I learned artistic integrity at San Francisco Opera. SFO prepared me for working as a conductor with smaller opera companies. I learned from Adler that you must always strive for the highest. If not, the audience will revolt. Small roles are just as important as the stars. Balanced casting is essential.

In my first season in Miami, we did *La Traviata*. I engaged artists from New York for practically all of the secondary roles. I was highly criticized by singers living in Miami. I was honest – there were few singers in Miami at the time that were of the artistic quality that I set as my goal for the company. Adler would sometimes say “he/she is not enough for us” and that was my conclusion in Miami at the time.

I stayed with SFO for four years, 1975–1979. I had signed a two year contract with Adler initially. And, my thought was, after signing, I would learn what I could learn and then return to pursuing my conducting career. That was always my goal. In 1978 I began to be offered conducting opportunities. I was having dinner in New York with Martina Arroyo and her husband Michel Maurel (my first manager), who said: “Martina will do *Il Trovatore* in Detroit in September/October 1979, and she would like you to conduct it.” I had conducted some rehearsals of *La Forza del Destino* with Arroyo in Memphis, and she was impressed. Initially, I said no because I planned to be at SFO in the Fall.

Soon after that, another opera company, Opera South based in Jackson, MS, also asked me to conduct a production in the Fall of 1979.

I had several conversations with Martina Arroyo who said: “if you want to conduct, now is the time to do it.” I consulted Beverly Sills, and she concurred.

Right before we left for our annual December audition trip to New York, I made the decision to resign and accept the conducting offers. I informed Adler the day before I left (I always spent one week auditioning in NY prior to Adler). He was surprised and said, “we will talk about this in NY.” And we did. He tried to get me to change my mind. However, I believe in pre-determination – this was a sign from God.

He accepted the resignation and asked if I could do the Fall season and help mentor my successor as Richard had done with me. I said no, because the conducting engagements would conflict. We had a wonderful time that New York in December. There were couple of instances when, after dinner, Adler and I were just singing as we walked down the street, sort of like a father/son relationship. I did come back in the fall of 1980, for about a month, to mentor Ernest Knell and John Miner.

During one of my last meetings with him, Adler was very paternal, saying “I will do anything I can to help you in your career.” And not long after he called asking if I would conduct *Lost in the Stars* for Western Opera Theater, which I immediately accepted.

Fast forward to the present. I find myself talking about Adler as though he is still alive. I often relay to my students something that Adler said, or did, that I think would be helpful to them. He could display a wonderful sense of humor (I often made him laugh), and there are many statements/comments he made over the years that stuck with me, that I use when the situation warrants.

For example, sometimes if a performance was not going so well, Adler would say: “Remember, it is STILL a great opera.” I remember a conversation with Adler, Otto Guth and me, when we were discussing casting for *La Traviata* for 1980. He wanted to engage an aging European artist as Flora because she could be counted on to have a lot of personality, thereby making the role “live.” I naively asked, “but can she still sing Flora?” Otto countered “If you let her.”

After his retirement from SFO, Adler came to Miami to conduct a concert with Luciano Pavarotti. It was great to be with him again, OUTSIDE of the opera house. It was clear that there was a different relationship – he treated me more as a colleague than an employee. That was GREATLY appreciated.

One of the major things I learned while working for Adler was how to cast an opera; how to combine voices (especially in Mozart), how to cast for large theaters vs small theaters; the importance of physical AND vocal personality.

I remember after a rather "weird" *Traviata* (SPOT 1979), he asked my opinion. After telling him I was not crazy about it, he confessed, "it's not MY *Traviata*, but it is effective!" THAT was a great lesson - just because you don't like something doesn't mean it's not good; one must think objectively. And, by extension, as a general/artistic director, just because you don't personally like a work doesn't mean you should not program it. He thought *Adriana Lecouvreur* was an inferior piece, but because Scotto wanted to do it (Fall 1977), and he adored her, he reluctantly agreed. We cast it from strength, even down to the great Giuseppe Taddei (my idea!) as Michonnet. The combination of Scotto/Obratsova/Gavazzeni brought fire to a work that can be very effective theatrically, but certainly is not considered top-drawer verismo. Every work is not a masterpiece! But a great performance can make it seem better than it is. Lesson learned!!

I rode to events with him on a few occasions - to Paul Masson Vineyard for a Merola performance, to Jean Donnell's house in Sonoma for a Merola outing, to Concord for a SPOT performance of *La Rondine*, and a few other times. During those times, we talked about opera and music in general, but not so much about San Francisco Opera specifically. Getting to spend time with him outside of the office was a relaxing time!

I am truly blessed to have been afforded the opportunity to work with Adler. There is no doubt in my mind - I would not have become who I am today without my time with Adler and SFO!