



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

SESSION 2: Parlez-vous français?

CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE: Roger Pines in conversation with Dame Felicity Palmer

Team Player

**DAME FELICITY PALMER REMEMBERS REHEARSING AND PERFORMING IN SAN FRANCISCO OPERA'S
1999 PRODUCTION OF *LOUISE***

BY ROGER PINES

(read time ~ 8 minutes)

The celebrated English mezzo-soprano spoke on Zoom with Roger Pines last May 2022 from her home in London.

ROGER PINES [RP]: Was the mother in *Louise* a role debut?

DAME FELICITY PALMER [DFP]: Yes. It was early-ish days for me in opera, and I was still finding my feet. But I love singing in French very much, and I thought, "San Francisco, and that cast—what could possibly go wrong?"

RP: Did you ever sing it anywhere else?

DFP: No, that was the only time. I thoroughly enjoyed it, but I've never been offered it again.

RP: Was it a role that you'd already been thinking of adding to your repertoire?

DFP: Not at all. At the time, if you said "Charpentier" to someone, it just meant "Depuis le jour." I didn't know *Louise* at all, and I think I'm right in saying that none of us [the other stars were Renée Fleming, Jerry Hadley, and Samuel Ramey] had done it before. It was interesting to be doing something where there was a blank page. None of us came to it with an accepted idea of how it should go. That can be a problem with other operas, where we've got a certain idea in our minds and then are challenged in the production. In this case, we all had to learn it from scratch—we had nothing to go on. That was actually refreshing.

RP: How does one take a hard-edged woman like the mother and make her sympathetic?

DFF: In coming into opera as a mezzo [after singing for several years as a soprano], one thing that has been most interesting to me is to look at some of the horrific women that I've had to play and wonder *why* they were so horrific. There's usually a reason why they're jealous or upset or worn down. In this opera, there's the father's obsession with Louise; for her mother, there must have been some very difficult feelings around that. Meanwhile, Louise has found this young man that her mother doesn't approve of, and the mother is seeing her husband favor Louise over her.

RP: Portraying the mother, were you able to draw on your own life?

DF: I had a fairly angry mother, but with a lot of these people, underneath there is a softness about them. In Act III, it's obviously really important to the mother to get Louise back home to the father, who is ill. In a way, it was I who had thrown Louise out and made her leave home, by disapproving of the man she loved. I like taking it back to how one would behave in such a situation. I don't know exactly, but if Louise *didn't* come back, and if the father died, the mother would then be on her own. There must have been some fear in her.

RP: This opera can be presented essentially as a sung play.

DFF: [Director] Lotfi Mansouri brought us a photocopy of a production book written by a mezzo who knew Charpentier. It had details of the blocking, descriptions of each character—their looks and attributes—and the importance of detail and reality. Lotfi took from that and impressed on us that he wanted it to be like a play, so that the characters were clear. One thing I found difficult onstage was the amount of business. For instance, when we did Act One, it went all right but the oven door fell off, there was no needle to sew with, the coffee pot didn't open, and the ironing board was a nightmare! Very often those practicalities can take over.

RP: The mother is an ordinary working-class woman. Her lines are generally about ordinary things and straightforward, uncomplicated feelings. Nonetheless, do you remember finding the text enjoyable to sing and interpret, however ordinary the actual content of the mother's lines may have been?

DFF: Once you're confronted with musical rehearsals and staging rehearsals and all the business, that does take precedence until everything is in place and you can then revert to enjoying what you're actually *saying*. But I did enjoy the words, and even though the mother is saying very straightforward things, the stuff *behind* what she's saying could be seen as not quite as simple as it appears! Yes, she may be telling Julien [Louise's lover] to get lost, but behind it is an inner frustration and sadness with life. That's what I like looking for—what's behind the text. In *Louise*, the composer has done his bit, and our job—with the help of Lotfi and [conductor] Patrick Summers—is somehow transmitting that and adding a bit of our own stuff, if you like.

RP: This is probably the only role you've ever had where you're saying things as mundane as "Go to sleep, it's bed-time."

DFP: This is what we'd call "kitchen sink drama." It's fun just playing home life onstage!

RP: *Louise* is quite a long opera, which means every production has to consider whether to perform it absolutely complete or to use certain cuts.

DF: In San Francisco, there was some opening of cuts during rehearsals. There were three editions, all different, with many mistakes in note values and in the orchestral parts. We'd be told, "We're opening this cut—could you learn it?" Those things take some time and get frustrating when you arrive thinking you know it, and then there's something thrown at you. But that's fair enough—*Louise* hadn't been done very often. A big cut was opened for Sam, probably also for Renée, and there was one thrown at me, too. The coaches take you aside and bash it into you!

RP: It must have been great to have such a terrific team in rehearsal, with all of you discovering the piece together.

DFP: I remember it as an extremely happy few weeks. We were lucky—not always the case in opera—to have, in Lotfi, a director who had very clear ideas of how he wanted to do it.

RP: What was his approach?

DFP: [In Louise's scenes at home with her parents] he was very insistent that it ring true as a household in action. It had to be a proper coffee pot, and so on. Nothing was fake. When we did it onstage, there was a lot to think about—not just the music, but timing it all so one was always in the right place. And since I was the mother, I had to do most of the work. She has to prepare a whole meal! But Lotfi also wanted the characters to integrate with each other, to *connect* with each other as human beings would. It seemed to me that the opera demanded very much acting ability. Apart from Louise's aria, it didn't have a lot to do with singing. It's about everyday conversation, which is actually much harder to do than one imagines. We're taught to emote, but this wasn't about emoting! I've often said to young singers, "All you're saying is 'Put that glass on the table.' You wouldn't add anything if you were saying it, so why are you singing it like an opera singer?" [DFP sings that phrase, in full voice]. That's what singers are taught to do, because that's what we imagine opera is about, but *Louise* is an everyday story about a family in some difficulty.

RP: What about the rest of the team?

DFP: I was thrilled to be working with them all. Patrick was absolutely wonderful. I'd worked with Sam Ramey before in *Figaro* and with both Sam and Jerry Hadley in *The Rake's Progress*, but I hadn't previously been onstage with Renée Fleming. I remember hearing her practicing "Depuis le jour" in her dressing room before that act—I thought, "My God, how she prepares is a lesson for every singer." At every orchestral rehearsal, I noted how wonderful it was.

RP: The mother was the third of four roles you sang in San Francisco. What do you cherish most about the company itself, in terms of the atmosphere that it offers artists?

DFP: I always found that, from the minute you arrived, the rehearsal department was always very friendly, and I thought about how professional the company was. You were really cared for and helped, even if you thought, “Well, I’m just a sort of nobody from England.” Because you don’t know—you walk into these big opera houses in America and it’s quite intimidating. It was a city and a company that I loved going to, and I wish I’d done more, but there you are—that’s life!

***Roger Pines**, who recently concluded a 23-year tenure as dramaturg of Lyric Opera of Chicago, is a contributing writer to Opera News, Opera (U.K.), and programs of opera companies and recordings internationally. He has been on the faculty of Northwestern University’s Bienen School of Music for the past three years.*