



## STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

### SESSION 2: Parlez-vous français?

CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE: Kenneth Overton writing on *Werther*, 1978

#### *Werther*, 1978: One for the History Books

BY KENNETH OVERTON

(read time ~ 8 minutes)

As a 19-year-old, I was a member of The Chautauqua Opera Young Artist Studio. That season I had the great fortune of working with Maestro Willie Anthony Waters. After that incredible summer, he became a mentor of mine. A few years after we initially met, he gave me a large cardboard box. In this box were several cassette tapes, (yes, I know I am dating myself here). These cassette tapes were labeled in great detail and they contained several live performances, radio broadcasts and pirated recordings of all the singers from what he called “The Golden Age of Singing.” Imagine my excitement when I was able to listen to live performances of Price, Corelli, Bergonzi, Cappuccilli, Simionato, Cossotto, Tebaldi, Callas, Bastianini, and so many more! One of the reasons he gave me these tapes was because he wanted me to learn how to really listen. He wanted me to learn what to listen for, how to understand the voice, the phrasing, the orchestration, and how singers fearlessly navigated live performances as opposed to the studio recordings that I had been enjoying as a neophyte. Needless to say, taking on this *Streaming the First Century* assignment and having the pleasure to listen to an incredible live performance that included some of my favorite artists was something I have been prepared for many years ago.

I must admit, the opera *Werther* was not extremely high on my list of operas that I would listen to for the sheer enjoyment of listening. I am more of a Verdi, Mozart, Puccini, and American Opera fanatic for that. In fact, I had only seen *Werther* performed live one time, and it was in the very summer where I met Maestro Waters in Chautauqua, and he was conducting it. However, when the menu displayed a cast that included in the title role, a young dashing Jose Carreras, my curiosity was piqued. It is not often that you find at the time, a 32-year-old tenor with all the ingredients to sing *Werther*. I was familiar with his Don José in *Carmen* in later years, but this part requires innocence, restraint, lyricism, and heroism from a truly seasoned artist.

It is also not lost on me that San Francisco Opera has had an exceptionally long history of employing artists of color to grace their stage way before it became popular to do so. Here in this performance, we

have two shining examples, a 30-year-old Kathleen Battle just before her meteoric rise as the younger sister Sophie, and one of the greatest singing actresses of our time, the recent and dearly departed Maria Ewing as her older sister Charlotte. This is a dream of a part for a mezzo-soprano with the gifts she possesses, it's a win for everybody especially those who witnessed it live.

As with most French opera, and particularly Massenet, there is a gorgeous overture and a couple of entre-acts where the conductor and orchestra really get to show their stuff while setting the scene. This production is no exception. Maestro Antonio de Almedia immediately takes us to the summer of 1780 Frankfurt, Germany with the gorgeous sounds he evokes from the orchestra. Also, in this overture you can clearly hear the impending love, tension, jealousy, torment, and grief that is soon to come. However, before we get to the meat of the drama, Massenet sets the opening scene with the singing of a Christmas Carol in July!

For me, the mark of a great composer is how they set text. The role of Werther of course is a poet and the words he sings throughout the opera's libretto are deliberately descriptive, colorful, and direct. Massenet takes full advantage of this by writing the tenor's lines with such expansive and expressive beauty. We are taken with the character of Werther from the very start, and in this performance, Carreras gives everything Massenet could possibly have meant. His opening aria "Je ne sais si je veuille" shows him at his lyrical and youthful best. He sings of the wonder and remembrance of his nature-filled surroundings as an "air of paradise." It could only be the power of a promise made to a dying mother that could keep Charlotte away from following her heart's true passion.

Just as beautifully as the opera progresses, so does the vocalism of our central character. In his second aria "Lors que L'enfant revient d'un voyage" we hear him use every color in the crayola box available to him as he sings of the contemplation of suicide, and later for the hopeful forgiveness and understanding of a child's harmless disobedience. The climactic high B natural is as tumultuous as a tidal wave, but Carreras's ability to then scale the voice down like a God calming the sea, is one of my favorite moments in this performance! Of course, we all wait to hear the most popular aria in the opera "Pourquoi me reveiller," it is a challenge for any tenor, but again Carreras triumphs! I find it amazing that at such an early age, and without the aid of a studio, that San Francisco Opera has captured one of his finest performances. It is no surprise that Werther would become a staple in his repertoire.

Hearing the always angelic voice of Kathleen Battle is a treat in any performance, but here I had to listen a few times to resolve within myself that it was indeed Ms. Battle. This is probably the earliest recording I have ever heard of her.

The role of Sophie can sometimes be considered a "thankless" part. She is the only bright spot musically and dramatically in a piece with such dark and rich texture. It can often be assigned to a young lyric soprano with just a beautiful voice, but in this performance, there is a foreshadowing of what was to come of an iconic career. Ms. Battle absolutely dazzles in the role and her sparkling soprano is a welcome treat particularly in "Du gai soleil plein de flame." Her use of the text, in combination with the melodic

phrasing, reveals an artist beyond her 30 years. Then of course her signature top notes are like a basketball player hitting the game-winning three-point shot every time. Whoever was the genius that cast she and Ms. Ewing as sisters, deserves a continuous round of applause. The scene they share in the third act is truly magical. The bright and colorful joy in Kathleen juxtaposed with the burnished melancholy of Maria makes for great listening.

And speaking of Ms. Ewing... I saved speaking about her until the end, for a couple of reasons. One is because hers is the performance in this recording that most deeply affected me, and another is because I do not believe she ever received all the accolades that her talent deserved. It saddens me that we often wait until great artists have passed to then adorn them with the flowers they should have received while they were with us.

Although Charlotte is only 20 years old in the opera, Ms. Ewing gives us a well-seasoned, beautifully mature yet youthful performance. When we first hear her in Act I, we hear the respectful voice of a young woman who is now the mother figure to her seven siblings. There is a care and lilt to the voice that is most attractive as she greets Werther. It is impossible to talk about this opera and not mention two very important musical moments. The aria “Va laisse couler me larme” known to most singers as the “mezzo national anthem.” This fairly short aria is often sung for auditions and competitions, but here it is in the hands of a most capable singing actress. Ms. Ewing takes Massenet’s melody, which looks simple on paper, and fashions it into a most gratifying moment in this recording. The appropriate use of the overtones and subtle chest tones are the signs of a true veteran. The crowning jewel for me, is the Letter Scene at the top of the third act. Here is Maria at her absolute best. As Charlotte reads the letters that Werther has written to her, Maria opens her artistic toolbox and painfully, and hauntingly bring us along for a tumultuous ride. The way she uses her voice when she is recalling how charming the letters are, yet how much pain they bring her, is truly masterful. I went back and listened to “Ces lettres, ces lettres” time and time again, and I believe you will too. Listen closely to the words “O Charlotte et tu fre mi ras.” Brava Maria!

What an incredible feat for San Francisco Opera, that in 1978 could stage *Werther* with a Spanish Tenor and two Black American Women, all of whom were at the beginnings of their global careers. This recording is one for the history books.

***Kenneth Overton** is lauded for blending his opulent baritone with magnetic, varied portrayals that seemingly “emanate from deep within body and soul.” Kenneth Overton’s symphonious baritone voice has sent him around the globe, making him one of the most sought-after opera singers of his generation. Amidst performing, Kenneth serves as co-founder and artistic director of Opera Noire of New York, a performing arts organization created to empower African-American artists to reach their full creative potential in a creative supportive environment.*