



## STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

### SESSION 2: Parlez-vous français?

#### Broadcast Intermission Interview

#### *Manon Lescaut*, 1974

Featuring: Leontyne Price (role: Manon) and Otto Guth (former SF Opera administration)

(transcript read time ~ 15 minutes; audio run time ~ 17 minutes)

[BEGIN AUDIO]

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

SCOTT BEACH, BROADCAST HOST: Otto Guth, the Musical Supervisor of the San Francisco Opera, who last year celebrated his 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary with the company, and is a truly charming gentleman. I've had the pleasure of knowing him for several years now, and it's a great pleasure to welcome him to our intermission. He interviews his longtime friend, our leading soprano in this evening's performance of *Manon Lescaut*, Leontyne Price.

OTTO GUTH [OG]: Leontyne, here we are. Let's talk a little bit about how come you are singing *Manon Lescaut* now. Did you want to sing it a long time?

LEONTYNE PRICE [LP]: No, actually, Otto. It's just the list of Verdi heroines has sort of run out, and my shortlist of Puccini heroines had run out, and I sort of... I think I got the bug from doing *Il tabarro*, which I did here two seasons ago, to do something a little more histrionically adventurous, and *Manon* was the obvious choice. And then Maestro Adler asked me. It seemed everything worked sort of simultaneously, and so here we are, together again. (laughs)

OG: Do you enjoy the part?

LP: I'm mad for her.

OG: I know it.

LP: I think she is –

OG: I know.

LP: -- exquisite. She has so many facets to her that I hope to be discovering years hence, you know –

OG: And you know –

LP: -- and to sing it is an absolute joy.

OG: There's such a lot of beautiful singing to be done.

LP: It is an extraordinarily beautiful score.

OG: Did you go into any research?

LP: Yes. I have a lovely friend who gave me an edition directly translated from the French, the story of the Abbé Prévost. There are only 494 copies, editions, I think, that are existing, that had been translated into English, and as a wonderful gift my friend [Peggy Chisholm?] gave me this for the beginning of my background on *Manon*. This I have just gobbled up. Also, I've been to the libraries. I found very, very helpful as research the book by George Marek from RCA, his book on Puccini, and also I think it was William Ashbrook, two English books which have been most helpful, and I'm still gobbling up different things, you know, excerpts here and there.

OG: You are quite an expert now. (laughter) You are quite an expert. If I want to know something about *Manon*, I'm going to come to you.

LP: All right, while it's still fresh in my mind. (laughs)

OG: Do you like doing operas for the first time here in San Francisco with us? Why?

LP: Yes, for many reasons. The first place, I am blissfully happy here, which probably may be the reason that I come so often. Also, it's sort of like a good luck charm, because I've added absolutely every role that's in my repertoire I've done here, practically everything, and it has worked, really, as an extraordinary *buona fortuna* charm, because it seems to sort of be the kickoff for everything that sort of I keep in the repertoire on a regular basis, you know? (laughs)

OG: Do you have already plans for the next new role?

LP: I'd like to give, one of these days, the *Rosenkavalier* a stab.

OG: Oh, you would?

LP: Just for fun. Why not, you know?

OG: Very good.

LP: And the Kaiserin in *Die Frau ohne Schatten* is a superb, superb role. I would one of these days like to do the Countess in *The Marriage of Figaro*. I haven't settled on one part, but these are possibilities that I have... I like the idea of the *Trittico*, or rather the *Suor Angelica* –

OG: You would like to do –

LP: -- and to do it in connection with the *Tabarro*.

OG: Very, very interesting.

LP: These are some things I've been sort of kicking around, you know.

OG: Are you going to do a lot of opera the next year or next two years -- I know you're engaged far ahead into the future -- or are you more on the concert line?

LP: Otto, it's 50/50. The career for the last, I would say, four seasons has been divided into three parts: the recording, I guess you call, creative, artistic level, one part of it; one third concerts, which include appearances with orchestra and in recital with my darling pianist, David Garvey; and then the other third opera. So this is sort of a *Trittico* part of my career, I guess. And I like it because I'm never bored. I never lack in excitement. And changing from one -- well, hyper-technically, I guess they are three different mediums, but it's wonderful to sort of go in and out. It keeps me kind on my tippy-toes.

OG: Yes, yes. You told me that you had sung the duet, great love duet from *Manon Lescaut*, on your record with Domingo.

LP: Exactly a month ago, in London, yes, Plácido Domingo and myself did four love duets, which the flip side includes the *Manon Lescaut* duet and the *Butterfly* duet, and the other side two Verdi duets, the *Ballo in maschera* and *Otello*.

OG: Wonderful. I always thought you should sing this.

LP: Oh, well, Otto, you and I have discussed this a lot, and I have many people who disagree with me vehemently on my ideas about Desdemona, but sticking straight, which Verdi did I think more technically than possibly in any of the scores that he took from great classics, I think that the character of Desdemona represents fragility itself, in a way, a decorative figure, and there are so many technical references to the picture of this fragility, which sort of borders on the picture being a very [bianda] Bianca sort of ambience. Now, it would be wonderful if there could be some genius in the world who could change the story around, but since there isn't I'd love to sing the part probably on recordings, but I do have a slight hesitation about doing it onstage, because, I mean, it's just –

OG: Well, I guess –

LP: What can I tell you? It's a little tricky, you know.

OG: The best would be really to change the story around, because –

LP: Well, if they could do that I'd be happy to.

OG: -- I don't want it to change you. I don't want it to change you.

LP: Oh, (laughs) well, maybe that's why I haven't done it. It's a glorious part.

OG: Tell me, tell me: do you feel that at this point the climate for Black artists -- after all, this goes into the same problem as Desdemona –

LP: Yes.

OG: -- do you think the climate has changed for the better, and would you care to say anything about –

LP: Yes, I would, as a matter of fact. I'm sort of on a soapbox about that. I do think that as far as the female artist is concerned that things are sort of a little less tight, but I do find, in great wonderment -- I don't understand why. The immense talent in our Black young men has not been tapped at all. I find this hard to believe that there are none that are qualified in the operatic ambience not to be on the scene by now. This worries me a great deal, as does the sort of still choice of two things: either a tokenism, of which I am a spear bearer, (laughter) as sort of an ex-token Black. I still don't understand -- you know, it is devastating to see that there are not enough -- a fantastic amount of instrumental talents that we have, that are not flowing through in major orchestras, symphony orchestras, operatic orchestras. These two things disturb me greatly, and I have talked to a number of young people, particularly the young men, who seem to think that it is a gamble. Some of them who have families find it almost too much of a gamble to sort of put their eggs in one basket like this. That is one of their straight answers, but to me, I think in many senses they're not represented because it's simply sort of a traditional copout. People are not ready, I think, maybe to... The old hat is not ready to accept -- which is ridiculous, stupid, actually -- the Black male hero as they seem to find it a little less tricky to accept the Black female heroine, you know.

OG: Yes.

LP: And that's got to be straightened out, soon. I certainly hope to do everything I can in that respect.

OG: Do you do anything...? I think you have some, as I know, female Black young singers, whom you're helping, whom you chaperone.

LP: Yes, I have one protégée that I think is just destined to have a very important career.

OG: Why don't you give her a plug and say who she is? (laughs)

LP: I certainly will. Her name is Joyce Mathis, and she's a glory, as far as I'm concerned, and I really love her as a human being. She has all the qualities, I think, to make a great artist -- a superb talent; she works

hard -- and I have great faith that she is going to branch into a very important career. I'm very interested in her.

OG: Anybody else?

LP: Well, I have one lovely friend from whom I'm taking cues that I'd like to sort of bring under my wing. Actually, she has much better eyes than I do. Her name is Peggy Eason, and if you didn't know her as well as I did some people would say that she's blind, which, in her case, is absolutely incidental. She's the most provocative, most scintillating young person I've had in my life in a long, long time. She's teaching me a great deal about seeing. She has a lovely voice and is very interested in branching out into a musical career, possibly in the teaching area. So these two young ladies, lovely, Black young ladies, are sort of teaching me a whole lot about life, and about a lot of things that I should have known earlier, and it's a joy to have them with me in my life.

OG: Tell me, because you mentioned teaching career: would you ever be...? You know, the Russians think that every important artist must be a teacher, too. How do you feel about this? I don't agree, by the way, but what do you feel about this?

LP: I don't either, in general, Otto. I think I would eventually like to try to share some of my ideas and experiences with other artists, and I think in the case of one of these young ladies I tend to do this now. I'm available to them whenever they need me. However, I think that from a strictly sopranos and tenors, all of us operatically speaking are in a race all our own, and we don't tend to be, you know, really magnanimous. (laughter) I think that as long as you're on the scene, it's almost impossible to be completely involved with anyone else, except your own place when the overture starts. Now, this obviously cannot last indefinitely. I'm trying to string it out as long as I can, but when --

OG: You don't show any indication. You don't show any indication.

LP: (laughs) But while I am active, before too long -- and I have begun, in some senses -- I would like to try to share maybe even eventually some vocal experiences, and I think there may be some things that I could share with a young artist that would help. I would like to go into a studio, perhaps in my own home, in another year, two years or so, and start this sort of kickoff on this particular football team. I don't know if I'll be any good at it, but I certainly want to be available to try it, you know, because I really don't want to be a bitter -- what shall we say -- ex-Aida or something like that, (laughter) or a nonfunctioning ex-Manon Lescaut. So I'd like to try it while I'm still active, and try to see if maybe I can make an exception on this whole thing about the ego trips that we do take as operatic singers.

OG: For the time being, keep your singing up, (laughter) keep your ego trips up. You are doing fine.

LP: Thank you.

OG: Let's just for a moment come back to the performance.

LP: Yes.

OG: Do you find the Company good and congenial?

LP: I have to repeat, again, one of the joys of coming to San Francisco are the entire ambiance is the most workable in any opera house I've ever been in. The conditions are not only... They are professional and pleasant at the same time. Of course, this is due from where it comes, from the top of the helm, and that is Maestro Kurt Herbert Adler, whom I have known for years, and actually is the most adventurous operatic impresario in the world, as far as I'm concerned. And I always look forward to it. It's an adventure of excitement for me, and I do think that this whole attitude and the whole nature, the whole atmosphere has to start from the top of the administration, and it seems to work its way down. As I say, it comes from the top. I think the whole operatic field is sort of like the same attitude that athletes have toward baseball -- and football, too, you know, but particularly baseball, or maybe a bullfight. (laughter) Because it really is the excitement of the smell of blood, I think, that makes opera very exciting, and the sense of the arena. So I think of it also, you know, as a way to, I don't know... It's an arena feeling, and everybody sort of comes up to bat, and everybody roots for their favorite ball hitter. I think of our performance as sort of... . And I hope I don't get any negatives rebuffs, but it's a fun thought and I enjoy it, you know. (laughs)

OG: Are there any singers, past or present, who had a special influence on you, whom you admired especially, whom you feel you want to emulate?

LP: Well, thank you. I hope sometime -- I think maybe I'm a little of a different personality, but all my life I remember this elegant, fantastic lady in Jackson, Mississippi when I was nine years old, the grace with which she walked across the stage in this divine white gown, not to mention the sounds that came from her throat, and later to give all of us who are active in opera today the chance to be heard, and her name is Madame Marian Anderson. This is my first and still is my greatest inspiration. If I can be the human being that she is one of these days -- and I've got a lot of work to do -- that's still a great inspiration to me. As far as the arena that I'm talking about, often which is the operatic arena, I think that the distinctive impression that La Callas, Madame Callas, gave on me, made on me some years back is really the initial bite that I had on this operatic disease. I mean, she's thoroughly responsible (laughs) for this, as I told her some years back in Paris, with great admiration. I think that not only for me, I think that she brought an exciting electricity to opera which made it as popular as baseball. That's my feeling. So in this way, she's a great inspiration to me.

OG: Do you feel that you have sort of a special message which you want people to take away from a performance you sang? Do you feel that there is a sort of very special thing which only you can give the audience, and which you want them to take home, and could you somehow try to give a definition of it?

LP: Otto, I'll tell you honestly: I think that artists -- and I say this very frankly -- we're very fortunate, particularly the state of the world these days, to be able to be in a field that can exhibit, that can share creative beauty between human beings. I feel like a human being when I sing, who is blessed or lent a gift to share with other people, and if at the end of a performance, whatever the medium may be, if I have been able to release them emotionally, or to share an emotional or beautiful experience with them, from my throat to them, to them, I think that that's worth being alive.

OG: That's it, yes.

LP: Yes.

OG: Well, thank you. You're very sweet and generous, as always, and I think we better stop while we are ahead. (laughter)

BROADCAST HOST: What a pleasure, to hear from Otto Guth, talking with Leontyne Price, two very charming and dedicated people, and we will be delighted to be seeing and hearing from them again for as long as they want to be around.

NARRATOR: You've been listening to *Streaming the First Century*, San Francisco Opera's Centennial Celebration told through historic recordings. This recording is a copyrighted production of San Francisco Opera, all rights reserved.

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