



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

SESSION 2: Parlez-vous français?

SPANNING THE DECADES: Chorus Edition, pt. 2

Featuring: Ian Robertson (SF Opera former chorus director) and Kip Cranna (SF Opera dramaturg emeritus)

(transcript read time ~ 12 minutes; audio run time ~ 14 minutes)

[BEGIN AUDIO]

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

KIP CRANNA [KC]: Hello everyone. This is Kip Cranna. I'm Dramaturg Emeritus at San Francisco Opera, and I'm here today -- this is July 13, 2022 -- to chat with Ian Robertson, who until recently was chorus master at San Francisco Opera, having retired after 35 years in that role. Ian, it's great to be with you. How are you?

IAN ROBERTSON [IR]: Thank you, Kip. I'm fine. I'm having a nice retirement, but I remember fondly all the years I worked with the opera company and of course with you, Kip.

KC: (laughs) Well, as I say, it's remarkable to see what the choristers do, and I know you've had a big role in getting them prepared. Let's talk about some of the specific repertoire. There's been a lot in a variety of styles. The one that often gets mentioned from your tenure is the Messiaen piece, Saint François d'Assise, which was kind of mystical piece with, how could you say it, dissonances that seem to somehow become magical and very spiritual. Would you put that up near the top of the most difficult pieces you've worked on?

IR: Oh yeah. That was definitely, definitely a highlight and an experience that I will never forget. I think your use of the word dissonance, of course, is highly accurate because in some places, the chorus were in 34 parts, sometimes a lot of them just half a step apart from each other. Again, repetition and memorization played a huge part in solidifying that. But I worked closely with obviously [Sir Donald] Runnicles, who was conducting it, and Nicholas Brieger, who was the stage director, to try to position the chorus in such a way to make it a little easier for them to grasp these dissonances.

Of course, in Messiaen, those dissonances eventually lead to bliss, don't they? Harmonic bliss associated with his Catholic faith and his beliefs, and it was very exciting to see that transformation because Nicholas Brieger in one of the scenes was trying to shape the chorus who were wearing costumes that included a wing, a bird's wing, and he was trying to shape them into something that looked like a massive bird's wing. That was at the same moment as the chorus were singing in 34 parts, of course. The way I had planned it was we positioned the chorus, so that no chorister was standing next to a

chorister who was singing only a half-step apart. In other words, they had the advantage of a whole step apart or a minor third apart.

I was trying to keep that solid while the director was moving the chorus around to get the right shape. Eventually we reached a good compromise, and I think it was very successful. But also one of the joys of it was Messiaen had written off-stage choruses of the most sublimely blissful, in his mind, sacred, holy sounds, ethereal, to accompany the travels of Saint Francis and the angel. Just hearing those choruses, I still hear them in my head. We did it off-stage from up in the grand tier lobbies. We did that all up in the lobbies, and it was just like ethereal, and I just could sit there for hours and listen to that, and the chorus sang it so beautifully.

KC: I remember our endless trial and error, trying to find the right positions for those off-stage choruses and whether the doors should be open or not into the hallways and so forth. It was a lot of work behind the magic there.

IR: It was. It was. I remember, too, *Parsifal*, way back when I think [John] Pritchard was conducting it, we had to find places for the off-stage choruses of children and adults because [Richard] Wagner clearly specifies that one set of choristers should be at the highest height, and then others should be at the middle height, and then some at the lower height. We experimented at the back of the balcony circle and all up and down there, and it eventually provided a great sound, most beautiful sound. These poor kids, a lot of children, boys chorus, girls chorus were involved in that, and the performances didn't finish until midnight, so some of these kids were up late these nights. But I still speak to some of them. They remember it as an unbelievably exciting experience.

KC: I'm sure. I've talked to a number of veterans, I guess you could say, of the San Francisco Boys Chorus, which you led for many, many years, not only in their work at the opera, but in concerts and so forth. They all speak of it with great memories of their experiences, as something that has stayed with them.

IR: The boys chorus and the girls chorus have been involved all these years with the opera. I mean, the boys chorus goes way back to 1948, but to have the kids in these operas is such a meaningful thing. They don't know what they're getting into, and all of a sudden there's a whole new world out there associated with music and drama, and they just love it. It changes their lives.

KC: Yes, I'm sure. It opens up a whole new perspective for some of them. Back to the whole idea of the chorus and working with them on stage, I hadn't thought of this as much before, but now it does seem important to me that you're very careful about who stands where or sits, whatever, who is positioned where. It isn't just a matter of where the stage director wants them. There's more to it than that.

IR: Yeah. That was one of the things, that it was always a joy to work with a collaborative stage director who would help me, and I would help him or her to put together, to get the best sound as well as create the best visual or dramatic look for them. I remember the major example, and I was so excited in my first couple of years, I did *Mefistofele*, the [Arrigo] Boito opera, *Mefistofele*, with those incredible opening and closing choral scenes in heaven when they're all angels.

KC: Wearing masks.

IR: Wearing masks and wearing robes and holding things and being the voice of the angels above, and I was able, with the director's cooperation, to position the choristers in first soprano, second soprano, and I would mix the baritones with the bases and the tenors over here, and we were able to maintain that, even though they were in high boxes. There were theatrical light boxes, and we were able to maintain that. I'll never forget that opening performance. That first scene just climaxed entirely with this massive choral sound and massive orchestral sound. I think there was an eight-minute ovation from the audience.

KC: I remember. I was in standing room. It was incredibly exciting. The audience just couldn't believe what they'd heard. It was one of those magical nights in the theater. Let's talk about some other memorable productions. When you announced your retirement, you specifically mentioned some of them, including *Saint François*, which we've been discussing. Another one is *The Trojans* of [Hector] Berlioz, another sprawling, big French work. That's quite a challenge as well.

IR: Yeah. *Trojans* was with Runnicles again, so I knew the chorus were going to be in good hands, but it was new to most of the chorus. It was in French, and we spent a lot of time on French diction in order to try and get the best liaison between the music of Berlioz and the French language. I mean, the music of Berlioz can be a little idiosyncratic, a little eccentric, and I wanted to make sure that we were matching up with what we thought he wanted when he wrote it into what was coming out in the end. I think we did that, in a lot of cases.

I just remember there's a lot of music for chorus, and a lot of it doesn't fall into regular patterns or regular scenic elements. We spent a lot of time just pacing these scenes slowly because some of them go very quickly. The music is very, very fast, right at the beginning for instance, but we paced it slowly to make sure that the language was ingrained into the music, or the music was ingrained, whichever way you want to look at it. I think that was one of the highlights. In fact, the opera, when I saw it coming up, I thought maybe I could retire after that. But then some more juicy pieces came along and kept me going for a bit longer. (laughter)

KC: One of the things about Berlioz that I think you described it so well, I express it as being a composer who sets up your expectations for where the next bar is going to go, and it doesn't go there. It goes somewhere else, and you think okay, well that makes sense, but I didn't anticipate that. He always surprises you.

IR: Absolutely. It all makes sense, but only after you've looked at it and after you've opened the page and say what happened there? Then you see oh, that went there. He was so idiosyncratic, but it's just a joy. I've always loved Berlioz's music, but to have a chance to do that one was very special to me.

KC: Lots of work for the men. We should talk a little bit about that. There is sort of a work imbalance in opera in that there tends to be more work for the men.

IR: You go through all the Italian operas and then the German operas, and there's always more for the men than for the women. The women get a little put off by that, but there's nothing we can do about it, so it's good to be doing some operas, which, well we're doing one this year ...

KC: *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, that's for the women!

IR: It's got the women in it, and we've done some others, too, which I can't remember.

KC: *Suor Angelica* is another good example. When you have nuns, you're going to have women.

IR: Yes. At least in *Trovatore*, you have a nuns chorus along with the soldiers chorus. There's a separate nuns chorus, which is good. There are rather beautiful moments. So Jake Heggie's *Moby-Dick*, with all men, and then we did Jake's *Dead Man Walking*, which had not too much chorus in it, but had men and women in it. Then we were delighted to do things like Benjamin Britten's *Billy Budd* and also, previous to that, *Peter Grimes*; *Peter Grimes* involving all the men and the women.

Peter Grimes is something that I can relate to because I was brought up on the east coast of Scotland, which is the North Sea. Nice cold winds and the mists that would come in, and I always felt with *Peter Grimes* that he was capturing that east coast feeling of stillness, chilliness, but he was incorporating it into a story about common people who got very upset and biased about the behavior of Peter Grimes, the fisherman. There was our opportunity, my opportunity, to try to describe to the chorus what it was like living on those beaches with those waves and those winds and that haar, as they call it, the mist, and I was able to do that.

Then there was *Billy Budd*, which of course I had a strange history with because I had half-prepared *Billy Budd* at Scottish Opera when I was invited to come here, so I never finished preparing it. Then in the middle of the 2000s, we did *Billy Budd* in a production that came from Vienna, I think, which I wasn't very happy with because there was a lot of misguided stage direction going on because there were so many men milling around the stage. I wasn't getting what I wanted. Anyway, it was moderately successful.

Then here I am in twenty whatever it was, 2016, 2017, with a chance to fulfill my *Billy Budd*. Wonderful. Good stage direction. Good conductor, Lawrence Renes. Not only that. Good, clear notes from Glyndebourne Opera chorus master, how to deal with all these smaller groups, how you would make it work within the bigger group. So, I had a great time with *Billy Budd*. That was another one I thought maybe I'd retire after that, but no, there was more to come.

KC: Yes, I remember. To me, the big moment that's so difficult for the chorus is the battle scene. [sings] This is our moment. There are people all over, singing in different groups.

IR: (laughs) Then you've got the gunners and you've got the officers and you've got the squadron and you've got the powder monkeys all singing different things.

KC: Then toward the end, these drummers come out.

IR: The drummers, and they drown us all out. But again, that was great because the instructions from Glyndebourne were really clear. It very rarely happens that I get good instructions from a previous production. But there it was, fairly carefully laid out. As long as I double-checked the voice parts and made sure they were in the right place at the right time, I think it really worked. I enjoyed listening to that scene every night.

KC: Ian Robertson, what a pleasure to talk with you, recently retired chorus director of the San Francisco Opera. Thanks so much for being here.

IR: My pleasure, Kip. Thank you very much.

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