



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

SESSION 2: Parlez-vous français?

SPANNING THE DECADES: Director Edition

Featuring: Pamela Rosenberg (SF Opera former general director) and Paul Burnett (interim director, Oral History Center, UC Berkeley)

(transcript read time ~ 19 minutes; audio run time ~ 26 minutes)

[BEGIN AUDIO]

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

PAUL BURNETT [PB]: This is Paul Burnett interviewing Pamela Rosenberg for the San Francisco Opera Project, and this is our third session, and Pamela Rosenberg is reaching us again from Berlin. And thank you for joining us again.

PAMELA ROSENBERG [PR]: Donald was a little bit stunned when I said to him, "Well, I want my first premiere to be *Saint François d'Assise* by [Olivier] Messiaen, he kind of fainted. "Okay." And that was in '99. We did it in September of 2002, we premiered it. It's over five hours.

Then I went to a board meeting to present my ideas and my plans. My contract had already been signed quite a while before that, so, it was a large board meeting, a breakfast meeting. I'll never forget. Phyllis Wattis was there, who was a great champion of contemporary art in San Francisco at that time, and a great patron of the arts. And so, at that meeting I presented, among other things the Messiaen, a twentieth-century work that's over five hours long, well, for those in the board who didn't know actually anything about Messiaen, this did sound kind of daunting, I guess.

And I'll never forget a former chairman of the board, came up afterwards to me, and said, "A twentieth century work that goes on for five hours?" "You must be mad. After the *Saint François* run was finished." He said, "It was life-changing for me." "I went four times, and it was life-changing for me." And I actually had that same reaction from a lot of people.

But at that board meeting, Phyllis Wattis, who was in a wheelchair, and so I went over to sit with her at the end of the breakfast, and she said, "Young woman," which flattered me—I wasn't so young then—"I just want to tell you," she said, "I only support new things, and so the Messiaen's been around for a while but that's new for me and I'll support it." And so she said, "Any contemporary new work you do," she said, "you've got me." So that was a shocker for some people on the board, when I presented my planning, but there were so many exciting things in the planning that I think that the majority were cautiously curious, and wondering what is this going to be, but kind of excited.

So people opened up, and that was what I said to the board was that if you don't offer—it's the question of the chicken or the egg, what comes first. If audiences only see the same thing over and over again, then you create a fear of the new in them, if they don't have the chance to be offered something other, and so then general directors are afraid to program something new, in case box office doesn't live up to it. But if you open up the possibilities, many people will actually go with it.

And so the *Saint François [d'Assise]*—I'm jumping a little bit ahead of myself now, but *Saint François*, that season, it became this cultpiece. The last three performances there was a line going out around the block, and we could have sold it many more times, and we sold, percentage-wise, more than any other thing almost, other than [Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*]. But the war horses like [Giuseppe Verdi's] *Otello*, et cetera, *Saint François* sold more. So it kind of proved my point, that if you give people the opportunity that they will be open to it, too, and not to be afraid of scheduling.

[PAUSE IN AUDIO - BETWEEN ORIGINAL INTERVIEW SESSIONS #2 and #3]

PB: I want to back up, then, and have you talk a little bit about the creative team that you put together, and, as an example, I thought it might be great to talk about the genesis of conversations around the *Saint François d'Assise*, which is the [Olivier] Messiaen opera that you chose to work with. So if you could talk a little bit about why you chose to stage that opera, and the conversations around what it was going to look like. Was this a North American premiere?

PR: A South and North American premiere. So the whole Western Hemisphere. [laughter] I say that because we had a co-producer in Buenos Aires who was going to be our co-producer, and then they had a big, huge financial crash in Argentina, and so after San Francisco it would have gone to Buenos Aires, so it would have been really a Western Hemisphere event. [laughs]

PB: Can you tell me a little bit about the people that you brought in, and how you decided that you wanted to land on this as an opera production?

PR: Well, when I was offered the position in San Francisco, I thought it would be really important to introduce works that have never been done in San Francisco, and sometimes never been done in the United States, because there are some incredible works that are part of the opera canon, so to speak, are done elsewhere, sometimes frequently and sometimes not so frequently. And, for me, the *Saint François d'Assise* of Messiaen is one of the great, great works of the second half of the twentieth century, and so I thought, okay, let's sock it to them right up front, [laughter] you know?

And so, it's an extraordinary work because it is really so unique. He is in his own sphere. And so he hasn't really, except for the fact that he's partially part of the spectral music movement, which works in timbres, et cetera, he's not continuing in the footsteps of anyone with his musical language. And so he still was able, nevertheless, to create something that had an enormous artistic impetus in the music world. So I really absolutely was keen to do it.

It's an enormous project because the forces involved are huge. I'll get to those later, but to get back to the team, Donald Runnicles, when I met with him and said that I would like to have that be our real opening, was quite stunned, [laughs] because it's, as I said, a vast and complicated work. And he, from the day I told him, which was in 1999, right after my appointment had been announced — because

obviously I had been thinking about what would be important for me to do—and so when I expressed this desire, and he said he would be fascinated to do it, even though quite humbled by it, he then started from that next morning on for the next three years until the premiere, the first half-hour of every morning when he woke up he worked on the score. That's what he invested into that.

I knew immediately who I wanted as the stage designer: Hans Dieter Schaal. In Frankfurt in the 1980s he had done an epic *Les Troyens*, [by Hector] Berlioz, at the Frankfurt Opera when I was there, and created what I call experiential spaces, so they were spaces in which something takes place rather than being symbolized. And *Les Troyens* is also a monster piece, [laughs] also, like *Saint François d'Assise*. And his aesthetics are just stunning, as well.

And then Nicolas Brieger, who is the director of the *Saint François*, I had worked with him twice. He did a fascinating [Giacomo Puccini's] *Turandot*, unlike any *Turandot* you've probably ever seen, but it was so sensual, it was so beautiful. And he's also wonderful working psychologically with singers. And he also did [Sergei Prokofiev's] *The Love of Three Oranges*. I did that project with him, as well, and so I had confidence in him.

And then Andrea Schmidt-Futterer is sort of *the* star costume designer in Germany, one of the two or three top, and she and Brieger had done a lot of work together, as well. And then the important linchpin is Wolfgang Willaschek, the dramaturg.

So we started, I think our first meeting was already in '99, maybe a first pass-by. And then after that, in 2000, many, many meetings, in which the team really delves together into the piece. And I always insist that the conductor of a new production be part of that process, starting with delving into the score, happens together with the conductor. And reading the piece together, and just turning back layers, or more and more layering down, and just looking at different aspects of it. And that process is, for me, absolutely the only way to do it, to have a team from the beginning working through the piece together, and slowly developing the ideas, and bouncing them off one another, and taking the score.

PB: So from what I've read, and also experiencing the opera and experiencing the music, it seems as if the music is paramount. It's not that the staging is less important, but that the staging was seen ... it was a challenge. It could either scuttle the music; it could hold it back, or get in the way. So everything was conceived around the music as the primary experience. Maybe that's wrong. But the conversations that I was reading about— There was a phrase, and I don't know if you wrote this phrase—which was in the yearbook, and it was really extraordinary—that you didn't want to "load the performance with symbolism," which I thought was a really great phrase, that there's this notion that, aesthetically, you can interrupt it or get in the way of the music. Can you talk about how understanding was achieved among the players and among the creative team with respect to the music? How was it understood in terms of the staging and the production?

PR: Well, I think that everyone involved respected the fact that, for Messiaen, he wrote his own libretto based on Saint François' writings and various sources, but it was his own language. But the words came after the music, in a way—not completely, and he had sketched out, during the four years in which he wrote the opera, and then took another four years to orchestrate it, et cetera, but that's one reason he said he had to write it himself: because he wanted to feel at liberty to accommodate the music, and if someone else were writing the libretto for him then there would be all those issues.

And so it was evident to the team that the music also is embodying this kind of celestial sphere, and these states of grace. And a piece that's based on the main character achieving greater and greater states of grace is not going to give you a storytelling narrative, that has a dramatic impetus in that way. The dramatic impetus comes through musical impulses, and musical spheres. And I think that that was just completely clear to everybody involved, so at no point would they have said, "Well, we need to make this scene more dramatic."

PB: There's so much to talk about with this. I think I can just sort of chip away at certain elements of this. It's a five-hour piece of music, continuous music. And when I saw a recording—and I want to be clear: I never saw it, I never had the full experience of being in the house watching it. I was able to get a glimmer, a flicker on the wall, of this approach to music and performance. And I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about what happens to the audience in terms of time. Music is a temporal art form, and this piece is very different from almost every other piece of music I can think of. Something is going on here with time and music, and I'm wondering how that plays into the staging and the overall aesthetic. How did you all react to the music in terms of the experience of it, and Messiaen's approach to time?

PR: It is an extraordinary phenomenon that anybody who has been at a performance anywhere of this piece— I have endless, endless quotations from people more or less saying the same thing: the first thirty minutes you're in our time, and after that, because time in Messiaen doesn't necessarily move horizontally, and so many people afterwards said they were shocked when it was over because it felt like it was only three hours. It's a little bit like with [Philip Glass'] *Einstein on the Beach* or something, where you get into another time warp, and then you're surprised that you've been in this epic piece of *Einstein on the Beach* [laughs] that's gone on for—I can't remember—five hours, too, and you don't feel it. And that's with the Messiaen, as well: you don't feel it.

And also, it's just his musical language, the combination of, sort of Gregorian chant, the static monodies of Gregorian chant, and then, from the subcontinent of India, rhythms mixed with Javanese—just the combination of colors, and the birdsongs. For some people "The Sermon of the Birds," which goes on for almost sixty minutes [laughs], got a little bit long for some people.

PB: I was tracking some of it. I went back and was just like, "Wait, did that just happen?" And in act two there's a choral decay. It's a single note, and it goes from piano to pianissimo over the course of two minutes. It's a two minute choral decay, and I got a little bit hypnotized. And I wanted to just step out for a second and say, "Okay, let's measure that. How long did that take?"

And it was extraordinary. And you talked about stasis, but there's movement in the stasis. That's the thing, right? So over two minutes it does decay, but by an almost imperceptible amount. So there's this messing with our modern perceptions, where we're given these cues that say, "Here's the resolution; here's the tension and resolution," and we expect it, and it's the convention, and also in our modern lives.

Now, one of the people that was writing about this time—it could have been your reflections or someone else's—was writing about your stress on connecting the art to people's lives. And I'm wondering if you could talk about this kind of dreamworld of Messiaen, this moving stasis, this contradiction of an earthly spiritual experience, and how that was intended to relate to the audience's lives in 2002.

PR: Well, in this case there is not an explicit causality that I'm hoping for, at all. It's not that I want them going and saying, "Ah, that applies. And some people said, "Oh, well, you want to convert us all to Christianity or something." I said, "No, [laughter] that's also not what it's about." But the fact that each of us in this world are confronted with suffering, and are confronted with contradictions, are confronted with—I'll just say suffering, and everyone, that's a part of the human condition.

And so in the case of this opera—to your statement or question before that, I absolutely think that opera is a medium, and theater is a medium, which help us to find orientation points that speak to our experiences as humans, and help us reflect on them. So I absolutely think that art has that function of helping us to reflect. In *Saint François*, I did not want or expect or postulate that the audience should come and then be connected as a contemporary audience to the subject matter per se. I think so many people were moved by—for instance, he wants to meet up with a leper because he feels utter disgust for someone like that. And he wants to learn to overcome it, and when he does, when he kisses the leper it is so moving. So many people told me that tears just shot out of their eyes when that happened.

And just being immersed in that situation in this opera, I think that someone seeing it and only experiencing it vicariously—but it was more than vicarious; it really touched a nerve with a lot of people. And so if you came out of there and reflected on, well, the next time I walk past a homeless person maybe I shouldn't avert my head in disgust.

PB: I think that in our earlier sessions you talked about, going back to Wieland Wagner, this real emphasis on interiority for the performers, that there's so much work that goes on—"this is what I want you to actually feel." It's not method acting—it's different—but it's this notion that the authentic emotion must be expressed without the theatrical presentation of this overcharged [histrionics]—which is opera, right? Typically, in traditional opera, the grand gesture is the way to do it. And that moment in the scene with the leper it was so abundantly clear to me that that is what you were talking about how those two actors conveyed that emotion—because, again, stasis: there is almost no motion between these two actors, for minutes! They are just in this embrace for minutes, and there's almost no movement. [laughs] And I just think it's an extraordinary representation of what you were talking about with the artists that you brought together.

PR: That Nicolas Brieger did, definitely. He does really such fine psychological help, gives them such help. And that's it, and it's not that you acted in the moment, or you are thinking it, then it conveys itself. Also, vocally, in the colors of your voice. I often have been, when I audition singers, which I've done for forty years—and sometimes I have the urge, almost, to stop the singer in mid-phrase and say, "What are you feeling and thinking right this second? What's your character thinking right now?" Because they're usually doing it so superficially, or outside of themselves, you know? I don't do it because it would freak them out [laughter] if in the middle of an aria in an audition they're stopped and asked. But that's where you want to shake them and say, "What's the state of being that your character's in right now?"

PB: And almost, "Technically, this is very beautiful, but I don't believe you, or it's not convincing; convince me that you actually feel this way," which is a nice way of thinking about it. But what a challenge for this particular piece of art, which just embodies contradictions. This is a piece about an encounter with

the celestial; by the most earth bound earthly—not earth bound—but St. Francis is all about earth. And then transcendence through that earthly experience of suffering. And trying to convey that through a stage, and through how it would look, there's a dominant piece of structure in this piece which is this path, right? And it opens with the monks slowly ascending this path that's lit from on top-

PR: Hans Dieter Schaal, "How do I connect Heaven and Earth?" That was in the set. So in the back you had the beautiful moon, and you had the blue sky, but it opens up with a scene of real destruction because on either side of the path winding its way perpendicularly across the stage there were two house fronts, like three-story apartment buildings, that had been destroyed by an earthquake. And so there was this sense of destruction and upheaval, to just create this space, this kind of experience that he is starting his journey in. The chorus actually stood behind the windows of those abstract apartment buildings, and that's where they vocally came from.

PB: Well, that leads me to ask about the music. It's a massive orchestration, isn't it?

PR: Oh, that's an English understatement! [laughter]

PB: Yes. It was a somewhat challenging orchestration. So I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about the herculean effort of you and Donald Runnicles, and just give me a sense of the scope of the music—

PR: Yes, because in the original score Messiaen calls for—the orchestra is 150, [laughs] including three gamelans, which aren't too tiny, and then, no, 120, and then 150 chorus, which we had our chorus. I think we did 110, and we had to reduce some of the strings, which there have been performances where the number of strings had then been reduced. But he calls for the gamelans to be placed on either side of the pit. Usually there are boxes, which in San Francisco there were, as well, and most traditional opera houses have boxes that people sit in. So we used those, and then built up risers from the bottom of the pit going up to those so that we could actually seat more musicians. And then there was a gamelan, I think, in front of Donald, as well. So it was massive to place it. We succeeded.

PB: So acoustically it must have been—

PR: It cost a lot, and Phyllis Wattis was the name of a wonderful patron in San Francisco, and she was ninety-two when I got to San Francisco, and she had an extraordinary collection of contemporary art. And so my first meeting with her she said, "I just want you to know I *only* contribute to modern contemporary things." So I said, "Well, I've got one for you." [laughter] Some other people also helped, but she helped a lot, because obviously the expenses were much higher than they would have been for a standard-size opera.

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