



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

SESSION 3: Italian Roots

SPANNING THE DECADES: Director Edition

Featuring: David Gockley (SF Opera former general director) and Paul Burnett (director, Oral History Center, UC Berkeley)

(transcript read time ~ 10 minutes; audio run time ~ 17 minutes)

[BEGIN AUDIO]

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

DAVID GOCKLEY [DG]: Even then. And I truly lionized the work done by Kurt Herbert Adler in San Francisco, who had founded Western Opera Theater. And the value of Western Opera Theater was that you had fifteen young artists under your roof for how many months. They were available to go on the mainstage when they weren't on tour. Some of them became very important artists. They got the right kind of training, the right kind of background. They didn't have to go to Europe. And they were staged in productions that went to Sacramento, Oregon, blah, blah, blah, and over a multi-, multi-week basis. It was tremendously valuable for the young artists in that they developed the ability to perform every third night, or, in some cases, every second night.

And it developed a relationship with a community that brought Western Opera Theater, say, to Fresno. And there was the knowledge that the WOT, as it was called, Western Opera Theater, was an outgrowth of the San Francisco Opera, and so the Company, when it went to Fresno, would speak about the parent company, and what the parent company was doing, and there was the opportunity to develop weekend attendance for San Francisco. So it was kind of a marketing arm for the main company. It was an experience-getter for the young artists. It enhanced what was on the mainstage because you had a group of young artists who grew with you.

And so I thought that that was a good idea.

There was I guess the first of the American training—and let's call it training versus education—and it was the San Francisco Opera's affiliate, the Merola Opera Program, which was like a twelve-week summer program, but very intense, very successful. And a lot of American companies looked to find ways that they could contribute to the training of young artists, and it had benefits in that the singers developed a relationship with the opera company, and they were there, in many cases, in residence, and they were like a resident opera company of young people. And they could be made use of, also, going into the schools, going into the community, doing previews of the opera that was coming up next. And often they performed small roles.

And, lo and behold, San Francisco Opera I always had a keen eye on because Kurt Herbert Adler and his successors were always in on the ground floor of any movement that there was, and they had not only the Merola Program, as I said, but they developed a program with affiliate artists, and they brought a higher level of singer in during the winter season of operas, the Merola being the summer. And they were there all during the winter season, when the operas were going on, so they could perform, they could do what was called “Informances” in the community.

And so that is when Carlisle Floyd, in the late seventies, and I and his new employer, the University of Houston, my employer, Houston Grand Opera, combined resources and formed the Houston Opera Studio, later the Houston Grand Opera Studio. And we brought a great voice teacher over from Florida State, Elena Nikolaidi, who was a dear and close colleague of Carlisle’s at Tallahassee, Florida State. And so we started our own affiliate artist program, which was called the Houston Opera Studio.

It was one of the most successful what Carlisle and I called “bridge programs.” And we found that there was a niche in these bridge programs, and they began to spring up in other locations, but San Francisco and Houston were in the vanguard of that.

There were also summer programs where young artists were employed as choristers, like the Santa Fe Opera, which started a lot of careers, and where I got early experience in my soon-to-be curtailed performing life. But Lake George Opera, Central City Opera, and gradually more summer programs were able to use apprentices or choristers who were aspiring soloists. But San Francisco’s and Houston’s programs were special because they didn’t require singers to sing chorus.

There was a kind of feeling that they were being exploited if they had to sing chorus. We thought of them as soloists right from the start. If they performed with us, it was as soloists. If they performed in the community, it was their performing as a soloist, or sometimes we had two or three, a duet or a trio group, go out, and they could perform duets and trios, but as soloists, not as chorus.

So that was training, and a lot of the graduates of the Opera Studio program and of San Francisco’s Affiliate Artist Program—which was, by the way, later renamed the Adler Fellowships, after Kurt Herbert Adler—who else? And they are still the Adlers, or the Adler Fellows. And they began feathering in to having larger roles, doing more roles over the course of a season. They spent two or three years as fellows, or Opera Studio members, and then they came back as full artists. And they were given a fairly generous fellowship. In fact, AGMA, the union representing the young artists, and all artists—singers, for that matter—they were greatly enthusiastic about these programs, and they felt that the stipends that they were getting were more than sufficient.

PAUL BURNETT [PB]: It sounds like a couple of things are happening. One is that in order to have a truly American music theater phenomenon, you need to wrest some of the European control over the art form at the formation level, at the education level, and make that an indigenous American phenomenon, or help make it so. I know Kurt Herbert Adler had begun that process, but you were keenly aware that this was something that needed to happen.

DG: Yes. We needed to have a community of performers that were learning and also contributing their talent to the community in an organized way that helped generate interest in opera in general. And they learned by being young members of the Houston Grand Opera, or San Francisco Opera, and so they kind of adopted the philosophy of the Company that took care of them, that launched them, and in our case we had a broader definition of “opera,” perhaps, than most opera companies around the

country, or even San Francisco Opera, in that we included operettas and, I always used to call them, classic musicals as part of what we did on a regular basis. So they understood, they kind of absorbed that.

PB: And now you have been intimate with the whole history of San Francisco Opera. You have been thinking about it. You were a candidate twice for General Director before. And now is your shot, and you are thinking this needs to be much more in that vein that Lotfi Mansouri saw it in, and that Kurt Herbert Adler saw it in, in fact Gaetano Merola had seen it in, which is a more Southern European orientation. And so in terms of the music, can you talk about how you were going to fulfill that promise?

DG: In thinking about the way I could put my stamp on the new regime, I had the idea one night although I knew it was going to be unpopular in certain circles—why shouldn't we have an Italianate, or Italian, music director, and thereby go back to our roots? And I began to quietly make lists of Italian conductors, and go and attend performances, meet them, get some idea of their personality, their preferences, et cetera. And one of the guys on the list was Nicola Luisotti, and he had actually been engaged by Pamela in Stuttgart several years before that, and by virtue of his success there she brought him to San Francisco, and he did Verdi's *La forza del destino*. And my sense was that he had a huge success with the critics, a huge success with the orchestra, and those are the two criteria, or those are the two sectors—you cannot go into an appointment ~~that~~ where the person has already been to you and they have been panned by the critics. And orchestra members, they're very eager to let people know whether they like a conductor or not. And, in fact, San Francisco had a, and still do have a practice of formally reviewing a conductor and presenting the General Director with a written evaluation.

So I wasn't expecting my reaction to Luisotti as being so positive and so compelling, but I attended three performances, one at the Seattle Opera and two in Europe, although I cannot remember where they were exactly. But I just loved the guy. We got along really, really well. I loved his attitude. I loved his personality. I loved the way the orchestra members loved him. Going back and reading reviews, not only San Francisco, Seattle, the European companies, but he got consistently good notices. And so I started talking with his manager, and, in my way of thinking, it was just the right time for him to have a relationship, a permanent relationship with a company. And he already had a relationship—but it was not music director; it was like principal guest conductor—with the opera company in Naples. And he had a full calendar of engagements, which is always a good sign. That indicates other companies think he's good, that he's valuable.

PB: Well, he must have been the right person to fulfill your goal of restoring that Italianate lyricism.

So the music director [role] is where that happens—

DG: He had a sunny personality. And, by the way, he also conducted very well. One of the performances I saw in Europe was a *Lohengrin* that he conducted. So there was the question can he do other than Italianate or sunny repertoire, and my sense was he could. And he ended up doing a *Lohengrin* with San Francisco. He ended up doing *Salome*, by Strauss, obviously a very much north-of-the-Alps opera.

PB: Right. And so he came onboard and was with you almost your whole time, right?

DG: Right.

PB: So getting the music right is so important, in order to make the voices matter in the way that you wanted to.

DG: It's the most important thing! Another thing: he was liked by famous singers. So I was aware that he was going to be an ally in our desire to have the world's greatest singers be part of my time in San Francisco.

DG: the people who are watching it identified with at the core of their cultural consciousness, that they wanted to see again and again and again, to reinforce to them who they were and what their traditions were, what their past was

PB: It sounds like you're saying two things. One is that there's something profoundly fundamental about opera as an art form. It's ancient.

DG: Yeah. Sitting around the fire.

PB: Sitting around the fire and intoning the lore of the people. So there's something universal that everyone experiences when they see and hear these powerful stories on a stage and there's also identifying in a new way, working with stories that expand the notion of what the American story is. And that's what opera is particularly useful for emotionally, in that it is about the heavy subject matter. It's about the deepest, most painful, and most exalting and most triumphant aspects of our existence.

DG: And that's what music can draw out of you. It can touch you in ways that only it can and, can I say, mythologize a story and put it on a level of meaningfulness that straight prose theater cannot.

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