



## STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

### SESSION 3: Italian Roots

#### SPANNING THE DECADES: Director Edition, pt. 2

**Featuring: Francesca Zambello (stage director, former SF Opera staff) and Kip Cranna (SF Opera dramaturg emeritus)**

(transcript read time ~ 11 minutes; audio run time ~ 13 minutes)

[BEGIN AUDIO]

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

KIP CRANNA [KC]: This is Kip Cranna, Dramaturg Emeritus at San Francisco Opera, talking with Stage Director Francesca Zambello, who has had a long history with our Company, and we're thinking about the Centennial, the 100-year anniversary of the founding of San Francisco Opera right now, and we want to look back and visit some of the highlights that Francesca has experienced at San Francisco Opera. Thanks for talking with me Francesca. How are you?

FRANCESCA ZAMBELLO [FZ]: I'm great. Kip, it's so lovely to see you and talk about a Company I love so much.

KC: You mentioned Janáček, he is a composer that San Francisco Opera's had a pretty good relationship with. There was a *Jenůfa* in 1980 that had a very, very, distinguished cast, and they're involved in the historical broadcast that are available to people to stream for free as part of our centennial observance. But you did your own production of *Jenůfa*.

FZ: I remember having one of those earthquake experiences when I saw Gabriela Beňačková sing the title role in the mid-'80s in San Francisco. The opera was unknown to me, except for the title, never having heard it live, and Sir Charles Mackerras conducted it. Watching that opera come together -- because I think I wrote the supertitles, which was one of the great things with seeing all these operas come together: you were able to watch all the rehearsals. I remember just being transported by the music live. And he was such a great interpreter of it, and Gabriela Beňačková, who is Czech, just was a phenomenal *Jenůfa*.

I was fortunate to direct, my own production of it 15 years later, in San Francisco, having done a production that went to several other theaters. But I was thrilled to be able to do it in San Francisco, because *Jenůfa* is one of those operas that, as a director, you just have to be terrible to mess it up. It's so great. The story is so powerful, and the music is narcotic because it enters into you slowly, and you become entwined with the sounds of Janáček. And I remember -- you know, it was at a difficult time in

2001, just in terms of our country and everything that was going on and I just remember finding such solace in that opera. And we had a wonderful cast, at that point, a very young tenor, Jay Hunter Morris, who went on to become a very successful -- Siegfried and a number of other things. So, I'm thrilled that I got to do the opera in San Francisco, where many of his operas have been performed. I know I saw a wonderful *Makropulos Case* a few years ago with Karita [Mattila] and her as Káťa. His works are just -- they always are transformative to work on, I think, and to experience in the audience.

KC: Some people say he was the original minimalist because, as you say, these sort of hypnotic repetitions of little, tiny motives really draw you in. Musically, from my perspective as musical administrator in those days, I know that it was a revelation that Sir Charles brought to us about the fact that the original *Jenůfa*, the *Jenůfa* that people knew, was kind of a bowdlerized version. I guess the director of the theater insisted on all these changes, and mainly little cuts here and there -- and Sir Charles made us put those little things back in. I remember he had a bit of a conflict with Beňačková, who didn't want to learn all these (laughs) new little bits, but it really did, I think, restore the true version of this piece and made it something that was really quite remarkable.

I have a very vivid memory of you working with a distinguished cast on *Bohème* in 1988, which was televised, and I have this distinct memory of you talking with Luciano Pavarotti onstage. He pulled you aside and said there was a problem with the set. (laughs) I wonder if you could talk about that a bit.

FZ: Absolutely. So, in 1988 I was given the amazing responsibility of directing a production of *Bohème* that would be televised, with Luciano, Mirella Freni, her then husband, Nicolai Ghiaurov, and the late Stephen Dickson was in the cast, and a young woman who was fairly unknown who was Musetta, and it's one of those careers that stayed unknown, but that's what happens in this business.

So, the production had a realistic feeling to it. You know, there was a real garret and a huge scene change, a vista -- meaning an open scene change -- to the second act of Cafe Momus. So, in my first few days of rehearsal, the garret, as Parisian garrets are, was on the top floor, supposedly, of an apartment building, and so there was a staircase coming up through the floor.

Luciano, said, "I need to speak to you about this." And so we have this conversation where he says to me, completely with a straight face, he said, "I don't think that this works. I feel like it looks like Rodolfo is the devil coming up through the floor." And I said, "But, this is like a standard kind of thing. You know, Rodolfo comes through the floor. It's not like... You know, they're in a garret. It's in the top floor. You know, it's clear. He sings about the rooftops in his aria, so he -- we know that he's in the top floor." Luciano, of course, was at the height of his career then, and I was a fairly unknown young director, and so I finally had to bow to him, and said, "Okay, we're going to cut a door in this wall, and this will be the door that suggests that you're coming from a different part of the garret into the space. But we couldn't get rid of the hole in the floor, so the other bohemians went up and down through the floor, and we made that door like it was like the backdoor to the garret. And so that was the door that Luciano used, and then, listen, I mean, he sang like a god, and with Mirella it was an incredible experience.

KC: That performance is still available on commercial video.

FZ: I see that it is being sold all the time, because I think it's the only commercial video with the two of them together. It was an amazing experience, albeit difficult for that.

It was years later -- I'll never forget: I was in a restaurant in Milan, and I was working at La Scala, and I knew that Mirella Freni taught voice at the Milan Conservatory. And I looked over, and I knew it was her and she looked at me, and then I, I thought, I'm not gonna bother her in this restaurant, you know. I mean, it's Mirella Freni. And so she recognized me. We had worked together on other things after that, and she came over, and we had a really good laugh about that staircase, and the devil, and Luciano. And it was a very affectionate conversation, but it -- it's quite a memory. It was a great experience. And I remember, also, it's when we made a -- not we, San Francisco, but an outside company at that point -- made a very famous documentary about the chorus around that production called . . .

KC: *In the Shadow of the Stars*.

FZ: . . . *In the Shadow of the Stars*. And the chorus of the San Francisco Opera are phenomenal. They have always been. They're an amazing group of artists who, one night they're playing a character in a Czech village, and the next night an elegant woman walking down the streets of Paris, going to the Cafe Momus, and etc. They're a superb group, and there's an incredible bond with them. I was very happy they made that documentary about them, and I think I was interviewed a few times about it, and could speak really about their theatricality, as well as, of course, their amazing musicality. At that point Richard Bradshaw was the Chorus Master, and now there's a brand new Chorus Master, although I'm very sad -- sad and happy that a new person has come, but they have also been under the leadership of somebody else who's been wonderful, I think, for decades. They're an amazing group, the chorus.

KC: Right, Ian Robertson has just retired as Chorus Master, and we have a new person coming in [John Keene], so -- on we go, into our next hundred years.

Another production I'd like to talk about is *Prince Igor*, which you did in 1996, under, again, rather unusual circumstances: the Opera House was closed at that point for renovation and earthquake retrofit, and we performed large operas at what's now called the Bill Graham Civic Auditorium. [Which] can seat up to 5,000 people. And we did some other smaller productions at a Broadway-style theater called the Orpheum. But *Prince Igor* was a big deal in this vast space that you had to somehow fill up with action, and an unusual piece that isn't done very often, from the Russian repertoire. Tell us a little bit about that experience.

FZ: Kip, you're drawing on (laughs) all these amazing memories. So Lotfi Mansouri, the then General Director called me, and said, "You know, look, we're out of the Opera House, and this is what we're thinking of doing. You know, help me work on this." And so, with Lotfi and the then Technical Director, John Priest, and the amazing Production Department of the San Francisco Opera, there was a kind of unit set, which served the productions, because several other large productions that season in the hall, which was -- the Civic wasn't an auditorium -- so we had to reconfigure all the seating and create a huge stadium-style event. And I have worked in a number of outdoor venues and stadiums, from the Bregenz Festival and the Arena Verona, and so it seemed like this was a fun challenge, and it was.

And so, Lotfi asked me about doing this Russian opera, *Prince Igor*, and I've done many Russian operas, and I love that opera. Totally unknown, it's kind of tricky, because it has many versions. And I remember working with you, Kip, and putting together a version of the opera, which we eventually performed. We had tons of supers, and chorus, and part of it takes place in sort of a Bedouin encampment, and so we found these dancers -- I can't believe we found these dancers -- who were from Kazakhstan, who happened to be in San Francisco at that time.

They were the kind of dancers that can do that amazing Russian dancing where you're down low to the ground, and you're kicking your legs and kicking your knees, and doing tumbling and everything. Anyway, so this -- these guys enlivened this performance to such a degree that I think people were coming sometimes just to see them, despite the fact that we had a superb cast with the likes of Paata Burchuladze and Elena Zaremba and Sergei Leiferkus.

But it was just this incredible dancing, totally just Russian historic, and it was phenomenal to watch, from the Stans. And I don't know if these guys would even be able to get visas to come in our country now, but they truly were captivating. And the piece was a huge success there, I think because of the music, the cast, the whole experience, which was pretty fun, you know, eating in this room, and then going in and sitting and watching the opera here, and there was a great sense of community when we did it, and you know, many people... I think sometimes when you leave an opera house and do that -- I've had that experience -- a lot of people come who normally don't come to the opera house. In a way, it feels much more accessible.

KC: That was our experience. I think people treated it as kind of an adventure, sort of a field trip, in a way, to something quite new and different from the original opera house experience.

FZ: Which is why I think it's a great idea sometimes for any opera company to go and do onsite productions in different places. So it was -- *Prince Igor* in the Civic Auditorium, I will not forget that one, nor will I ever forget those guys.

KC: Thank you. Francesca Zambello, thank you so much for spending time with us as we look backward at the last hundred years at San Francisco Opera, and forward to the next. I really appreciate your time.

FZ: Thank you very much, Kip. Always a joy to be with you and friends at San Francisco Opera.

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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