



## **STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY**

### **SESSION 3: Italian Roots**

#### **SPANNING THE DECADES: Dramaturg Edition**

**Featuring: Kip Cranna (SF Opera dramaturg emeritus), with Jeffery McMillian (SF Opera public relations director) and Barbara Rominski (SF Opera director of archives)**

(transcript read time ~ 25 minutes; audio run time ~ 32 minutes)

[BEGIN AUDIO]

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

**BARBARA ROMINSKI [BR]:** I'm Barbara Rominski, director of archives with the San Francisco Opera. Joining me today is Jeffery McMillian, our director of public relations. We're teaming up to talk with Dr. Clifford Cranna, music administrator with the Company from 1979 to 2019, currently dramaturg emeritus and our Company's most knowledgeable historian. Thank you for joining us today, Kip.

**DR. CLIFFORD (KIP) CRANNA [KC]:** Thank you. Great to be here.

**BR:** Could you perhaps start with your start with the Company?

**KC:** I actually started in what was called the business office at the time. Things have been restructured since then, so there isn't quite the exact equivalent of that organization. But I had been studying musicology at Stanford and looking for a job. There was an opening at San Francisco Opera, which I found out about through Jimmy Schwabacher, James Schwabacher, for whom the current Schwabacher Debut Recitals are named. Jimmy was on the board of San Francisco Opera, very active as a philanthropist in the city and a former singer himself. He told me about this opening at San Francisco Opera called assistant business manager, a new position, and he said, "I'll put in a word for you if you're interested." And I said, "Yah." I'm from North Dakota, you know. That's why, "Yah."

So, that's how I got a foot in the door at San Francisco Opera, and after two years working in that area, which involved all kinds of things like contracts for TV and radio, organizing the Company's tour to Manila, all sorts of odds and ends like that. I finished my PhD sort of coincidentally with moving over to the musical side of the Company and became what was called assistant musical administrator.

**JEFFERY MCMILLIAN [JM]:** Was opera a part of your study as a graduate student at Stanford, or were your musical interests' other places?

KC: Opera was sort of tangentially an interest. I was studying early music. My partner, Bruce Lamott and I would come up to San Francisco Opera every Friday during the season and get standing room, which only cost three dollars in those days, quite affordable for a grad student. And so, we saw a lot of the great stars in the early '70s. This was starting in '72, '73, in there, and so I was very familiar with what San Francisco Opera was doing. I never dreamed at the time, of course, of actually working there.

BR: Would you have taken advantage of the Spring Opera program as well then, as a graduate?

KC: Absolutely. In fact, I remember one year, Bruce and I subscribed to Spring Opera. We got four operas for 12 dollars, (laughter) sitting way, way up at the top, and it was fascinating to watch young artists at the starts of their careers, people like Carol Vaness and all kinds of interesting artists that went on to fame and fortune after that.

KC: When I first started coming to San Francisco Opera in the early '70s, it was an era of big-name stars, the likes of which we don't have anymore, not in the sense of talent but in the sense of reputation. They were of course people like Beverly Sills, Marilyn Horne, Joan Sutherland, Luciano Pavarotti of course, Plácido Domingo, José Carreras, Giacomo Aragall. The list kind of goes on and on, Sherrill Milnes.

The problem wasn't, or isn't now, that we don't have great, talented singers. And I would say there are singers out and about now who are equally or even maybe more versatile and talented, with gorgeous voices. But the way we perceive opera singers has changed, just because the way we get information has changed. In the '70s, you got famous if you had your picture on the cover of *TIME* magazine, and famous opera singers were often on the cover of *TIME* magazine, Sills, Pavarotti, etc. Now nobody reads magazines anymore. I read *TIME* magazine still, but I'm an exception. And people get their information, unlike in those days when there was ABC, NBC, and CBS for television stations, so you would have opera stars on those shows. People like Sills, for example, would be on *The Muppets* singing with Miss Piggy, singing opera, singing *Pigoletto* with Miss Piggy. And she was often on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson. In fact, when Johnny went on vacation, she subbed for him as the host, not the guest but the host of *The Tonight Show*.

Opera singers are extremely rare. I don't remember the last time an opera singer has shown up on one of the late-night shows nowadays; just doesn't happen. So, opera has slid out of the sort of spotlight of ordinary culture, I would say, not exactly pop culture but of the American informational center, and it's been now moved over to sort of a more rarified area. And getting information about it is different now.

We have social media, of course, and you can tweet about your favorite opera star, but it isn't quite the same as having an appearance on a major television network or in the press the way it was. I think that that's a sad thing, but it's inevitable just because we have somehow fragmented the way people get their information. People often, what they know about the news comes from their phone, and we don't know where that's exactly coming from necessarily, but there is no sort of centralized information distribution situation that will make opera a part of it. It's just the fact that stars aren't made quite the same way.

KC: We haven't actually talked about the definition of dramaturg. Should we do that?

JM: Why don't we? Yes. So, dramaturg emeritus, what is a dramaturg?

KC: Oh, I get asked that question all the time. My quick answer is scholar in residence, in terms of how it applies to me. Dramaturg is a title that's used in Europe all the time in opera companies, and it often is a scholarly person who comes out of the theatrical side of the business, rather than the musical side like me.

And a dramaturg, particularly in the European model, is often working with directors and designers on production concepts. I've never had any role like that. I've never had any direct involvement in how something's going to be staged or designed or how it's going to look. I'm much more involved in how it's going to sound in terms of the structure of a piece, language-wise and that sort of thing.

JM: You're also so well known as a historian around town. I wonder if, in your research, you've come across some discoveries about Merola, the only general director you didn't work for here. And what have you learned about Merola?

KC: It's obvious that Merola was uniquely gifted in a number of ways that made him the right person to get an opera company started here, that is to say a permanent resident company rather than just a company that -- or someone that brought in touring companies, sort of rented shows from elsewhere in the country. Merola was a charmer, it's obvious to say. We have just very brief little video footage of him filmed from the '30s, I guess, or maybe the '40s, and so far as I know, I haven't heard any audio interviews with him. But we have lots of photographs of him and lots of descriptions of him.

We know from his experience in starting the season in 1922 that he created at Stanford that he had to have had a lot of appeal, a lot of charisma to persuade, as we now know, people of ordinary means. Italians, mainly Italian merchants, businessmen were not necessarily super rich but had some means that they can invest to bankroll his season at Stanford, where he did three operas in the summer of 1922. The Stanford stadium was new then, and it was kind of a big deal. We know that he had gone there to a football game, and he was impressed with the sound of the band. He thought the acoustics were good and thought, "Let's put on opera here," and he managed to make that happen.

So, he had not only the charm and charisma, the musical talent, but he also had the business sense. He had organizational skills to actually make things happen, get people to do things, which you have to do as a general director. You can't just be a dreamer. And we know that when he got the Company started, performing what we now call the Bill Graham Civic Auditorium in the fall of 1923, he was able to bring top artists from around the world. And it was not easy to get here in those days. But it was a tribute to him that they came, because he was a talented conductor, and they obviously felt they'd be in good hands; they'd be well treated, and it was not some sort of country roadshow. It was state of the art at the time. So, we have to give him a lot of credit for what he did, and I wish I'd met him.

BR: I've heard you talk a number of different times about midwifing an opera and about working on a commission from the very, very beginning and then all the way through its fruition as a premiere on our stage. Can you talk to us about that process?

KC: Yes, I can. It's fascinating, and it's extremely different, depending on who's involved, the subject matter, the composer, the librettist, and most particularly the general director whose idea it is. Some general directors are extremely hands-on. I would say David Gockley is at the top of the list there, who really get directly

involved with telling the composer and librettist what he wants and what's wrong with a scene, what needs to be improved, that sort of thing. Others are a little more laissez faire.

And in any case, my job has always been, among other things, to shepherd the project through administratively, making sure that communication goes back and forth with the artists about how the commission plan is shaping up and making sure ultimately that the documents get signed and that checks are cut at the right time. Normally, payments for commissions are sort of doled out in a timed sequence. Often, there's a certain amount due on signing of the contract, a little more due when the first draft of libretto comes in, etc., and then sometimes they get a nice check on opening night, (laughs) or somewhere along the line there, there's a deadline for the final payment. So, I have to be making sure that that happens.

And then there's often a series of checkpoints throughout a commissioning process. Often, a company will have 30 days, for example, after the receipt of a draft libretto to provide comments. And if we don't provide any comments, then it's deemed to be proved. It's that kind of legalese language in a commission agreement, and I was the one who had to sort of oversee that and make sure that these back-and-forth communications were happening.

In some cases, I did get directly involved in sort of giving my advice, particularly on the shape of libretto. It's awkward with composers sometimes in terms of feedback. You can't say, you know, "That really should be an F sharp instead of an F natural (laughs) in that bar," but you can say, "That aria seems awfully short. It seems it's going to be over before we've even sort of hunkered down to listen to it," or, "That scene seems to peter out, doesn't seem to have much of an ending." We can offer feedback of that nature.

And some composers are extremely open to feedback like that. They like to absorb it all. Sometimes they don't take your advice, but they're eager to hear it. Other composers are less open to that and feel like, "This is what I wrote, and this is it," but nonetheless you can have your opinions expressed and see what happens. And sometimes we're wrong too. Sometimes a composer will ignore our advice for a good reason, because it ultimately turns out to be just what he intended and what was right.

JM: Was there a range typically with a world premiere in terms of back-and-forth, in terms of making cuts and additions, or would some composers submit an opera that was pretty much ready to go, and others had a lot of work? Or did they all need a lot of work?

KC: I would say, in general, once the score is received, there's not a tremendous amount of change that happens. It's really in the libretto process. And of course, there's workshopping. One of my jobs as director of music administration and later, dramaturg, was organizing workshops. We workshopped most of our new commissions. That just involved musical run-throughs, usually about a week's time, where the singers would not necessarily be the singers who would ultimately perform the roles in the world premiere, but they might end up covering them. But they were learning the music. They'd still be on book for the final run-through. But the composer and librettist and director and conductor typically would all be involved, and they'd get an idea how the piece is shaping up and what the arc of the drama is looking like. Are there weak musical moments? Are there strong musical moments that need to be amplified, and so forth. The workshops were always very revelatory.

Then would come the, quote/unquote, final version of the vocal score, and not much happened after that in terms of major changes. What would often happen would be textual changes, word changes; we needed to get the right vowel on that high note, that kind of thing, or a singer needs to put the high note in a different place. I remember in one case where the aria ended, “I still love,” high note on “still”, and the singer really needed it to be, “I love still” because that’s a much better vowel for that high note. So, there’s a lot of tinkering of that nature. Sometimes there would be cuts when a scene just seemed to be going on too long or being too repetitive.

And then the issue of scene changes comes into play, and there’s some tinkering often in the music between scenes. My favorite story about that, if you don’t mind my digressing a little bit here is, *Streetcar Named Desire*, which we did in 1998, the world premiere, obviously based on the Tennessee Williams’ play. And there’s a whole story about working with the Williams Estate on that. But the libretto was by Philip Littell and the music by André Previn.

At the end of the opera, we have the famous line, “Whoever you are, I’ve always depended on the kindness of strangers,” and in the staging, Blanche, who sings that, then repeats, “Whoever you are, whoever you are, whoever you are,” with a big high note at the end as she’s way off stage, ethereally floating into the distance. While this is happening, the set is rotating so that she’s kind of left alone on stage as she’s going off into the wings. And the set was creaking, and it was just ruining the effect. And so, Colin Graham, I believe, was the stage director, said to André, “Is there any possibility we could have a little more music here,” so we could slow down the movement of the set, and it won’t be creaking.

And André at first said, “No, no, that’s not possible. This is what I wrote. This is the score,” and so forth. But he of course came out of the Hollywood scene. He won his first Oscar while he was still a teenager, so he knew all about that problem. And during the break, I saw him get out his pencil (laughs) and start noodling. And at the next rehearsal, we had, I think, maybe 30 seconds more of music so the scene change could happen without creaking. So, that kind of flexibility, it’s very utilitarian to some extent. It’s not necessarily great art that’s compelling these changes, but it’s the reality of the theater.

BR: This makes me remember something that I read about André Previn, again that we had commissioned him for a piece at the end of Lotfi’s [Mansouri] tenure, and Pamela [Rosenberg] ended up canceling it when she came in in 2001. So, it’s a commission that we started, and yet it didn’t come to fruition.

KC: Yes, and this wasn’t the first time that that sort of thing had happened. Lotfi Mansouri, who had commissioned *Streetcar*, really got along well with André Previn. They liked each other. And after the success of *Streetcar*, it was decided that they would work on another commission. It was a piece called *Silk*, or *Seta* in Italian. It was a novella by Alessandro Baricco, which had been translated into English. And we negotiated the rights for that, and it was set to be premiered, but Pamela decided that we would not do that piece, and we would commission various other things instead.

This has happened with Lotfi as well. Going back to my very first commission that I worked on, it was a piece by Hugo Weisgall, the American composer, and it was based on the “Book of Esther” in the Bible, the libretto by Charles Kondek. And this was a commission by Terry McEwen. It was the only commission that we did in the Terry McEwen era. Terry knew Hugo Weisgall and rather admired him. We workshopped it twice, and Lotfi Mansouri, who would later become general director, happened to attend one of those

workshops. Hugo's music is very spiky and sort of angular and dissonant, and that was his style. And he was well admired for his work, but Lotfi, when he took over as general director, he decided we wouldn't do *Esther*, and it ultimately had its world premiere at City Opera, New York City Opera.

So, this idea of commissioning is very much attached to who the general director is and their tastes and their wants. And you can't do it if your heart isn't in it.

BR: Is there a particular commission that you worked on that you found the most fulfilling?

KC: Oh, wow. Lots of them, I can think of. *Streetcar* is one because it was an adventure, working with the Tennessee Williams Estate. A little background to that story there, many people had been interested in an opera about *Streetcar*, but the co-trustees of the estate would not agree to that. But one of them had died by this point, at the time that we were interested in commissioning something, and the other was amenable once the name of André Previn was attached.

This was back in the mid-'90s when the way you got familiar with new American composers and their work was that their agents sent you cassette tapes. Do you remember cassette tapes? (laughs) So, Lotfi and I would listen to these cassette tapes that publishers had sent, and Lotfi wasn't hearing anything that he really felt appealed to him, the language of *Streetcar*.

By chance, I was driving to work one day, and I heard a piece by André Previn on classical radio station, and I thought, "Hm." And I mentioned that to Lotfi, and he called André, and the way André told the story later was that he said yes right away. That isn't actually true. (laughs) He said, "I need to think about this. I think the answer's no," but then he called back and said yes. And so, that was kind of fun.

I remember that the rights agreement from the Tennessee Williams Estate specified that the libretto, which would be by Philip Littell, would be faithful to the original play. They were not insisting that we slavishly re-copy the language or anything like that. And that there be no nudity, that was the only other stipulation. I thought, how strange that they thought we would have Blanche have a nude scene or something like that.

Anyway, but there are a couple of stories I can tell about that if you don't mind my using up all this time on your tape. But the libretto originally by Philip Littell, which I thought was really well done, of course it couldn't include all the wonderful language of the play, or the show would've lasted six hours. But it did have what was called the parrot joke, where there's a birthday party for Blanche which her boyfriend Mitch has not shown up to because he's now learned about Blanche's shady past. And so, this is a rather gloomy party with no boyfriend there, and so Blanche is trying to cheer things up, and she tells a slightly off-color joke about a sea captain's widow and his foulmouthed parrot. André called me and said, "I don't know what to do with this. I don't see how I can set this to music. I mean, I don't know what we'll do." And so, Philip was persuaded that the parrot joke, funny as it is, would have to go. And I've often talked about that when I lecture about music fairly often, and I talk about comedy and how jokes, funny as they are, don't really work in opera because the music doesn't have anything to add, and often it gets in the way because it makes it harder to hear the words.

There were a couple of other interesting things. There's a scene before Mitch finds out the shady news about Blanche's past. They have a slightly romantic moment where they've come back from a date, and

Blanche doesn't want him to turn on the light because -- she has an aria about that, "Don't Turn on the Light". "I want magic," she sings, in the magic of the colored light rather than that harsh glare that shows all my wrinkles. But Philip had given Mitch a rather poetic bit that could be used for sort of an aria there, basically a love song to Blanche. The Williams Estate didn't like this. They thought it was out of character for Mitch, that he was not the kind of guy who would open himself up in this manner. And they suggested that it should be more about his ailing mother because he was kind of a mama's boy and taking care of her. And I remember saying something to Philip along the lines of "singing about your sick mother doth not a love song make." And so, it became curtailed significantly and just something more general, along the lines of Blanche, "Maybe you and I are meant for one another," or something like that.

The third interesting in all of that was that the libretto that Philip had originally drafted omitted what is called the ape speech. Everyone is familiar with the famous "Stella, Stella, Stella" scene. Stanley has gotten drunk while playing poker with his buddies, and he gets annoyed when his wife Stella and her sister Blanche play the radio too loud, and he throws a fit. And he smashes the radio up, and he slugs Stella, and she runs upstairs in tears to the neighbor's house. The guys sober up Stanley. They throw him in the shower, so we get that wet T-shirt look that everyone remembers from the film. And then, Stanley's contrite, and he's out on the ground below the balcony, and he's calling out, "Stella, Stella, Stella."

The next morning, in the play, Blanche has a scene with Stella, where she is remarking on this incredible violent scene of the night before, telling her that she thinks her husband is an animal. He's an ape. Like thousands of years have passed him by, and there he is, Stanley Kowalski, king of the jungle. Unbeknownst to the ladies, Stanley has come from work, and he's in the other room, overhearing all this. This whole scene was cut from the draft libretto, and again, the Williams Estate said, "No, this is essential because we need to know that Stanley knows what Blanche thinks of him in order to understand what happens at the end of the play." And so, that scene went back in and turned out to be very strong, so strong that we put an intermission after it, and it became a three-act opera.

So, this kind of interaction, it's the only major interaction with a literary source like that that I've had, but it was fascinating to see that kind of interaction, people who understood the Tennessee Williams aesthetic and were meant to protect it but obviously didn't want to interfere too much.

KC: Jake Heggie, I can say a lot about Jake. I've had the pleasure of working with him from the '90s onward. He was, as I am sure you know, Jeff, working in your department, in communications, writing press releases, driving artists to their interviews with radio stations, things like that. But he was also writing songs, and this story is well known now. He began showing some of his songs to the artists he admired, particularly Frederica von Stade, who we all know as Flicka. And I remember Flicka joking about this later. I can hear her rolling her eyes and saying, "Oh, great. The PR guys writes songs." (laughter)

But she sang them and learned them and realized that this is a very talented guy, and Jake began to have quite a reputation for a talented songwriter. And Lotfi Mansouri wanted him to write an opera.

I'll back up a little bit to talk about Lotfi Mansouri in the context of commissioning. When he became general director in 1989, he kind of pulled me aside, and he said, "Kip, there are three commissions I want to do. I want to commission an opera based on *Dangerous Liaisons*, the novel, the French 18<sup>th</sup> century epistolary novel." And he did that. The piece was composed by Conrad Susa and the libretto by Philip

Littell. He said, "I want to commission an opera based on *A Streetcar Named Desire*." He did that too, as we'd just been discussing. And then he said, "I want to commission an opera with a libretto by Terrence McNally," Terrence of course, the well-known Broadway playwright, most famous for *Master Class*. Terrence is a well-known opera lover and managed to get operatic themes into many of his plays. And so, it was Terrence that Lotfi had in mind to match up with Jake Heggie to write an opera.

And Lotfi's idea, because this was going to be for the centennial for the year 2000, was a piece sort of based on, as the French say, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. The more things change, the more they stay the same. And this was a play called *Les Belles de Nuit, Beauties of the Night*, which involved a sort of romantic figure who imagined himself in various periods throughout history and his sort of romantic desires. And kind of the idea that was carried forth with this, the more things change, the more they stay the same. The characters in these various time periods were always nostalgic for an earlier time, no matter when it was.

Terrence hated that idea. (laughs) He didn't want to write anything about some previous periods. He wanted something more contemporary, and he came up with *Dead Man Walking*. I was in Lotfi's office when (laughs) Jake and Terrence sprang this *Dead Man Walking*. We thought, "Oh, okay." That was what they wanted, and Jake had said many times that when Terrence first broached this idea, the hair stood up on the back of his head, and he was already hearing music. It just really resonated with him. And it was a great success, as history has shown, back in 2000, one of the most successful operas of the 21st century, gets done all the time. And Jake has gone on to write lots of other operas.

We haven't commissioned directly, that is to say, for world premieres, any of Jake's other operas, but we've certainly done them, his very successful take on *Moby-Dick* with a great libretto by Gene Scheer and more recently, the adaptation of *It's a Wonderful Life*, a great Christmas opera, again with a libretto by Gene Scheer. Jake's also done a piece for the Merola Opera Program, our summer training program, which is a Faustian piece called *If I Were You*, based on a French novel about a young man who dreams of being someone else and finds a way to switch with other people. And Jake is working on another very exciting piece now for Houston, and I'm looking forward to seeing it there when it's finally done.

JM: Well, thank you so much, and thank you for being such an important part of Streaming the First Century and such an important part of this Company for so many generations of fans at San Francisco Opera since 1979. My goodness. And we're still learning from you, so, thank you so much.

KC: Thank you, Jeff and Barbara.

BR: Thank you, Kip.

KC: It's been a pleasure talking to you. I'm happy to be here.

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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