



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

SESSION 4: Ho jo to ho!

Broadcast Intermission Interview

Fidelio, 1978

Featuring: Gwyneth Jones (role: Leonore) and Terence McEwen (interviewer and future SF Opera general director 1982-1988)

(transcript read time ~ 16 minutes; audio run time ~ 19 minutes)

[BEGIN AUDIO]

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

ANNOUNCER: On this final Intermission of the 1978 San Francisco Opera season it's a pleasure to present our guest, Gwyneth Jones. Ms. Jones was interviewed several weeks ago at the KKHI studio by her good friend Terry McEwan, Executive Vice President of London Records. Mr. McEwen is, of course, no stranger to opera audiences, and we hope you'll be delighted by their conversation.

TERENCE MCEWEN [TM]: Anyone who knows me knows that Gwyneth Jones is a very special prima donna in my life. The last 20 years I've been working with famous prima donnas, but you have to have some favorites and Gwyneth is one of my special favorites, so it's a terrific thrill for me to be here in San Francisco, my sweet, to interview about *Fidelio*. (laughter)

GWYNETH JONES [GJ]: Yes, yes, great.

TM: And, as a matter of fact, *Fidelio* has played an important part in our friendship because I've been to two great *Fidelio* productions of yours, one at the Vienna State Opera, and one in New York, and, like, you knocked me out. And I'm fascinated by not only *Fidelio* and the way it is done but the way you do it. For instance, I think one of the, let's say, ten great operatic moments of my life was the moment you walked on the stage in Vienna, because without singing a note or saying a word you created a character who was completely believable, and yet I knew the woman that was in that costume. And you didn't say a word. The dialogue was cut. Do you remember?

GJ: Yes, yes.

TM: You went right into the quartet. Is that unusual? It seems to be a different amount of dialogue every time I see or hear *Fidelio*. Why was that done that way, and why was it so effective, in your opinion? Because it sent a shiver up my back, Gwyneth.

GJ: Yes, it was rather wonderful. I felt this, too. Usually, one has the dialogue, and Otto Schenk, who was doing the production, felt -- and Lenny, too, Lenny Bernstein -- felt that it took away from the dramatic entrance of Leonore. And I think what created this fantastic mood for the quartet was the fact that I came in carrying a very heavy basket and chains and things, and the Marzeline, who was Lucia Popp, came rushing towards me with great joy in her eyes, and it was just this look in the eyes. And she turned away, because I first turn away from her because I want to avoid my eyes meeting with her eyes, and she thinks it's because I'm in love with her, and she turns away in ecstasy and starts the quartet. And it was so fabulous. It's the only time that we've done it like that, and I also found it very, very wonderful, especially doing it there in Theater an der Wien, for the Beethoven centennial --

TM: Where it was created, of course, right.

GJ: -- where it was created. It was really the most wonderful, moving performances.

TM: It must have been a marvelous experience.

GJ: Every night we just had the tears rolling down.

TM: Darling, there's something else that fascinates me -- I mean, one of the many things that fascinate me about your Leonore, and your approach to the part, is that you are a very feminine lady and person, and a very beautiful lady, and renowned for both of those qualities, and yet with a minimum of makeup -- for instance, you wear your own hair; I know that --

GJ: I wear my own hair, yes.

TM: -- and you don't sort of go to great pains, it seems to me, as I've seen many sopranos do, to make themselves look masculine, and yet you are completely convincing. I remember you being a very convincing Octavian, too, and I wonder how you manage this. Is it in your head, or is it in the way you move, or how do you do it?

GJ: It's in my head, and it's in my heart, because I feel with each role you do, you have to believe. You have to become the person that you're playing and --

TM: Because surely the difficult thing about Leonore is that, on the one hand, the audience must always be conscious that she is Leonore, and that she is Florestan's wife, and that she's searching for her husband; on the other hand, if she isn't convincing, and you can't believe the Marzeline's story, then it does make the opera a little ridiculous.

GJ: Yes. Well, this is the big difference between Octavian and Leonore. They're both a girl playing the part of a boy; the only difference is that Leonore is not a boy. And so I tried to keep her as natural as possible, and it is this naturalness, I think, and this sincerity that Marzeline falls for.

TM: Right, of course.

GJ: She feels something very special about Leonore. She doesn't quite know what it is, but she falls madly in love with her. And trying to –

TM: That determination gives Leonore a strong character, of course.

GJ: The determination, yes, quite, quite. She has a very strong character, and I don't try to play it too boyish. I mean, obviously one has to be the whole time aware that someone could discover that you're not really a boy, and this is the big danger, you know, but I think it's the sincerity and coming from the heart, and this great love, and this terrific, fantastic woman, this Leonore.

TM: It's the vibes, I guess, really. (laughter)

GJ: Yeah.

TM: That's what it ends up being, you know –

GJ: Yes, that's what it is, yeah.

TM: -- the vibes that you get across the footlights.

GJ: And I think that, for me, why Leonore is such a fabulous part to play is because it has such a special message to bring to the public, you know, this message of love and freedom, and this means something very much to me. The two moments, for me, also, I think as you do, that actually the opera begins with Leonore's entry, because whatever happens before that is –

TM: It's just preparation, yes, of course.

GJ: Yes, yes. And this is the one fantastic moment, and the other two are when Florestan says, "*Ach, Leonore, was hast du für mich getan? Nichts, nichts.*" Every time the tears just roll down, because it's –

TM: I've actually seen the tears run down your face, and they've been running down mine –

GJ: I just –

TM: -- sitting in the audience at that moment.

GJ: I don't think I've ever sang "*Namenlose Freude*" without tears in my face, you know, and the whole dungeon scene.

TM: And as a result tears in your voice, of course –

GJ: Yeah.

TM: -- and that's another thing I'm interested to know.

GJ: Yeah, and it's every night. Every night is for real, you know. It's happening for the first time, and I think this is the important thing. And the other marvelous moment for me is the prayer at the end, "O Gott! Welch' ein Augenblick!", because this is so universal, and I feel such a reaching out to the public, that you just have something so important to tell them, and it's so for real, especially if you do it somewhere like Berlin, or Prague, I did it recently.

TM: Really? Yes.

GJ: That was really quite –

TM: So these were political backgrounds then, yeah.

GJ: Yes. It was really such a moving performance, although it was a very, very difficult performance for me because everybody else was singing in Czech, you know, (laughter) and this was quite difficult.

TM: Have you ever sung Leonore in any other language but German?

GJ: English.

TM: You have sung it in English.

GJ: I did it first with the Welsh National Opera in English, and a couple of weeks later in Covent Garden in German, without any rehearsal, and it was actually with *Fidelio* that I really made my name. I made my career from Covent Garden, where they tour their programs up and throw it down like confetti, you know? (laughter) Then I went straight off and did it in Munich and then Vienna, and everywhere having about 40 or 50 curtain calls, and doing it with Karl Böhm and Josef Krips, really wonderful conductors, and all over the world: the Metropolitan, Chicago, San Francisco. And it's really been a role in my career that's brought me a lot of happiness and a lot of success and...

TM: I can imagine. Gwyneth, tell me something about Leonore vocally. It's, to me, always been a kind of interesting phenomenon because I don't think -- and I may be wrong; correct me -- that it's a terribly difficult role vocally, except for, at least, the famous second half of "Abscheulicher," which has been transposed and, as we all know, Toscanini transposed it for Lotte Lehmann in Salzburg –

GJ: Yes, I know, yeah.

TM: -- in '37. But it has actually been sung by ladies with a mezzo-soprano color voice, and, of course, you began as a mezzo, I know.

GJ: Yes.

TM: And is it a difficult role vocally? Are there any terrible hurdles? I've always thought "Namenlose Freude" must be terrible because it's such a moving moment, the great duet, but is it? It's not terribly difficult vocally, is it?

GJ: Well, it's not written very comfortably for the voice. I've never had any problems with it because, as you say, I used to be a mezzo, and it's rather good to have the sort of middle voice.

TM: The dark sound, right.

GJ: The dark sound is very good for the Leonore, and I happen to love top notes. I mean, I just adore them, you know. (laughter) I mean, when I get to Brünnhilde, the *Siegfried*, you know, when the top C's come, then I'm really happy, and I just adore top notes.

TM: Us opera lovers do. (laughter)

GJ: And so it's no problem for me, you know?

TM: Sure. Wagner is kinder, in a sense, to the soprano, isn't he, to a dramatic soprano, than almost any other composer, because he keeps you in the same general area at the same time.

GJ: Well, this is it, you see.

TM: Doesn't keep throwing you from one tessitura to the other.

GJ: Yeah, apart from some of the things in *Götterdämmerung*, for instance. I mean, you have all these great, tremendous outbursts, which are very high, and then you suddenly come down to (singing) "*Abendlich Dämmern*." And, you know, (laughter) you're really down in your boots if you're not careful. And there again, you have to think high. You can't try to produce a mezzo sound. And if you think high, it comes out full and mezzo-y. It's only when you try to make a sound that you get into trouble. If you just let it come out naturally then everything's okay.

TM: It's marvelous, because what you're saying is the proof of what I firmly believe, and that is that no matter how good the vocal equipment is, if the grey matter isn't inside that skull (laughter) it isn't going to come out right.

GJ: No.

TM: You've got to be able to think –

GJ: You're dead right.

TM: -- and work it out. And as a matter of fact, I wonder if it's different for you. For instance, you've made two television films of this role. You've recorded it for [Brand X?], and with Karl Böhm, and, of course, you've sung it many, many, many times in many, many theaters.

GJ: Yeah, about 150 times now.

TM: Hundred and fifty, really?

GJ: (laughs) Yeah.

TM: How different is the projection, for you? Is it a different situation vocally, television, records, and in the theater? Or can one make that generality? Does it also change from theater to theater? If you're singing in, let's say, San Francisco Opera, which is a house with a big body, a big, empty space between you and the public -- at least the public sitting back in those balconies -- or in Geneva, for instance, a smaller theater, Berlin.

GJ: Well, no, some people say this. You know, they sort of say, oh, well, it's much easier to sing Brünnhilde in Bayreuth because the acoustics are so good, you know? I don't believe in all this. I mean --

TM: You sing --

GJ: -- you sing --

TM: -- or you don't sing.

GJ: -- and your voice is your voice, you know? And it's sort of -- you just have to be able to project your voice, and whether the theater is small... Obviously, if it's a teeny-weeny little theater you have to try to hold it in a bit, but there's no way doing to make it half the size. I mean, it's just... Your voice is as big as it is, and I just like it to come out, and in a place like San Francisco, at the Met, I always feel so wonderful, because there's such a great, big place, you know. There's such a --

TM: That big (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

GJ: -- lovely lot of space, and I really feel great because now I sort of feel, well, now, you can really let it blossom like a flower, you know. And I feel very, very happy when I have a big auditorium.

TM: And in front of a microphone you do the same thing --

GJ: Well, you --

TM: -- or are you more conscious of --

GJ: Well, you have to be a little conscious because, of course, I mean, on some of the very high outbursts, if you stand too near the mic, I mean, it makes problems for the technical. They have to then really start maneuvering with their knobs and things, you know. And it's probably more difficult for them to record a large voice --

TM: Yes, of course, it is. I can tell you --

GJ: -- than it is a small voice. (laughter)

TM: -- it is.

GJ: You know, and so one has to sort of take a step back, you know, when you get to a top C and this sort of thing, which... But I don't really find... Obviously one has to concentrate, also, much more on line, but one has to do that in a theater, too, so I don't really feel –

TM: And television? How about television? Does a camera make a difference? Does it...?

GJ: Well, I –

TM: I mean, you're singing for microphones, but you're conscious of the camera.

GJ: We just recorded *Tannhäuser* in Bayreuth this summer –

TM: You mean for television?

GJ: For television, which is the first time that –

TM: Which part are you singing, or both?

GJ: Both, I do both of them, and you'll be seeing it sometime on the television screens. And it was the first film to ever have been made in Bayreuth, the complete opera. And it was quite strenuous. You know, we had three days. We did one act each day, you know. And it was live singing, which I think is wonderful, because when one does playback –

TM: It's the only kind that works, really.

GJ: -- it really doesn't –

TM: You're absolutely right.

GJ: -- come over in the same way, and it's very strenuous. But it was onstage, so it was really like doing a performance without... I mean, the public was the cameras, and so one could get int—

TM: You didn't have to worry about the cameras, in other words. You just did a performance, a hundred percent.

GJ: You did a performance, yeah.

TM: Perhaps conscious of minor details a little, yeah.

GJ: Well, one is... Well, one is always conscious, with recordings and with television filming and things. One is always conscious that it is going down as a document, which is going to be kept, and this always makes you a little sort of nervous, you know, and yet at the same time very excited, and you feel wonderful, because it's going to be there then, you know? But I feel that if you get into a character, which is very important to me -- I always have to become the character that I'm playing, so that I believe deeply I am the person, and every performance is happening for the first time. It has to be fresh, you know? And --

TM: It's one of the reasons I love you, my dear. (laughter)

GJ: And so --

TM: It's really what counts.

GJ: -- you know, if I'm standing in front of a microphone, or onstage, it's happening. You can just... It sounds a bit sort of calculating, but immediately I hear my music is happening for the first time, and I'm doing it. I remember when I recorded *Otello* and we did one take, which was literally just when he strangles me, you know, and I had to do the scream, and I made the orchestra nearly stop playing, (laughter) because, I mean --

TM: You scared them to death.

GJ: -- for me it was... I mean, I was just standing there. I wasn't lying on the bed, and he wasn't on top sort of, you know, strangling me, but I could just feel the --

TM: You were into it.

GJ: I was into it, you know.

TM: You could feel it around your own neck, yeah.

GJ: And, I mean, they just absolutely... I could see their hair standing on end, you know. (laughter)

TM: As a matter of fact, *Otello* leads me into something I've been wanting to ask you privately, and I may as well ask you in front of the microphone. You've become -- and don't take this the wrong way, my dear -- a kind of German lady. I mean, you live in Switzerland. You sing in Munich and Vienna. You sing in the German-speaking area more than anywhere else, although you still have very much of an international career. But your repertoire has also become more and more German. I mean, I've heard you sing lots of Italian opera, and I love you as an Italian opera singer, and San Francisco is lucky enough to have one *Tosca* this season, and I know you haven't given it up. But has that happened on purpose, or has it happened because you happen to be a wonderful Brünnhilde or that sort of thing?

GJ: I don't think so, no. What a lot of people... I sing quite a large part of the year in Munich and Vienna, where we do repertoire, and Hamburg, places like this, and there I do constantly my Italian repertoire: my *Aidas*, my *Butterflys*, *Ballo in maschera* --

TM: You do *Butterfly*s, too. I didn't realize that.

GJ: Oh, I do *Butterfly*s still.

TM: I didn't realize.

GJ: I adore *Butterfly*. And I'm going to do *Turandot* now. And I keep my Italian repertoire fresh. The thing is that because I've been involved with the Chéreau *Ring*, which has become very famous -- we're, in fact, hoping to film and record it next year or the year after, over two years -- one sort of associates me more and more, because I have had an enormous success also in London now as --

TM: And you're also becoming a very famous Strauss singer, not only Wagner but Strauss (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

GJ: Well, I've done a lot Marschallin and things like this.

TM: -- since our first *Salome* adventure.

GJ: Yeah.

TM: I think we should let the public in on that. That was fun. (laughter) When Gwyneth first told me that she was singing *Salome* in Hamburg with Böhm -- this was in New York and we went to a favorite place of mine called the Egyptian Gardens to see some bellydancers, and I said what I deeply believe, and that is that the bellydancing that goes on in Egyptian cafes today is really exactly the same thing that Salome did centuries ago in Judea, and Gwyneth agreed with me, but only Gwyneth Jones is this kind of artist, that kind of thorough lady. It was just fabulous. She then studied bellydancing, right? (laughter)

GJ: Yes, right here in San Francisco.

TM: That's right.

GJ: The last time I was here, because I was so impressed with this bellydancing in New York that you introduced me to, and I went along to buy myself some makeup -- I'd run out of some sort of cream -- and what do I see but hanging on the wall, "[Yamila?] teaches bellydancing," and I thought, right. (laughs)

TM: That's fabulous.

GJ: So off I went, and I learned to bellydance, and I do the whole bellydance movements in my dance. I then had ballet dancing lessons, too, and incorporated the whole thing, and I do really quite a dance (laughter) --

TM: I've got a gorgeous picture on the wall of my office --

GJ: -- complete with -- I'm coming to --

TM: -- of Ms. Jones doing her bellydance.

GJ: I'm coming to the Met to do it for you.

TM: I know, my dear. Can't wait. (laughter) And the soprano whose figure is as gorgeous now as it was when she made her debut -- I guess even more gorgeous --

GJ: Well, yes, I lost quite a bit of... Actually, it was through Salome, because the thought of taking off those seven veils, (laughter) I thought, I better take a couple of pounds off, too!

TM: Gwyneth, it's a joy, joy to see you and a joy to talk to you and a joy to hear you sing.

GJ: I couldn't have had anyone nicer than you to do the interview.

TM: Welcome back, darling. Thank you.

GJ: Thank you.

ANNOUNCER: You've just heard a conversation with soprano Gwyneth Jones and Terry McEwan, Executive Vice President of London Records.

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