



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

SESSION 4: Ho jo to ho!

SPANNING THE DECADES: San Francisco Opera Center Edition

Featuring: Christine Bullin (former SF Opera Center director) and Dr. Clifford "Kip" Cranna (SF Opera dramaturg emeritus)

(transcript read time ~ 33 minutes; audio run time ~ 41 minutes)

[BEGIN AUDIO]

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

KIP CRANNA [KC]: Hello, I'm Kip Cranna. I'm the Dramaturg Emeritus of San Francisco Opera. I served on the staff administratively from 1979 until 2019, and I'm still affiliated with the Company on what I call a rent-a-Kip basis, and I'm glad to be here.

CHRISTINE BULLIN [CB]: Hi, I'm Christine Bullin, and I first walked through the north stage door of the San Francisco Opera House on August 15th of 1978. And I was recruited by Kurt Adler and Robert Walker to run Brown Bag Opera, which was a sort of not very (laughs) substantial assignment at the time. But also, to somehow organize a project which Mr. Adler had made a fundraising grab for, but it didn't really exist, which came to be something called the American Opera Project. Those are my first two assignments. Shortly after I got here, Susan Munn retired, and so I inherited, the Affiliate Artist Program, as well, and all of that was in waiting when Terry McEwen [general director 1982-1988] came and proposed that we tidy up these proliferating gardens of (laughs) affiliate programs and streamline it, which became the San Francisco Opera Center.

KC: I'd love to hear lots of detail about the beginnings of the Opera Center, but before that let's talk about what you were doing and where you were before you came here.

CB: Yes, I graduated from college, went in the Peace Corps, and made a wrong turn in becoming a rare book librarian, because order was not, ultimately, of that much interest (laughter) to me, so I wasn't all that good at it. I did that at Harvard University.

And having been a volunteer for the Opera Company of Boston when I was in college, I wandered by there to see if [Ranty?] was working there, and found myself suddenly typing and answering the phone, because there was relentless chaos there, and you just stepped in and suddenly there you were. So I -- which was the Company founded by the legendary Sarah Caldwell, who was an American original.

Around the time I had thought I would move on, a woman called Cynthia Robbins, who worked with Edgar Vincent at a public relations firm was working out here for Mr. Adler, and she proposed to him that I was a bright young thing and might be employed. So he was in New York. He summoned me for

an interview and proposed that I come and run Brown Bag Opera and this new thing which didn't even have a name yet. And because of the -- because it was time to evacuate Sarah-land, although that was the most -- one of the most formative experiences of my entire career, I gotta say. And because of the repute of the San Francisco Opera at the time -- I mean, there were three great companies, and two out of three people would say that number one was the San Francisco Opera at that time in the late '70s. So -- and San Francisco, and my mother lived in Los Angeles, so against my better judgment about going to work for another ill-tempered, abusive, but brilliant person, (laughter) I came and put myself into the clutches of Kurt Adler.

I have always said if you can tour, you can do it all, because touring involves it all. So, my first formative experience in opera was running a touring company [w/ Opera New England, an affiliate of Opera Company of Boston], because if you got all those movable parts, plus one of which is Sarah Caldwell, you make it or you don't make it.

KC: We don't want to get ahead of ourselves, but managing touring is something that you would end up doing here, as well. Let's talk about when you got here, and Brown Bag Opera which was your initial brief, as I understand it.

CB: Yes.

KC: What did that involve?

CB: Just to do a little preamble, when I arrived on August 15th, that was a signal date. Because in the calendar of the San Francisco Opera, because it was a week before what was then called, for which reasons only I understand anymore -- was called the Merola Grand Finals, or the final concert of the Merola program, slightly before Opera in the Park, and slightly before opening, which that year would involve Domingo and Ricciarelli in *Otello*, which only slightly preceded Pavarotti and Caballé in *Tosca*.

So walking through this stage door was amazing. But somebody pointed out to me -- and it was probably Alice Cunningham, that part of the genius of Kurt Adler was that he had created a sort of season you could have if you were an opera lover in San Francisco with no money. You could come to the Merola Grand Finals for free. And Brown Bag Opera was part of that. After Christmas, after the season ended, there was a winter season which took place first in Herbst, I think, of noontime concerts, one a week for, I don't know, six weeks or something, and the Affiliate -- San Francisco Affiliate Artists Program was in existence at the time. Carol Vaness was in it at the time, and Tom Hampson had just been in Merola when I got here, so there was all that, too.

So this was a vehicle for the singers of the Affiliate Artists Program to perform, and the idea was that there was this winter series which was free -- you could come at lunch; you could bring your lunch -- but that we also performed wherever there was an opportunity and an offer. So we performed in parks. We performed all over the place for free audiences. But Brown Bag Opera also became a sort of catch-all phrase for anything happening out of the house in an informal way. So if somebody wants us, for instance -- I remember the occasion -- to go sing at the perfume counter of Nordstrom's, (laughs) in advance of Michael Tippett's *Midsummer Marriage*, that was known as a Brown Bag. It wasn't necessarily billed in the moment as a Brown Bag, but in our minds Brown Bag was that sort of generic term for such things, which could involve three singers, six singers. Whatever we wanted to do, we could do, because it was free.

KC: I remember emceeding some of these Brown Bag performances as time went on. Sometimes they would be in commercial settings, like a men's club or some sort of commercial venue for a banquet sort of situation, and I would be the interlocutor for those young singers.

And I do have a distinct memory of a Brown Bag at a plaza down in the Financial District and one brilliant soprano struggling through Lucia's aria in act one of *Lucia di Lammermoor* as a firetruck went by with his siren blaring and she didn't miss a note, so –

CB: Right.

KC: -- I think it was a formative experience for these kids.

CB: Well, it was and I have said on any number of occasions, like this, that if anybody got snooty about it and said, "Well, why are you doing that?", first of all, there was Kurt Adler's genius mission to the people outside of the opera house, which was the motivation behind all the affiliate programs, you know, WOT and Merola and, you know, all of them.

When people would say later on, when we would roll out Debbie Voigt and Susan Graham and all these people to audition for Covent Garden who came through and they would say, "Your people audition so well, why is that?" And I would say, "Brown Bag Opera. They can stand it up and put it on for two people sitting in a room glaring at them, you know, 40 people in a park. Whoever it is, they get up there and they turn it on, and they have good nerves, because fire trucks may go by," you know what I mean. And I do believe that. It was very true that they were very at ease auditioning.

KC: Now, you mentioned the Affiliate Artist Program, which, as I recall, was called the Exxon Affiliate Artist Program originally. This was a residency for young singers, is that right?

CB: Yes, this was created by Richard Clark of Affiliate Artists with Kurt Adler. And I'm sure it was of appeal to Kurt because Affiliate Artists organized all the funding for it. So he got a thing that he didn't have to pay for. Richard set this up and it was a strange hybrid of Affiliate Artists and the San Francisco Opera in that these singers were available to be cast on the main stage, and they also had an affiliate artists obligation to perform. So they were attached to a corporation and a community somewhere which was the Affiliate Artists model.

So Carol Vaness was the Chevron Affiliate Artist, and her sort of home base as an Affiliate Artist was in Los Angeles, so they had to go and spend a couple weeks a year obligatorily in whatever portions worked out, doing what was called their "Informance." Which is a 45-minute program, sort of explaining themselves, explaining opera, talking about whatever they wanted to talk about, and incorporating arias, which was a Brown Bag-like formative experience, to stand up alone and take on a bunch of people in a retirement home, who were -- many of whom are not awake. (laughs)

KC: Am I correct Barry McCauley was an Affiliate Artist?

CB: Barry McCauley was in it at the time.

KC: Pamela South?

CB: Mm-hmm. Gwen Jones. Stephen West. I was trying to remember who the baritone was, and I'm sorry -- I hope he's not listening -- (laughter) but I don't in this moment.

KC: But I do remember seeing some of these "informances," and they were somewhat like telling your life story while being an opera person and singing and integrating all that.

So the affiliate artists, then, became ultimately what we now call the Adler Fellowship Program, if I understand.

CB: Yeah, that was one of my initiatives, if you will. (laughs) The component parts that were in existence at the time were Merola, Western Opera Theater, Spring Opera, Brown Bag Opera ... I think that's it when I arrived.

KC: Well, maybe we should just explain what some of these things are. Western Opera Theater was a touring organization.

CB: Correct. Much more expensive activity, and Western Opera Theater performed probably 60 percent of the time, 75 percent of the time, with two pianos, not with orchestra. It had what was called the orchestra segment, which was booked by ICM, and which took them into major venues, major presenters in the Midwest, with an orchestra.

Western Opera Theater was the first. It was the first, I think, opera entity funded, of its sort, funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. Not coincidentally, Kurt Adler was on a panel there (laughs) at the time. And this was another, "I'll have those funds, thank you very much," and, you know, "Yes, I know what I'm going to do with them," and come home and figure it all out. But Texas Opera Theatre was an imitator of Western Opera Theater; Opera New England quite a bit later, because Western Opera Theater was 1967, I think. Sixty-six. Uh, so -- and, again, it was this impulse to get it out, get it around, make it available to people, wherever they were able to host it.

KC: As I understand it, then the singers for Western Opera Theater came out of the Merola Opera Program. Is that not correct?

CB: They did not, no.

KC: Oh.

CB: And that was the thing. I mean, it's hard not to skip around in this story, because there are so many moving parts to it. (laughs) So you had -- just to recap, you had Spring Opera bringing young singers in from New York who were already, uh -- had taken their first career steps, and was also a venue for operas that would not be produced on the main stage.

Spring Opera doesn't really exist in my story, except that it was around when I came, and I saw it because Terry [Terence McEwen, general director 1982-1988] canceled it at a certain point. It was running a huge deficit. The salient thing also was that Merola, Western Opera Theater, and Spring Opera had boards -- independent boards, so their relationship to the main company was odd. (laughs) They used the Company's premises. They ran their programs. They had funding coming from outside

sources. And part of the fact that they were all separately incorporated had to do with the fact that each of them had its own 501(c)(3) for the purpose of accepting funding directly to that entity. Then they had boards who, in various degrees, liked to think they had something to say about something, but that was the era of Kurt Adler, and actually they didn't.

You could go to Spring Opera, and Spring Opera was sort of the crown. It was like the real opera, but then there was Merola, then there was Brown Bag, then there was so on and so forth. So, Terry was in a situation which was not exactly as he had anticipated. But he came in. We met. He and I met. I'm getting to your question (laughter) in my longwinded fashion. We met. We instantly got along for whatever reasons. He was always wanting people around him who loved singing, and who could talk to him about it, and for whom singing was the heart of opera, which had, the central place in our hearts as opera lovers. And I was one of those people.

But Spring Opera having been dispatched, he looked around and he said... Well, the provocation was that he tried to hire Carol Vaness, who was the star of the (laughs) whole proceedings at that time -- but was going to leave here without having been cast. And he said, "Now Carol Vaness is such a big deal I can't get her back, and why are we training all these people and I can't get them? And I want" -- and I would pound my hand on the table, if I were allowed, because Terry did that, and he had this ring that would (laughter) make a percussive sound. He said, "If I'm training all these people, I wanna be able to, to have access to them."

And he wanted something which he couldn't have, which is sort of, right of refusal for years after they left here. He couldn't have that. But if you create the right relationship with them, you can foster loyalty, and you can foster a public for them. And the public here was very receptive to the idea of homegrown talent mixed in with their big stars. He said, "I want an ensemble company with stars," which meant to him that he could spend all the money bringing in whichever big-name singers, and he could staff the rest with, not kids, but good, good talent that was around here and/or available to him.

And it seemed to me, okay, well, that makes sense. We're out here on the edge of the continent. It makes a lot of sense, and it has a lot of logic, gives -- bestows logic upon all of these affiliate programs. So he said to me one day, "C-could you just please tidy all this up? (laughter) What is this?" And so I went in sort of a, you know, a retreat of my own, and thought and thought and thought. And I had a lot of conversation with Christine Fiedler, who was on the Development Department at the time. And I came up with this way of putting all of these programs into a sequence, retaining their basic mission to serve a larger public, but being a pathway for singers from one to the other to the other.

I think that the original question which set me off for 15 minutes now was --

KC: Where did the WOT singers come from?

CB: Yes. They did not come from Merola. That was a glaring thing at the beginning. Well, there they all are in Merola. Then WOT's off auditioning for other singers, but you -- one has to remember that the whole system which underlay the Merola program was based on the Met auditions. They were regional. They happened here, but they happened all over the place. Various judges, different judges, you know, went out to Arizona, to L.A., to Hawaii, if you could score that gig, and auditioned singers. Which resulted naturally in a system where the best singer in each audition got to come to Merola. Which gives you a whole bunch of sopranos of a certain sort, who are better developed at that age than other kinds of

soprano -- you know, more dramatic sopranos, for example. So it couldn't have staffed the WOT tour. You had to be conscious about that.

So Terry endorsed this whole thing. "You can audition for Merola, and there is the possibility of employment with Western Opera Theater, and then that group is where the Adler Fellows will be drawn from and named." So suddenly this audition gave you entry, if you made it, to a life of several years, a very protected life in the San Francisco Opera. So the quality of young singers auditioning, I think, was improved in that moment.

KC: Well, I think that there's great logic in the sequence of employment opportunities that you pointed out there and certainly it was borne out in the quality of the singers that started showing up for these auditions as years went by, and they realized that there was a real door here opening for them to get regular work for a number of years. I think there's rationale there, and what Terry [was] speaking of -- about is a resident company, I think justifies this utilitarian approach to casting Merola because you're picking singers that are gonna fit into what the employment is that you have available for them.

CB: What it also meant, which was good for Merola, was that the second production in Merola was the production which would go on to WOT, which would have been rehearsed, and it was very clever, the whole thing, but it was the WOT production. Therefore, Merola got a second production in the summer without having to create it, build it, spend money on it; that's where they merged.

So somewhere maybe in the first round of all this, the man who was the independent director of Western Opera Theater saw the writing on the wall about the fact that Western Opera Theater was going to come under this central management, which was a good thing, actually. I mean, we -- it wasn't -- it was sort of *senza rancore*, I think. And I, having had the experience with Opera New England, felt very comfortable with touring in general and in particular. Then, the Affiliate Artists Program was there as the model of the third major component.

KC: The Adler Fellowships, you mean.

CB: Yeah. That was the model for what I then turned into the Adler Fellowships, and the relationship with Affiliate Artists came to an end, again, not acrimoniously or anything. The Affiliate Artists Program was the model, for what became the Adler Fellowship program, and the first generation of Adler Fellows were, in fact, in the old Affiliate Artists Program.

KC: Now, if -- as I understand it -- similar to casting Merola to fit the productions that were going to be done, choosing out of the Merolini, as they came (laughs) to be called, there tend to be maybe 20 of them that were here for a summer training program and then there would be perhaps eight or ten Adler Fellows, as I recall, somewhere in that range?

CB: There were six to start with.

KC: Uh-huh. And so out of the Merolini, you would choose these Adler Fellows, and there was somewhat of a utilitarian motive there, as well, right? Because they had to be castable in the productions that were going to be coming up.

CB: Yes and no. And that was part of the beauty of it, which had not existed before, really, and it had to do with Terry. I mean, the whole key to this -- is the generosity of imagination of the general director of the company, and his or her willingness to understand what development of young singers is about -- how fast it happens, how sometimes it doesn't happen, and to be patient with that process, and not judge it at every step along the way. I mean, Terry, I said, "Don't come -- you know, don't come to Brown Bag. They're stumbling around. You know, I'll tell you when you should come." (laughter) But yes, the idea was that there would be small roles they could take. They were covers. I mean, covers was very heavy on his mind, because of course it is out here. But he was very willing to invest in that way in somebody who wasn't gonna be useful for a while. I'm trying to think of examples.

KC: Like a contralto, for example --

CB: Yes. The more dramatic end of the voices. There were ones who were very utilitarian -- I mean, all the mezzos and all the baritones got tons of things to do. You know, Debbie Voigt might have been onstage less, although there were always -- you know, she did her maids and her birds and her trees and her (laughs) --

KC: Yes. I remember her as maid in *Jenůfa*, I believe it was, by Janáček as a very young artist.

CB: Oh, the -- you know, somebody was the mayor's wife, and somebody was, you know...

KC: Right.

CB: Terry really relished that. So that was how that came about. Within a year or so, I proposed to Terry that there be 12. And he bought that. So that is when the number of Adler Fellows usually ended up between six and 12.

KC: So that was a win/win both for the Company to have more artists available and for employment for the young singers who were looking for work.

CB: Yes, and for a singer like Debbie Voigt, at the age of 23 -- her first professional appearance was in Santa Rosa, in *Don Giovanni*, on the WOT tour -- it was maybe a last moment where somebody like that was not pushed too soon into things that they were not well enough prepared for, not really stage-worthy, not knowing how to behave. I mean, there are a lot of things that go into being a big house opera singer. Not all of them are talent. There are certain kinds of savvy, certain kinds of grooming, certain kinds of training, you know. So they emerged from here, they had had three years of incubation.

KC: So I was just thinking, if you crash and burn in Santa Rosa, for example, no one's gonna have filmed that and put it on YouTube. There's not gonna be a review in the *New York Times*. It's no big deal. You learn from that experience and go on.

CB: And you get up and go on in Fresno four nights hence.

But just back to my entry in one of these floating things, Brown Bag Opera I was given, Affiliate Artists Program I inherited and so then there was this bit of funding from the National Endowment which was oriented towards new works, which is cleverly encompassed by this whole array of things that Kurt had. I mean, Spring Opera did that.

So he said, "Here's this money, do something. It's supposed to be a new opera." So I dubbed it the American Opera Project, because it was supposed to be about American opera. And having known John Harbison in Boston, when I lived there, working for Sarah, I knew that he had an opera which had never been produced called *The Winter's Tale*.

KC: Shakespeare.

CB: And I remember Susan Quittmeyer was in it, and all those kids were in it. And we put it on in Herbst [Theatre], and then we did Kirke Mechem's *Tartuffe*, which became a very viable piece of repertoire for colleges, universities, and whoever wanted to undertake it, 'cause it wasn't easy, that piece. (laughs) We did produce the premiere. Eventually we did Vivian Fine's *The Women in the Garden*, John Harbison's *Full Moon in March* and so on.

So once the major structure was assembled -- Merola, Western Opera Theater, Adler Fellows singers going from one to the other, or a certain core of singers going from one to the other... There were singers who only did Merola, like Susan Graham, and is nevertheless sort of included in our (laughs) inventory.

I then determined (laughs) that... I had a lot of unilateral... Terry was not a delegator -- let's just say that -- and he seemed to like my ideas, so I just was going off making enemies right and left, doing stuff. (laughter) I decided, and proposed to him, that absent Spring Opera, the Adler Fellows needed their own vehicle where they could do leading roles. So Spring Opera didn't exist. The American Opera Project existed, and I then integrated that into something which was called the Showcase.

KC: The Opera Center Showcase.

CB: Which we performed at Herbst -- we performed at Artaud.

KC: Theater Artaud is now called Z Space, I believe.

CB: We did *Il turbo in Italia*. We did standard repertory things, and we also did newer, newfangled things as a vehicle for the Adler Fellows to really take on extended performances, because doing your bits on the main stage... And at that time, I gotta say, it was just very charming, often, being sent down there with their teeth chattering to hand a handkerchief to Dame Joan Sutherland, you know? (laughs) And they would come back up and say, "She was so nice to me. She was so nice to me." Well, of course she was nice to her; you're a handsome young man and you gave her her hankie and stayed out of her way. (laughter) Doing that was its own enormous experience of what those people are like, what the job is like, how you behave down there with those people, (laughs) and how you try to become one of the nicer of them yourself, and what the magnitude of the big stage really is. So they had a lot of that, but they needed to strut their stuff. And at that point we weren't farming them out and letting them go off to other companies. Which is very tempting with singers in an opera program who feel that they're ready to do something, and people are coming sniffing around. You have this job. You can't be running around. This is what you are doing in furtherance of your career.

KC: So you and Andy were mentors, obviously, in a big way to a lot of these people, and I presume that if the right opportunity came along, like if someone is a born Lucia but not quite ready for it, but here's a

chance to sing it in Arizona, you might release them to go do that sort of under the radar, give it a chance.

CB: Yes, and with Terry's approval... I mean, for example, Cheryl Parrish, who was a first-generation of the Adler Fellows, was a very particular kind of Viennese heldensoubrette, (laughter) and very, very, very good onstage. And Terry had his eye on her, and her dream in life was to sing Sophie in *Rosenkavalier*. So Terry -- we made Terry aware of this. He started paying attention to her and he was considering her. He made her audition on the main stage four times (laughs) for it, because he wasn't just gonna do it out of sentiment. This was a production that had Fassbender, Kurt Moll --

KC: Kiri Te Kanawa.

CB: -- Kiri Te Kanawa. I mean, he's not gonna say, "Oh, let the kid try." He wanted to be sure of himself and have her be sure of herself. So at some point, I think in the same season, before that happened, there was an opportunity for her to sing *Rosenkavalier* in Portland. Terry said, "Let her go. I want her to have that experience before she does it on the main stage." So, you know, structured, targeted. He wasn't against it, but the whole point had been you've got this flock of kids you love around by which time Dolora was around also, you know.

KC: Please, we have to talk about her, Dolora Zajick --

CB: Yes.

KC: -- but let's finish talking --

CB: Yes.

KC: -- about Cheryl. (laughter)

CB: So anyway, so she did. And there was also a *Rosenkavalier* that she did in L.A., and it was not at an inconvenient time, but he was very aware of what good that would do for her, and it would, in the end, reflect credit on him when she performed it, and she didn't freak out, although Kurt Moll was mean to her, but she didn't freak out, and she covered herself with glory. She had a huge success.

KC: I remember her audition. As you said, I think Terry made her sing it more than once on the main stage in audition and I remember she sang the bit of Sophie, the famous high, floaty part --

CB: Yeah.

KC: -- and afterwards there was a little bit of muttering, I think, with you and Andy and Terry, and then he said, "Okay, kid, you got it." And she did a little leap. I remember this --

CB: (laughter) Yeah.

KC: -- leap to this day, as she went offstage, a little

CB: Yes --

KC: -- somersault there.

CB: -- her balletic leap offstage.

KC: Yes, right.

CB: You can't imagine the thrill, because she had earned it. She wasn't being given it because she was here, and she would be cheaper.

KC: All right, let's talk about Dolora Zajick. There are many prominent names that come out of your early years shepherding the Adler Fellowship program.

CB: The auditions that happened in the fall of 1982 for the program in 1983 were geared towards our doing *Madame Butterfly* on the road. Betsy Crittenden, who was an agent at CAMI-

KC: Columbia Artists.

CB: -- Columbia Artists, yes, called up and said, "I've got somebody for you. I want you to pay attention when she comes out." So she entered the -- and by this time, she had been excused by John Crosby from Manhattan School of Music, people were, "Oh, yeah, oh, for God's sake, you know, she'll never make it," kind of, which was based not so much on her voice as her sort of general awkwardness onstage.

So there we were in New York at the auditions, and Dolora comes out wearing a -- some *shmata* and a pair of espadrilles, and opens her mouth, and Andy and I looked at each other, and that was it, she was in. And Andy called Terry that very night from the hotel room where we were discussing it, and said, "I know that we're trying to cast *Trovatore* for the Verdi season," which was 1986, "and I know that you don't have an Azucena, and I know that you're looking at some of these very antique -- or somebody who was still alive, (laughter), and that he had known since time began kind of thing. And Andy said, "Please don't cast it. We will get her ready for you, and you can just" -- three years hence -- "and you can just, turn your back, and then if the time comes to cast it officially and this hasn't worked, then it hasn't worked, but this is what we're doing here, and this is exceptional."

And so Dolora arrives and is sort of set apart from others because she has this honking voice. I mean, when they all went down and sang on the stage, and Terry was just, like, riveted (laughter) with this voice, and we said, "Okay, we're taking her away now, see ya." But the task at hand was for Dolora to do Suzuki, which, as you can imagine, was much better for her than she was for it, but that was also what the WOT tour was there for. I mean, she wasn't gonna fool you into thinking she was a fragile Japanese girl, ever, and talk about teacups flying. (laughter) But she did it. She did it in good humor. She became stage worthier. She became used to going out onstage. She got a response from the audience because of the quality of her voice. She was probably louder than any of our -- (laughter) any of our given Butterflies, because you can't ask her to, you know, whisper.

KC: Right.

CB: You just can't. But she did the WOT tour. Clearly it was foreordained that she would be an Adler Fellow, because the thing is -- which is, again, not an attitude that I found replicated in any other general

director that I worked with around the world, or here, or anywhere -- is you gotta try. We need these voices. Stop whining about where all the big voices are, and take on the fact that they are often housed in unwieldy (laughs) housings, and it takes a longer and different kind of effort to develop them, but what are we here for if we're not doing that? Because he -- Terry had a balance between the practicality of having all these singers around to use and what the ultimate goal which would be that this ensemble company with stars, eventually, most of those stars had been produced here. He loved that idea, and I think he would have carried on with that idea had he stayed.

And do you remember Ethel Evans --

KC: I do. Dame Ethel Evans, we used to call her. (laughter)

CB: -- who was --unique, sui generis, acting coach for opera, who was famous in the world, and a very eccentric woman, whose specialty really was taking very gifted opera singers who just weren't creatures of the stage, who weren't naturally gifted in that way, and teaching them what the techniques and the mechanics were. And she took on Dolora, and Dolora -- the thing about Dolora -- the -- one -- make-or-break characteristic of a singer is their willingness to be told stuff, and there were singers who achieved great fame and fortune for a while and then didn't have it anymore, who -- some of whom were in the category of didn't want to go to masterclasses, didn't want to be told, didn't want to be corrected in front of anybody. Dolora was ready to be told, because she knew. She was also at the upper end of our age scale at that time. I think she was 34, and mezzos could be up to 35. So she was squeakin' in under the wire. It was kind of her last chance.

KC: In order to get into Merola you had these age limits? I'm sure that's not true anymore.

CB: Well, it's probably illegal.

KC: Yeah.

CB: It was 35 for everybody except sopranos, it was 30, because it's just a natural fact of nature, David Attenborough could tell you -- that (laughs) those voices appear earlier, are more refined earlier, and are ready to roll earlier.

Dolora was going to appear with Luciano Pavarotti in something, and Ethel took her aside and said, "Here's what he's going to do to you: he's going to drop to his knees in front of you when you don't expect it. He's gonna get behind you and put his hands on your face." Ethel taught her how to fend this stuff off, how to step back and not have that happen, what to do if he suddenly decided to -- 'cause he was the king of upstaging everybody around him. So Dolora went into tutelage with Ethel about that, and that performance was broadcast from the Met, and you can see Dolora, artfully stayin' out of his way.

That was one of those finishing touches which you wouldn't get anywhere else, you know? And then Dolora went off and became what she became. And the thing about her was she was never in doubt about her vocal gift, and never in doubt about how to manage it, which is partly because she -- her first teacher -- her big teacher was Ted Puffer in Nevada. He instilled things in her which stood her in good faith, in good stan—stead.

KC: Well, she certainly had plenty of support and encouragement while she was in the Center.

KC: So you left San Francisco Opera to recreate the San Francisco Opera Center, if I understand it, in Paris. Uh, am I telling that story correctly?

CB: (laughter) Yes, I did, and anybody French I knew would say, "Oh, Christine's going to work at the Paris Opera," and then they'd guffaw. I put myself willingly into the clutches of yet another authoritarian.

KC: Backing up to the Opera Center experience, one of the major events, as I recall, during your time was the trip to China. People weren't going to China much. This was the mid-'80s, is that right? Tell us how that came about.

CB: Yeah, it was early on in the opening of China, and Isaac Stern's movie, *From Mao to Mozart*, had just come out, and he was really the first Western artist, in a tradition going back to the '20s of Western artists in China, and made that movie, and that sort of got everybody's attention.

What happened was that United Airlines bought TWA's routes, took over TWA's routes in the Pacific, and United Airlines started this, opportunistic, but magnanimous gesture that they were going to connect pairs of sister cities, which were on their routes, who would exchange performing arts groups. Peter Henschell, who was adjunct mayor to Dianne Feinstein at the time, and a huge opera lover -- he came over and said, "Well, I think Western Opera Theater should go, and where do you want to go? There's Melbourne. There's..." And I said, "I wanna go to Shanghai," 'cause I did. I wanted to go to Shanghai. (laughter) So he said, "Okay." So a certain number of meetings later, including with Mayor Feinstein, that was set up. TWA was onboard. And the touring show that year was *La bohème*, featuring Ann Panagulias.

So the end of the WOT tour that year in March was this two weeks in China residency at the Shanghai Conservatory. Rapture. I mean, absolute rapture. They were very good at receiving. But the Shanghai Conservatory was poor, but full of these voices, you know? God. And there was so much rapture, and it was such an eye-opener, and we loved it, and I was totally enraptured with China, as was Patrick and, you know, any number of other people who went.

KC: Patrick Summers, our --

CB: Patrick Summers.

KC: -- music director at the time.

CB: Yes. So we came back with the idea that this had to be continued.

So we went back every year. The following year we participated in a production of *Tosca*, given by the Shanghai Opera, which Patrick conducted, which is also on film. It's another amazing experience.

I percolated on this Pacific Voices idea, which I pitched to Lotfi [Mansouri, general director 1988-2001]. I remember one day he had a meeting, and he said, "I'm looking for initiatives." Silence fell around the table, and I put up my hand and said, "I have one." And so I pitched my initiative, which -- I don't know if I had named it at the time. I named it while sitting on a plane somewhere.

KC: Pacific Voices.

CB: Yeah. And I said, "And we can -- the whole Pacific Rim consists of Australia, New Zealand, you know, Mexico. There are a lot of people on the Pacific Rim and think of the major singers -- Plácido Domingo, Kiri Te Kanawa, Joan Sutherland -- who represent these." And I dragged in Régine Crespin to represent French Polynesia. (laughter) 'Cause she and I were kinda chummy at the time. And that they would agree to be honorary committee people, which they all did. And Russia, because the association with Gergiev was just starting at the time, and Russia is on the Pacific Rim. So that was a hugely consuming project, because there were a lot of little parts to it. And I involved all the consulates in San Francisco, and I tried to involve as many significant people in the community from those communities as I could.

KC: So you brought singers from all these countries here, right?

CB: Yes, we brought, I think there were ten countries, and two singers from each, something like that. And they -- but there were four singers from China.

KC: So it was kinda like a mini Merola program.

CB: It was -- it was a two-week Merola -- was the intention of it with a grand finals at the end, which was that concert on the stage, which our orchestra played. And it was hugely successful. I would like to have thought that there was follow-up in terms of what its underlying goal was, because at that point also, or shortly thereafter, these singers were getting out of China. They were finding ways come out and to come to conservatories and all that on their own. We started to have Chinese singers audition for Merola who were in American educational institutions. So that whole thing got sorta merged. The ultimate goal was not to say, "Let's train everybody in the world, and let's enfranchise young opera singers from all over the Pacific Rim." It was more a statement of the position of the San Francisco Opera in this community and on the Pacific Rim, which I think was not lost on a lot of people.

KC: We should probably wrap it up. Christin Bullin, thank you so much. We could go on for hours, (laughter) but this has been fascinating, and I really appreciate your giving us your time --

CB: Well --

KC: -- and your memories.

CB: -- thanks. It's my pleasure to remember it all. It was a wonderful 14 years of my life that I spent coming into this house every day, and so I appreciate being asked. Thanks.

KC: Thank you.

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[END AUDIO]