



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

SESSION 4: Ho jo to ho!

SPANNING THE DECADES: Chorus Edition, pt. 3

Featuring: Ian Robertson (SF Opera former chorus master) and Dr. Clifford “Kip” Cranna (SF Opera dramaturg emeritus)

(transcript read time ~ 13 minutes; audio run time ~ 18 minutes)

[BEGIN AUDIO]

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

KIP CRANNA [KC]: Hello everyone. This is Kip Cranna. I’m Dramaturg Emeritus at San Francisco Opera, and I’m here today -- this is July 13, 2022 -- to chat with Ian Robertson, who until recently was chorus master at San Francisco Opera, having retired after 35 years in that role. Ian, it’s great to be with you. How are you?

IAN ROBERTSON [IR]: Thank you, Kip. I’m fine. I’m having a nice retirement, but I remember fondly all the years I worked with the Opera Company and of course with you, Kip.

KC: Could you talk a little bit about dealing with 18th century rep, which is something a little different and not something we normally think of the operatic voice? In Gluck, for example, we did the French version of *Orfeo* and recorded that. Mozart, of course, Handel, they have different vocal requirements. Can you talk a little bit about working with your choristers on that?

IR: Yeah. Fascinating subject. I’m glad you brought it up. In the choice of voices over the years for hiring opera choristers, I was always careful to, first of all, engage people who had voices of quality but had also voices of flexibility, so that they could, if necessary, sing an operatic aria in full voice, a Verdi or Puccini, but they could also sing Mozart with clarity and cleanliness and immaculate intonation.

And so, the process then becomes not straightforward, but it’s certainly made easier by the fact that your chorus is full of that kind of voice, and they are able to bring down the element of vibrato without any particular conscious way of doing it, it becomes natural. And they therefore are maintaining their pitch and their focus right where it matters, so there’s no missing the pitch by pulling off the vibrato, which can often hide pitch, hide the center of the voice. We get to that point where we have that. That’s what I tried to bring to bear in the Baroque and the Handel and Mozart, too.

I remember doing *Semele*, the Handel opera, with Charles Mackerras conducting. It had come from Royal Opera House, and it involved a chorus of 24 singing on stage and a chorus of 24 singing in the pit. What kind of challenge was that going to be? But Charles Mackerras, he was thrilled with it because we made it work far better than the Covent Garden, in his words. In fact, he said that he had managed to get it so

close together that he was only aware of hearing the chorus in the pit. He could see that chorus was singing, and he could only hear the chorus on stage if something was going slightly wrong. He could then start hearing that chorus. He was happy and it was just a great experience.

Again, you think Handel is fairly straightforward musically, but it's not. It's like Mozart. It's not. It's got to be sung in. The melodic twists and turns, the harmonic underpinning has all got to be repeated, repeated, repeated until it's second nature, and then they can sing in the pit without the score. They didn't have the score in the pit, and they sang obviously on stage without the score, too.

KC: You used the word cleanliness, which I think is wonderful in this context of the 18th century because there's really no place to hide in these vocal lines. It's got to be so precise and clear.

IR: That, absolutely, also is what will clarify and enhance the harmony as it goes through. The chords are utterly clear. In fact, even in the big Puccini operas, if you're singing with too much vibrato and losing focus, then the chords are disappeared, you know? You need to get a combination. You need to pull that back a little bit. Don't over sing. Don't over sing.

KC: So the harmony stays locked in.

IR: The harmony is there.

KC: You alluded to something we could talk about a bit, which is the placement of the chorus. Stage directors, particularly in our modern era, love to have them way upstage. Can you talk a little bit about making sure that they are together with the orchestra? That distance is a big factor sometimes.

IR: Yes. I know, and some directors say, well it's okay because you've got loudspeakers broadcasting the orchestra upstage. They'll be able to hear it. But that is complete nonsense because while you hear a little bit of the orchestra amplified on the stage, it's only there as a mere background guide. And depending on the conductor's skill, for a faraway chorus, here comes Runnicles again, he could pull anything together from 600 yards away with an orchestra down there. He would have them together. But not all conductors are able to do that.

In fact, I became known as the nag because I would keep saying to directors, "But they're so far upstage. It's going to be hard for them to be together with the orchestra, and it's going to be hard for them to be balanced vocally with the sound of the orchestra." I managed to gain some ground that way, but most directors, I think, understand. It's only the ones who perhaps are coming from straight theater or movies that we've had who don't really get that. But they usually adapt or tell me to go away.

KC: The choristers themselves, I presume they gain experience over the years, and if they are upstage, they learn to adjust slightly for that. They have to sing slightly ahead of the beat, don't they?

IR: Yes, they do learn that eventually or they learn to adapt to what they're hearing if it's being amplified in their ears, which I don't like, and they don't like. But generally, over the rehearsal period, and this is good with opera because you do so many rehearsals, you work with the conductor for several weeks leading up to the performances. And then you begin to learn and see the idiosyncrasies of the conductor's body language or his baton technique or what his arms are doing and also listening to his instructions to sort out where you need to sing.

KC: Let's talk about pitch a little bit. There are a lot of times when choristers have to come in out of nowhere and find the pitch without too much help from the orchestra. How do you help them in those situations?

IR: Right. Yes, they do have to do that, and again, this is a matter of repetition and rehearsal, muscle memory, muscle memory, aural and muscle memory. We keep doing it over and over. Here's the music you're going to hear, (sings). Now sing your note. Okay, let's try it again.

Ask your accompanist to play something, play some Rachmaninoff or something not in the right key, and then let's do it again. Here's the music you will hear. There's your note. Did you get it? Yeah, I'm getting it. Then repetition. The same for memorization. The repetition of it becomes muscle and aural memory. Of course, we always tried to look in the orchestra score to see if there's anything that's playing our notes or anything resembling our harmony that might be there, but often it's not. You just have to find it by instinct, by muscle memory, aural memory, coming in the right note.

KC: Let's talk about the prompter in that context. We are one of the international companies that uses the prompter on most occasions. Tell us a little bit about their role with the chorus.

IR: Yeah. I was never accustomed to prompters with my 10 years with Scottish Opera, so it was quite an engaging surprise when I began to work with prompters here at San Francisco Opera. I very quickly realized the advantages of that. I watched old Philip Eisenberg, who was one of our great prompters.

KC: Legendary.

IR: Legendary. Worked through *Meistersinger* with the chorus singing the fight scene in maybe 12 parts, and he was able to cue them all, one by one. I began to support the use of a prompter for the chorus because in some places, the chorus wouldn't be prompted, but here I encouraged that, so that it was another level of security in stressful situations, and that was fine for me. I would go along with that. I worked with some really great prompters and have always enjoyed it. I think choristers really value them, especially maybe if the conductor is preoccupied with the other important things in the pit in a performance, cueing the orchestra. It's always a very useful backup to have someone leading the voices, so yea to prompters.

KC: It's a great advantage in the scenes, such as you mentioned. The fight scene in *Meistersinger* is one, but I'm thinking of other ensembles where people are entering willy-nilly and keeping track of the entrances. . .

IR: It's just like *Billy Budd*, with all those separate groups coming in all over the place. Prompting was essential. It really helped.

IR: And all the Verdis, of course, the *Boccanegra*, and the rare Verdis, *Vespri Siciliani*.

KC: The Verdi opera that, to me, has such a wonderful chorus is *Don Carlo*.

IR: *Don Carlo* is so special. The first time I did it, I think we did it in French.

KC: Yes. In the Pritchard era, it was the first time that we had done it in French, and it was quite a revelation.

- IR: It was a very great revelation to me because when we did it subsequently with Maestro Luisotti, it was in Italian. To me, it missed a whole lot of color in the voices. I never expected to do *Don Carlo* in French, but there it was. I was doing it in French.
- KC: It's a French grand opera, after all.
- IR: French grand opera. (sing) That music suits the French more than it does the Italian. That was fascinating.
- KC: I think *Don Carlo* is not at the top of the list of the average opera fan's Verdi, but it is mine. I think it really is a masterpiece.
- IR: Well, it is in so many ways. It paints so many different vocal colors within the characters, especially in the men's voices, King Philip and the inquisitor, and then you've got the *auto da fe*, which is a big chorus scene, which needs to be done with at least 90 choristers to get it right.
- KC: Yes, I know that's always been a challenge for you, as we've gone through our budget battles over the years, trying to get as many choristers as you need for your operas.
- IR: Yeah. I think, considering the War Memorial Opera House seats 3,000-plus people, it was always important to make sure we were adequately staffed on stage, as it were, because the orchestra is generally, in the bigger operas, a big orchestra, and so it's got to be balanced on the stage. I think over the years we've managed to work out good compromises and come up with what I thought we should be doing, but I started, within a year of being here, I was working with a chorus of 90 for *Mefistofele*, and then when we got to *Saint Francis*, we were doing a chorus of 120.
- KC: Big, big forces there. Let's talk about the actual makeup of the chorus. Most of them are year-round professionals; that's what they do for a living. And then for larger chorus operas, you bring in part-time people. How many do you have in your regular group?
- IR: The regular group has settled recently to about 45. It was at 48. For the traditional opera, for the Mozarts, you could go less for the Mozarts, but for some of the smaller Verdi operas, you can work with 24 or 32, but 48 always seems to be a good section to be in for that kind of repertoire. Then when the bigger operas come along, we go out into the neighborhoods and find the wonderful lawyers and the wonderful bankers who have got wonderful voices who like to come and sing and earn some money on the side by singing this wonderful music. And it was always a joy to be able to go out there, to explore to see who you could find who would be interested in coming to do that. Of course, it's pretty stringent additions. You've got to have a good quality musical education and special in voice, and although they went into different walks of life.
- KC: Sight-reading is important.
- IR: Sight-reading not so much because what do we do in an opera chorus? The only thing to be done is repetition, repetition, repetition. Memorization, memorization. But certainly, we do some sight-reading.
- KC: I've noticed in looking at your rosters over the years that you tended to have more sopranos and basses than the inner voices. Why is that? Sometimes it's one or two more.

IR: There are different reasons. For the sopranos, you've always got to make sure because they're the most exposed at the top of the range, and they need to have good blending qualities, so it sounds like one voice and not five different voices. So you've got to be careful that you're not putting a huge operatic soprano in there that doesn't have the ability to bring the focus down a little bit because under the stress of the situation, that voice is likely to give out its full blast and ruin your blend.

Tenors, again, they're nestled in the center of the texture, so they have support both above and below, so you can work with a few less of them, provided you've got enough first tenors to sound like one voice when they're going over the top of the voice.

Basses, of course, are the root of the harmony. They're the structure and the foundation upon which the rest of it is built.

Mezzos can usually handle everything there, especially if their range is not too low, but some operas have got specific choruses for low. They're either older women in the plot or something like that, like *Onegin*, that they can sound grand with a lot of chest voice. Provided you've got your singers who can handle that, but also sing lovely mezzos for Mozart.

It's a constant search for great people, and we have great people.

KC: Now that you're in retirement, quote/unquote, you're not done with music at all. Tell us a little bit about what your activities are these days.

IR: Well, I've always dabbled in composition and music arrangement, so I'm doing that, and I've got to be more actively involved with the San Francisco Boys Chorus that I led for 23 years in their 75th anniversary year, which is coming up. That requires a lot of music arrangement. When they sing with the symphony, like at the Christmas programs, I could have them just show up and sing with piano, but there's an orchestra sitting there, so I arrange carols and other songs for the orchestra over there and give them a chance to sing with orchestra. So, I've got plenty to do there.

And I've got a long dormant desire to write music for some Shakespeare sonnets and also music for violin and piano because I know several good violinists, so I'm getting ahead on that. I really didn't have much time. It's like Mahler composing in the summer when he wasn't conducting. Though I'm no Mahler.

KC: Are you practicing those contemporary piano pieces as well?

IR: Not so much now. Now a lot of modern piano music is associated with electronic music as well and other things. I'm not really into that, although I did record several pieces which I had to play along with at a concert of Scottish composers, and that was kind of just weird. But who knows where it's all going? But so much of it is electronic nowadays, music making. Especially in the last few years, so-called classical music has gone off in so many different directions that are no longer just strictly music. They're more like video, audio, electronic, et cetera, et cetera.

KC: It's evident in the classical Grammys, they are very diverse now.

IR: I've still got too much to explore in the more traditional sense. I'm happy to do that.

KC: Ian Robertson, what a pleasure to talk with you, recently retired chorus director of the San Francisco Opera. Thanks so much for being here.

IR: My pleasure, Kip. Thank you very much.

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