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**RICHARD  
LEECH**  
THE STUDENT  
BECOMES  
A MASTER

**GIOVANNI &  
FIGARO:  
INVERSE OPERAS?**

**WENDY HOFFMAN:  
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# THE STUDENT BECOMES A MASTER

**RICHARD LEECH** IS NOW ONE OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST TENORS, AND AS HE DEMONSTRATES HERE, ABLE TO TEACH HIS CRAFT TO OTHERS. BUT HE STARTED OUT SINGING IN THE HIGH SCHOOL CHORUS AND THEN THE OPERA CHORUS, LEARNING HIS CRAFT FROM TWO VERY DEDICATED TEACHERS. SLOWLY AND CAREFULLY HE BUILT HIS VOICE LAYER UPON LAYER, NEVER TAKING A ROLE TOO SOON. THE RESULT IS A TECHNIQUE OF WHICH HE IS NOW THE MASTER. SINGERS WHO WANT A LONG CAREER SHOULD STUDY THESE FOUNDATIONS VERY CAREFULLY. **BY GIL CARBAJAL**

**CS:** You sang last night with a fellow American singer, Kathleen Cosello, who was not feeling well and considered not performing, but most of the audience didn't notice. How is it singing with a colleague who has a problem like that?

**Richard Leech:** Well I think that we're all very sympathetic, because we're all in that position with more regularity than we'd like. Kathleen was quite under the weather. I think she chose not to make an announcement because if you do make an announcement, often you get the audience "looking for" the problem. All we want is for our colleagues to be aware of it. Kathleen had an amazing performance, feeling ill and all.

**Although Robert Hale wasn't your Mephistopheles last night, you have coincided in Madrid, and you've actually been collaborating.**

Yes, that's right. Robert and I are not performing together, but we did quite a bit of the rehearsing together. It was great to see Bob again because we worked together very early in my career in Pittsburgh. It was not so early in his career. He was already well established, and he was the star. He was quite instrumental, actually, in getting my foot in the door here in Europe. I first went to Berlin for *Les Huguenots*. Robert was the one who told Götz Friedrich, "I know this tenor. You really should hear him." I went over and sang for Götz, and that really started the ball rolling.

**Speaking of the origins of your career, tell us how you got involved in music. Did you have a natural voice, or did you need training?**

I was born in Hollywood, but I grew up in upstate New York, in Binghamton. Around the time I was 14 or 15, a choir teacher noticed that I had a voice. I never sang as a boy soprano; I never did all that. My choir teacher said, "You have a good voice and should take voice lessons." I said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah," like any 14 or 15 year-old kid in upstate New York. I wanted to know when football practice started.

We happened to be friends with the president of the board of the opera company in Binghamton. And as it turns out, I found a terrific situation. If I had searched the world, I couldn't have found a better place than I had in Binghamton.

Leech as Don José in the Opéra National de Paris 2002 performance of *Carmen*, with Beatrice Uria-Monzon.

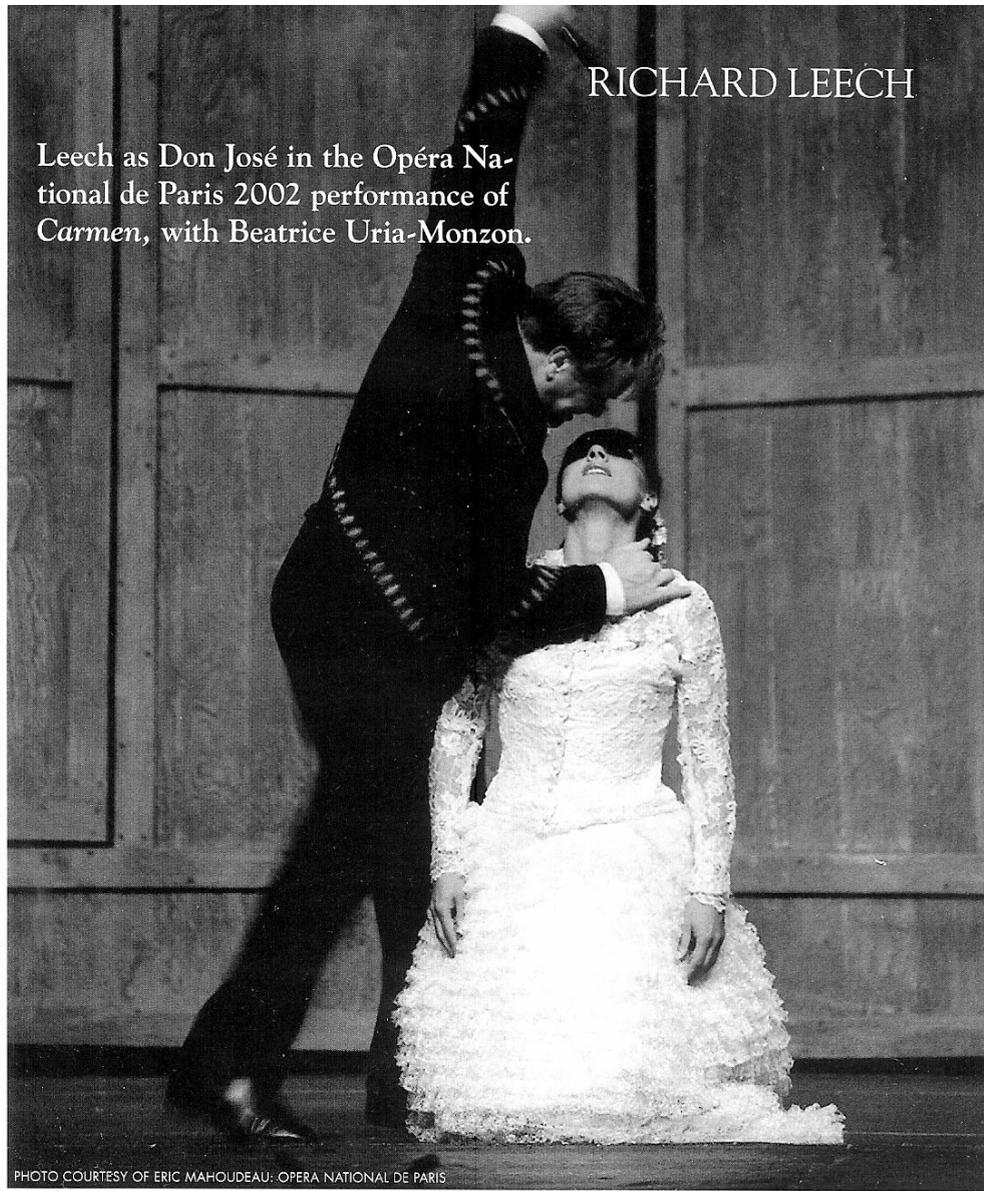


PHOTO COURTESY OF ERIC MAHOUDEAU: OPERA NATIONAL DE PARIS

***"The trick for a young singer, or an old singer, is to understand that virtually everyone has something that you can learn. I'm not saying that all advice is good; most of it might not be. But the reality is that there's something there that you can take away from every experience."***

**Why is that?**

Well, there were two teachers there, Carmen Savoca and Peyton Hibbitt, my two mentors. I joined the Tri-Cities Opera when I was 16. I joined the chorus and started taking voice lessons. I had a trial lesson with Carmen because we knew the president of the board. I ended up studying with him from then on.

The opera company in Binghamton is unique in the sense that it produces opera, utilizing to the greatest extent possible the

body of singers there to study. In other words, the thirty students there perform all the roles in the company's opera productions, for the most part.

That gives everyone an opportunity to be on stage, which is difficult to find. Right now every singer reading *Classical Singer* understands that there's a Catch-22 in this business: You can't get a job without experience, and you can't get experience without a job. But I was fortunate in

Applying make-up  
before a performance.

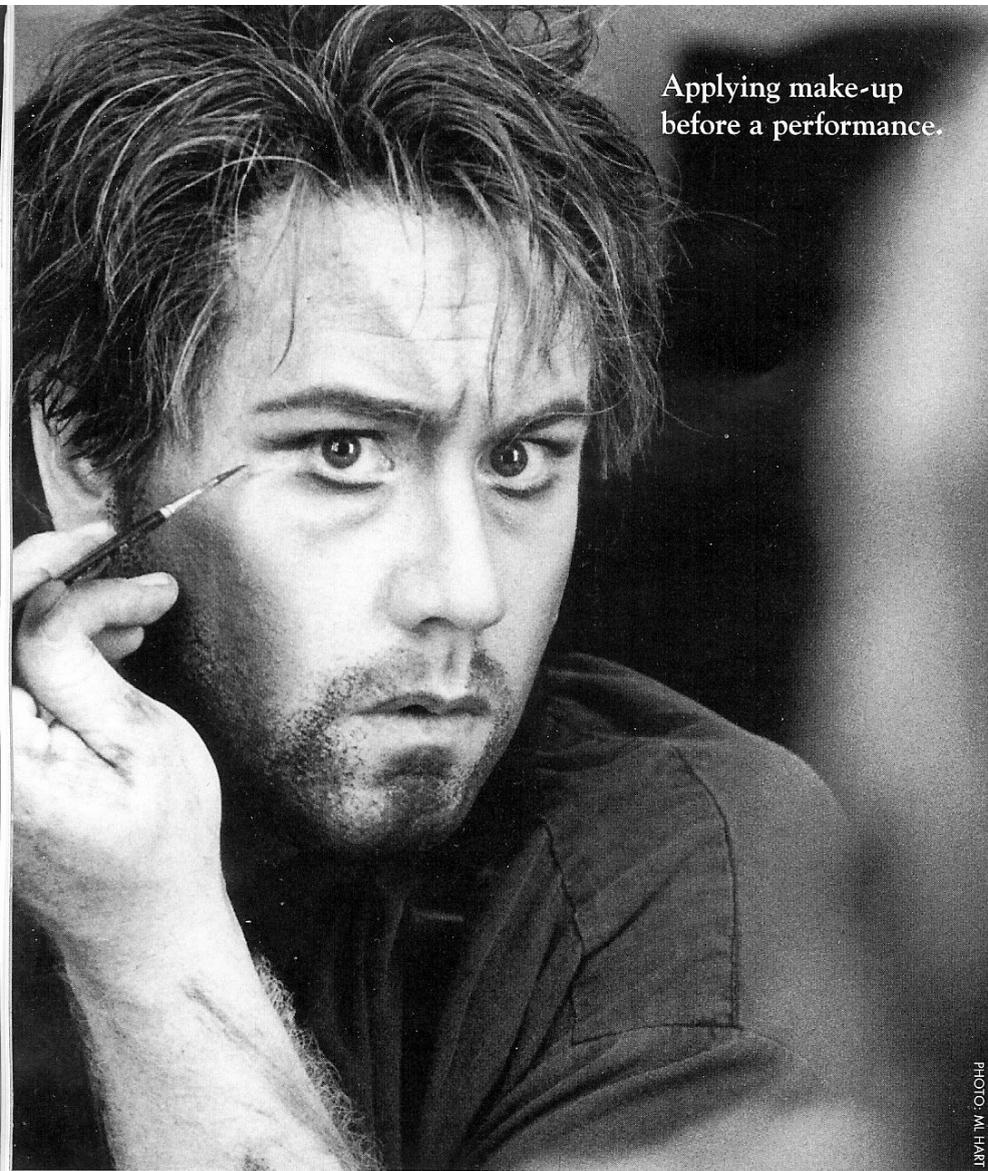


PHOTO: MI HART

**“If I had searched the world, I couldn’t have found a better place than I had in Binghamton.”**

Binghamton to get both training and experience.

**The fact that you were in Binghamton leads us to your family. You were obviously there because your family brought you there. What was your family’s interest in music?**

Well, my Dad was an IBMer, which is why we ended up in Binghamton. My sister was a ballet dancer. My mother was extremely oriented toward the arts. But other than that, there was no real musical side to my family. My great-grandmother was a classical pianist. But that was about it. It turns out my Dad has a great voice! He just never knew it.

**What was their attitude when they saw your budding interest in singing? Did they**

**encourage you?**

They encouraged me the way they would have encouraged me to do anything. That was the kind of support I had. It was pretty special.

**When did you have your first solo?**

I think I was only in the chorus about a year or so; I may have been sixteen when I did Parnpignol in *La Boheme*. The great thing about those years was that I was in the chorus absorbing operas like *La Boheme*, and by the time I did my first Rodolfo, I had been in it twice. Many operas were that way—they were actually old friends before I ever began.

**I sang in a choir too, and the boys with the most outstanding voices had to deal with their voices changing with adolescence. How**

**was that experience for you?**

By virtue of the fact that I never sang as a boy soprano, I never had it. I never dealt with it at all. I started singing after my voice had fully changed. As a matter of fact, I was singing bass in the choir, not realizing that the upper range was there. It was only when I started studying that we realized that it was. They tried for a while to call me a high baritone because I think they wanted desperately to keep me, at seventeen, from just blowing it out, because I could have.

**Tell us more about your education. Once you realized you had a voice and that it was of interest to people in the music world, what did you do?**

Well, in Binghamton it came time to go to college. Being the son of an IBMer, I never understood the question, “Do you plan to attend college?” I thought it was a ludicrous question. Of course I planned to attend college.

I graduated from high school a year early. So here I was at seventeen; graduating early from high school isn’t particularly helpful when you’re studying singing, because half the battle is waiting for your maturity to catch up to your desire. So I auditioned and went to the Eastman School of Music. I was there one semester until I realized that what I had in Binghamton was unique. So it was a hard choice, but one that I was always glad that I made. I left Eastman and went back to Binghamton.

I was lucky in that I had some success early on. I was getting some little jobs here and there early in my twenties. It still required hours working in a grocery store, or wherever. What Binghamton provided for me was a home base, if you will, a hub from which I could go out and sing for any small company that would have me, and do some auditions in New York.

**Well, your mother must have been delighted when you decided to come back home after having left the nest to study at Eastman. But was Papa happy about your giving up college?**

You see, that goes hand and hand with what I was saying before. The way they supported me after I dropped out of college is a gift that I try never to forget, because it was quite amazing. But my father did say, “If you’re going to move home, you’re going to pay us rent, and you’re going to get a job.” So that brought me a sense of reality.

**Well, before we get on to your career, I would like to focus more on your voice training and**

PHOTO COURTESY OF MI HART

# RICHARD LEECH'S SINGING TIPS

## 1. COMMUNICATE

If the three most important things in real estate are location, location, location, then the three most important things in singing are meaning, meaning, meaning! When you sing with very specific meanings, the technique on which you have worked so hard is allowed to fly. Try saying phrases several different ways and watch the technique respond. Do the vocal homework; just make sure you don't let it define your poetic choices.

## 2. BE PREPARED

OK, backing up a step to that "homework." The boy scouts know what they're talking

about. I don't like to coach a piece until I can go beyond the words, notes and dynamics. I like to have opinions about the music before I start trying to sing it. (Until your brain knows what it wants, your voice can't possibly respond.) Then I am ready to discover how each phrase fits my voice and to have my coach help me make the choices that are right for me. Do not work on your "voice" with a new piece, ever.

## 3. YOU'RE GETTING WARMER

Each of us has a different way of warming up, but the most important thing is properly assessing your need for it...today. Some days you

can roll out of bed and sing a perfect high C. Other days, you have to slowly earn every note in your range. Whether you are performing, auditioning, or "just" having a lesson, DO NOT ASSUME that your voice is ready (not to mention your brain). I do find that if the bottom and middle (through the passage) are thoroughly warmed up, the top will be there, so I don't overwork it. Leave yourself the time it takes for the whole instrument to be ready. And be patient. Now, refer item number one above—"Communicate."

## 4. GET OUT OF THE WAY

I often talk about how singing and golf are the same. Those of

you who play golf understand the need to work technically to create muscle memory, then to set up properly, have a positive swing thought, and get out of the way. If you try to "control" the golf swing as you do it, you usually fail. It is the same for the singer. Learn to trust your technique. Understand that the "voice" knows where a phrase or a high note is and will be happy to sing it for you if you don't "help" it too much. For proper "swing thought," again see item number one above—"Communicate."

## 5. HAVE FUN!

If you don't, your audience certainly won't. And yes, even in an audition.

### whether you had any specific problems in developing your voice.

Carmen and Peyton were able to keep me from going too fast, to keep my level of progression under control. That was frustrating at times for me, because I could do it; I could sing a high C. I *could* sing arias that I wasn't quite *ready* to sing. That's typical of singers in general. There's a fine line—you need to find material that stretches you just enough to make you go to that next level, but doesn't hurt you. And that's one of things that my teachers were fantastic at. Carmen, by the way, passed away about four years ago. I'm blessed to still have Peyton, who's still in Binghamton and still teaching.

**I heard you recommended to young singers that they avoid giving in to the temptation to stretch their voices because it's required by the production. You encouraged them to set a goal to reach age 45 with the voice intact. Were your teachers behind those ideas?**

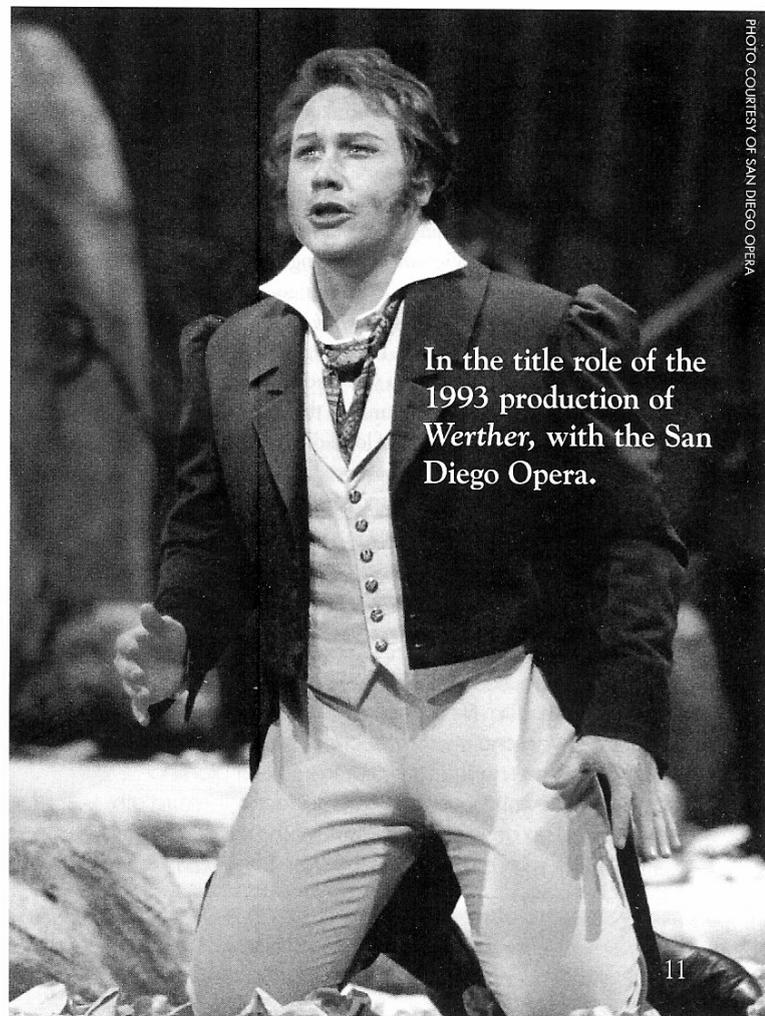
Absolutely. The single most important word a singer needs to know is "No." And it's difficult to say, because as a young singer, you want a job desperately, and when a job comes along, half the time it will be a job you should not accept.

**When did you finally break away from Binghamton, or when did you finally "graduate?"**

When I started getting jobs in my mid-twenties, I was working regularly enough so that you could call it full-time. I had my debut at City Opera shortly thereafter. So I would say that that's the point when I "graduated."

But I was always coming home and working with Carmen and Peyton, trying to touch base, sometimes to their frustration with them worried that I was doing too much too soon. They worried that I was singing roles that I hadn't worked on enough; they worried that the

*Continued on page 25*



In the title role of the 1993 production of *Werther*, with the San Diego Opera.

Continued from page 11

business was eating me up, which it can do so easily. They'd be worried, worried, worried; I'd go have a lesson and they would say, "Okay, it's all right." For a long time I think they were afraid that they needed to make sure that they worked on every note with me, but what they hadn't taken into account was that they had given me the tools I needed. Give a man a fish and he eats for a day; teach him to fish, and he eats for life. They taught me to fish.

**When did you begin to live entirely from opera?**

Oh, pretty early. Luckily, my wife Laurie did have gainful employment. Somewhere in the mid-eighties, around the time I debuted at City Opera, I was what I would call a full-time professional. Laurie became more connected to the Binghamton opera company than I was, because she became the assistant stage director to Carmen Savoca. She did that for about 15 years until his death. And so it was an interesting evo-

lution. Laurie and I actually met in the opera chorus. She was a singer in the chorus, and so her passion was being around the opera.

**Did you move to New York City?**

We still live in Binghamton. I'm in New York more than Binghamton, but it's home. I love going home to a small city.

**What about managers or agents? How have they helped or hindered?**

I had a manager in New York since I started, since my very first jobs. I changed once early on in my career, and I've been with the same manager in New York for a long, long time. But I don't need to be there for him to do his job. What singers need to stay aware of is that the job of managing your career is still your own, and every decision must be yours. You're the one who ends up on stage doing the piece, and so it is necessary to actively manage your own career even if you have a manager or agent.

**When did you first perform in Europe?**

It was in 1987. I had been in City Opera for a few years. I already had a Met debut scheduled for *La Bohème* in '89. I had just sung at Chicago Lyric for the first time. So I was starting to sing for important companies in the States.

Interestingly, a month or two before I flew to Berlin to sing for Götz Friedrich, I cancelled a European audition tour. It was all scheduled. The agent did the whole thing. I was going to go to this city and that city, the way that singers traditionally did to build a career.

Literally at midnight before I was supposed to go, I cancelled it. I resented having to go knock on doors when I had built what I thought was a pretty decent reputation in the United States. And the reality is that my generation of singers, and perhaps those who came along a little before me, were really the first to build careers in the United States. There weren't enough opera companies in the United States, and so a young singer had to go to Europe to build a career and get training like I was getting in Binghamton. They'd go to a house, they'd meet people with the right expertise, and they'd get experience on the stage. I realized I'd already done that in Binghamton.

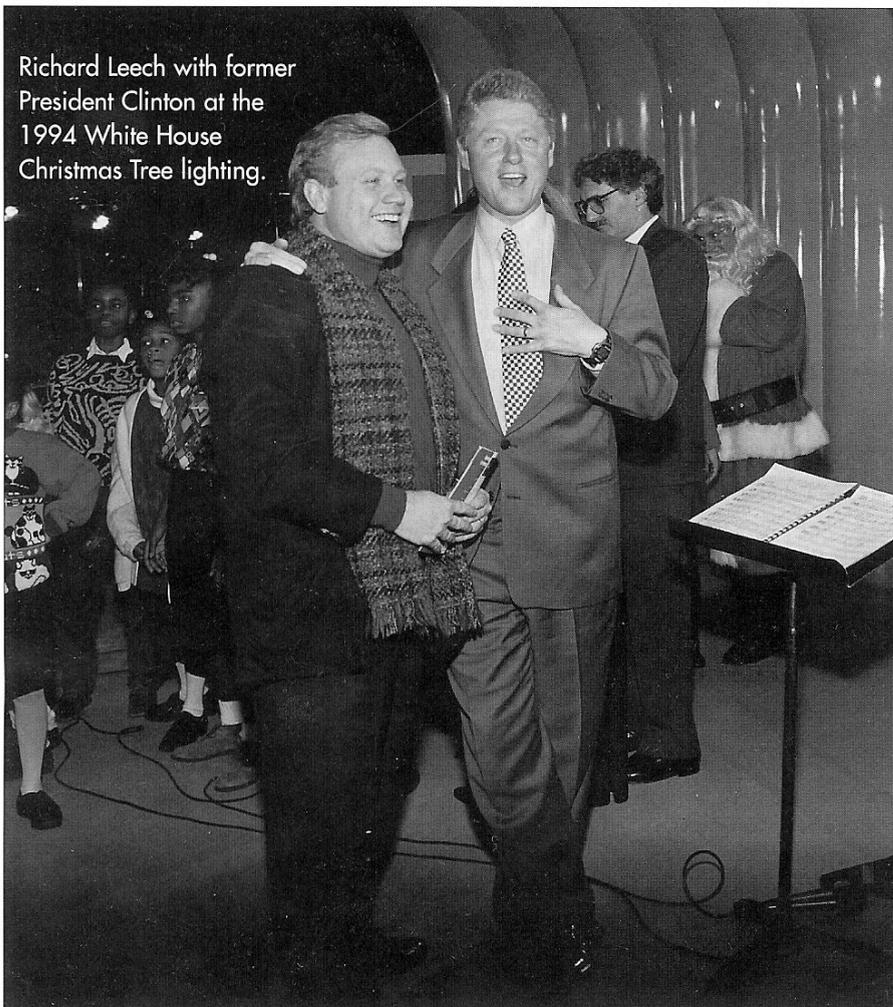
So I didn't go on the audition tour. And again, it was a situation where saying "no" was the best choice, because I ended up going on better terms to audition for Götz Friedrich. Friedrich asked me to come sing for him, rather than me knocking on his door and asking him to please listen to me.

I guess I'm trying to say it's no longer necessary to use Europe to build a career. There are hundreds of artists who have built their careers and gotten their training in the United States. There is still, of course, the issue of being international. Without a doubt, you must go to Europe and sing in any number of houses. And then you become a complete international artist.

**What do you consider some of the musical highlights of your career?**

Probably one of the highlights of my career was singing for the lighting of the Christmas tree in front of the White House with President Clinton, with Aretha Franklin and Trisha Yearwood. Opportunities like that are result of a certain amount of success. Singing *Bohème* with Mirella Freni at La Scala has to be right at the top of the list. What a joy. I could never have imagined that night as I was singing those debut Parpignols so many years earlier.

The reality is, for a professional singer *most*



Richard Leech with former President Clinton at the 1994 White House Christmas Tree lighting.

PHOTO: PERRY ADAMS/NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

nights something's wrong. Okay, you're never going to be at a hundred percent. So it's only a matter of how far off of a hundred percent you are. And now, do your job. And then you are a professional.

**Are their times when other singers, colleagues, inspire you and help you reach a peak point in performances?**

No doubt about it. Back to my debut in Berlin with *Les Huguenots*. Pilar Lorengar was Valentine. *Huguenots* is a hearty piece that is extended, difficult and high. And of course, the grand duet, which is one of the best pieces of music ever written, comes along late in the opera. I'd often get there thinking, "How will I do this now? I've got a D flat to sing, and—um—I'm exhausted." Thankfully, Meyerbeer [the composer] decided to let the soprano sing the phrase first. I'd get out there, and Pilar Lorengar would sing the phrase, and truly, I would be inspired. I was transported to a place that there was no doubt that I would sing this music no matter how tired I was. I can't describe it. I can't put a finger on why that happens. But it is inspiration from your colleagues. There's no doubt about it.

**Do you actually learn from them?**

You learn from everyone you're working with. The trick for a young singer, or an old singer, is to understand that virtually everyone has something that you can learn. I'm not saying that all advice is good; most of it might not be. But the reality is that there's something there that you can take away from every experience, working with other singers, or even coaches and accompanists.

**One of the changes I know has occurred in the opera world is that singers are expected to act. It's no longer sufficient to simply sing well. How have you dealt with acting in opera?**

Well, Carmen was always a singer-director-actor from the moment I started. And he was always focused on acting. It was interesting that with Carmen I had a voice teacher who was also the stage director of the company. And so I had that from the time I started. I'm thankful that acting is more important in opera now.

Most of the time you can be pretty realistic with your acting if you've worked at it and have some tools in your belt. And it's very satisfying. I think that opera deserves it. Opera can be thought of as a sort of ultimate artistic endeavor that includes singing, orchestra and the stage. And if we've cheated the acting side of that, then what are we really doing?

**In Faust you have to be rather intimate; for example you kiss Margarita. I suppose this must be easier with some singers than with others.**

Yeah, I suppose. Like they say, "It's a tough job but somebody's got to do it." The reality is that for me, if I'm acting a role well, Margarita *is* beautiful, and Faust is in love with her. Richard Leech really doesn't come into it. And neither does whoever the soprano happens to be.

**How do you go about preparing a role?**

You get to know it. You try to become old friends with it. You study it in an almost mathematical sense. You know the notes. You know the words. The reality is that there is a whole lot of homework. You only get to interpret after you know it cold, after you have done your homework. If you've given yourself a base of understanding, every time you work with a different conductor, it's going to be different. It has taken me many years to relax into the comfortable knowledge that I'm happy to sing it any way the conductor wants to present it—within reason. I feel comfortable knowing that maybe the director is going to make different musical choices than I have made in the past.

**How much do you pay attention to other versions in preparing for a role?**

Very little. There's a certain amount of tradition, performance tradition. You do want to understand some of that so that then you can make your own choices, but really only as a base from which to depart. I listen while I'm learning a piece. I try to find versions that are by someone who will inspire me in a certain direction. I will generally try to find a Jussi Björling recording, because he sends my musical thought in the right direction. It's dangerous to concentrate too much on listening to other interpretations while you are preparing a role, because you start to try to mimic those sounds. It's a trap that many singers fall into. You have to find the right interpretation for your own voice, working from within your own desire to speak, to say something important. Let the composer inspire you. He's the one who wrote the great music.

**You have a number of recordings. Tell us about the difference between performing in a studio versus a live performance.**

Well, we like to think that we don't change anything for a recording. And to a great extent that is true. The reality, however, is that the microphone is a funny thing, and many voices that fill the theater gorgeously are such that it can be very diffi-

cult for a microphone to pick up all of the amazing stuff that's going on in this sound wave. On one of my earliest recordings, Kiri Te Kanawa told me to "sing three-quarters for a recording." And I said, "Ah, no, I want it to be big." But what I quickly realized is that *less is more in a recording*. What I have now over time come to accept, which my teacher tried to teach me from the time I was seventeen, is that in the theater *less is more*. As I started singing *less* for recordings—more controlled, if you will, I found it was actually helping my stage work.

**Having learned so much from your mentors, your original teachers, and also your colleagues, have you considered teaching?**

It's interesting; I've always felt so inadequate to teach. I don't know why. Maybe just because having studied singing my entire life I know how difficult it is. It's a lifetime study. To the day that Carmen died, he was giving me breathing lessons. He'd teach me something and I'd say, "Why didn't you teach me that twenty years ago?" And he'd say, "You weren't ready to learn it then."

In the last few years I have started doing some teaching and some masterclasses. No small thanks to friend and fellow TCO graduate, Baritone Jake Gardner, who has started a small performing workshop called "A Singing Actor's Studio." It provides a wonderful teaching outlet that can be structured around busy performing schedules, and much like TCO in the early years, gives study and performance opportunities to young singers trying to discover and harness their own talents. Very exciting. And I'm getting great, great satisfaction out of it. I'm starting to realize, "Gee, I do have something to say." There's a wonderful satisfaction in sharing it with other singers, watching the "light bulb" turn on in a singer. It's very, very exciting. So I've been doing a little bit of that.

**In teaching masterclasses which are in a group setting, how can you get to the core of what a singer needs?**

The trick is assessing what each specific singer needs. Each singer has a different idiosyncrasy and a different need. One singer may need more breath. One singer may be throwing too much breath at the voice. So you can't talk about breath flow in generalities. You have to say to a specific singer, "Here's what you're doing. Try this; try this; try this. Now, that's what I want. Now let's put a name to that." Developing a vocabulary between a teacher and a student is the basic element of studying singing. Singers don't really have an agreed-



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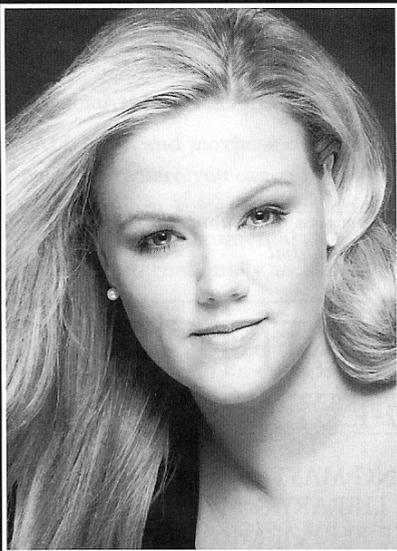
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upon vocabulary for talking about singing. If I say "open," or if I say "closed," I guarantee that if we put five singers in a room, we'll get five different definitions for each of those words. That's what's so difficult about me saying, "Well, my technique is a closed position with a high tongue..." That can be interpreted twenty different ways.

The great thing about a class situation is that it lets us explore that vocabulary with each singer. I prefer to be able to demonstrate: "Here's what I mean when I say I want you to put that in the nose more." I'm trying to find a pathway for that singer, to show her voice or his voice something that it can then recognize, use, and put into practice. I'm not saying, "Put your voice here and leave it there and sing in this spot." But quite often I'll make someone sing half an aria in a very nasal, closed way, as if you put a pencil between your teeth, and you end up saying um, um, um or unnnng, like ng. It really doesn't allow the singer to sing. What it does, though, is teach the "inner singer" something. It shows the voice pathways to follow.

For me, that's how you study your body and your voice. There are certain basics that are fundamental in studying voice technique. Those are things that take time and are difficult to address. Studying breath is one of those things. We can try to start with some generalities, talking about support, but until you can apply that to each singer's body you haven't accomplished anything.

Half of singing is the use of involuntary muscles. You can control some of them, but others you're not able really to control with a thought. They're controlled by some other part of your brain, perhaps by the emotions, or the desire to say something meaningful. You know, it's very easy to say, "It's important to have meaning in your singing." But that's simplistic. What the meaning really does, is that it has a technical effect. *Now* you're using what I call "the inner singer." Your "singer" is able to make choices that are not conscious choices on your part. I try to facilitate this process in a class situation.

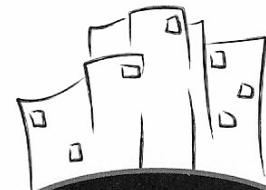
I make analogies with singing and golf all the time. Golf, of course, is extremely technical. That's why most people don't play golf. They say, "Are you kidding me? You want me to do that? Keep my left arm straight and then do what?" So you do all this technical homework: Where do you put your feet? Where's your weight shift? What's your turn? If you consciously focus on all those things at once, you actually can't hit the ball. It's almost impossible.

But what you can do is work on each of those

elements individually and get them so they're second nature. Consciously, you can think about one thing, or maybe two things. Absolutely no more. Whatever you've decided to think about consciously is your *swing thought*. Aside from the swing thought, your conscious mind, and your ego, are out of the way. It's similar with singing. If you've done your homework, when you stand up and start an aria, your *swing thought* will be the meaning of what you're singing, and an occasional technical issue. You never get far away from the meaning of the piece, because you've done your homework, and you're out of the way.

*Gil Carbajal is a free-lance journalist from California who worked for many years in the international service in English of Spanish National Radio. There he had direct and continual access to the music world in Spain. During that time he did radio interviews with Teresa Berganza, Placido Domingo, Pavarotti and Kiri TeKanawa. He currently reports regularly for the Voice of America and Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC).*

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