

OPERA

INTERNATIONAL

le magazine de l'art lyrique

RENEE FLEMING
RICHARD LEECH

*Manon et Des
Grioux à Paris*

N° 214 - 49 FF Belgique 359 FF Suisse 45,30 FS Canada 11,50 S. Italie 16500 L

RICHARD LEECH:

Telling a Story

Poised to make his debut at the Bastille in Massenet's *Manon*, American tenor **Richard Leech** took time during his rehearsal of *Faust* at the Metropolitan Opera to speak to *Opéra International's* correspondent **Carla Maria Verdino-Süllwold** about his international career, his first solo recording, and his love of the French repertoire...

You have built a distinguished reputation in French repertoire, so what are you feeling as you contemplate your Bastille debut?

I have enjoyed singing in Paris at the Châtelet and other places, and I am naturally very excited to perform at the Bastille. Singing operatic repertoire to a native speaking audience is an experience like nothing else. That special communication is what we strive for and often we are not singing to an audience in their mother tongue. So when we do communicate with an audience that can appreciate the words, this is very satisfying.

Does the size or the acoustical reputation of the Bastille offer you any pause?

I have heard varying stories, but I do know colleagues who love singing there. For better or worse, these days we are all used to singing in very large spaces, so it may not be as traumatic to us as one might suppose. It is true that French opera requires a little intimacy, but I can't change what I do because a space is cavernous. I approach singing at the Met, for example, in the same way I do at a smaller European theater.

Your first, dazzling Raoul in Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* in Berlin thrust you upon the international scene. Do you remember the thrill of those performances?

People would say "no one sings that role; it's impossible!" But there was something about Meyerbeer's combination of Italian *bel canto* and French style that fit me like a glove. When I put aside the stereotype that it was difficult and I decided to sing it to tell a story, I was fine. That's what we have to concentrate on in opera: telling a story. If you give yourself permission to be that simple, it is often easier than you realize.

You have been acclaimed for your sense of French "style." Is there such a thing?

When I began to sing, my teachers were more oriented to the Italian repertoire, and I was nervous about not knowing French "style." But along the way I began to get positive feedback from conductors and others that

helped me to trust myself and, more importantly, trust the composer. Once I listened to what was on the page and let it sing through me, I found that I could add a layer of my own "style" and be sure it fit with the composer's. Even though I had "missed the class on French style," I had defined it for myself! When I became confident that this process had started happening, it was easy to let it evolve. It goes back to my teachers who instilled in me a respect for honest communication, rather than imposing impediments on the music.

Massenet's *Manon* has been absent from Paris for a long time. What challenges and pleasures do you find in the role of Des Grieux?

Manon encompasses such a range of French music from the dramatic to the light lyric and everything in between. It has an unparalleled musical beauty. For the tenor, the focal point is the Saint Sulpice scene. I have to generate enough sympathy, for the audience to understand dramatically why Des Grieux loves Manon as he does.

What other French roles have you essayed?

I love Massenet's *Werther* and the Gounod operas; *Roméo et Juliette* and *Faust* are among my favorites. I actually started by singing Siebel at seventeen! These are roles I will always come back to. And now I have fallen in love with Don José. I recently did my first in San Diego in a very powerful production by James de Blasis, conducted by Richard Bonyngé. I had put it off for a long time, but I felt the time was then right.

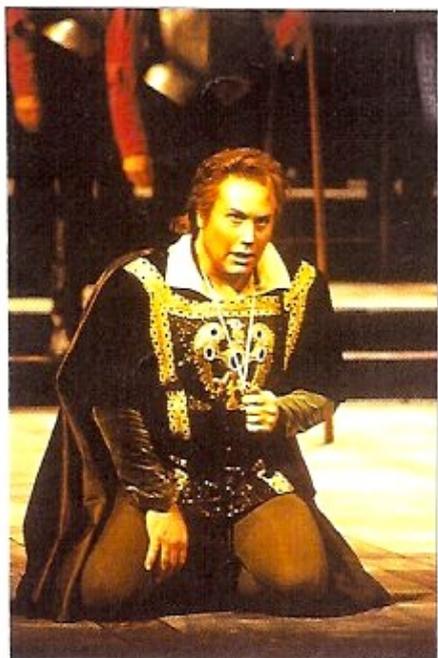
Do you see your voice evolving even into the dramatic repertoire?

I think I am presently maintaining a satisfactory balance for artistic and vocal health, and I don't see it evolving too much past *Carmen* or *Ballo*. I'm actually trying to bring back pieces like *Hoffmann* (at the Met) that I haven't done in a long time. I have returned to *Manon* after a long period of time, for example. I had sung two performances at New York City Opera in 1985, but that was like a little kiss that was quickly gone. Now I have a chance to finish the process I started with the benefit of my experience.



HART

Applying his makeup for Don José in San Diego



KLOTZ

Roméo

You credit Tri-Cities Opera in Binghamton, NY with giving you much of your excellent foundation. What was special about this company and about the educational path you chose as a singer?

Tri-Cities was and still is home base to me. When I was fifteen and living in upstate New York, my choir teacher urged me to take voice lessons. I began to study and to sing small roles with the company. For me, Tri-Cities Opera was its own solution in a very unique setting. It is a company dedicated to nurturing singing. Twenty-five to thirty singers study and perform in a workshop setting. A young artist can learn a role, perform it, go out and do it somewhere else, get more experience, come back to learn another. It gave me the continuity of experience and education that enabled me to expand my horizons. I did go off to the Eastman School of Music for a semester, but I soon realized what I had left and what I was coming home to. When I decided to focus my studies in Binghamton, I supplemented my voice lessons with a program of language courses and other studies at the University that gave me the tools I needed. In many ways, I managed to create for myself an American parallel to the European system.

And you have sung extensively in America, as well as Europe. Have your travels through as diverse a country as the United States enriched your perceptions?

They have! I feel blessed as an American singer to be able to sing everywhere in the States in repertoire I want to sing, and then have the luxury to go to the major houses in Europe. I am happy to see a resurgence of opera companies in America, even with the struggle for fiscal support. I think surtitles have played a big part in developing the American audience. I sang with them when Beverly Sills first brought them to the States, and I saw how the audiences responded to works in their native languages. And thankfully, our audiences are also getting younger! We need more and more programs to introduce children to opera.

What can young, energetic performers like yourself do to help develop this audience and counter the inroads made by cuts in arts education?

There seems to be a schism between classical and popular music. We have to make clear to young people that it is OK to like both. They don't have to choose. Sometimes, as classical artists we are guilty of putting our "product" on a different level than popular entertainment. Instead, I think

we should say, "I'm singing a song. I hope you like it." When I program a recital, I try not to make it elitist or inaccessible. I programmed the Mario Lanza songs on my recent CD tribute because as a boy listening to my father's gramophone, they had spoken to me. I was turned on to the communication and commitment in Lanza's singing. For so many people of that generation, he was their only experience with opera.

There is something an audience loves in a song that tells a simple story. And if it's in their own language, it's even more immediate. Even if it is not, if the communication is direct, they will respond. Look at the way Bjoerling brought his Scandinavian songs to audiences who didn't understand the words. I love to sing American songs to a German or French audience, for example. We need to create programs that intersperse the simple songs among the big hits. On this first solo album I was excited about mixing songs with arias. Another project I am exploring is recording the songs Tosti wrote in English.

What other recordings besides Lanza's have shaped your musical thought?

I have been especially impacted by recordings of Bjoerling, Caruso and Schipa. In my lessons I always sang simple Italian songs and Schipa had recorded so many and was such a wonderful technician that he became a huge inspiration. When I begin a new piece, I start with words, then I listen to someone whose vocal production I can relate to, but not for very long. Once I get an overview of the piece, I try to put the recording away. This gives you the best of all worlds. You know where you are coming from and you have a place to go to. It's time to store the inspiration and let the composer help you to figure out your own solutions.

Finding your own solutions is an essential theme for any artist, given today's music industry which often has little to do with art, itself. How do you manage?

One decision at a time. I always look at the doors before me; I make a choice as to what feels right in my heart and go through to find whatever else is on the other side. I'm not a great believer in a grand master plan, because so many things can change as a result of each individual choice. And if you — not some advisor or manager — make those decisions, then you can live with them, learn from them, and feel good about them. Most singers find out early in their careers that they must take their lives in their own hands: "this is where I want to go. How do I get there?"



Pinkerton

ROMANO

It is the same difficult balance with music reviews. You cannot control what critics will write, what has brought them there, or what they want to accomplish. I can only hope it's a reasonable observation of what I am doing. Instead, you have to find a way to trust the process, your talent, and people in and around your life who will tell you the truth.

How do you know that you, as an artist, have told the story, have told the truth?

It's something that singers and fans know instinctively. Every now and then — not every night — magic happens. The real fans come so they can be there on those evenings which are like no others. A very special communication between artist and audience gives the performance a life of its own.