Acting Opera

By Leon Major and Michael Laing

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Opera is artifice; it's not everyday life. What makes it work—what makes it lively and absorbing, not to mention grand and elaborate—is craft. Craft in opera, as in any other art, is built up out of precise details, imaginatively forged into a whole. If the specific, detailed demands of either music or drama are sloughed off in favor of generalized attitudes or vague gestures, however grand or passionate, the artifice is not sustained. The performance fails.

If the artifice can't be sustained—if the details of music and words and action can't be forged into living theater—then we don't have an opera. We have something else: At best, an expensive display of costume and music; at worst, a waste of talent. Luckily, the craft needed to create and sustain the illusion of opera can be learned.

Why Action is the Basis of Character

In an opera, as in a play or movie, there must be progress. Characters begin somewhere; they end somewhere else. Where they end must be different than where they began. Watching a character on stage not move or change or develop would be like watching cement dry.

Action starts with desire, with wanting something. A man and a woman love each other. Once one of them has said, "*Io t'amo,*" the audience knows where it is, and is set for what comes next: Finding out how the lovers go about achieving their love. How do the man and woman break down the barriers that prevent them from coming together? They don't just stand still, having emotions, expressing themselves. They do things, they make discoveries, they act. They know what they want and they try to make it come true.

Action can also start with fear, with something a character wants to escape. The rest of the piece will show us successfully—or not—how that character is able to overcome whatever makes him or her afraid.

Everything depends on conflict, whether internal or external, vigorous or muted. A scene without conflict is not a scene. Conflicts occur over the whole course of a story; they occur, they're resolved, there's a new conflict, a new resolution, and so on, and so on. The action progresses until there's some kind of final resolution. Either desire is achieved and fear conquered, as in a marriage; or desire is thwarted and the reason to fear victorious, in which case the characters end up alone or dead. Desires and fears, embodied in actions, are what move the opera forward.

Finding Out What a Character Wants

Scene 1 from the second act of *The Marriage of Figaro*, which consists only of the Countess's aria "*Porgi amor,*" offers special challenges to singers. This makes it a good place to begin scene study. The challenge is to think about an aria as an opportunity for action, instead of simply a chance to produce beautiful sound.

The aria, which introduces one of the opera's central characters, consists of just four lines:

"Porgi, amor, qualche ristoro
Al mio duolo, a' miei sospiri:
O mi rendi il mio tesoro,
O mi lascia almen morir."

"Love, bring some relief
To my sorrow, to my sighs:
Give me back my loved one,
Or in mercy let me die."

There is no apparent physical action in the aria, but there is intense interior action. The Countess's thoughts as she tries to understand and cope with her situation are just as vivid and real as any dance or fight. The singer will have to find ways of showing us these internal activities through external action, not just through her voice.

Each time a singer prepares to enter a scene, he or she must ask five basic questions:

Leon Major, with students, in the Homer Ulrich Recital Hall at the University of Maryland, College Park.

1 Where is the character coming from?
2 Where is the character going?
3 What does the character want?
4 What blocks the character from getting
5 How does the character overcome that

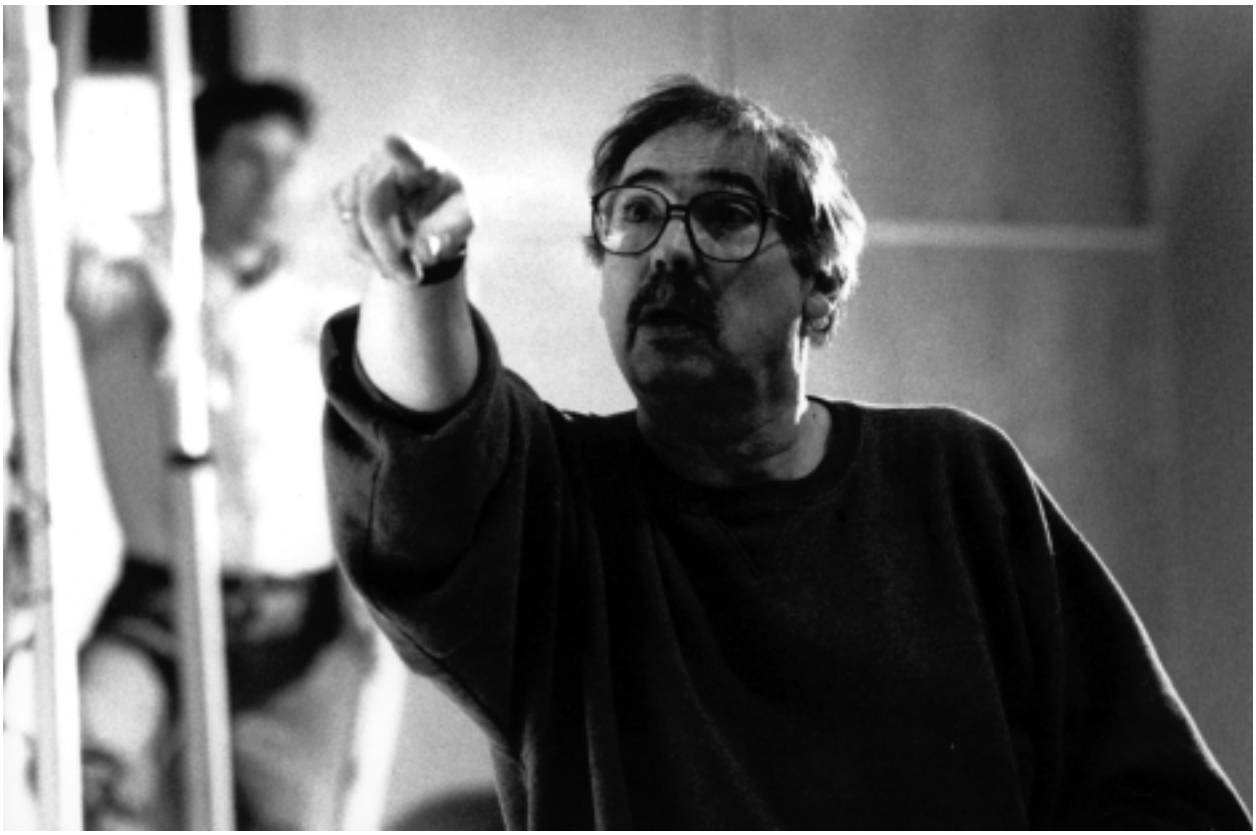
Where is the Countess coming from? Answering this question requires that we look ahead to the beginning of the next scene. We discover that the Countess has been completing her toilet and Susanna has been telling her about the Count's advances.

Where is the Countess going? She's getting ready for her day. But she's also "going" somewhere else. (The singer knows this from reading through the score, even if the character does not.) The Countess is going to the end of the opera, where she has these key words: "*Più docile io sono, e dico di sì,*" ("I am kinder, I will say yes"). The singer knows that the Countess's character, as displayed through her actions at the end, must be strong if she is to sing these words with conviction. It's these words, after all, that draw the main themes of the opera together—love, betrayal, forgiveness.

What does she want? The Countess is very clear about what she wants: She wants relief from her suffering. She is also clear about what relief means to her: either the return of her beloved or death.
What blocks her from getting what she wants?
The Count is not there with her—he's absent both physically and (as she's just learned from Susanna) emotionally.

The answer to the final question, ***How does she overcome that barrier?***, is revealed in the first line of the next scene: "*Vieni, cara Susanna, finiscimi l'istoria,*" ("Come in, dear Susanna, and tell me the rest"). The Countess who sets about understanding and solving her problem cannot have been helplessly lamenting just seconds before. Instead, she shows signs of the strength that will allow her to be, by the end, the true heroine of the piece.

We know where the Countess is coming from, where she's going, what she wants, and what prevents her from achieving that. We have an idea how she might wish to overcome that barrier. So how does the singer use this information to prepare the scene?



Leon Major . Photo courtesy of The University of Maryland.

The 17-bar introduction is the first challenge. What's a singer to do with all this voiceless, seemingly actionless music? Just stand still in mourning, waiting for her cue? In a minute, she'll ask for relief. One form of relief would be her lover's return; the other would be death. Is she really willing to die if he is not restored to her? Or does that wish just indicate how strong her desire is? The answer will be the key to how the singer prepares.

What kinds of thoughts might produce such absolute alternatives? One convincing answer is that they'll be thoughts about what she's lost: her husband's love. No one can grieve without remembering what's lost. She could remember her courtship—the excitement of being pursued, the barriers overcome for her sake. She could remember the man who disguised himself as a drunken soldier and then a music teacher to win her. (This background information, gleaned from *The Barber of Seville*, demonstrates one way information from an outside source can help with a singer's preparation.) But it's not necessary to use those images; any will do, as long as they allow the singer to focus on the Countess's loss. Whatever the stimulus, she will have to make her loss real in order to make a convincing plea.

Or perhaps Susanna has just left the room, and the introduction's first four chords (which are marked *forte*) are a signal of the Countess's anger at what she's just learned. The rest of the introduction might then consist of her attempts to calm herself and figure out what to do. Obviously there are a number of plausible ways to answer, ***What does the Countess want?*** The answer will have to connect with the point of view of the whole production, and will be worked out in detail over the rehearsal period. At this point in the preparation, questions are more important than answers.

But there's another important question: Why does the Countess continue to love her husband? After all, he behaves very badly. Aside from the social structure in which the story operates, which shows her as being dependent upon him, what are some positive reasons she might want him back? Whatever answers are found to questions like these, they'll have to be practical; in other words, they'll have to be easily comprehensible by the audience, without recourse to program notes.

Most important, the singer who plays the Countess must work out what she loves about the Count. This will

provide the context for her alternate request: Love, in mercy, should let her die. Does she mean this literally? Or is it simply blurted out in frustration and despair? Linking the words and the music here can help the singer work her way through this—and can raise questions she'll have to answer in her preparation. The Countess makes her request, "*mi lascia almen morir,*" and says it again in the repeat, turning it over in her mind, thinking about it. On the repeat there's a *crescendo* to *forte* on the A-flat; there's also a *fermata* on the same note. Does the Countess say the line casually, off-handedly the first time, then muse on the idea of death in the repeated phrase? Is she actually entertaining the idea? Interestingly, the dynamic returns to *piano* immediately and remains as such for the rest of the aria. She then repeats "*mi lascia almen morir*" once more. Why? What are the repeats for? Is she amused by the idea of suicide? Frightened by it? Attracted to it? The answer will provide us with a reason for the repeats and with information about the Countess. Every time we see her after that, we'll be informed by the attitude she took.

The action of recalling is a positive, active one, however painful it may be. Perhaps it's the Countess's courage in recognizing her situation that makes it possible to develop her character over the rest of the opera. The Count's attempt to seduce Susanna brings to a head the Countess's position: She can no longer avoid facing facts.

Later that act, the Countess makes a telling remark which seems to confirm this recognition. The Count, after behaving like a jealous tyrant and being proved wrong (and not for the last time!), pleads forgiveness. He couches his appeal in terms which he evidently thinks will be irresistible: He calls her by her name, Rosina. Her response is highly significant:

"Crudele! Più quella non sono,
Ma il misero oggetto del vostro abbandono
Che avete diletto di far disperar."

"Cruel man! I am no longer she
but the wretched object of your neglect
whom you delight to make suffer."

The Countess seems to be saying she is no longer the Rosina who was so ardently courted by the Count. Instead, she has become someone else, a person he ignores and insults. What of the early days she might have recalled as she sang "*Porgi amor*"? This is her recognition that those days are over, that she is no longer the woman the Count pursued, that he is no longer—to her—the ardent lover of the past.

Discoveries are key focal points in dramas. In this discovery the Countess is seeing that she has a choice to make, that she can either accept her role as the injured wife pleading for attention, or she can decide to fight and perhaps win her lover back again. We can see the effects of this discovery: Something is released in her, and she becomes free to make further choices. Her main choice, it seems, is that she will fight for her marriage. The stakes in the second act of *The Marriage of Figaro* are high. All of the characters have their own agendas: Figaro has to save his marriage and his job; Susanna has to save her virtue and her marriage; the Count has to get what he wants from Susanna while at the same time preserving his "honor;" and the Countess has to save her marriage and her self-respect. Stakes are important in the theater. The higher they are, the more intense a scene is—the funnier, the more tragic, the more dramatic. In "*Porgi amor,*" the stakes for the Countess are made clear, and the more intensely she can be seen by the audience to understand this, the more compelling her character will be. The more vividly she can recall the positive in her life—what she's lost—the more intensely she'll be able to wish for an end to her suffering, and the more convincingly she'll be able to bring her suffering to an end.

The introduction to the aria can be any number of things, but it must be true to the action of the opera as a whole. As soon as the aria is over, the Countess and Susanna start moving forward. Within minutes, Figaro will enter, full of plans to teach the Count how to dance to a tune that he, Figaro, will provide. So action succeeds action, and the way is open for a vital character to emerge: the Countess, not passive, not merely lamenting beautifully, but full of life and determination—a woman who is fully capable of achieving what she wants. ♦