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It's Not Over (Yet) for Those Who Cue Divas

**But Opera Prompters
Practice a Waning Art;
'So Many Words!'**

By **THOMAS M. BURTON**
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Soprano Christine Brewer has a voice critics have described as "brilliant" and "golden," yet she admits that her mind sometimes drifts during long performances.

In the middle of a recent five-hour production of Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde" at the San Francisco Opera, the 52-year-old singer started daydreaming and lost her place. She got excited, she says, then sped up and began singing the lines of her co-star, who started cracking up.

Ms. Brewer's salvation came from a little box at the foot of the stage. **Unseen by the audience, prompter Jonathan Kuhner climbed part-way out of his box and yelled, "Stop singing!"**

"Prompters are like gods," says Ms. Brewer, who quickly recovered and went on with a well-received performance.

While divas often sing their praises, opera prompters are a dwindling breed. Today, just a handful of prompters ply the trade in the U.S. In Italy, where singers say the practice originated, most of the big houses still employ prompters, but they're less often used in England and Germany.

At the Los Angeles Opera, new Music Director James Conlon is trying to reverse this trend. "I have insisted prompters be the norm and not the exception," he says. "A prompter is one instrument toward an impeccable musical performance." While New York's Metropolitan Opera, the Lyric Opera of Chicago and now the Los Angeles Opera use prompters for all or nearly all shows, **most major U.S. opera companies do without them. There are fewer than 10 prompters working full-time at leading U.S. companies, Mr. Kuhner estimates.**

The prompter's job combines the skills of a conductor, musicologist and linguist, with an unusual ability to listen to the orchestra, keep time with the hands and deliver the singers' lines a moment before the downbeat.

'It's Like Juggling'

"It's like juggling three different objects of completely different size and shape," says Mr. Kuhner, 59, a prompter both in San Francisco and at New York's Metropolitan Opera.

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During the last century, touring opera troupes with stars such as Enrico Caruso nearly always used prompters. They typically performed an opera for just one night and moved on to a new city and a new production.

As opera companies have mushroomed across the U.S. -- 72% of American opera companies began since 1960 -- this initially meant more prompters' jobs. But more recently, companies like those in San Diego, Houston and Dallas have cut them out -- for a combination of financial and artistic reasons. The San Francisco Opera still uses them, but less than it once did.

Some of the opera companies that don't use prompters say they're not necessary because singers are better prepared nowadays. Some set designers think prompters' boxes look clunky, says tenor Frank Lopardo. "New designers of opera productions don't want to have the prompt box interfere with their vision," he says.

Prompters tend to be on the same contract as other music staff at opera companies; at the Met, for instance, they make roughly \$75,000 to \$100,000 a year.



Lyric Opera of Chicago

James Johnson, associate conductor and prompter at the Lyric Opera of Chicago, in the prompter's box.

Prompters sit in a box below the stage, behind the orchestra pit. They say lines in a normal speaking voice, except in particularly quiet passages, in which case they mouth the words. Even superstars like soprano Susan Graham lean heavily on them. "I'm a big lover of prompters," she says. "Operas just have so many words!"

But prompters can mess up, too. Singing at London's Covent Garden a few years back, Ms. Graham needed to sing an aria with several verses, each of which began with the letter 'p.' Heading into the second verse, her mind went blank, she recalls, and she looked in horror to the prompter. But he panicked, too, and just stammered out "p-p-p-p."

"I thought, 'That part I know already,' " she says.

It's not just for the words that singers look to prompters. The prompter is a safety net and a friendly face, allowing performers to concentrate more on their acting. They help keep complex and loud passages together.

Baritone Nathan Gunn says prompters can also serve as "your voice of reason and practicality" when the conductor expresses his wishes in incomprehensible artistic language. A conductor, he says, "will say things like, 'Sing like an obelisk.' Or 'you're making a sound that's domelike. I want a parabola.'" Prompters can translate that into English.

Mr. Gunn says prompters "save your butt all the time. They always get the biggest applause at cast parties." He adds a pointer for audiences: If a singer stands at the front center of the stage too long, he's probably lost and looking to the prompter.

Five minutes before the Lyric Opera of Chicago was to perform Tchaikovsky's "Eugene Onegin" one recent Sunday, prompter James Johnson, tall and courtly with a shock of white hair, clambered down a ladder into the orchestra pit. Then Mr. Johnson, who doubles as the opera's associate conductor, climbed into the prompter's box, and sat down inside the orange-carpeted, 4-foot-tall enclosure.

Now he was invisible, except from the stage. Even from there, only his head and hands could be seen.

The house lights dimmed in the ornate gold-and-salmon-hued auditorium.

Exuding Confidence

As the orchestra began, Mr. Johnson, 68, kept perfect time with his hands, saying the first word of many lines and exuding confidence so the singers stayed calm. In extreme times, when a complex passage threatens to fall apart, he can pound his fists on the floor of the prompt box to make the beat more pronounced.

Baritone Mariusz Kwiecien, playing the lovelorn Onegin, knelt at the feet of his beloved Tatyana, played by soprano Dina Kuznetsova. Mr. Johnson cued Mr. Kwiecien, who sang in Russian: "If you only knew the agony it is to burn and thirst for love."

Mr. Johnson grew up in Colorado, listening to Saturday radio broadcasts from the Met. "My parents sort of accepted that every Saturday I'd be listening to the opera," he says. After his sister started taking piano lessons, he complained that he ought to, too, and his parents relented. By 1968, he was on the music staff at the Met, followed by conducting and coaching jobs in Strasbourg, France, and San Francisco.

He was hired at the Lyric as a rehearsal pianist and voice coach in 1987. Prompting was added to his duties from the start. "No one sets out to be a prompter," says Mr. Johnson, who splits his time between Chicago and his home in Paris.

That's certainly true of Mr. Kuhner, the prompter who pulled Ms. Brewer back to reality in San Francisco. His first love remains conducting, which he gets to do part-time as artistic director at the Berkeley Opera.

"I would have loved to have a conducting career," he says. "But this seems to be the closest I'll get."

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