



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

SESSION 4: Ho jo to ho!

Broadcast Intermission Interview

Die tote Stadt, 2008

Featuring: Emily Magee (role: Marie/Marietta), Torsten Kerl (role: Paul) and Dr. Clifford (Kip) Cranna
(interviewer and SF Opera dramaturg emeritus)

(transcript read time ~ 9 minutes; audio run time ~ 12 minutes)

[BEGIN AUDIO]

NARRATOR: Welcome to San Francisco Opera's Centennial Celebration.

ANNOUNCER: Whether one approaches *Die tote Stadt* as a musical work or a psychological study, Korngold's voluptuous score is a vehicle for exploring the meaning of death, obsession, fantasy, and reality. Kip Cranna, our Director of Music Administration, sat down with Emily Magee, Torsten Kerl, and Lucas Meachem, and asked what their thoughts were when they first encountered the piece.

EMILY MAGEE [EM]: I wasn't sure if it was the right thing for my voice, to be honest. I generally sang lower repertoire, and more lyric repertoire, and at the time when I did this role for the first time I thought, well, yeah, I'll give it a shot. And it turned out to be a big success for me at the Zurich Opera House, and also it helped to turn my voice in a different direction.

DR CLIFFORD (KIP) CRANNA [KC]: Obviously, since you do sing two different characters in this opera you have a variety of vocal styles to contend with, but it's more than just that, isn't it? You really go through a lot of vocal changes in the course of the performance.

EM: Yeah, I try to characterize the music differently vocally. As the dancer, Marietta, in the first scene, I try to give it a different vocal color than the spectral voice of Marie, and then also the sort of nightmare version of Marietta that Paul creates for himself later. It's hard, though, because it's such an exhausting role from beginning to end that you have less time and you have a little bit less energy (laughs) to try to do all those things, but I do try. And that's, actually, the most fun thing about the opera.

KC: All your various changes of mood and voice and character.

EM: Yes, all my various eras of vocal development, (laughs) too, I can call upon. Yeah.

KC: Torsten, tell me about your first thoughts when you encountered this opera. It's much more well known, of course, in the German-speaking world than it is here in America.

TORSTEN KER [TK]L: Yeah, it worked in a very similar way in the beginning, when I saw it first time, because every tenor I met told me, "Don't sing this part. It's too difficult. It's too high, too low, and too long." And there's just the aria at the end, and so you need the power to do the most important thing at the very end, so it's later than in every Wagner opera, for example. Sometimes you have to sing like Belmonte; sometimes you have to sing like Tristan, and it changes always. And so, yeah, it needed to be a long time to understand how you can do that with your voice, and what is really necessary to do, and which phrases you can sing a little bit less, and... Yeah.

KC: And you're onstage pretty much continuously throughout the whole opera.

TK: Yes, yes, that was the idea. So to bring that out, that it's a kind of Paul's dream, so it made it necessary to put him always onstage. And it worked very well, I like it, but yeah, you have to find your place when you sing, when you drink a little bit of water, and, yeah, I mean, that's the other hand.

KC: Lucas, you're well known here, having been in the Young Artists Program at San Francisco Opera. What do your friends and fan club have to say? (laughs)

LUCAS MEACHEM [LM]: Well, I said from, well, not day one, but about day five, when I was really sold on this project, and I started to understand what direction that we were going in, I said that this would be the sleeper hit of the season, and it really has been just that. I think people come to the opera with low expectations to no expectations, not knowing so much about the music, maybe having heard it on recording but not seen it, and they sit there and they just become enthralled throughout the entire show. You can really... I don't know, as a performer we all know that you can feel when an audience is really diggin' what you're doing, and they just totally get it, you know? Most people get it. It also helps to have an intelligent audience, which San Francisco does.

TK: Yes.

LM: It's really great that the San Francisco Opera audiences, they study the music. They study, sometimes, even the little text. Sometimes they read the books associated with it. It's incredible, like at the Opera Panel, the insight, discussion, how many well-informed people were there. And it's just great to have such an intellectual crowd to give intellectual things to, (laughs) so that's been wonderful.

KC: Emily, I'd like to talk a little bit about the things that the radio audience won't know about as they're hearing this broadcast, particularly the incredible quick changes that you have to go through, going from Marietta to Marie and back again. Can you say a little bit about that?

EM: Sure. Yeah, whereas Torsten is onstage virtually from beginning to end, I'm not onstage all the time, but when I am onstage I'm pretty much always active. I'm moving, physically moving, nearly the whole time, and if I'm not physically moving, or dancing, or running about the stage, I'm running offstage to make a

quick change, and there are a number of quick changes in this show. One of them is 19 seconds to get into a completely different wig and costume.

KC: Nineteen seconds, did you...?

EM: Nineteen seconds. And the other one I think is about 45 seconds, but it's from the front of the stage to the back of the stage, and I have to run (laughs) to make it happen, and then sing immediately after, some of the most lyrical music in the piece. So I must say it's rather exhausting. The first time I did the role, as well, we did it uncut musically but with two intermissions, and it was, I must say, much easier. This production, as wonderful as it is, and as effective as it is, it's very tiring for me, mostly because of these changes, and the physical demands that are made of me. What Willy Decker has been able to accomplish in this production is this change of character between Marie and Marietta in his vision, in his fantasy, and so these quick changes are super effective. They're very difficult, but they're super effective in showing what's going on in Paul's mind.

TK: I think that was the idea, too –

EM: Yeah.

TK: -- really, to say, okay, we know it's harder, but he understood that it's not possible to do the opera without a break, but he said, "If that would be possible, I would like to do that." Because then it's really one... He said it has to look like one second of his life, so it happens so fast, everything, and it's just a daydream, in a way. You sit in your room, and you're off for, let's say, some minutes only, and then you come back and you think, oh, what is that? It was a nightmare, but you can't show that when you do two breaks and do it in a grand opera way.

EM: I think the way he has done this production is he's given to the audience, to the public, this same sense of confusion as Paul has. You're not quite sure who's up there. Is it Marie? Is it Marietta? You don't really even know whose voice you're hearing. You don't know if it's really the singer doing that scene or if it's a double. It gives the public the same sense of a disturbed vision or an uncertainty that the leading role has, and I think that's the best part of this production. It's fascinating for the audience, as well. They feel like they've lived through a moment that has become this grand nightmare, this dream, this question. I think it's fantastic.

KC: I'd love to get impressions from all of you about what the ultimate lesson is in this opera. We know that Korngold wrote the opera, including the libretto. His father helped with the libretto. What do you think he really wants us to take away from the experience of seeing this opera? Is there a lesson about grief or happiness or life to be learned here?

LM: You can tell somebody over and over again that they're making a mistake, and they can know that they're making the mistake, but until they're ready to hear what you have to say to them, they're not going to change anything. It's like they have to be ready to hear what you're trying to tell them. So Frank does come in, and he says, "All right, listen, buddy, you're going down the wrong path here. This is not what

you want to be doing.” And I think in some way Paul knows that he’s right, but that’s in the part of the brain that is rational, which is very lacking in Paul’s.

TK: He needs his own impression, way to understand it. He needs the whole story to –

LM: His own comprehension, yeah.

TK: -- yeah -- to understand –

LM: Exactly.

TK: -- that it’s the wrong way, yeah.

LM: He has to go through that.

TK: Yeah. Yeah.

EM: I think as complicated as the piece is, the message is really very simple: it’s move on. Live life. Don’t live in death. And they set it in a city, why they call it the Dead City. Don’t stay in this city of death. Move on. Embrace life. But, of course, when that is happening to you it doesn’t seem that simple at all, and I think that’s what he’s given us in this piece: that we all can live through Paul’s nightmare.

TK: There is always an exit, so you see that in the last scene –

EM: Yeah, and –

TK: -- the doors in this opera. That’s always in all Willy Decker production I saw, doesn’t matter which opera. (laughter) The doors are really important. And we have just one door in this opera, a very big one, and you see, I mean, there’s always the possibility, because all the others open the door. Even Marietta, I mean, she was very [new?] in his life, but she was able to open the door. Only Paul never opened the door. Only at the end you see he close it again, and then he got the last little kick to move out of the room, but nobody knows what’s going on then. It’s up to you to think about this. He just left the room, and then the opera finished.

EM: Yeah, up until the very last moment you’re unsure of what he will do. He could just as easily close the doors and stay in this world, in this mausoleum –

TK: Yeah, or maybe –

EM: -- of worship, but he doesn’t. He, at the last moment, slips out the door. And I think it’s a huge moment for the audience –

TK: Yes.

EM: -- you know, to say, "Oh, thank God," you know?

TK: Of course, it could also happen that he comes back a short time later, just to realize that no, I can't, I have to go, and it starts again. Yeah.

EM: True, yeah.

KC: Well, it would seem to me that the music is telling us that that doesn't happen, that he has moved on –

TK: Yeah, yeah.

KC: -- moved on to a new chapter in his life, perhaps.

TK: Yeah.

KC: Okay, gang. Emily Magee, Torsten Kerl, and Lucas Meachem, thanks so much for talking to us.

EM: Thank you.

ANNOUNCER: That was Kip Cranna speaking with the principal singers in *Die tote Stadt*, Emily Magee, Torsten Kerl, and Lucas Meachem.

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[END AUDIO]