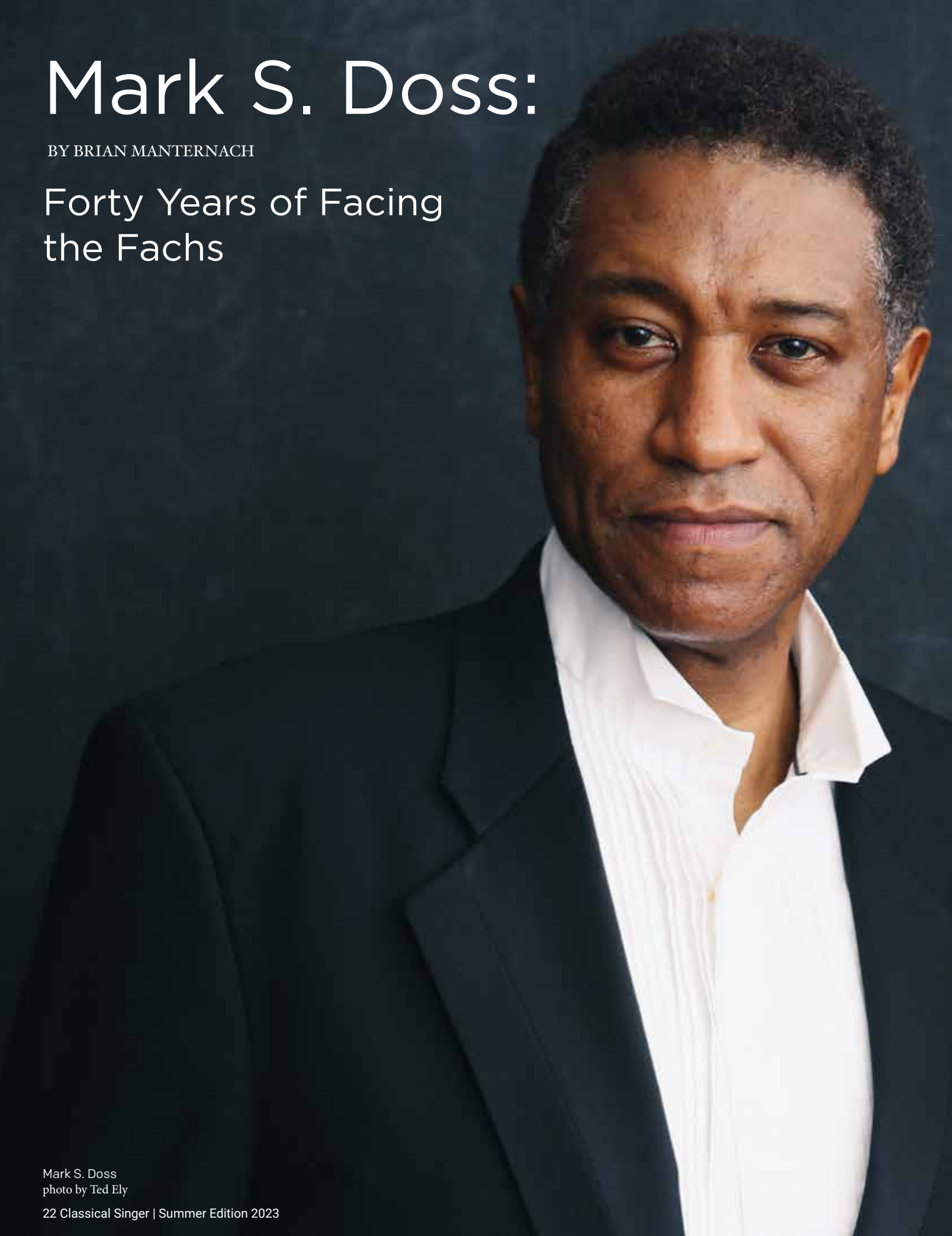


Mark S. Doss:

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

Forty Years of Facing the Fachs



Mark S. Doss
photo by Ted Ely

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With more than
100 operatic
roles to his credit,
Mark S. Doss has
made a career
of masterfully
treading between
bass and baritone.

Opera is a musical genre that is steeped in tradition. It reveres centuries-old composers and, despite a certain degree of emphasis on new works, still looks to bygone eras for its most frequently performed pieces.

On the other hand, when it comes to opera singers, the industry seems always to be on the lookout for the next rising star. Perhaps we are culturally conditioned to do so, given the prevalence of primetime, singing-based, reality programs designed to discover unknown talent, pluck them from obscurity, and thrust them into the mainstream.

Therefore, it may be surprising to see an opera singer who has consistently and quietly (ironically) built a decades-long, international performance career. Such is the case for bass-baritone Mark S. Doss, who has had steady engagements equally spaced over the 20th and 21st centuries. Over this time, his abilities and employability have never been in doubt. There has been one persistent quandary, however, that has repeatedly come up throughout his career: to bass or to baritone? That is the question.

The Facts of Life

For those familiar with Doss' vocal quality—hailed in the press as “rich,” “warm,” and “bronze”—it may be surprising to learn that his first voice classification was actually neither bass nor baritone. In his freshman year at Saint Joseph's College in Indiana, he was placed in the tenor section of the choir, the same voice part of his idol at the time—Mario Lanza. It proved not to be the most natural fit. “I wasn't vocally able to do it,” Doss says. “The top [range] was going crazy, but I wasn't able to prepare it because my larynx would go up. Occasionally, I could make some sounds like Mario made, but I was not going to be a tenor.”

With the help of a series of influential voice teachers, he was gradually able to find the range and build the technique that would become the foundation of his career. Graduate studies at Indiana University then led to an apprenticeship at Santa Fe Opera, after which he joined the Chicago Lyric Opera Center for American Artists.

When he competed in the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions as a young singer, the repertoire he chose reflected the diversity of Fach that he had been working on over the course of his vocal studies. “I did the gamut at that point,” he says. “I sang ‘Di Provenza’ from *La traviata*, ‘O Isis und Osiris’ from *Die Zauberflöte*, and then it was ‘Vecchia zimarra’ from *La bohème* and ‘Abendstern’ from *Tannhäuser*.”

After winning the district competition in Valparaiso, Indiana, he advanced to the regional competition in Chicago. It was there that one of the adjudicators made a comment that has stuck with him over the years. “The judge said, ‘Well, he has to make up his mind whether he's a bass or a baritone or he'll never have a career,’” he recalls.

In Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods*, the character of Cinderella is faced with a choice. After vacillating back and forth for a bit in her song “On the Steps of the Palace,” she eventually comes to a conclusion: “I know what my decision is/Which is not to decide.”

Doss as Scarpia in Welsh National Opera's production of *Tosca*, 2018.



photo by Richard Hubert Smith

Despite the adjudicator's advice, Doss never decided either. "I just go back and forth from the bass roles to the baritone roles," he says. Even so, the search for where he may best fit is ongoing. "I've been everywhere, going to teachers and coaches, asking them, 'What do you think? What should I be singing?' Just pretty much asking the question," he says. "Did I come to a realization? No. Over 20 years, I'm still asking people, getting their impression to see what I do best."

Doss tells the story of how, a couple of years before the pandemic, he arranged a consultation with artist manager Matthew Epstein to get another professional opinion on what he should pursue next for his career. Epstein reportedly complimented Doss on his upper range, which he didn't realize was as solid as it is. He then advised him to pursue roles like Wotan, but admitted that he would probably never sing *Rigoletto*. Doss then pointed out that he had, indeed, already performed *Rigoletto* and proceeded to sing "Cortigiani, vil razza dannata" for Epstein, one of the signature arias of the dramatic baritone character. As Doss recounts, "[Epstein] said, 'You've got this! There's an easy top. Audition for that for the big houses!'" However, he offered an additional piece of advice: "If somebody asks you to do a bass role instead, take it."

As confusing as this lack of definitive direction can sometimes be for Doss, he knows it can be just as confusing

to audiences. He recalls one flabbergasted singer colleague commenting that when Doss sings bass repertoire, he sounds like a bass, but when he sings baritone repertoire, he sounds like a baritone. Reflecting on the observation, Doss understands the confusion, especially for another singer, saying, "They study in order to perfect a certain Fach or a certain range," he says, "and then they hear somebody that becomes a chameleon and switches into different voice categories."

Doss recounts the casting director at Covent Garden telling him something similar. He said, "It gets a bit confusing because we want to hire the best in the world, doing specific repertoire that is so specialized. But you kind of do everything."

Doss has had some luck modeling his repertoire choices after certain established singers, even if it has not always been a perfect match. "[Ettore] Bastianini started doing bass roles at the beginning of his career, and then he made an actual shift [to baritone], which I never really did because I was doing baritone repertoire from the very beginning," Doss says. He also sings some of the same roles that George London performed, but London also sang some higher baritone roles that Doss has not taken on (and London never performed *Rigoletto*).

An arts critic once said that Doss's voice reminded him of that of a young Cesare Siepi, but Doss and Siepi have only a few roles in common. That comparison did not disappoint Doss, however, considering he once sought Siepi's autograph after a performance. "I had him sign my *Don Giovanni* score," Doss says. "I still have that."

Vocal Transitions

The reality of the decision not to decide means that Doss spends a fair amount of time transitioning back and forth from bass to baritone and back again. The process of doing so can involve a great deal of conscious effort, as Doss intentionally analyzes each role to see what the music and the character require. If it calls for a darker sound, he moves that direction. If it requires a higher tessitura, he allows the voice to float into a higher place. "That's kind of been my strength, I guess," he says.

Even so, the transition takes time. "Going back and forth from a low, low bass role to a high baritone role, there's a necessary time to do some transitioning in order to make sure those things sound right." He notes how bass roles often require more stamina to carry the core of the sound all the way through long phrases. For baritone roles, however, he has to let go more, trusting "What comes out, comes out."

He recalls how this took place when he was learning the role of Rigoletto. "When I got to performance number 10,

11, 12, it started to feel like, 'Wow, this is getting simple! I'm understanding the whole world a lot better.'" When a role starts to lock into the voice in this way, Doss feels almost like a computer in that he can consistently perform the role without needing to focus on process or technique. "It sort of goes through my head, and I say, 'Okay, this is the way to do it,' and I get used to it and it sits there comfortably."

This is particularly useful when he has to make these vocal transitions without the luxury of time. He notes an upcoming run as Germont in *La traviata* with the Welsh National Opera. "I'll have to go back and remember where it came from the last time I did it, in Hyogo, Japan," he says. "That was the first time I had done it. So you know the second time around will be different."

He remembers reading about how the baritone who premiered the role of Rigoletto also performed Germont but did not have equal success in the latter role. "I could see why, having gone through it," Doss says. "It just sits in such a different way than Rigoletto sits. You wouldn't think it would be a problem, but I've sung through the aria enough times now to try to understand it."

Consistent Accomplishments

Contrary to the adjudicator's advice early in his career, choosing to not exclusively pursue either bass or baritone rep is part of what has led to Doss' staying power in the music industry. In fact, when he performed Rigoletto in



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Mark S. Doss

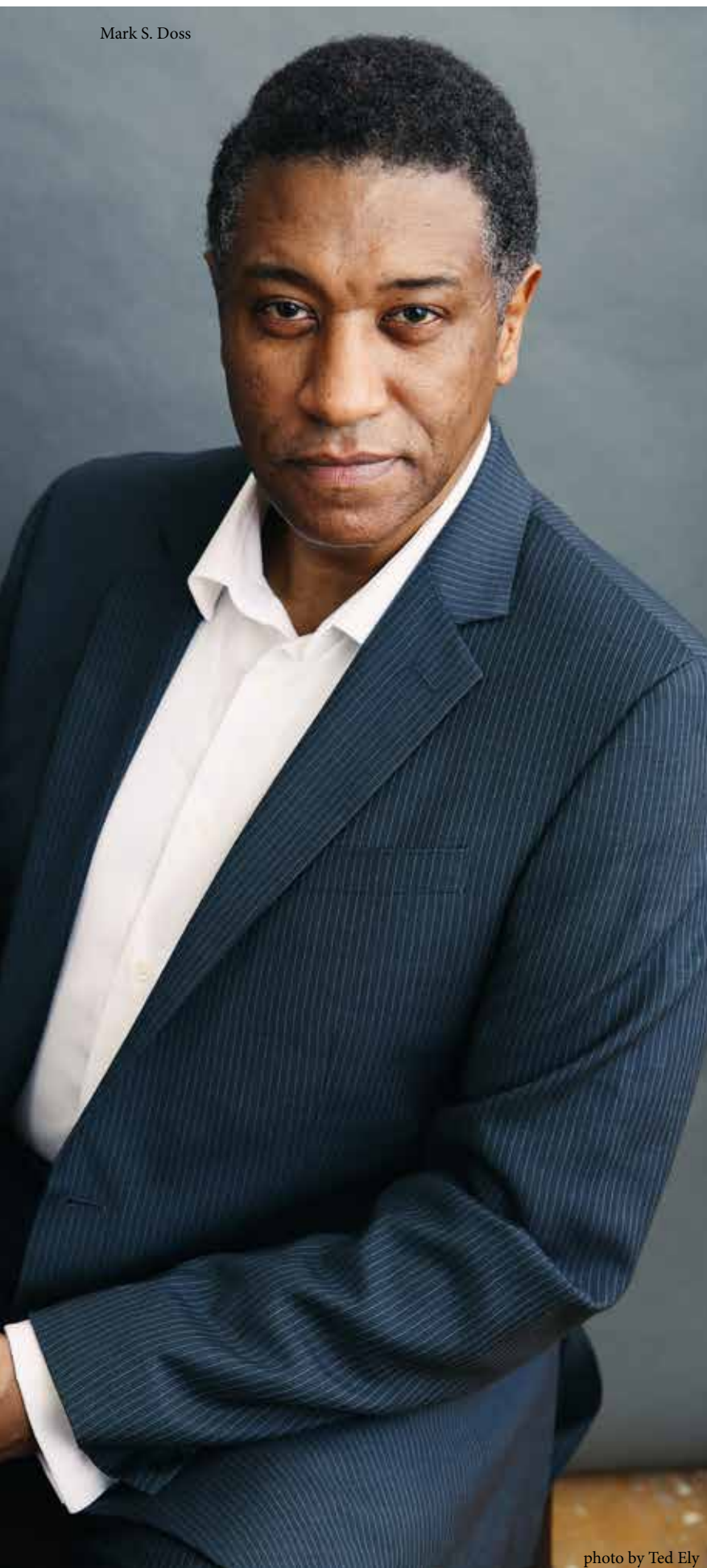


photo by Ted Ely

2019, it marked the 100th unique operatic role on his professional resume.

Among those 100, there have inevitably been some roles that have become signatures for him. One of those roles is Escamillo in *Carmen*, which he first sang in 1991 in student performances at the Chicago Lyric Opera with Antonio Pappano conducting. “That became the first run of the Escamillos that I’ve done now 123 times—the most of my career. La Scala and Verona and San Francisco and Chicago—that’s taken me a lot of places.”

Amonasro in *Aida* is another signature role, which he believes he has performed 50 or 60 times, most recently at the Teatro Regio in Turin, Italy. The same can be said of Jochanaan in *Salome*, which was the vehicle for his debut with the Teatre Principal de Palma in Mallorca, Spain (where he earned the company’s award for most impressive male singer of the season). He will return again to that role with the Houston Symphony in June of 2024.

Even so, Doss continues to branch out and challenge himself with new music. He completed role number 101 with performances as William Daley in *The Time of Our Singing*, which he describes, appropriately, as “bass baritone-ish.” “It could be called bass,” he says. “It’s a nice range. Complex sometimes, as contemporary music can be.” With so much standard rep under his belt, he appreciates the opportunity to dig into newer roles that do not have such an established track record of performances. “I enjoy learning new music,” he says, “so that was a cherry on top of the 100 that I’ve done before.”

He also appreciates the chance to sing in languages that are less frequently performed in the standard operatic literature. In particular, he has had limited opportunities to perform Czech repertoire in the original language. “There are a number of Czech roles, which is really good because it can be terrifying,” he says. Doss recalls how he prepared to perform in *Rusalka* at the San Diego Opera alongside Renée Fleming. He was in Basel, Switzerland, at the time, doing a run of performances as Escamillo, when he decided to go looking for help. “I was asking around, and it just so happened that the librarian was Czech. So I said, ‘Can I get together with you?’ and he said, ‘Certainly!’ His inflection was just really inspiring. I’m always taken by people who get really excited about the repertoire, the subject matter.”

Personal Premieres

Despite his nearly 40-year international performance career, including prestigious accolades like a Grammy Award for Best Opera Recording and the Entertainment Award from Planet Africa,

Doss is still achieving “firsts.” Besides adding his 100th and 101st operatic roles to his résumé, he made his New York Lincoln Center debut with the New York Philharmonic in April in *Here I Stand: Paul Robeson’s 125th Birthday*. Also, he will release a solo album on the Cedille Records label this July.

The trajectory of his career, however, has not necessarily been what he anticipated after a number of early accomplishments. When he was starting out, Doss won the Verdi International Opera Competition and the George London Award, and he was one of the winners of the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, all within the span of a few years. “That’s a pretty monumental start,” he says. “I think it fell off a little bit from the beginning.”

He notes that a teaching appointment at Michigan State University in 1996 helped bring him back on track by allowing him to work out certain elements of his own singing by delving more deeply into vocal pedagogy. “I learned how to sing a little bit better when I was teaching for the first time. I found that was where I needed to be in order to figure out things on top,” he says. “It’s sort of continued since then as far as really being good, I think, if I can modestly say that.”

He makes the analogy to the caterpillar who, when asked to analyze how he walks, starts tripping all over himself. “A lot of teachers are like that,” he says. “Some of the great singers—great performers—are asked to teach and they get

tied in knots. I’ve never been like that. I’ve always gotten much better with teaching.”

Playing the Long Game

Fast start or not, looking back, he can appreciate all he has accomplished thus far, especially when he considers the careers of some of the great singers he has admired at different points throughout his life. Lanza died tragically at age 38. Bastianini died of throat cancer at age 44. London experienced a voice disorder that forced him to retire from performing at age 46. Doss, however, has been working steadily from the time he was hired as a Santa Fe Opera apprentice in 1983, and he shows no signs of slowing down.

“I didn’t imagine I would be doing as well as I’m doing now,” he says. “When you’re sitting at this point, and you’re saying, ‘Okay, I’m still getting better’...well, I hope that’s what I will do until I can’t sing any more. That’s my goal.”

Brian Manternach, DM (he/him), is an associate professor at the University of Utah Department of Theatre and a research associate at the Utah Center for Vocology. He is an associate editor of the Journal of Singing, and his research, reviews, articles, and essays have appeared in numerous voice-related publications. brianmanternach.com / drbrianmanternach.blogspot.com / bmantern@gmail.com

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