

The Singer's Library: Conducting Opera

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

Joseph Rescigno shares views from a distinguished career behind the baton.

Maestro Joseph Rescigno embodies every element of the term “seasoned conductor.” His career includes work with more than 50 companies on four continents, performing operas ranging from established masterpieces to world premieres. His guest engagements with the likes of New York City Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, and Washington National Opera, among others, have occurred alongside longstanding appointments with the Florentine Opera Company of Milwaukee and La Musica Lirica in Italy.

These extensive experiences have led to many perspectives that are now chronicled in a recently published book, *Conducting Opera: Where Theater Meets Music* (University of North Texas Press). In the preface, Maestro Rescigno affirms, “My goal is to illuminate how we can realize what opera can uniquely achieve: a fusion of music and drama such that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” (p. vii).

In this interview, he describes the impetus for the book, explains how singers may benefit from a deeper understanding of the conductor’s role, and encourages optimism, even amid difficult times.

Arthur Fagan, professor of orchestral conducting at the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music, said of *Conducting Opera*, “This is the book I always wanted to write but Maestro Rescigno beat me to it.” Did you similarly always want to write this book, or did the impetus and motivation come about more recently?

The idea for this book came from two sources. First, in the early 2000s, I noticed that certain organizing principles I was taught both in school and by older conductors were either being ignored or underemphasized by the younger generation. In addition, my press agent, upon hearing me do an interview for NPR, suggested that I write a book. That said, I began in late 2007, but the book underwent two major revisions and really was not in the final form until early 2017.

The book includes your insights and suggestions on a long list of celebrated operas. However, you included only operas you have performed, and you conduct complete operas only in languages that you can at least read. How did this principle develop?

The first time I conducted a work in a language totally strange to me was in 1975. It was Szymanowski’s *Litany to*

the Virgin Mary Op 59. With the help of the Polish soprano soloist, I was able to translate the piece but I never totally felt a complete, visceral connection with the text. When I began to conduct operas in German, I went to NYU Deutsches Haus and took several courses in conversational German.

Ideally, an opera is a musical drama or comedy. The connection of the text and music is essential. It is *intended* by the composer. It affects the phrasing and approach. For this reason, when doing an opera, I must have at least a reading knowledge of the language.

The book emphasizes the “beloved works” that opera-goers are most likely to encounter. Even so, you state that although you would not want to see operas like *Madama Butterfly* and *Ariadne auf Naxos* “drop out of sight,” you would like to see more performances of pieces like *Il trovatore* and Massenet’s *Manon*. Why do you believe these operas are not given the same attention as others in the canon?

It is a combination of factors. An opera like *Trovatore* has a plot line that is less attuned to modern tastes than *Traviata* is, just as *Norma* is more distant from today’s audience than *Capuleti e Montecchi*—*Romeo and Juliet* still being a totally universal, and oft-told, story. Simultaneously,

works like *Manon* or *Les Contes d’Hoffmann* are more expensive to produce than a *Butterfly* or a *Barber of Seville*.

In addition, on the positive side, companies are doing far more contemporary works than they were 30 years ago, so pieces that are costly to mount from the standard repertory can get less attention than others that are more economical.



Brian Manternach

You suggest in the Preface that the book may be beneficial for conductors, singers, stage directors, and even the general music lover looking to get a behind-the-scenes look at opera. For singers in particular, you recommend they bring to the book an interest in understanding the kind of issues that drive conductors. What do you think singers may stand to gain from these detailed conductor’s perspectives? How might that benefit what they bring to their performances as singers?

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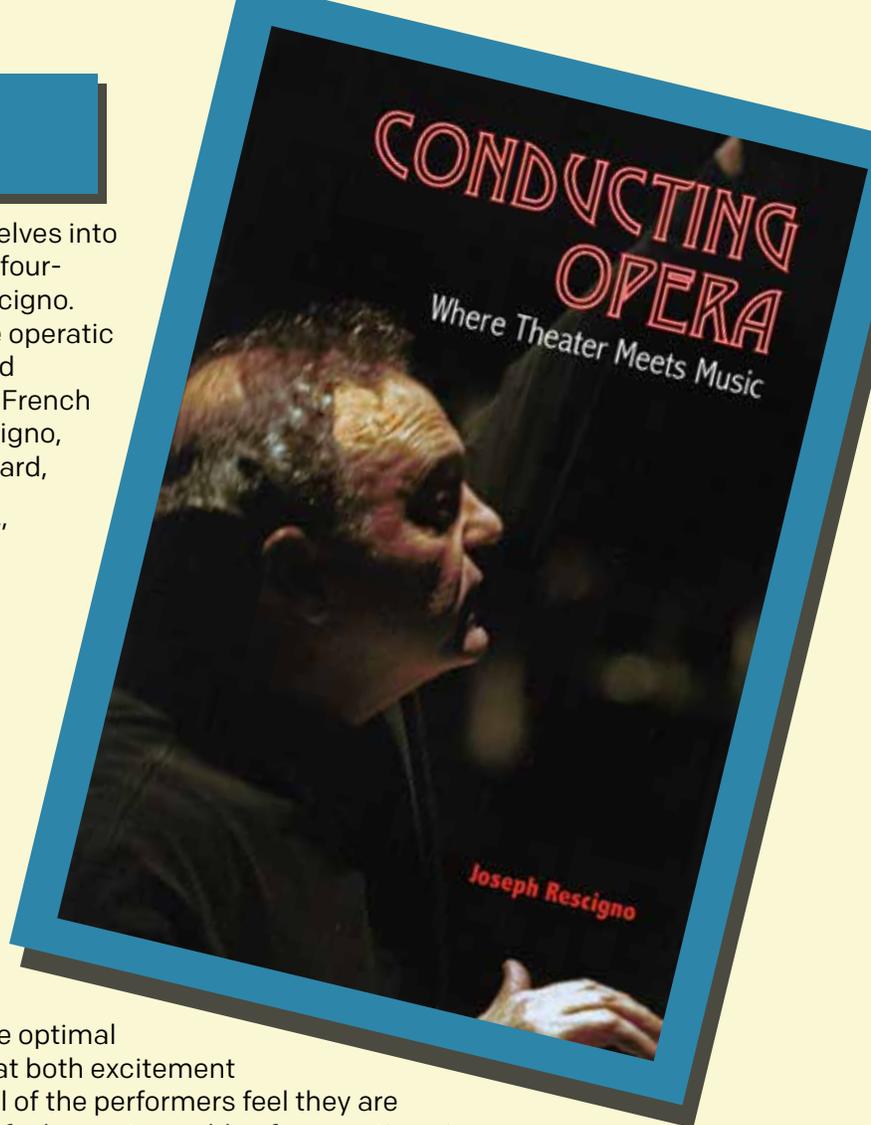
Review

Conducting Opera: Where Theater Meets Music delves into the works that have played most prominently in the four-decade career of conductor and author Joseph Rescigno. The book includes separate chapters devoted to the operatic output of Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, Puccini, and Richard Strauss, as well as chapters on bel canto opera and French romantic opera. Each section, as described by Rescigno, includes practical advice on "propelling a story forward, supporting singers, navigating through problematic passages, and remaining true to the style of a work."

Besides the specific detail provided on individual pieces, Rescigno also shares general perspectives related to his overall approach to conducting opera. For instance, when approaching dynamics, he identifies one or two dramatic climaxes of an entire opera, and then works diligently to ensure that no other moments of the opera exceed the volume of those designated high points. This is particularly effective in larger works that contain high amounts of orchestral sound throughout, which could otherwise desensitize an audience to dynamic subtleties.

With regard to tempo, he is not a strict adherent to a single "correct" beat. Rather, he seeks the range of tempos that will best allow for the optimal pace of a performance. Furthermore, he believes that both excitement and boredom in opera are due, in part, to how free all of the performers feel they are to do their best. By carefully attending to pacing, he feels most capable of supporting singers and allowing them to shine.

Despite the experience and authority from which the book is written, Rescigno insists that it is ultimately "one performer's take." As such, it is not intended to be a work of history or musicology. However, this does not diminish the tremendous value his perspectives offer to opera performers and enthusiasts alike. Singers in particular will be well served to study Rescigno's thoughts before stepping on stage in one of the masterworks he profiles. Considering the *Gesamtkunstwerk* that is opera, the more singers understand their roles within the greater overall picture, the better enabled each participant will be to deliver effective, collaborative performances.



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Just as a fine orchestral musician understands how and where his or her part fits into the whole of an orchestral work, so too should the singer understand how a specific role fits into the overall opera musically (in relation to the orchestra) and dramatically (in relation to the other singers). Also I hope to give a young singer guidance in how to sing in a personal style that is still stylistically and interpretively appropriate.

When I interviewed you for *Classical Singer* back in 2008, much of our conversation was about how to make a lasting career in opera. You said at the time that readers should feel optimistic about the future of opera. Fourteen years later, are you still optimistic?

“Prediction is very difficult, especially of the future” has been attributed to Niels Bohr and Casey Stengel. And how the world has changed since 2008!

One must try to remain optimistic about the future of opera because it is part of being optimistic about the future of humanity. Are we living in difficult times? Yes. However, there was almost never a time without great difficulties. Shakespeare wrote some of his greatest plays during the plague. Dante wrote *La divina comedia* in exile. Shostakovich wrote his great symphonies under the oppression of Stalin and horrors of World War II.

If everything were easy, nothing would be appreciated. Some things were more attainable in the past, whereas other things are possible that were only dreams before. My only change in advice to the gifted young singer is to try to get work in Europe, especially Germany. In the 1980s and 1990s, regional opera was expanding in the United States. It no longer is.

But optimism is and should be the province of the young.

Brian Manternach, DM, is an assistant 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.

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