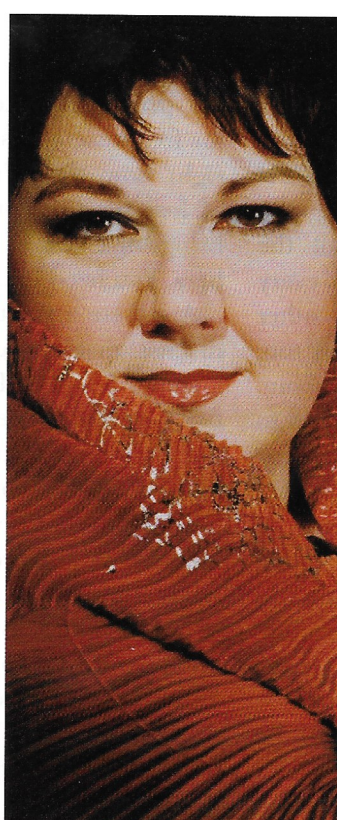




Amber Wagner



Simon O'Neill



Jane Eaglen



Richard Bernstein

Early Bird or Night Owl

Strategies to Make Your Performance Shine, No Matter the Time

BY GREG WAXBERG

Four singers and a registered dietician share tips for diet, exercise, and rest on the day of show to help you sing well whether your performance is morning, noon, or night.

A final dress rehearsal at 10:30 a.m. A matinee with the unusual start time of 11 a.m. or 3 p.m. Singing Wagner with an early curtain at 6 p.m. Singers are expected to perform at different times of the day, which can affect one's eating schedule or make it difficult to find time to vocalize properly. Depending on how your body functions, preparing physically and vocally to sing in the afternoon versus the evening might require strategy. Here a registered dietician and four singers discuss techniques for making your body behave exactly as you want it to when the moment demands it.

It probably comes as a relief that the human body functions almost the same throughout the day and evening. "The

difference might be your energy levels. Metabolism slows when the body is less active," says registered dietitian and author **Andrea Chernus**, who works with opera singers and is the Juilliard School's nutritionist. According to Chernus, singers need to be aware of meals when preparing for various curtain times.

"If a singer needs to be ready for a matinee, there is probably less time for meals, so it is important to eat two meals. Get up at your regular time and be able to have breakfast and lunch or two mini-meals so that you have at least half an hour to digest," she says. Chernus also recommends practicing in rehearsal what you plan to eat on performance days so that you know how your body will react

to the food. Concentrate on eating lean proteins and healthful carbohydrates—like oatmeal, whole grain breads, and vegetables—and stay hydrated. In case of an especially early curtain time, "you must plan to eat breakfast, not just something like a banana."

To prepare for singing in the evening, when you have more time to eat, Chernus advises having the main meal about two hours before the performance, with a snack before and afterward, or two mini-meals through late afternoon. "Many people get up late and they stay up later, so they are hungry after the performance. Be careful not to overeat, like having a fourth meal. A small sandwich or bowl of soup should be enough," she says.

When asked if there are foods that singers should avoid on performance days, Chernus names fried and spicy foods as well as creamy and heavy sauces—all of which digest slowly and can make your stomach feel heavy. Also stay away from anything you are not used to eating. On the subject of certain drinks, she is not a big fan of protein shakes as meal replacements, unless you are nervous or not very hungry, or of Vitamin Water (sweetened, flavored water with some vitamins added, and usually about 125 calories per bottle), which she describes as “no better than soda.” There is a diet version, Vitamin Water Zero (no calories and naturally sweetened, with added vitamins), but Chernus still believes there are no significant advantages to drinking it.

One singer who does drink Vitamin Water Zero is soprano **Jane Eaglen**, because it hydrates her body and makes her mouth feel more lubricated (she finds that water makes her mouth feel dry).

Due to her English roots, she also drinks a lot of tea, especially with a protein-filled breakfast when she is preparing for a matinee. “I get up earlier than usual because I need to be awake and start moving so I can get my blood flowing,” she says. Eaglen has a shorter, more intense, vocal warm-up prior to a matinee—whereas for an evening performance, she gradually warms up during the day.

Her meal routine is similar for an evening performance: normal breakfast, possibly fruit in the early afternoon, then protein and light carbohydrates around 5 p.m. “Little and often is better than a huge meal because it keeps your blood sugar and general energy on a more even level. I think a big meal would make me tired. I do tend to have a half sandwich and a banana in the interval before the last act of *Götterdämmerung* or *Tristan und Isolde*. Otherwise, you are singing the Immolation Scene or Liebestod eight hours after you ate anything,” Eaglen says.

Bass **Richard Bernstein** is also familiar with long hours; in April 2011, he sang two roles at the Metropolitan Opera in one day—an Apprentice in *Wozzeck* (Saturday matinee) and Angelotti in *Tosca* (Saturday evening). That doubleheader did not faze him because neither part was vocally difficult, but he has been called for rehearsals on days of opening nights. When that happens, he marks, drinks a lot of water, refrains from talking, and goes home or rests in his dressing room. Bernstein prepares similarly for matinees and evenings, except that he tricks his body into thinking it is later in the day. This technique eased his first foray into Wagner, as Daland in *Der fliegende Holländer* for The Princeton Festival this past June.

“For evening performances, I stay in bed as long as possible,” he says. The night before the opening, Bernstein went to bed at 12:30 a.m., woke up at 10 a.m., and stayed in bed until noon because

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Bernstein as Daland in The Princeton Festival's production of *Der fliegende Holländer*, 2013

photo by David Newton Dunn



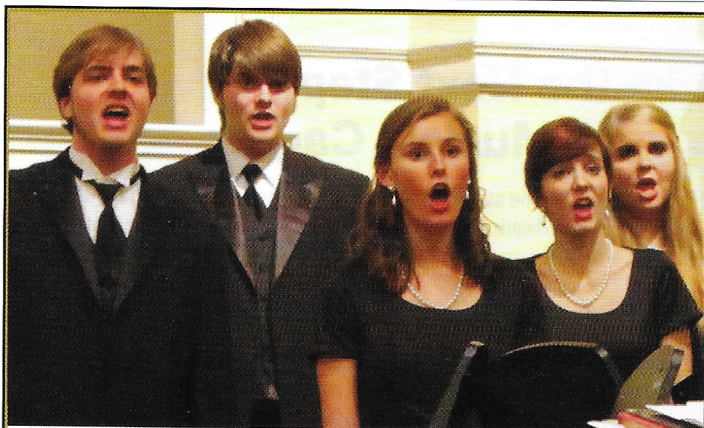
"I wanted my body to be really, really relaxed." He studied the score in bed, ate, and went outside to cut tree limbs (physical activity in lieu of his normal routine of going to the gym). At 4 p.m., he drove from his home in Mahwah, N.J.,

to Princeton (150 miles round-trip every day for this production, so he could stay at home with his wife and three children), and ate a light dinner of shrimp salad at 5 p.m. "I never sing on a full stomach," he explains, "because I don't know what

could happen as a result of nerves. I also never drink coffee before an evening performance because I get my energy by exercising and I wouldn't be able to sleep after the show."

Then came his standard pre-performance preparation. "No matter where I am or what opera I'm singing in, and even if I took a shower at home an hour earlier, I always take a shower in my dressing room to 'shower' into the role," he says. The shower gives him a chance to vocalize, comforts him, and offers an outlet for meditation. For the Sunday matinee at 3 p.m., Bernstein drank coffee to get extra caffeine in his system, did more yard work, and listened to a tape of his role during the commute. "My best study time is in the car, so it's a good way to focus on driving and focus on the music. But I'm not warming up, because I save that for the shower."

Bernstein also addresses the challenges of 10:30 a.m. dress rehearsals and 11 a.m.



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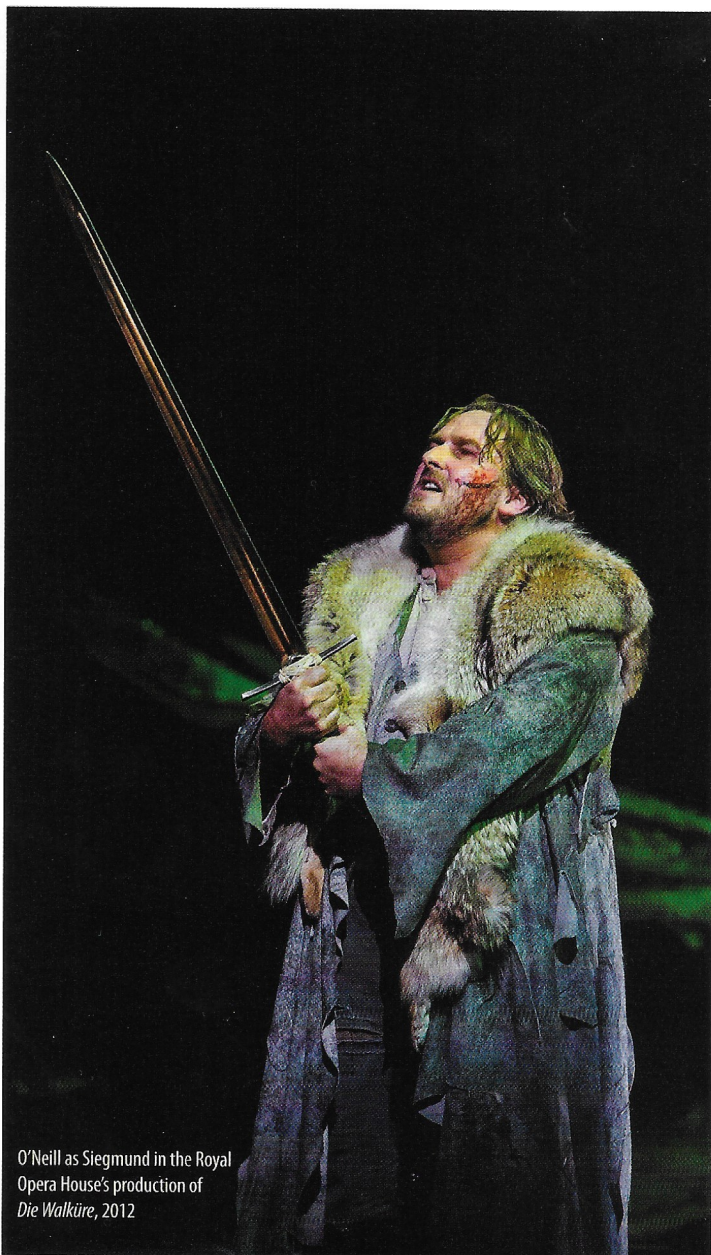


photo by Clive Barda

O'Neill as Siegmund in the Royal Opera House's production of *Die Walküre*, 2012

matinees at the Met. “If I can, I exhaust myself physically the day before so I can go to sleep before midnight and be up by 7 [a.m.] to miss rush hour and start vocalizing,” he says. A conscientious student of his art, Bernstein takes to heart the advice of his late predecessors: he emulates Luciano Pavarotti, who never changed his technique and who kept his promise to Leonie Rysanek, who made him promise not to sing Wagner until he was in his 40s (Bernstein is 46).

A number of years ago, soprano **Amber Wagner** learned from a trainer the importance of protein, as well as what food to take to the theater in case she needs more protein or a burst of sugar. As a result, she eats tons of protein, especially prior to a matinee, when her meal might consist of steak or chicken with eggs, potatoes, and perhaps pasta. She avoids coffee. “When coupled with adrenaline, coffee gives me jitters earlier in the day,” she says. “It is fine for an evening performance because my body has time to process it.” Her other no-no leading up to a matinee is any kind of sleeping aid “out of fear of sleeping through my alarm.”

Wagner, a new mother, gave birth this past June and discovered ginger tea during her pregnancy. “It is a natural anti-inflammatory to soothe my vocal chords,” she explains, “and mimics what Ibuprofen does for headaches.” She also found that peppermint tea calms the vocal chords, and both teas comforted her in the midst of a series of Verdi Requiems while she was pregnant—she drank at least two cups of one of those teas after every performance.

To prepare for evening performances, Wagner sleeps most of the day and eats by 4 p.m. so that she is not walking on stage with a full meal still in her stomach. “Wagner is a totally different story!” she says. “I eat between every act, [something] like a sandwich.” Similarly, for performances that require earlier curtains, she has food and water between each act.

As far as warming up her body is concerned, Wagner takes a brisk walk or goes to the gym before any performance, and her vocal preparation is more extensive for a matinee “when you have to hit the ground running.” She estimates that she spends an extra 20 to 30 minutes coaxing her voice to wake up, whereas she has several hours to wake up her body for an evening performance.

And talk about brutal scheduling: when Wagner sang Senta in *Der fliegende Holländer* for the Savonlinna Opera Festival in Finland in July 2012, the final orchestra dress rehearsal began at 9:30 a.m., so she arrived by 8 that morning. “I was going to mark, but didn’t want to waste the precious time I had with the orchestra. I just went back to sleep afterward!”

Speaking of sleep, tenor **Simon O’Neill** often lets his body clock dictate how much rest he gets on performance days, especially if he has jet lag from international travel. Breakfast on matinee days, particularly Wagner matinee days, is a bagel or toast with eggs, followed by a lighter lunch (salad or sandwich) for an energy boost . . . but nothing within an hour of curtain time.

“Before either a matinee or an evening, I warm up my voice and body. It is far more fun to perform a role like Siegmund or Parsifal as physically as possible, so my body must be ready for such stress,” he says. “I prepare my body in the same manner for both times, although one must be careful for an evening performance of Wagner or Verdi not to expend too much energy during the day.” O’Neill learned a great deal about these topics from Plácido Domingo and Donald McIntyre and is grateful to both of them for helping build his career.

So, the experts seem to agree on the essentials: eat lots of protein, space out meals as much as possible, try not to sing on a full stomach, be certain of your body’s comfort level with your cuisine, remain hydrated, give yourself adequate time to warm up your voice . . . and make time for sleep!

Greg Waxberg is a writer and magazine editor for The Pingry School and an award-winning freelance writer. He can be contacted at GregOpera@aol.com. CS