



photo by John Martin

Jim Meyer as friend of Geronte di Ravaio in San Francisco Opera's production of *Manon Lescaut*, 2006

It is a big, organic mass of beauty. Utterly thrilling. It's really an incomparable feeling." Lyric bass Jim Meyer is describing the feeling of contributing to the blended sound of an opera chorus—in his case, the San Francisco Opera Chorus.

A member of the company for over four decades, Meyer has worn two major administrative and musical hats with San Francisco Opera: chorus and dance manager and also chorus member. Upon his retirement from the chorus after 43 years in December 2016, his artistic integrity, collegiality, and dedication earned him the San Francisco Opera Medal, the company's highest honor for outstanding artistic achievement over an extended period.

"Jim Meyer, in his nearly 45-year service, marks one of the most lasting, treasured relationships that we have recognized through the Opera Medal," says San Francisco Opera General Director Matthew Shilvock.

Meyer describes the honor as "thrilling beyond imagination." Though it sounds cliché, it is true that decades ago he never would have imagined spending so many years with San Francisco Opera—not when he was in New York pursuing a career as an architect. Yet, two simultaneous factors contributed to his cross-country change. He was attending the Pratt Institute during the Vietnam War era when the school was temporarily shut down, beginning in January 1970, because of the United States' invasion of Cambodia; the closure was intended to avoid a repeat of anti-war riots from a few years earlier. Because of the shutdown, Meyer's admission to the institute's architecture school was delayed, leaving him with "too much time on my hands," but he used that extra time to re-evaluate what he wanted to do.

This is because, at the same time, Meyer was continuing his family's legacy of musicianship. His parents were amateur musicians—mother, a semiprofessional pianist and organist; father, a tenor—and he "always enjoyed music and singing." Indeed, he was singing as a soloist at St. Luke's Lutheran Church in New York; he had joined the choir when his family moved from Pennsylvania to New York in 1966 (in his mid-teens) and started to solo occasionally about three years later. The church's soprano soloist was studying privately with

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BY GREG WAXBERG

Jim Meyer talks about his unique and fulfilling manager as well as a member of the chorus.

Eleanor Steber, thought Meyer had a good voice and could make a career from singing, and suggested that he sing for Steber.

"I auditioned and immediately scheduled my first lesson," he recalls. "I worked with her once a week from mid-1970 until September 1972 when I moved to San Francisco. I learned all the fundamentals of classical singing, just as she had been taught and developed over her long career."

Why did Meyer choose San Francisco? "I needed a change of pace from New York and was afraid of getting swallowed up by the city," he says. "San Francisco was a sophisticated city—enough to have a big opera company. I thought it would be a good place to become a singer." (Meyer continued his music studies at San Francisco State University, but did not graduate because earning a living became his priority.) In 1974, during his first season with the San Francisco Symphony Chorus, he was invited to audition for an open baritone spot in the San Francisco Opera Chorus and was accepted, switching to bass in his third year.

Fast-forward 14 years, when San Francisco Opera Chorus Director Ian Robertson asked Meyer to create the position of chorus manager, the first position of its type in the United States. "The position is everywhere in Europe," Meyer explains. "The chorus director auditions and selects the singers, while the chorus manager takes office work off the shoulders



of the chorus director—budgeting, scheduling, payroll, being a liaison with production departments. Fortunately, I have a knack for bookkeeping because my father taught me to be responsible with money and not to be afraid of numbers."

When asked if he reports to the chorus director, Meyer says he "works with various departments. Technically, my supervisor is the director of operations. Just as the orchestra manager deals with *that* entire world, I deal with the entire world of the chorus and with the dancers. I don't report to the chorus director, but pretty much consider him my boss."

Unlike the orchestra manager, however, Meyer's job is not mandated by a union. "My position is designed to be cooperative with unions to make certain that the company is following

contracts," Meyer says. "I'm prevented from going to union meetings. When I became chorus manager, I was on the national board of AGMA and had to step down. I knew the local contract very well, which I think was a major selling point in my getting the position."

Essentially, the position began to help San Francisco Opera operate more efficiently, and the job evolved as Meyer responded to requests for various tasks. While his role expanded two years later to include dance, and he became chorus and dance manager, the job itself has not changed substantially based on who was general director, music director, or chorus director.

"A new chorus director or music director might ask to hear people sing, so I'd have to schedule that," he says.

RAL CALLING

g work for almost 45 years with San Francisco Opera as both chorus and dance



Meyer receives the San Francisco Opera Medal after the December 6, 2016 performance of Verdi's *Aida*. Backstage with Raymond Aceto (Ramfis), Matthew Shilvock (General Director), Meyer, Leah Crocetto (*Aida*), George Gagnidze (*Amonasro*), Ian Robertson (Chorus Director), and Brian Jagde (*Radames*).

"The biggest change has been the adding of more layers to the job since I started. Because computers have made the work easier and more efficient, there is, of course, the ability to increase detail in budgeting and forecasting—for example, doing more year-to-year comparisons, looking back and budgeting forward."

As might be expected, Meyer's life has not been without pressures inherent in balancing the commitments of administrative work and singing in the chorus. "Time was the big challenge, and finding time to prepare myself vocally to be a chorister each day. I'd not had a 'day job' before that, often running right up against chorus work. It took time to learn how to do that."

Ironically, Meyer had been covering Tempo (Time) in a production of Monteverdi's *The Return of Ulysses* and realized "it was not a comfortable fit, trying to be manager—fielding questions or even a crisis—right up to performance time and having the responsibility of a solo role or cover role."

And therein lies the big difference from Meyer's time in New York—he may have briefly been a church soloist in the Big Apple and entertained notions of making a career from it, but he ultimately realized that being a professional soloist was not for him. True, he sang a few solo roles with San Francisco Opera: M. Javelinot in *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, a sailor in *Billy Budd*, and a gondolier in *La gioconda*, for example. But they were exploratory, and he conducted an experiment that sold him on his decision to be a full-time chorister, which he mentions when talking about the impact of his administrative role on his singing.

"Becoming chorus manager made the time I have onstage much more valuable to me. It made me appreciate the fact that I have this other talent that is worth a lot to me. I see it and hear it when other people in administration talk with delight about seeing me onstage. Maybe they

wanted a career, but went into administration. I made that choice while I was singing in the chorus. I took a leave of absence from San Francisco Opera for one year, in 1983, just to make sure that I didn't have a strong enough bug in me, somewhere, to be a soloist—and I didn't. I did solo work, then more solo work with the company. The chorus was fine and a wonderful fit. I didn't want to audition anymore."

In fact, the 1982–83 production of "Dialogues" had helped play a role in that decision. Singing the doctor, M. Javelinot, Meyer had one line, in English, and was onstage for about 20 minutes with Régine Crespin. "It was great fun, but one-liners are very hard to do because you don't have a chance to redo them or for the voice to warm up any further. It made clear to me that singing in the chorus was *far* more preferable." All these years later, following his retirement from the chorus, he confirms that "I had the privilege of singing with one of the great opera choruses in the country, if not the world. It really felt *great* and was extremely satisfying. I don't have the temperament for being a soloist. I have the mindset of being a group participant."

As part of that group, he learned to sing with his section. In addition, "Ms. Steber said to always keep a connection with Mozart. She was one of the most important Mozart singers of her time and she knew what she was talking about. It seemed to make sense to me—don't stray too far from what is needed to sing Mozart well and you'll suffer no harm to your voice. She must have been right, I'm happy to say after 43 years in the full-time chorus." He likes the fact that Robertson requests all chorus auditionees to sing a Mozart aria.

Meyer was accustomed to 26 hours of rehearsal Tuesday–Saturday during music-only weeks (no performances) and 30 hours of rehearsal Tuesday–Sunday during performance weeks (same base salary), and the entire chorus usually

rehearses together, with occasional men/women sessions for a new opera. Intriguingly, some of these rehearsals—and other behind-the-scenes aspects of the San Francisco Opera Chorus' work—are featured in the 1991 Academy Award-winning, feature-length documentary *In the Shadow of the Stars* by Allie Light and Irving Saraf.

Meyer explains that the film was Light's brainchild, stemming from when her late first husband had sung in the San Francisco Opera Chorus in the 1940s and 1950s. "He sometimes snuck a black-and-white movie camera onstage to make films in rehearsal. Her idea was to make a film about what it's like being in the shadow of the stars." As chorus manager, Meyer helped coordinate the filming and artist releases for each chorus member, allowing the use of their images and interviews.

Advocating for the importance of a chorus, one interviewee describes the ensemble as "smaller stars that fill out the heavens," while another says that he is "just as important as the person who lowers the curtain or operates the spotlight or [does] any other important job that doesn't involve standing in the middle of the stage and singing an aria." A third singer says that she joined the chorus to "fulfill a need to sing and to be in theater." Meyer agrees with these sentiments. He did not want to be interviewed, but does appear on screen in some of the choral scenes. The film includes excerpts from *Macbeth*, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, *Il trovatore*, *The Rake's Progress*, *Der fliegende Holländer*, and others.

For those who are curious, *The Rake's Progress* is one of Meyer's favorite operas as a chorus member ("the perfect opera with its combination of

acting and singing"), as are *Peter Grimes* (often requested by the chorus to be programmed), Messiaen's *Saint Francis of Assisi* ("every company should do it"), *Les troyens* ("a big sing—there's nothing like it"), and *Parsifal*.

He doesn't hesitate when explaining why being a chorister for 43 years was so rewarding: "singing great music, witnessing great solo singers do so well what they do (a great privilege of the job is being around big-name singers), and earning a good living doing something I truly enjoy."

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