

# Behind the Scenes

## How Opera Companies Rehearse and What You Should Expect

BY GREG WAXBERG

*Stage directors and opera company administrators discuss the rehearsal process.*

The weeks leading up to an opera's opening night are filled with activity, but that activity varies depending on whether it is a repertory production, new production, or world premiere. In each case, the opera company allots a certain number of weeks for the production to come together in rehearsal rooms and on stage, so singers should know what to expect when they arrive at the theater.

### Repertory Revival (average time: 3-4 weeks)

Even a frequently produced opera requires thorough rehearsal because a company's revival likely has a different cast and conductor than the previous performance. "There is always a new combination of who is singing which roles together," says stage director Paula Suozzi. "People's bodies change, so stage actions might need to change. We work in a live medium, so it is important to keep the operas fresh."

Last November, Suozzi rehearsed the Metropolitan Opera's *Die Meistersinger* with James Morris and Johan Botha. Both artists had sung their roles together at the Met in previous years (2001, 2003, and 2007), but rehearsals still were not straightforward. "Jim was utilizing the DVD from the 2001 production that



photo by Alan Alabastro

he did with Ben Heppner to remind himself of the staging," explains Suozzi. "We had changed things in 2003, and it further evolved again in 2007, which is the staging that Johan had in his memory. There are times when singers want to keep things the same, but we also have to give singers the space to change."

Directors do not expect singers to watch DVDs of productions (if you want to, go right ahead), but there is consensus in the industry that every singer must completely prepare his or her role prior to rehearsals. "It's not just a matter of having the text and music memorized," says stage director Matthew Ozawa. "It is *really* important to understand what you're saying,

Think about your character and the character's journey, motivations, and tactics. Younger singers tend to wait for a director to give them all of that, but it's most beneficial when a singer already has ideas. Then, be willing to work toward the director's vision."

In general, the opera company dictates the total number of hours, and the director determines what is rehearsed on a given day, depending on the singers' availability. On the first day, there might be a presentation with pictures of the sets and costumes, a discussion of the original concept, a sing-through of the music with piano accompaniment, and initial staging so singers understand their entrances and exits.

photo by Hubert Schriebl







photo by Bill Mohn

Opposite page: Singers John Tessier (left) as Tamino, Philip Cutlip as Papageno, and Anya Matanovic (back left) and Marcy Stonikas as the Three Ladies work with props at a Seattle Opera staging rehearsal for *Die Zauberflöte*.

Top: Opera Theatre of Western's 2015 production of Nolan Gasser's *The Secret Garden*

Bottom: Two years before its 2010 world premiere, singers (L to R) Nathan Gunn (Paul), William Burden (Dodge), and Kate Lindsey (Amelia) participate in a workshop of Daron Aric Hagen's *Amelia*, a new work commissioned by Seattle Opera.

“The music rehearsal on the first day can be a little nerve wracking, because everyone has just arrived, but it puts us in the right place to find out who needs work on what,” says Aren Der Hacopian, Seattle Opera’s director of artistic administration. “When staging begins, coaching sessions progress at the same time, as needed. There are costume and wig fittings, and we get into the meat of rehearsing.” Singers are called only for the rehearsals when their characters appear, but they are needed for costume fittings and musical run-throughs and they are welcome to attend other rehearsals. Singers who are involved in ensembles such as duets, trios, or quartets can usually have individual rehearsal time as needed.

Then there is the question of staging and singing rehearsals—together or separate? It depends on circumstances. For example, Suozzi relates that there had to be separate musical rehearsals with Met Music Director James Levine for *Die Meistersinger* because his schedule did not allow him to attend many of the staging rehearsals. “At the staging

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rehearsals, we had an assistant conductor who knows the maestro’s tempo,” she says. “For a revival, the conductor is often not there for staging rehearsals, so there’s separate music time.”

Minnesota Opera Music Director Michael Christie combines them for an integrated process. “I forego the traditional days of music-only rehearsals before staging rehearsals begin, because the pace of the music, the length of pauses, and dramatic emphasis—among many topics that have musical and staging implications—are going to have to be decided together anyway,” he says. “At most opera companies, the rehearsal process starts with music-only sessions when the conductor sets a tempo, only to find later that it doesn’t amplify decisions you’ll make together with the director or it doesn’t work for the singers once they’re moving in the space. If we really need to pause to work a particular musical passage, we do—or allow the singer to get a coaching.”

Ozawa and Der Hacopian both emphasize the importance of respecting your colleagues and having a good attitude during rehearsals. “Part of the process requires being patient and being ready,” Ozawa says. “A good example is cover singers. Most of the process is about watching other singers, but many younger singers who are covers don’t always know that the role is high stakes. Being on the phone or chatting with people during rehearsals ends up being problematic.” Der Hacopian puts it succinctly: “No attitudes. There is *always* another singer [who can perform your role].”

### **New Production (average time: 4-5 weeks)**

A new production is more of a challenge for the opera company than for the singers, so the added rehearsal time is mainly for stage preparation. “At

some companies, tech rehearsals happen over the summer, while others hold tech rehearsals prior to staging rehearsals,” Suozzi says. “Either way, now you have a new set on stage *with* the singers, and lighting cues that were written during the tech rehearsals will probably change. The cast gets more time on stage with the full set to figure out entrances, entrance cues, and other things you can’t foresee ahead of time.”

She also points out that props, and ideas for props, are added as rehearsals move forward. “In rehearsing a scene, a singer or the director might say, ‘Maybe my character should be writing a letter here,’ which would then add paper, pen, and some type of thing on which to write. This process of discovering the staging and adding ‘bits’ and props takes longer. Every single movement and choice made onstage creates props that need to be found, bought, or built, and then refined so they do what the singer needs them to do.”

Since a new production is meant to give a new perspective on an opera, singers can look forward to lots of decisions being made fresh. “With a revival, the set is constructed in a certain way or the time required for costume changes is known, so there are only so many variations within the confines of the production’s original decision making,” Christie says. “With a new production, you are really starting on the ground floor with set pieces, whether a role that isn’t singing is still present onstage, and so on. Musically, structural decisions like cuts have been incorporated into a revival and are often tricky to unwind, so one has the opportunity to evaluate the benefits of what the audience hears in a new production.”

### **World Premiere (average time: 6-8 weeks)**

With music being finalized, characters being developed, and other ongoing

changes, rehearsing for a world premiere is labor—and time—intensive. If the opera is based on original source material, such as *The Manchurian Candidate* at Minnesota Opera this past March or *Bel Canto* coming to Lyric Opera of Chicago in 2015–16, singers are encouraged to become familiar with the source. “Singers can read the novel, but we’re presenting what’s in the score, not what’s in the novel,” says Andreas Melinat, Lyric’s director of artistic administration. “Most artists tend to be curious, and we encourage young artists to do research on their own.”

What other advance work is possible for a world premiere? An opera company establishes a schedule for the composer to finish the music, but many people consider a world premiere risky because of a composer’s working style and possible delays—so a singer’s preparation depends on how quickly the composer and librettist provide the cast with the complete music and text. “Singers should get the music five to six months in advance. I prefer a year, but I don’t think any work is ready a year in advance. There are drafts,” Der Hacopian says.

Minnesota Opera has workshops. The composer, librettist, and director come together with singers and piano accompaniment for two separate multiday workshops to work on one act at a time, followed by a third workshop six months before the premiere that often brings the actual cast together with the orchestra. Christie describes it as “a unique opportunity for the creative team to evaluate their work with live performers and get feedback from the performers and our staff. It is a galvanizing process for our entire company and allows the creative team to lock in work they’ve done or make changes as necessary.”

Workshops also proved incredibly helpful to the cast and crew of Opera



Theatre of Weston (OTW) before they presented the East Coast Premiere of Nolan Gasser's *The Secret Garden* in January. San Francisco Opera gave the World Premiere in 2013. According to OTW's Co-Producer/Artistic Director Lise Messier, feedback after the premiere was that the opera's principal musical theme warranted further development, so Gasser expanded a couple of arias and other sections.

OTW created events so the singers who were not in Weston, Vermont, could come together—a June 2014 fundraiser, when four singers performed the Act 2 finale of the original version, and a workshop weekend in August for the cast to rehearse with the composer and videographer and give a public concert with arias, ensembles, and the revised Act 2 finale. The next time the singers came together was in December—rehearsals started two days after Christmas and

opening night was January 4. "Our music director isn't available until late December, so we don't have the luxury of having our singers for two or three weeks," Messier says.

Challenging, indeed, and an intense rehearsal period, but the singers made it happen. "They faced the challenge of prewritten changes in tempo. It was a technical challenge for them to get comfortable with those tempo changes. I blocked the staging within three days, but I didn't pressure the singers. I had to make sure they were comfortable singing before I started to block," says OTW Stage Director Diana Stugger. "They showed that you have to trust one another, work as a team, encourage each other, and not have any temperaments."

Generally, an opera is further refined with give-and-take during rehearsals, since cuts are possible and the cast and composer figure out any issues with

the music, such as how much music is required for a scene change. "There's more room for interpretation, too, because you're creating a character for the first time. The director values singers' opinions," Ozawa says. Melinat has seen composers work with singers if something seems awkwardly written, observing, "That's a perk to make up for some of the challenges."

No question—conductors and stage directors and, no doubt, singers thrive on rehearsals because of the fun and hard work involved in creating a fresh take on an opera every time the curtain goes up.

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