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LESSONS OF A LIFETIME: Sherrill Milnes

The year 2015 marks two remarkable milestones for the legendary Sherrill Milnes. This month the baritone celebrates his 80th birthday, and in December it will be 50 years since he made his Metropolitan Opera debut. Since then, he has sung nearly all of the major baritone roles on stages the world over. Always committed to teaching and education, he continues to draw on his vast experience to fill a void for the next generation of singers through his VOICEexperience Foundation. Read about Milnes' life and career, what he considers the "golden age," and his newest endeavor: the Savannah VOICE Festival.

by Greg Waxberg

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Lessons of a Lifetime: Sherrill Milnes

BY GREG WAXBERG

The year 2015 marks two remarkable milestones for the legendary Sherrill Milnes. This month the baritone celebrates his 80th birthday, and in December it will be 50 years since he made his Metropolitan Opera debut. Since then, he has sung nearly all of the major baritone roles on stages the world over. Always committed to teaching and education, he continues to draw on his vast experience to fill a void for the next generation of singers through his VOICEexperience Foundation. Read about Milnes' life and career, what he considers the "golden age," and his newest endeavor: the Savannah VOICE Festival.

By his own pronouncement, Sherrill Milnes, who turns 80 this month, has always worn a teaching hat. Most of us think of him as the baritone who thrilled audiences internationally during 42 years of singing professionally. What you may not know is that he always found time to work with singers by teaching over 500 masterclasses and was guest faculty at Yale University for 14 years. From 2000 to 2007, he was a full-time music professor at Northwestern University, where he did his post-graduate work. And since 2000, Milnes has been training singers through the VOICEexperience Foundation, a summer program that he founded with his wife—soprano, producer, and stage director Maria Zouves.

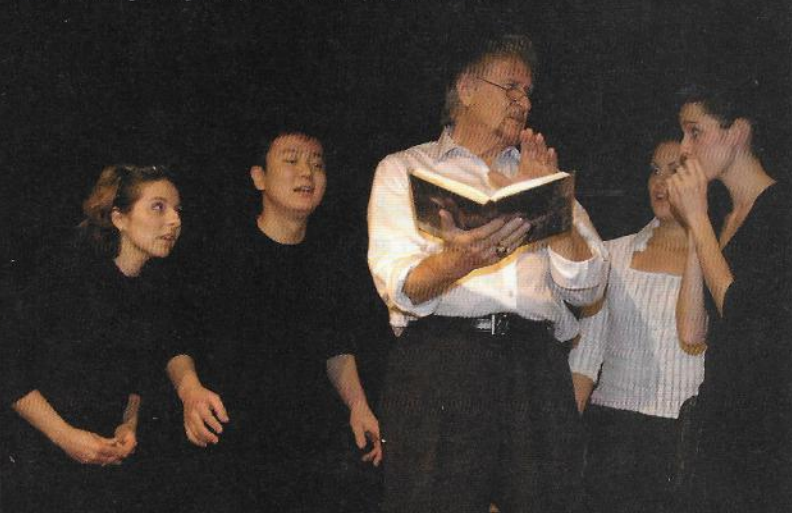
He actually wonders if his genes have "teaching DNA," because his mother was a piano teacher and church choir director. She was a major influence on his musical upbringing, along with many fine teachers in the Chicago suburb of Downers Grove, Illinois, where he grew up on his family's small dairy farm. Milnes received music education degrees (both a bachelor's and a master's of music education) from Drake University, making him an advocate of music schools.

Generations ago, he observes, singers were not taught much about acting and were encouraged to rely on the prompter. "If they had a voice, they were told not to go to music school," Milnes says. "But those who did were simply *smarter*. They knew things that other singers didn't know. I loved it. So throughout my career, this background put my mind in a

different place from many singers who have performance degrees. I was trained to teach."

Thanks to an instrumental background (violin, viola, string bass, clarinet, piano, and tuba) that gave him sight-reading skills, Milnes sang in choirs and developed a knack for ensemble, which would later endear him to conductors. Graduate voice studies at Northwestern led to an audition with the Boris Goldovsky Opera Theater, and Milnes' voice was destined to take him on a decades-long journey. He sang at New York City Opera, the Metropolitan Opera, Covent

Milnes teaching during his Opera as Drama program in NYC.



Milnes working with Portuguese baritone Tiago Matos in a masterclass at the 2014 Savannah VOICE Festival.



photo by G. Konstantinidis

Garden, La Scala, the Vienna State Opera, and other major opera houses around the world as a “Verdi baritone”—and appeared in other notable Italian, French, and German roles as well.

A Stellar Career Motivates Him to Give Back

With gratitude for their careers, Milnes and Zouves wanted to perform a service for young singers by offering training and career development during the uncertain time that follows college graduation. “We wanted to do something in an organized manner, not just wherever I happened to be in the country,” Milnes says. “Post-college in the U.S. is a big gray area for singers—what do they do? In the U.K., for example, some singers come out of the university setting and go right into an opera company. That’s basically *unheard*

of in the United States. In Germany, almost every town has an opera house. We have small opera companies in the U.S., but they do two or three operas each season. German-speaking houses do seven performances a week with their own orchestras, choruses, and Fest singers. We don’t have that. We have university programs and certificate programs. These are good, because singers come out of those programs with performance degrees and experience. But, logically, singers are looking for the next best [opportunities] down the road. What do you do after all that to begin that professional life?”

Sing in a chorus? But, Milnes points out, a chorus “doesn’t really juice you up for leading roles, or even for important secondary roles. Apprentice programs are the most logical next direction, but

the competition for these positions is fierce and they don’t make a living for you.” Through VOICE Experience in Florida, New York, Illinois, and Georgia, he (as artistic director), Zouves (as executive director), and other faculty from the opera world give singers personal attention to “move them to a higher level of vocal beauty, interpretation, body energy, and pizzazz. The only way to find your gifts is through hard work. We try to give inspiring, but realistic, feedback.”

VOICE Experience began its life in the form of training conferences at Walt Disney World resorts, with singers also performing opera vignettes of about 20 minutes in EPCOT. Over time, those performances evolved into more outreach with dozens of opportunities for audience building, such as

working with schools in cities where VOICEExperience has programming.

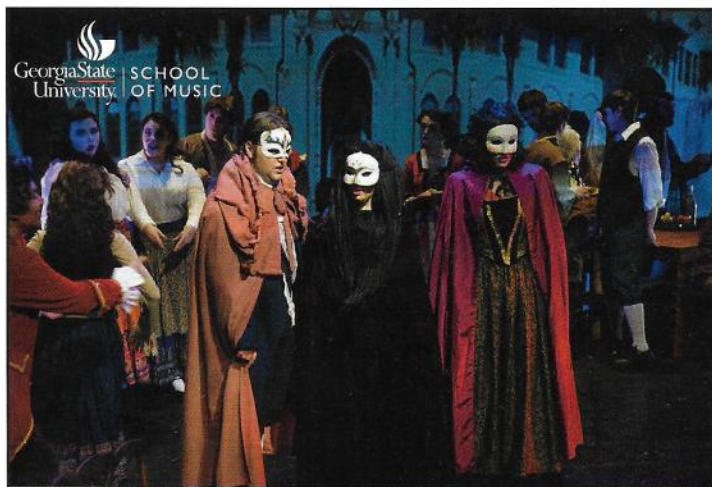
Later, the program operated in conjunction with Zouves' work as vice president/associate general director at Opera Tampa—but when she stepped down in 2011, VOICEExperience was looking for a new home. "We wanted to go somewhere that *needed* us as much as we needed to be there," Zouves explains. Enter Savannah (spring 2012), a city without an opera company or opera festival, recommended by a VOICEExperience graduate, soprano

Rebecca Flaherty, who lives there. "Savannah has tons of festivals—jazz, wine, food, film, books—but no opera," Milnes notes.

Introducing the Savannah VOICE Festival

In fall 2012, he and Zouves established the Savannah VOICE Festival as an outgrowth of VOICEExperience. Singers from the United States, Portugal, Canada, Korea, Spain, and other locations perform opera, musical theatre, and songs. This is an important aspect of

the festival: singers embrace a variety of repertoire. "As well-rounded artists, we need to sing *all* of this—opera, Broadway, Latin, French *mélodie*, Lieder, Italian songs, Zarzuela, sacred music, Bach, Beethoven, Schubert, Haydn," Milnes says. "If you don't know *Messiah*, *Elijah*, *The Creation*, the *Lord Nelson Mass* . . . why don't you know it? You better know a big hunk of it, because that's where you're going to be hired and show your musical guts as a soloist. A mezzo coming out of college is not going to get a job as Carmen. Most opera is the



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Bass Scott Russell puts Milnes in the barber chair in a scene from *Sweeney Todd* during an opera scenes concert at the Savannah VOICE Festival 2014.



photo by G. Konstantinidis

NFL. This is not college or high school singing.”

Lucky Auditions to Start His Career

For his part, Milnes did not make a career by winning competitions. Instead, he was often in the right places at the right times. For instance, his audition with the Goldovsky Opera Theater came about because Milnes was studying with Robert Gay, one of Goldovsky’s former associates, at Northwestern. Gay suggested that Milnes audition for Goldovsky, who ended up offering him the role of Masetto in a 1960 touring production of *Don Giovanni*. Milnes went on to sing over 300 performances of a dozen roles (all in English) with that touring company in the early 1960s.

Similarly, his Met audition resulted from the opera company looking for a Verdi baritone to succeed the late Leonard Warren. At the Fox Theatre in Atlanta, in front of Met General Manager Sir Rudolf Bing and his colleagues—“Bing’s Boys,” Milnes calls them—Milnes sang “Eri tu” and “Avant de quitter ces lieux.” You can imagine his elation when Bing told him [Milnes mimics Bing’s Austrian accent]: “We would like to have you on our roster.” (As a side note, Milnes advises singers to not tell their friends about an audition beforehand. If nothing happens, you have nothing to explain. “But if you get something, shout it from the rooftops!”)

Valentin marked Milnes’ Met debut on December 22, 1965, the first of 652 Met performances from 1965 to 1997. Therefore, in addition to his 80th birthday, 2015 also marks the 50th anniversary of his debut. “Valentin is a perfect debut role,” Milnes says adamantly, because it is a supporting role, so “management will wait to see if the singer considers Valentin the top or bottom of his list of future roles.”

Becoming Valuable at the Met

Milnes’ list clearly went up, and a number of Bing’s requests propelled him into German operas, including *Fidelio*,

“In Germany, almost every town has an opera house. We have small opera companies in the U.S., but they do two or three operas each season. German-speaking houses do seven performances a week with their own orchestras, choruses, and Fest singers. We don’t have that.”

Lohengrin, and *Das Rheingold*—and the eventual impressive list of Verdi roles. “Bing asked me to do Don Fernando, so I looked at the score and saw that I could sing it, but something else occurred to me,” Milnes recalls. “I knew I would sing with singers with whom I ordinarily would not [have the opportunity to] sing—including Birgit Nilsson and James King—and I also knew that I would be working with conductors whom, ordinarily, I would not work with. *Fidelio* was my first opera with Böhm.” As fate

would have it, Böhm liked him so much that he asked Milnes to come to Vienna to make his Vienna State Opera debut as Macbeth.

Commenting on his status as a “Verdi baritone,” Milnes has two perspectives. “The dictionary might say that Verdi treated the baritone part more specifically than earlier composers, with higher tessitura, a bigger orchestra, and more brass. His writing forced the baritone to learn how to sing higher, longer, and louder.”

Talking about the sound of his voice, Milnes is more practical and, frankly, humble. “Does my voice sound exactly like Leonard Warren or exactly like Robert Merrill? No. Each timbre is specific. Nor do I sound like Renato Bruson or Piero Cappuccilli.” His skills in the Verdi repertoire, along with other leading parts, prompted the Met to continue offering him major roles in his first season, like Renato (after baritone Kostas Paskalis cancelled). “I knew ‘Eri tu,’ but nothing else about the opera. I learned it and sang two performances. I turned out to be what the Met needed.”

Highlights of his Met career included 16 new productions, seven opening nights, and 10 telecasts—for which he always reviewed the cameras’ practice tapes to see what he was doing on stage that needed to be corrected. Live telecasts were the most nerve wracking, followed by taped telecasts, radio broadcasts, and live performances.

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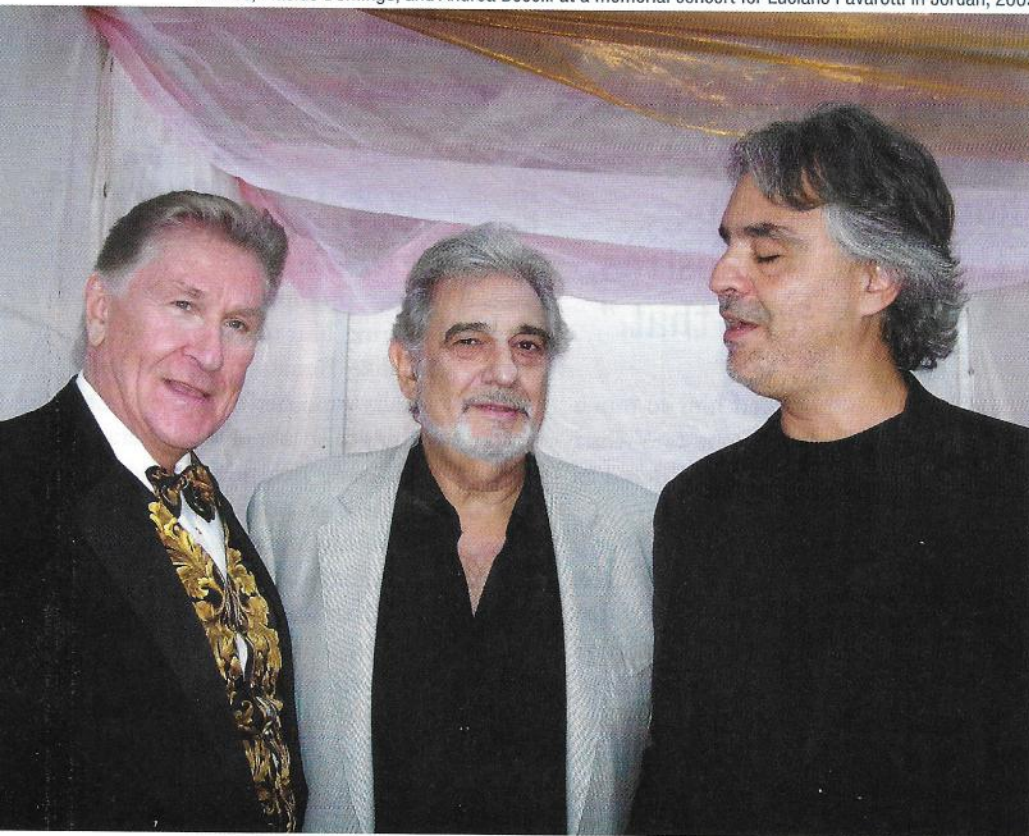
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Milnes, Plácido Domingo, and Andrea Bocelli at a memorial concert for Luciano Pavarotti in Jordan, 2009



“One is always somewhat nervous, but preparation and being in good health make you less nervous,” he says. “In some ways, I was more nervous *before* I got into the excitement of a performance. Once I was in it, certain automatic mechanisms—partly the muscle memory, from preparation—took over. You’re so involved that, for the moment, you tend to forget about nerves because you’re concentrating on what you’re doing.” Ultimately, there is no way to avoid nerves, so you have to be able to perform when nervous.

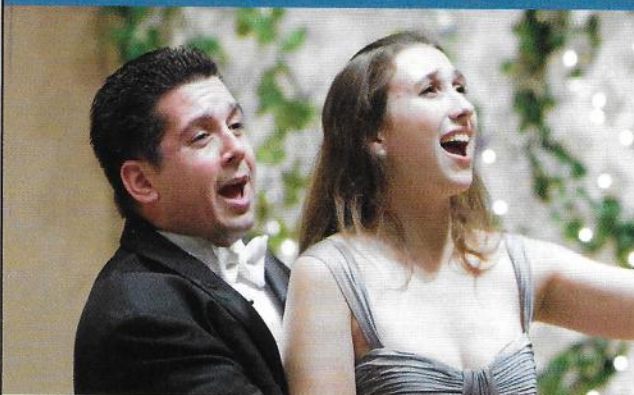
During his career, Milnes’ Verdi roles on stage and on recordings included Amonasro, Renato, Rodrigo, Don Carlo in *Ernani* and *La forza del destino*, Miller, Iago (one of two “psychotics” he had fun singing), Germont, Count di Luna, and the title roles of Macbeth, Nabucco, Rigoletto, and Simon Boccanegra. He also portrayed Michonnet, Carlo Gérard, Rossini’s Figaro, Marcello, Escamillo, Don Giovanni, Jack Rance, Hamlet (another favorite role, in both English and French, because of Shakespeare’s thrilling character set to “gorgeous music”), Enrico, Tonio, the Earl of Westmoreland in *Sly*, Michele, Athanaël, Scarpia (the other “psychotic” he had fun singing), and Henry VIII. His stage presence, acting abilities, thrilling high notes, pathos, and vocal resonance permeated these performances.

The Milnes Stamp on Roles

When it is suggested that he seemed to make these roles his own, Milnes is intrigued. “That’s interesting, because I took stuff from everybody! I was a huge thief! It may have seemed ‘solely me,’ but there’s no such thing. Too many people have sung the same piece.” The trick is to take and imitate, “but you can’t stop there—practice it enough so that it becomes your own. Everything I did was amalgamations.”

What, then, made his interpretations unique to him? “The sound of your voice gives you different ways of doing

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“When a singer tells me they’re coming on stage because they have to sing in four bars, that’s the musical reason. The character doesn’t know that they have to sing in four bars. You, the singer, have to find *reasons* for things. You’re entering for a reason. That makes a huge difference.”

something,” he says. “In certain operas, *colleagues* make a huge difference—Giovanni needs a good Leporello, and Scarpia changes with every soprano who sings Tosca. Whom I was singing with had a lot to do with bringing a role to life onstage.”

Scarpia’s death scene featured an impressive stunt: falling over backward in a chair. “I worked out that staging in a new production in Munich and kept it for Berlin, Paris, the Met, and other theaters where the chair allowed it. It

had to be the right kind of big chair, with a thick back that protects the fall. The trick is to push back with your legs like you’re getting away from her, and that’s what pushes the chair over. The big challenge was to not make it *look* like a trick, but like it was really happening. If you’re going to do some physical activity on stage, it has to look like it’s really happening. I got banged up a few times, but it happens.”

As his Scarpia explanation makes evident, Milnes had reasons for doing

things on stage, and today’s singers need to have them as well. “When a singer tells me they’re coming on stage because they have to sing in four bars, that’s the musical reason. The character doesn’t know that they have to sing in four bars. You, the singer, have to find *reasons* for things. You’re entering for a reason. That makes a huge difference. Or, often, somebody sings something and they politely turn, because they know the soprano sings next, and they wait for the soprano. I tell them, ‘You don’t know she’s going to say something. For all you know, the scene is over, and the sound of her *voice* stops you. The character does not know who’s next.’”

He even changed his interpretations based on individual words, selecting a noun, verb, adjective, or adverb that his character thinks is important and emphasizing it. “Know what your colleagues are singing and make up your reactions,” he advises. “Does your



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Milnes as Scarpia in the T.V. movie version of Puccini's *Tosca*, filmed in Rome, 1976



character like what that person said? Disagree? Should you give a slight nod? A slight shake? A slight turn away? A slight turn toward? It's always everyone's turn, whether by acting or reacting. In most cases, the stage director doesn't have time to teach you how to act. They are there to get the opera on its feet and make a performance."

Speaking of the stage director's role, Milnes has always been respectful of everyone's functions within the opera business. "When I was in a cast, I was not there as a teacher, coach, or conductor. I knew when to keep my mouth shut," he says. "If you're a member of a cast, don't offer your opinion to your colleagues about their

walk, or an entrance, or some attitude. That's the stage director's business.

"I like to judge voice competitions because I hear how certain age groups are developing, and it tests my knowledge of style, language and, especially, communication—my sense of what it is they are doing or *not* doing that does or does *not* communicate with the judges," he continues. "When I was a judge recently, singers asked me for advice, but I was not taking notes with a 'coaching hat.' Sometimes there is nothing to say. Sometimes there is not an exact 'why.' Another singer was just *better.*"

What Was the "Golden Age?"

"Humankind has always tended to think it was 'better in the past.' Maybe it was," Milnes says as he ponders the meaning of "golden age." "I was lucky in the beginning of my career to sing with great, older artists like Bergonzi, Tucker, Corelli, Gedda, Karajan, Böhm, Bernstein, Leinsdorf, Solti, Giulini . . . that ilk. They had knowledge and solidity that are tough for a young person to have. There were things to learn from all of these giants. They all brought something special. I took that and made it mine—and now I pass it along."

On a broader scale, he observes that "another generation of conductors takes us further away from the source. Before Böhm, there was Mahler; go back three or four conductors, and you're at Mozart. That's the *source*. Considering my age and where age put me in terms of the 'age of opera,' I feel very blessed and lucky that I was able to tap into these people. There are several periods that could be considered the 'golden age.' It is more of an audience's perception." Musical principles of those "golden ages" are now the basis of VOICEexperience.

As he continues to pass along his expertise and advice to the next generation through VOICEexperience and the Savannah VOICE Festival, Milnes is helping singers in all voice ranges. "Certain technical principles

Leopold's Ice Cream in Savannah, Georgia, renamed one of its flavors in honor of the Savannah VOICE Festival.



to be automatized so that you can put your mind into the character. Of course, we want beautiful singing—we sell beauty of sound—but always give me a *performance*.”

Savannah VOICE Festival Brings New Life to the City

Sure enough, performances are at the heart of the nonprofit Savannah VOICE Festival, the partner organization to VOICEexperience in the Sherrill Milnes VOICE Programs. Singers can advance from one program to another, beginning with Camp VOICE for Teens. VOICEexperience looks for singers who show potential, then gives them what Zouves calls “the highest level of information.” The majority of the programming takes place in August, along with a celebration of National Opera Week and other events throughout the year.

Joseph Marinelli, president of Visit Savannah, has witnessed the Savannah VOICE Festival’s impact on the city. “Mr. Milnes and Ms. Zouves started making friends and building relationships with community and business leaders, as well as donors and opera enthusiasts,” Marinelli says. “Although Savannah is now widely recognized as one of America’s most popular cities to visit, it’s still a small city that depends on doing business with people you know and like.” He reports that the addition of JetBlue service from the northeast has brought

more people to town “to enjoy these wonderful emerging opera stars in a more intimate setting than maybe they can get at home. And for folks visiting our city during festival dates, they are pleased to learn that this offering is available while they are here.”

This coming March, to celebrate Milnes’ 80th birthday, the Savannah VOICE Festival and Savannah Music Festival are collaborating for the first time to co-produce *Suor Angelica* and *Gianni Schicchi*. And, in the category of just plain fun, Leopold’s Ice Cream in Savannah had temporarily renamed many of its flavors in honor of the 2014 festival, including “Milnes’ Mocha Chocolate Chip” and “Zouves Greek Yogurt Parfait.”

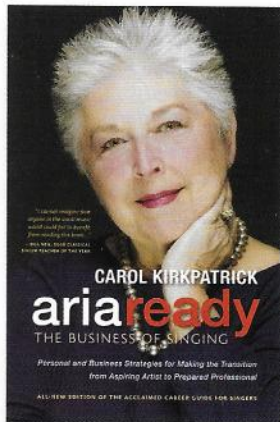
Singers in VOICEexperience

Lyric mezzo soprano Jessica Ann Best, a year into her position as education and outreach coordinator for the VOICE Programs, has been singing with the organizations for seven years. Milnes coached her during his final year at Northwestern, the first year of her master’s program, and she then received a scholarship with VOICEexperience for three years. Along with connecting her with her current voice teacher, the program allowed her to study technique, interpretation, and diction with Milnes.

“He is a natural educator, so he knows how to hone in on things,” Best says. “He’s so caring, nurturing, giving, and

are the same, so I ask myself, ‘What can I give them that will make them better right away?’ Everybody thinks I’m a diction cop, and in a way I am, but audience perception is everything. What they *think* you know is more important than what you *actually* know. That sounds like nonsense, but it’s not. If the audience thinks you know what you’re doing, that’s what matters.”

What about vocal technique versus acting, so that your performance does not come off as well-sung but wooden, but you also act well without sacrificing vocal beauty? “Enough of your technique has



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generous—and a majestic singer and person. His coaching made a difference for me between being a good singer and being an *elegant* singer.” Since then, Best and other singers have continued to perform in the VOICE Programs, events, and operas. Two other benefits—Best met her current voice teacher through VOICE Experience and she has improved her own teaching at her private voice studio.

Soprano Amy Shoremount-Obra, who made her Met debut in October as the First Lady in *Die Zauberflöte*, was introduced to VOICE Experience through her voice teacher, Diana Soviero, guest VE faculty. Among other experiences, Shoremount-Obra performed her first Musetta in the VOICE Program’s artistic collaboration with the Savannah Philharmonic and essayed Donna Anna at the 2014 Savannah VOICE Festival.

“Sherrill gives notes during rehearsal, often bringing up a past experience

he had dealing with the same issue, says Shoremount-Obra. “To hear any pearls of wisdom from him is like being handed a diamond. He and Maria have introduced me to so many great people who have helped advance my career and they have provided me with opportunities and experiences that I will never forget.”

Baritone Matthew Morris is in his post-college years, a time that he describes as “a difficult area to navigate for an American singer today, but especially a young lyric/lighter voice.” He has observed that Young Artist Programs are looking for bigger voices. “Logically looking to train singers for American opera houses, they take young singers with bigger voices and give them the light, lyric roles, which effectively cut out casting possibilities for a young lyric voice. That’s where VOICE Experience and Sherrill and Maria are so brilliant. I was able to do my first *Bohème*,

Giovanni, and *Gianni Schicchi*. The catch-22 is that, once you have done a role, you are far more viable to be cast at another opera house—but someone has to give you that first chance. Sherrill and Maria are experts at spotting high-level talent and giving them that first role.”

Milnes continues to channel decades of experience so that he can train singers and build audiences for the art form dear to his heart. “The opera world gave me a wonderful career, so some kind of payback was appropriate.”

For more information about the Sherrill Milnes VOICE Programs, visit voicexperience.weebly.com and savannahvoicefestival.org.

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

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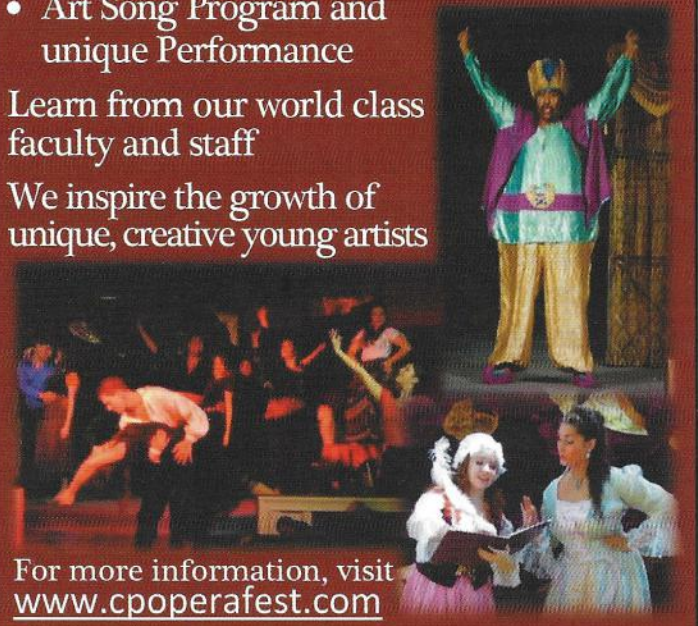
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