

Also in the Cast: the comprimario

At 3 PM the plane touches down at Orly Airport. Weary singers descend smiling into the arms of the waiting French press. Note with what subtle skill Mme. X elbows Mme. Y out of the onrushing camera's range.

Behind them in rank and file come other singers, without whom Mmes. X and Y would not be singing opera in Paris or indeed anywhere.

Who provides the house where Butterfly and Suzuki keep their lonely vigil – B. F. Pinkerton, perhaps? Who foots the bill at the Café Momus – Musetta, maybe? Who dusts with loving hands the stringless but tuneful piano of the consumptive Antonia – Dr. Miracle? Never!

When countless Butterflies, Musettas and Antonias have dwelt, dined, and died, who is still there, renting, paying and dusting? Your obedient servant, the comprimario.

The French public will probably not see his picture on the front page of *Paris Soir*, but in the week to come in Paris, this unsung hero will in six days appear in six performances and two dress rehearsals.

Such a strenuous program, though fairly infrequent, is well within the range of duties of opera's character singer.

Often he may begin his day as the pathetic Fool in "Wozzeck," only to discover in the evening that he is the Emperor of China in "Turandot." Or, opera being what it is, he may appear in the afternoon as the powdered and perfumed Dancing Master of "Manon Lescaut" and that evening inherit the foul rags of Falstaff's companion Bardolfo. Therein lies the art of the comprimario.

A surprising number of opera lovers don't know what the word comprimario means. Those singers who do know don't like the word. The *Zingarelli Vocabolario della Lingua Italiana* defines comprimario as "*Cantante che sostiene una parte secondaria, o che non e della absolute.*" Most comprimarios will accept the latter part of the definition ("not an absolute lead singer") but not the degrading first part ("one who sings a secondary role").

Certainly Leporello is a secondary role to that of Don Giovanni; yet to call Leporello a comprimario is wrong. Micaela is secondary to Carmen, and Musetta to Mimi, yet neither of these roles can be termed comprimario.

In today's opera companies the word comprimario is seldom heard. Everyone on-stage who sings solo lines is called a soloist when referred to collectively, and by name when referred to individually.

I personally like to be called a singing actor. For unlike many young soloists who are content to sing small parts until they break into leading roles, I have specialized in the character roles that are so crucial to any opera performance. And I expect to make a life-time career of these. Such characterizations could be transferred from opera to the legitimate theater with very little change. Being able to do this proves the true art of the acting character singer.

This art includes such illustrious names as Albert Reiss, whose career with the Metropolitan Opera Co. stretched from 1901 to 1920. He was famous for his Simpleton in "Boris Godunov," which he sang with Didur, as well as his Dancaire, and Remendado in "Carmen" which he sang with Farrar and Martinelli.

Among his other well-known roles were David ("Meistersinger"), Valzacci ("Rosenkavalier") and Bardolfo ("Falstaff"). At the Metropolitan he became the first tenor to sing the Witch in "Hansel and Gretel."

In 1908, Reiss was joined by Angelo Bada who made his debut as the Messenger in "Aida," under Toscani. Also in the cast were Caruso, Homer and Destinn. Bada stayed on for a career of 30 years and 150 roles.

Leoncavallo wrote "Der Roland von Berlin" for him, and he performed it for Kaiser Wilhelm II, to whom the opera was dedicated.

The next outstanding character actor to join the Metropolitan roster was George Cehanovsky, who ended his brilliant career in 1966, after a record-breaking 40 years. During these years he brought his public delight upon delight. His versatility permitted him a complete palette of roles, from Lescaut and Bretigny in Massenet's "Manon" to the waspish Fleville in "Chenier," and from the gruff Dancaire in "Carmen" to his solicitous Schaunard in "La Boheme."

Perhaps the most familiar and endearing artist ever to sing this repertory was the great Alessio de Paolis. In his 26 seasons with the Metropolitan Opera, he created some of the most successful characterizations ever presented on any stage. His Shuisky and Spoletta are legendary, and anyone who saw his Old Prisoner in "La Perichole" will remember it as one of the highlights. His villains and clowns are those that we of the younger generation of acting singers will longest remember.

All these artists provided a golden frame for the greatest singers the world has ever known. Those of us who have inherited their tasks must continue to provide that frame.

Though a composer devotes whole arias to descriptions of a loved one – her hair, her eyes, her costume – little or nothing is told us of the character and appearance of supporting players

The singing actor must discover his own personality, his makeup and his movement. Aided by the stage director, the makeup artist, the costume designer and the conductor, he must create a complete character, a miniature portrait – perhaps in only a few brief moments. This portrait must endure and compete in the spectator's memory as strongly as the vocal glory of the romantic leads.

Character is basically founded in movement. Goro darts nimbly about the stage, but the lame Bardolfo and the aged Alcindoro must not assume such a gait. The artful flourishes of Goro's fan would never do for the trembling duster of Frantz in "Les Contes D'Hoffmann."

No matter how strenuous or how subtle the movement is, it must always be in character. (No audience could miss Bardolfo's climbing the tavern wall, but how many catch Trabucco biting the coins paid him by the soldiers of "La Forza del Destino"?)

In the simple act of walking and the way it can be altered from sprightly to halting lies the greatest secret of characterization.

Akin to walking is the dance. The Dancing master in "Manon Lescaut" leads his pupil through the stately measures of the minuet. His every movement must reflect the affectations of the 18th Century.

The old tutor M. Triquet in "Eugene Onegin" probably never was a dancer, as his pathetic minuet reveals. And Frantz in "Hoffmann" meets with even less success, since he ends up flat on the floor.

On the other hand, the lusty comedians of "Ariadne auf Naxos," Scaramuccio and Brighella, must know all the dance routines of commedia dell'arte.

In the vein of movement, mime and dance falls Benjamin Britten's "Curlew River." Based on a Japanese Noh play, "Curlew River" is set in early medieval times beside a fenland river. As in a mystery play, the action is performed by monks who enter in procession; as in Noh, all the parts are taken by male actors.

There is nothing like this in standard opera. This music has meterless, almost improvised freedom of rhythm, and the singers and instruments find themselves involved in completely different meters, singing and playing together unrelated rhythmic patterns. Because of this, no conductor can be used in a performance.

The role of the Madwoman is sung by a tenor, gowned and masked as in a Noh play. Like all such plays, "Curlew River" is intensely formalized. In fact, the score is accompanied by a book of production notes, which tells the director what the movement must be on every measure of music. Each movement of the hand or tilt of the head must assume meaning. Though formalized, these movements must be executed with enormous intensity. Each crease of the Madwoman's gown must fall into the proper folds as she moves in quasi-Noh dance from madness to sanity. All this requires extreme concentration by the actor, calling for almost yoga-like muscular as well as mental control. Such involvement can be shattered by an uncontrolled, unnecessary or weak gesture. To my mind, "Curlew River" is one of the finest theatrical tours de force created in the past 25 years.

For his second parable opera, Britten chose the Biblical tale of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and the miracle of their release from the "Burning Fiery Furnace," where they were cast by the wicked king Nebuchadnezzar. This opera, though somewhat larger, requires the same kind of formalized character acting and singing that were used in "Curlew River."

Character makeup is an art to be learned through trial and error. Though pamphlets and books exist, an artist must be able to modify various makeup techniques to suit his own features. My makeup at the Metropolitan is carefully planned by George Shindhelm and me. Together we study a character thoroughly, planning and discussing what makeup is possible (for example, the age of the character, and what his features could be like). After Mr. Shindhelm draws a sketch in makeup colors of the character, I transfer these ideas to my own face. Sometimes we have to change them completely; at other times, we accept them as originally conceived.

The makeup must then be approved by the stage director of the particular opera, after being seen under the correct stage lights. I then file the sketches, so the makeup can be recreated for future performances. Mr. Shindhelm makes all the rubber pieces I use on stage – the noses for Bardolfo, Trabucco and Basilio, the eyelids for Goro and bald pieces for the Fool in "Wozzeck."

In the Cincinnati Summer Opera production of "Das Rheingold" as Mime I made my own rubber forehead, ears, chin and hands. As for wigs, when they do not arrive already designed by the costume designer, they must be found at the Metropolitan in stock. For "La Perichole" I visited Nina Lawson, our hair stylist, and we looked at several wigs, finally settling for one that had never been dressed – just the thing for a 12-year inmate of a Lima prison.

I keep my own makeup in a big fishing tackle box, which is piled full with greases, pots of color, powders, pencils, brushes of various sizes, rings and jewelry, mementos, cough drops and a collection of antique eyeglasses.

These last, the spoils of many a trek through the flea markets of Paris, Madrid, and Rome, are useful and pleasant hand props. (Friends knowing of my interest have occasionally added to this collection. I often wonder what some long-gone former owner would think if he saw me squinting through his prescription lenses at a conductor.)

Being a comprimario at the Metropolitan is an extremely difficult job. Under our contract, we can perform four times a week, and under extraordinary circumstances this number of performances can be increased (as in the 1962-63 season, when I sang 106 performances, or almost every other night. I understand this to be an all-time record for appearances during a single season.)

Besides performing, I rehearse several operas musically each day. This is done with the help of our assistant conductors, who coach us and know what will be expected of us by the conductors. It is at this point that I develop the vocal effect to be used in a role. The old men must have their cracked, thin voices, the mean ones their sly insinuation, the idiots their stutter.

When Samuel Barber wrote for me the role of Mardian the eunuch in “Antony and Cleopatra,” he asked me to sing the music transposed up four tones into the falsetto, which is correct for a eunuch. This required that the aria end on an E-flat above high C.

All this means that a singer must have a sure vocal technique because singing with a different vocal effect every night can greatly damage an artist who is not secure vocally. To produce an ugly sound on stage without acquiring a permanently ugly voice in the process is a sign of a good singer. Occasionally I am asked to sing roles that are not written for my voice category. Alcindoro, in “La Boheme” for example, is a bass, Dancaire in “Carmen” is a baritone, and Orlofsky in “Fledermaus” and the Witch in “Hansel and Gretel” are contraltos.

The reason comprimario tenors must steal roles outside their normal repertory is that during the period of the *bel canto* opera composers (Donizetti, Rossini, et al) Luigi Lablache was at the composers’ disposal. Because Lablache was a basso comico, most of the great comic acting roles are for bass voice. During the period of the great acting tenors – that is, during the present century – composers were not interested in writing for the singing actor but only for the singer (that is, until “Curlew River”). What a marvelous repertory could be made from “Charley’s Aunt,” “The Picture of Dorian Gray” or “Alice in Wonderland.”

The care and upbringing of a comprimario tenor can be illustrated by my own career. It began in Pittsburgh at the age of 16, when I was taken by a high school teacher to study voice with the venerable M. Louise Taylor.

A tour of duty with the Army in the Far East led to study under the GI Bill and later a Fulbright scholarship at the St Cecilia Conservatory in Rome. After five years of study in Italy, I returned to Pittsburgh where the impresario Richard Karp advised me to study comprimario roles. My first successes were with his Pittsburgh Opera Company. Soon after came San Francisco, Chicago, Hartford and Philadelphia. Finally, I performed in the Cincinnati Summer Opera with Fausto Cleva, who brought me to the Metropolitan for my debut, in the "Fanciulla del West" that opened the 1961 season.

So we have left Mme. X and Mme. Y being photographed at Orly, forgetful of their performance that night. You have seen these great divas walk our boards many times; you will see them again. And I, your obedient servant, the comprimario, "also in the cast," will be there with them, renting their houses, dusting their pianos and paying their bills.

Andrea Velis

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