Susan Graham’s clarity of sound, superb technique, and in-depth character portrayals have made her one of the world’s most acclaimed modern mezzo-sopranos. In this edition of *Classical Singer*, Graham talks about her all-American upbringing in New Mexico and Texas, her road to success, her wide-ranging repertoire choices (which span various centuries and styles), her interest in new American works, and her masterclasses. In addition, she speaks briefly about stage directors and offers some valuable advice to young singers.
Mezzo-soprano Susan Graham is one of the most versatile singers in the opera world today. Graham sings trouser roles and sexy ladies with equal fire. Her Sesto is masculine; her Poppea, sedate and alluring; and her Iphigénie, intense.

She sings everything from Baroque to new contemporary opera and operetta, and her tone displays a purity of sound that often leaves her audiences awe-struck.

During the 2006-7 season, I was privileged to see Graham in two vastly different role portrayals for Los Angeles Opera: Poppea in Monteverdi’s *L’incoronazione di Poppea* and Anna (Hanna) Glawari in Franz Lehár’s *The Merry Widow*. After those experiences, I viewed a DVD where she played Sesto in Mozart’s *La clemenza di Tito*, and on two CDs I heard her voice glide through songs, arias, and Lieder by Mozart, Brahms, Mahler, Handel, Gluck, Berlioz, Debussy, Poulenc, and Hahn. The expanse of her repertoire is phenomenal—and as Graham puts it, she’s doing it her way.

“I’ve always had the good sense to listen to my instincts,” she said to me one sunny afternoon in Los Angeles. “I’ve always known pretty much what is right for me to sing and what is not, and I’ve never tried to make my voice anything that it isn’t.”

Graham appears utterly relaxed as we converse in the living room of her temporary apartment. Dressed in white leisure pants and a soft, blue knit top, she looks younger than she does in photographs or onstage. Her hair is blonder than I remember and she is wearing turquoise jewelry that reminds me of her roots in New Mexico.

Where do I begin, I asked myself, when speaking to a star of Graham’s magnitude. She has sung with the most highly acclaimed artists in the world under the batons of the most renowned conductors in opera houses including La Scala, the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden, the Wiener Staatsoper, the Opéra National de Paris, and the Met. France honored her as a Commandeur dans l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. Musical America recognized her as its 2004 Vocalist of the Year, and Midland, Texas—the town where she was raised—actually named a day after her.

So where do I begin? At the beginning, I decide.

Tell me a little bit about your childhood, your family, and your exposure to music.

I grew up in sort of an amateur musical family. My mother is very gifted. She has an amazing ear. From the time she was 4 years old, she could sit down at the piano and play anything that she ever heard. She grew up during the time of the Big Band era, so that was the kind of music that she played around the house when I was growing up. She also studied music in college and sort of passed that love for piano playing on to my sister and me. I also have a brother, but he went in an athletics direction, whereas my sister and I went into music. My father was a wonderful, big man. I think I got my lungpower from him, because although he was soft-spoken in real life, he was also a Little League baseball coach and could holler and be heard clear across the baseball field.

I was a very avid student of piano and studied very seriously for 12 years. I competed in all the piano competitions while growing up in New Mexico and Texas, and I also accompanied the choirs in church and schools. Through my very diligent musical training I had a good ear and I could read music really well, so that it sort of translated into being able to sing the right notes. I actually thought that I’d started winning singing contests because I could sing the right notes at the right time. It never dawned on me that it had anything to do with a particular vocal talent. I was just a really good musician.

So then, when I was about 16, I started studying voice. I was in Texas by then. When I was about 12, we’d moved from Roswell, N.M., where I was born, to Midland, Texas. I studied with some very serious voice teachers. In fact, I’m still in contact with one of them to this day. At 16, I was preparing Brahms songs, and Fauré, and Debussy. I’d always loved playing classical music on the piano—Mozart, Beethoven, Debussy, and Ravel—and then, when I got to sing the music of some of these composers with the overlay of text, something clicked in me and brought it all to life.
“My father instilled in all of us to aim high and work hard to fulfill the goals that we set for ourselves. I just thought to myself, ‘What is the most unimaginable, unfathomable thing that you could aim for? To be an opera singer—to be a successful opera singer—now that sounds impossible, and I think I’m going to try it.’”

Singing tapped a kind of musical expression in me that I never could reach by playing the piano. It was more fun for me to stand up in front of a piano and sing than it was to sit down at a piano and play it. I had an innate need to communicate, express, and make contact with the audience, and I found that was much easier to do when I was standing up, singing. I just loved the eye contact I could make with the audience and the deeper emotional levels I could reach by singing. That’s not to take anything away from the amazing brilliant pianists we have, who are every bit as expressive through their medium as I am, but that wasn’t me.

My first big role was Maria in The Sound of Music in high school in Midland, Texas. When I got into college, we also did musicals, and Gilbert and Sullivan, and opera. At Texas Tech University, I received a vocal scholarship and became a voice major. As a voice major, I was required to be in an opera—yet from where I came from, people just assumed that if you had a voice, you’d go into musical theatre and to Broadway.

I’d never seen an opera until I was about 17, when the Texas Opera Theater came through my hometown and I saw Così fan tutte. When I saw Despina licking chocolate off a spoon, I
thought, “Now that looks like fun.” So, at Texas Tech, I was exposed to opera and decided to pursue it.

I was raised in a family that had a very high work ethic. My father instilled in all of us to aim high and work hard to fulfill the goals that we set for ourselves. I just thought to myself, “What is the most unimaginable, unfathomable thing that you could aim for? To be an opera singer—to be a successful opera singer—now that sounds impossible, and I think I’m going to try it.”

After college, you went to the Manhattan School of Music. Tell me a little about your experience there.

What I got from Manhattan School of Music was the opportunity to reinvent myself. I’d left Texas and all of my baggage behind, all of my intimidations. I was a late bloomer. I was a mezzo-soprano. Nobody knew where my voice was going to sit, but I pretty much knew that there was a slot that my voice fit into. I had already studied a little bit of Cherubino, Octavian, and Orlofsky—I had sung Hansel—and it was becoming very clear that those were going to be my bread-and-butter roles at the beginning of my career, but I wasn’t really aware of what it really meant to be an opera singer.

I remember my first day at Manhattan School of Music. There were about 100 of us in a room, and they said to us: “Out of everybody in this room, maybe 10 of you will go on to have careers in music. That means as a secretary in a record company or working at a management company. Out of those 10, maybe five will perform, and that means playing the last trumpet in the Walt Disney World band or as a singer on a cruise ship. Out of those five, maybe one person in this room will go on to have the career that you are dreaming of.”

The point they were trying to make was that if there is anything else that you love doing and can be happy doing, do it, because unless you love this with all your heart and you are willing to sacrifice everything for it, you should be doing something else, because it’s going to cost
you. Everything involved in being an opera singer is staggering, even dealing with the jet lag and climate changes, being in airplanes and the bad air. In fact, I have jokingly said before that I’m going to write a book called What They Don’t Tell You.

It costs a lot of money to do this career, and it costs you other things as well. It costs you holidays. It can cost you a stable family life and a reasonable marriage. It can cost you children. But what you will get out of it is the fulfillment of what your soul needs to say, and I can’t think of anything that I could have done that would have fulfilled what my soul needed to say in that way. I thank God every day that I have been so blessed to do something that I love so much, something that fulfills me so much and makes it worthwhile for me to get up every day. And that is what I got from Manhattan School of Music.

Tell me a little about your vocal studies, technique, and teachers.

I found a great teacher 20 years ago: Marlena Malas. For my money, she’s the best. I’ve always had a real natural placement that has been very good, although when I first went to her, I had maybe three different voices, which I think was a function of my youth. I just didn’t know how to tie them together yet, and she was brilliant at sort of making it [her voice] all one piece.

If I’ve been criticized in my development, it might be that I didn’t have this booming lower register. I used to jokingly say that I was a mezzo with no low notes. Marlena always brilliantly guarded against people who would say, “Oh, you’ve got to develop her lower register.” She’d always answer, “Not at the expense of that top.”

My top has always been my calling card. I may not have low notes, but I’ve always had this upper extension, although the weight of my voice is in the mezzo tessitura. Now that I’m into my 40s, the bottom is filling out a little and the top is getting easier.

Did you think of trying to get a Fest contract in Germany at the beginning of your career?

I thought about doing that. I didn’t belong to any Young Artist Programs, just Merola, which was a summer program. I desperately wanted to be an Adler Fellow, but the person who was running the program at the time, Christine Bullin, looked at me and said: “I’m not going to put you in the Adler program because you’re ready to
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By the time I finished Merola, I was represented by Betsy Crittenden at Columbia Artists Management. I’d won the Schwabacher Award from the Merola Program, and the next year, I won the Met competition. As a result, I became one of the young singers to watch.

How did your career begin?
I started out in Seattle, St. Louis, San Diego, and Detroit doing roles like Stéphano [in Roméo et Juliette]. I did Nancy in Albert Herring in San Diego and Érika in Vanessa in St. Louis. That was a huge stepping stone for me, in 1988. It was my first year out of school, and I was really lucky to get that job. It was a fantastic production directed by Graham Vick, and it got a lot of attention.

I remember [artists’ manager] Matthew Epstein saying to me that summer: “It’s too bad this has happened at the beginning of your career because it’s not always going to be this good.” He meant that the circumstances, the situation and the productions that I’d be in, and the opportunities that I would have were not always going to be that perfect—and he was right.

I started out doing smaller, boy parts. Santa Fe was probably one of the most important American houses in my early development. I sang my first Cherubino there with Bryn Terfel’s first Figaro. Then I began covering at the Met.

My debut at the Met was as Second Lady in

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The Magic Flute in 1991. Then came Octavian and Cherubino there, and Béatrice et Bénédict in Lyon [France], which sort of kicked the door open for me in Europe. I sang in Salzburg and then Massenet's Chérubin at Covent Garden.

I was in Europe for a good five years, going from Munich, to Salzburg, to Vienna, to Amsterdam, to London, and Paris.

Are you fluent in French, Italian, and German?

I am less fluent in Italian than the other languages because I haven't spent that much time in Italy and haven't sung much Italian opera, except for Mozart's operas in Italian. I'm not an Italian mezzo. I don't sing Amneris or Ulrica, and I don't sing Bel Canto, although I have sung Rosina. I sort of went more the direction of Anne Sofie von Otter.

Two of my greatest idols were Frederica von Stade and Tatiana Troyanos. I think that I was an amalgamation of Tatiana, Flicka, and a little of Christa Ludwig. Some of my earliest jobs were stepping in for Anne Sofie von Otter. That's how I sort of got into the Berlioz track, after I replaced her because she had canceled a recording of Béatrice et Bénédict.

How is your repertoire changing as you mature?

Obviously I don't want to sing Cherubino and Dorabella anymore. I'm moving out of the youthful page roles, although I still sing Octavian and the Composer, since those are a little meatier. Now I'm singing Iphigénie, Didon, and Poppea. These are all sort of epic characters. The Chicago, London, and San Francisco productions of Iphigénie are the same co-production and version, but the Met production utilizes the 1781 Vienna version—since Plácido [Domingo] was cast in the part of Oreste—which is slightly different. [The New Grove Dictionary of Opera says the Vienna version includes some orchestral and choral changes, and the role of Oreste is transposed from baritone to tenor.]

Why have you been focusing your attention on Baroque opera, opera seria, and French opera?

The roles are very interesting. The only Handel roles that I've done are male roles, like Ruggiero in Alcina and Ariodante. The characters are so strong, and they have such a tender nobility. But then there's that fiery side, too, in sort of wild, ornamented, decorative writing, and I love the challenge of doing that type of role. On the other hand, there's "Poppea," which is just essence.

Singing Poppea doesn't offer a lot of technical and vocal fireworks, but it's all in the expression, and bringing expression through language is one of my real joys. For Los Angeles Opera's production, it was a directorial choice to have a very spare acting style. When I did "Poppea" in Houston with Graham Vick, the singers had more of a film-acting style. It was more sexy and the costumes were more revealing.

Directors seem to dictate how singers play their roles. What if you don't agree?

Then I just have to find a way to make their desires work with
A Young Artist Observes

Mezzo-soprano Natasha Flores is a member of Los Angeles Opera's Domingo-Thornton Young Artist Program. She was a cover for Jill Grove's Nutrice in the company's production of Monteverdi’s L'incoronazione di Poppea last season, sang Nutrice for the final performance, and had the opportunity to observe Susan Graham during rehearsals and when Graham performed the role of Poppea. It was quite a learning experience, she says.

“The intensity Susan brings to her performances is stunning,” said Flores. “In performance, there is a calm and elegance about her, but underneath, there is fire—an intensity which makes her absolutely mesmerizing. She has wonderful phrasing and a beautiful legato which makes her vocal line have a warm texture you never want to end. Her voice and presence make her stand out. If you haven't guessed, I'm a fan.”

my needs. There have been some very big challenges in that department, though. I did a production in Paris not long ago that was one of those eyebrow-raising productions. A very avant-garde director brought all kinds of elements into the piece that I thought had no business being there. I was sort of intrigued by what was presented to me at first, but what actually happened six months later was not exactly the same thing. The ideas were the same but they were embellished upon. There were elements there that compromised my ability to give the kind of performance that I wanted to give.

You seem to enjoy contrasting styles. Could you elaborate?

Well, you don't sing Poppea like you sing Octavian. When you're singing Poppea, you've got maybe 10 pieces in the pit. You've got a harpsichord, a viola da gamba, a few lutes, a theorbo, and a harp. These are very transparent textures. The vocal production isn't really different, just on a smaller scale. On the other hand, when I sing Octavian with a hundred-piece orchestra, there's a lot more sound to get over, so I have to crank it up a little more.

When comparing Hanna in The Merry Widow and Sesto in La clemenza di Tito [the 2006 Opéra National de Paris production on DVD], there is quite a difference in playing a corseted grande dame at the turn of the [20th] century versus a contemporary...
angry man. It's a completely different physicality. . . . I am very comfortable in that kind of modern, contemporary physicality. . . . I also like slapping on a corset and a big hat and parading around in the most beautiful costumes I've ever worn, although there is much less opportunity for physicality and expression in something like that. Sesto is all about hysteria, and frustration, and angst—and, of course, Hanna is not.

What comes to mind regarding the recitatives that play such a major part in the roles you sing?

Recitative is the closest thing opera has to spoken dialogue, except for actual spoken dialogue, of course. Whenever I give masterclasses or coach young singers who tend to “ariafy” the recitatives, I always try to stop them from doing that. I think it's very important to be able to speak recitatives and then to just add the overlay of singing on top of that.

Recitative is not meant to be as operatically produced, vocally, as an aria is. The recitatives tell the story and the arias express the emotions.

At the other end of the spectrum, you are known for singing new, contemporary American operas in English. What draws you to these new works?

The music and characters have to attract me. The music has to speak to me, first of all. I won't agree to performing an opera until I've actually seen some of the music. All three of the big pieces I've done in America were sent to me in bits and pieces as the ink was drying. The first one that I did was The Great Gatsby [the Met, 1999]. I've always been a fan of the book, and I saw the movie. It all sort of took place in a world that I thought was really intriguing. John Harbison wrote music that I found haunting, and I loved my part [Jordan Baker].

Then Jake Heggie’s Dead Man Walking [about a nun who offers a death-row convict friendship and spiritual guidance] came along, and it was life-changing [San Francisco Opera, 2000]. It had such social relevance with such a current theme that is part of all of our collective consciousness. To bring a living, breathing character to life [Sister Helen Prejean], a person whom I'd met and known, and to portray her on the operatic stage, was such a thrill for me. Portraying her was also a great challenge because you can’t just mimic somebody like her. We couldn’t be more different physically, so I just tried to glean her spirit and bring that into my portrayal.

Then I played the role of Sondra Finchley [the other woman] in Tobias Picker’s An American Tragedy [which is reminiscent of the true story of Scott Peterson and the drowning death of his pregnant wife]. I enjoyed creating Sondra from the ground up, trying to create what kind of a person she was in that era [the late 1890s]. She was kind of sassy and flashy. I could relate to her, and it was fun to try to flesh out that sort of lesser character [the Met, 2005].

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Tell me a little about your masterclasses. Why do you give them?

In my masterclasses, I focus on interpretation and expression. Technique is for the young artists’ teachers to work out. I’m much more interested in what’s inside the person and how it gets out. I feel that I can help singers free their expressive channels because of my experience and the lessons that I’ve learned along the way.

We’ve all sat in performances where we’ve heard technically perfect singing but are not touched. I’ve also been to performances where the singer may have been less than perfect technically but had something to say. If you don’t have something to say, I don’t want to buy a ticket to see you.

That’s why I’m so passionate about the recitals I give and the repertoire I choose. Each song comes from the bottom of my heart and tells a whole story—with a beginning, middle, and end—even if it’s only 30 seconds long. I always tell young singers to say what they mean and mean what they say: in other words, to sing with meaning.

Do you have any advice for young singers?

Every singer has to find the music that speaks to him or her. I would just urge young singers to find their own voice and sing what they love. You have to find your own way.

One discovery for me was Reynaldo Hahn songs. I recorded a collection of them very early on. They all became little jewels to me. Each one had some little hemiola, modulation, a funny surprise cadence, or some little twist in the story that it was telling, and sparked my imagination. Music is a calling, and it’s a privilege to breathe the printed page to life, to literally breathe air into that ink on the page. How do you answer that calling except with humility and joy.

Graham has sung Iphigénie en Tauride in Salzburg, Paris, Chicago, San Francisco, and recently at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. She will sing Iphigénie in a new production with Plácido Domingo at the Met, from Nov. 27 to Dec. 22. In 2008, she will sing Sesto in La clemenza di Tito at the Met from May 3 to 15, and Ariodante with the San Francisco Opera from June 15 to July 6. She has scheduled concerts and recitals in New York, Chicago, London, Madrid, Amsterdam, Paris, Zurich, and Berlin.

Carie J. Delmar writes reviews and features on opera for various publications and websites, including www.OperaOnline.us. As a free-lance writer, she has written stories on education and entertainment for the Los Angeles Times. She has worked as a reporter and publicist, holds degrees in theater arts and psychology, and has studied voice, piano, acting, and dance. She recently completed a novel based on the life of her father, who was an opera singer in 1930s Vienna and Prague. Her e-mail address is operacjd@aol.com.