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### **Seattle Opera's Speight Jenkins Shares the Bill with Wagner.**

#### **Hail to the Chief! – But Which One?**

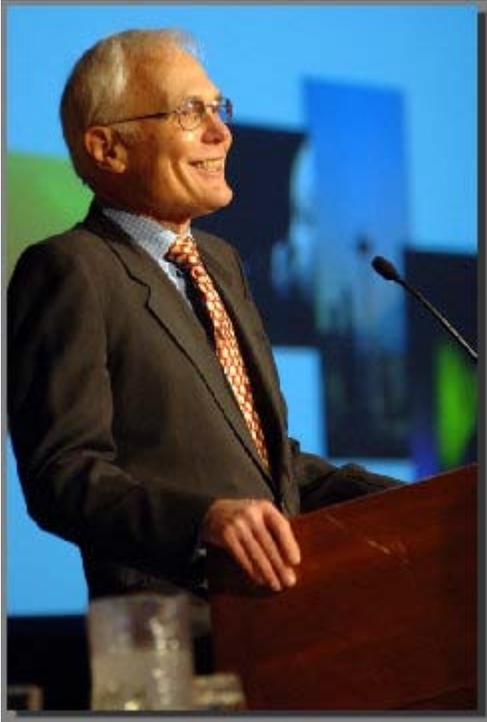


Photo: Rozarii Lynch

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By Carol Jean Delmar  
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He’s a fast-talking, opinionated, outspoken Texan who when asked to speak about his

grandchildren, suddenly forgets the business of opera that he's in, slows down, softens and glows. He's Speight Jenkins, general director of Seattle Opera – America's miniature Bayreuth. We caught up with him in May just after he announced the names of the finalists in Seattle's first ever Wagner competition which culminates this month with the two top winners receiving \$15,000 apiece.

Wagnerians are a special breed. Although many aren't musicians, they have been seduced by the grandeur of Wagner's music -- his mythical stories with gods, goddesses, dwarves, maidens and giants in legendary settings unknown. The spell cast upon them can spread within their families from generation to generation, some feeling the magical allure as early as the age of 4.

“Last summer, my granddaughter who is now 4 came to Seattle. I put her in the radio booth with me when I was doing our broadcast of ‘Rheingold,’ expecting her to stay for the first 20 minutes of it for the Rhinedaughters’ scene,” Jenkins describes. “She knew the story because her mother had told it to her. She was totally fascinated and would not leave for two-and-a-half hours. She sat there glued to her seat asking me questions so that I had to translate every bloody line for her cause she wanted to know everything that was happening. She remembers it at this age. I asked her about it and she could go on and on about the giants and dwarves.”

Some people fear that opera is a dying art and the love of it may not be passed on to future generations. But Jenkins may have hit upon the solution to the problem. If children are exposed to the operas that aim to fascinate, Valhalla might be around for a long time to come.

Jenkins was one of those taken in by its magic at a slightly older age than his granddaughter. He didn't catch the bug until he was 6.

“When I was 6, I had heard about opera and when I asked my mother what it was, she said that it was a play sung to music,” Jenkins remembers. “I asked, ‘What are the stories about?’ And she said, ‘There's a story about a woman who went to sleep on a rock surrounded by fire,’ and I asked, ‘What is that about?’ And she said, ‘She has sisters that fly through the air on horses,’ and I asked, ‘Can I read about it?’ And she said, ‘I'll find you a book.’

“So she brought me a book and showed me the story of ‘Die Walküre,’ Jenkins recalls as if he were sitting in a kindergarten classroom telling the story to a group of 5-year-olds. “I was immediately sucked into it. I was reading at that point and read the whole ‘Ring.’ I heard about the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts and started listening to them. The next year they did ‘Die Walküre.’ You can't explain these things. The music on the radio just got to me and I was fascinated.”

Jenkins didn't see his first Wagner opera until he was 10 when the Metropolitan touring company came to Dallas with a production of “Lohengrin,” he says. “So those of us who were around in the '40s and didn't live in New York had the chance to not only hear

opera on the radio but had the opportunity to see the greatest stars of the period in person.”

Jenkins, 69, considers himself to be a student of opera but not a musician. He never studied voice or took music courses although he plays piano and clarinet. “I’m a self-taught person,” he says. “I never wanted to sing or conduct. I always wanted to do what I do now but I couldn’t articulate it. Who knows how one becomes a general director? I can’t even tell you now after having been one for 23 years because everyone takes a different road.”

Jenkins decided to become a lawyer, he says, because his family wanted him to have a profession, but he was more interested in journalism, thus became an editor for Opera News from 1966 to 1973, a music critic for the New York Post from 1973 to ‘81, and host of the Metropolitan Opera’s “Live From the Met” telecasts from 1981 to 1983, when he was selected by the Seattle Opera board to become the company’s second general director.

#### SEATTLE OPERA

The company’s foundation was set by Glynn Ross, who founded Seattle Opera in 1963 and became its first director. Ross was intrigued by Wagner’s music and had spent two summers working at the Bayreuth Festival. The Seattle landscape reminded him of Bavaria so he thought that it would be the perfect setting to reproduce some of Wagner’s greatest masterpieces. Although the grandsons of Richard Wagner -- Wolfgang and Wieland -- were having great success with productions of the “Ring” in Bayreuth, it wasn’t being performed much in the United States, and when it was, the sets didn’t recreate the rocky, mountainous terrain that a credible production required. In 1975, Ross produced the complete “Ring” cycle twice: once in German and once in English, and after its phenomenal success, he continued to present a German and English cycle every summer.

Jenkins’ passion for Wagner made him the ideal choice to succeed Ross, who left Seattle to become Arizona Opera’s director. But Jenkins had a different opinion: “It was a big gamble on their part,” he says. “I was from Dallas, had been in New York for 20 years, and I was a newspaper critic, journalist and television man. People thought they were totally crazy to choose me for this role, but they believed I could do it. I had always wanted to do something like this, and Seattle was very attractive to me because of the Wagner tradition.”

But as in any new administration, Jenkins decided to make some changes. “Glynn did a ‘Ring’ that was economically viable to do every year. . . . He built the idea that Seattle was the home of the ‘Ring’ Festival, and our name became known throughout the world,” says Jenkins. “But I wanted to produce international-class Wagner, and I wanted to do all of it, which we have done.”

In 1986, Jenkins produced a new more costly “Ring” which drew international attention because it was “the first ‘Ring’ ever done in the United States that had had a real

European flavor to it,” he says. “It was fiercely debated about at the beginning but ended up enormously successful.” That production was performed four times. In 2000, a new partial ‘Ring’ was launched, followed by the complete cycle in 2001 which was repeated in 2005 and will be performed two times more.

The ‘Ring’ is no longer an annual Seattle event because of the costs involved. “You need to have people eager to hear it,” Jenkins says. “That’s why we do it every four years, and we do three cycles. Glynn never did more than two.” And although Ross always performed one cycle every summer in English, Jenkins presents all three of his in German.

Seattle Opera is so preoccupied with its Wagnerian identity that there is a Wagner icon on the company’s Website which upon clicking displays a biography of Wagner, synopses of all of his works, and Jenkins’ recollections of happenings during past productions. In fact, for those who work at Seattle Opera, Wagner’s birthday is a holiday. The office is closed.

But in spite of the company’s commitment to Wagner, there are seasons when it is impossible to find his name on the roster. “Anybody that doesn’t love Mozart doesn’t understand music,” says Jenkins. “If you’re an opera director, you have to love Mozart and you better love Verdi and like Puccini a lot because you’re going to be doing them.”

#### THE COMPETITION

This year Jenkins has launched the first Seattle Opera International Wagner Competition so that Wagner’s music can even be heard on an off year. “We started it because of our tradition and because I’m doing a Strauss opera this summer,” explains Jenkins referring to “Der Rosenkavalier.” We thought it would be a good idea to always reiterate our Wagner connection.”

Of the 43 contestants auditioned by him last fall in Vienna, Berlin, London, Paris, Seattle and New York, eight finalists were selected to compete this month in front of a five-judge panel and audience in Seattle’s Marion Oliver McCaw Hall. The two top prizes are worldwide visibility as promising Wagnerian singers, and two \$15,000 awards funded by the Charles Simonyi Foundation for Arts and Sciences.

‘It is a real honor to be involved in the first Wagner competition in Seattle,” says award-winning mezzo-soprano Stephanie Blythe, who is one of the judges. “Since Speight Jenkins gave me my first big opportunity to sing Mr. Wagner’s music in Seattle’s new ‘Ring’ in 2000, it makes me very happy to be able to serve Seattle and the Wagner community by helping them find new and exciting Wagnerian talent.”

Although some of the singers have sung major roles with small and medium-sized companies, their experiences in larger houses have for the most part been limited. “I didn’t want to choose anyone who had done more than one major Wagnerian role in an opera house at the time,” says Jenkins. “I wanted people who had gotten a start and who had the benefits of being dramatic singers but hadn’t made it yet.

“Dramatic voices don’t settle until the singers are 35,” Jenkins explains. “That’s why we extended the age range to 40. Of course, there are exceptions. Jane Eaglen was singing ‘Die Walküre’ at 28; Birgit Nilsson started pretty young, and Astrid Varnay debuted at the Met at 21. Ben Heppner didn’t come into his own until his late ‘30s. He did his first ‘Meistersinger’ with me in ’89, and he was just getting started.

“They [Singers] never start out singing Wagner – almost never. When Birgit Nilsson was asked what it took to sing Isolde, she said, ‘Sensible shoes.’ What she meant was that if you can sing Wagner, you can sing it and then it’s easy. If it isn’t easy, you shouldn’t be singing it.”

#### MORE INSIGHTS

“It has been said that Wagner wrote so badly for the voice that singing his music could ruin it. That’s not true,” Jenkins remarks adamantly. “Verdi is much more difficult for the voice than Wagner. Wagner knew how to write. What is true is that when people push their voices into singing Wagner before the voice is ready for it or if they don’t have the right kind of voice – then it can wreck them. One of the things that drives me crazy is when a young singer says to me, ‘Oh, I’m singing Tristan but it’s just in a small house.’ My response is always, ‘It’s Tristan, for heaven’s sake. It doesn’t matter if you’re singing it in your bathroom. You’re singing ‘Tristan und Isolde,’ and you have no business singing Tristan until your voice is ready to sing it.’ Normally that’s when you’re 40 years old. Jon Vickers refused to look at the ‘Tristan’ score until he passed his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. Ben Happner sang his first Tristan with me and it was a big challenge for him. Now he’s taking on Siegfried. Ben is a great singer. He’s a canny singer and won’t take on a role if he discovers when he starts rehearsing that it’s not right for him.

“The majority of dramatic sopranos who sing Isolde and Brünnhilde have voices that are natural for the roles,” Jenkins continues. “They shouldn’t be pushed into it or they’re not going to be able to do it. One of the young women in the competition has the possibility of being that kind of singer,” but Jenkins declines to name which one.

“I’m very excited about these eight people,” he says enthusiastically. “When I heard them, they sang wonderfully. I was astounded at the quality of the voices I was listening to.”

And that’s something that Jenkins should know a great deal about. “To be a good general director, you have to have a knack for choosing singers,” he says. “If I’ve put on some good shows, then I guess I do.”

In addition to “Der Rosenkavalier” and the Wagner concert, Seattle Opera’s 2006-07 season includes Rossini’s “L’Italiana in Algeri,” Mozart’s “Don Giovanni,” Handel’s “Giulio Cesare” and Puccini’s “La Bohème.”

Competition finalists include soprano Carolyn Betty from Delaware, tenor Jason Collins from South Carolina, soprano Dorothy Grandia from New York, tenor Paul McNamara

and soprano Miriam Murphy from Ireland, baritone James Rutherford from England, tenor Andrew Lindsay Sritheran from New Zealand and bass Carsten Wittmoser from Germany. The alternates are South African soprano Maria Jooste and English tenor Philip O'Brien.