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Jessica Swink (L) and Barbara Bonney (R)

Inside a Master's Class with Barbara Bonney

By Carol Jean Delmar
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What is a master class? In essence, it is just that – a class given by a master. And on the last Friday in March, it was renowned soprano Barbara Bonney who was the wise experienced sage offering her knowledge to the six young opera singers who were seeking her guidance, a little timidly albeit, probably because the class was in front of an audience. Pretty intimidating one might think. Not in front of “this” audience of old softies though. They were there to root for the young performers and to watch them grow.

The event was sponsored by the Opera League of Los Angeles, the primary volunteer organization for Los Angeles Opera, whose members do everything from serving dress rehearsal dinners to manning the opera shop and boutique in the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. This was an educational event for them, one which would help them understand the singing process, but would also help the participants as well – most of them resident artists with Los Angeles Opera who have completed their university and/or conservatory training, show promise, and are covering and performing smaller roles with LA Opera.

“I love master classes,” tenor Peter Nathan Foltz, 28, told OperaOnline.us before the event. “There’s something about combining the energy of a live performance with the opportunity to improve that is sort of an interesting synthesis of energy – the fact that it’s a sort of lesson, but at the same time, you have that same sort of rush that you get from doing a live performance.”

Foltz was playing Don Curzio in Los Angeles Opera’s production of “Le Nozze di Figaro” at the time. “The other thing about it that I’ve always enjoyed is the fact that a lot of times audiences aren’t singers and don’t know what it’s like to have to learn to sing,” he continued. “They sort of assume that everyone is either born with the ability or not, and they don’t know what it’s like to be given advice on this topic. It’s interesting to be able to give them that opportunity. I always learn a lot at master classes, and I always walk away with a better product and sometimes an entirely new vision of the piece.”

After singing Tamino’s “Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön” from Mozart’s “Die Zauberflöte,” Bonney told Foltz that he sang the aria up there with the best of them – his voice had a lovely lyrical quality to it. When she asked for audience comments – something that is rarely done at master classes – one person said something about the way the tenor held his hands; another mentioned that every time he sang a higher note, he sort of raised himself onto his toes. At first it seemed as if Bonney didn’t want to criticize him but was throwing the responsibility onto the audience instead. Yet a few moments later, that proved to be a false assumption. She was simply drawing the audience in so that the master class could be a class for them as well as for all of the participants.

Next Foltz sang an art song, a Mozart Lied: “Abendempfindung,” a bittersweet reflection of someone who looks toward the end of life. Here Bonney began to change Foltz’s approach and vision. Less comfortable with the art song than the aria, Bonney told him to

concentrate on the words and sing to a particular person in the audience. “When the energy comes back, you’re less nervous,” she explained. She spoke about the ability of singers in operas to hide behind their characters and costumes, etc. But in Lieder, the singer is more vulnerable. “Be who you are and share your message. You really are your own person with Lieder,” she said.

Although Foltz received more-or-less what he had expected from the master class, there were surprises in store for some of the others.

“Usually in public master classes, they [the artists giving the classes] go into performance, style and language because technique is a personal thing and it’s a hard thing to change in a 20-minute time slot. I think it’s kind of fruitless [to go into technique] in a master class situation,” baritone Andrew Wilkowske, 30, told OperaOnline.us a few days before the master class. He said that in a private master class, the person giving the class can be more candid because there isn’t an audience watching. “The public master class is sort of an entity unto itself. It’s just as much a performance for the audience as it is a coaching,” he said. “The work that takes place between clinician and singer is in itself a performance for the audience. That’s not intentional; it’s just the way it happens. It’s our nature as performers that when we’re in front of a group of people, it just turns into a performance. So what you take from those experiences is different than what you would take from a private coaching.”

But Bonney apparently was not of the same opinion. She “did” go into technique and she “did” give something to Wilkowske to take home with him. After he sang “Vedrò mentr’io sospiro,” the Count’s aria from “Le Nozze di Figaro,” the role which he was covering for LA Opera, she worked with him to open up his sound and “create a little more bloom,” as she described it. She spoke of what he was doing with his jaw and tongue, talked of using more head voice, and spoke of his upper molars and making space. Greek to the average audience member, but when he sang part of the aria once again – Ah! What a difference the few minutes had made.

Throughout the master class, Bonney’s focus was on technique and creating a “ping,” as she described it, so that the young singers would not overburden their voices and so that their voices would project over the crescendos of any orchestra.

Jessica Swink walked onto the stage and hugged Ms. Bonney since the two were colleagues. Swink, 26, was covering Susanna and portraying Barbarina in LA Opera’s “Le Nozze di Figaro.” Bonney was singing Susanna. So Swink proceeded to perform “Ach, ich fühl’s,” Pamina’s aria from “Die Zauberflöte.” Her soprano soared effortlessly through the hall with an almost aching beauty. After all, Pamina was expressing how heartbroken she was when Tamino wouldn’t speak to her. Swink’s stance was straight and secure, and her voice sparkled like the facets of a diamond. Likewise, bass Jinyoung Jang, who was covering Dr. Bartolo, gave a dynamic performance of “La vendetta,” dramatically singing and acting out his desire to settle his score with Figaro. Both displayed major talent and polish.

But their wise experienced sage was on the “ping” brigade. After all, since Jussi Björling had it, it couldn’t be such a bad thing to have. So Bonney proceeded to downsize Jang’s Bartolo, and had him sing parts of the aria with only the word, “meow,” a way of lightening the tone and bringing it more forward into the mask. Similarly, she had Swink sing parts of her aria on the vowel “ee” and then on “Nya.” “Get skinnier upwards,” Bonney said, explaining to Swink that she was singing the Mozart aria too heavily. She used phrases like: “keep it light”; “keep open”; “get more angular”; and “keep it as fresh and forward as you can.” “Sing it with the voice you had 10 years ago,” she told Swink, who looked a little perplexed but did as she was directed while placing her left and right hands on either side of her lower back to maintain support. Such a jolt could cause any singer to get a little off balanced. Was this supposed to be happening in front of an audience? Maybe it was really a class after all. But did they sound better? Some of the audience members weren’t quite sure judging from their comments. Maybe it wasn’t about how the singers sounded at that particular moment but rather about solidifying their technique. Maybe it was about preserving their voices. They didn’t ask any questions. Oh, well! They would probably discuss what had happened with their teachers later on.

On the other hand, Gregorio González didn’t have any doubts. He realized from the moment he stepped on the stage of the Zipper Concert Hall that he needed to work on his “ping.” A graduate of LA Opera’s Resident Artist Program, he was portraying Antonio in “Le Nozze di Figaro” for the final time. Last June, the young baritone was advised to become a tenor by no less than Plácido Domingo, he said. It all started during a master class given by Frederica von Stade. “After I sang my aria [as Enrico from ‘Lucia di Lammermoor’], she told me, ‘I think this might be a bit too early for you to sing,’” González, 32, told OperaOnline.us before the Bonney master class. “She [Frederica von Stade] was concerned about my age and the age of my sound compared to the normal age that people sing the role.

She felt the color was not exactly there. I didn’t have the volume in the middle part of my register that I wanted. Then she asked me, ‘Why don’t you sing something that speaks to you, something that you’re familiar with, maybe something from your country?’ I told her that I had this zarzuela piece that I was working on and that I’d love to sing it for her. She raved about it when I finished, and the audience loved it, too.”

The transition from baritone to tenor is not an easy one. It means getting rid of some of the heavy, covered quality in the baritone timbre. It means higher and more forward placement, more relaxation in the throat, more support, and, yes, more “ping.”

González said that he believes his voice is currently too heavy for the Mozartian tenor roles, but he hopes to be able to sing the more lyric parts in the future. Since the artists were asked to sing only Mozart for this master class, González was in a bit of a quandary. He followed his heart and began with ‘Ich grolle nicht,’ the seventh Lied in Schumann’s “Dichterliebe.”

“Ich grolle nicht, und wenn das Herz auch bricht,” he sang. “I’ll not complain through my heart is breaking.”

Hardly Mozart.

Bonney went with the flow and explained to González that he was using too much energy since there were 16 songs in the song cycle and that there needed to be more give and take between him, as the singer, and the accompaniment – in this case, a piano accompaniment played aptly by Catherine Miller Popovic.

But Bonney didn't let González off the hook that easily. Mozart was on her mind. So for his next presentation, he sang part of Don Ottavio's "Il mio tesoro intanto" from "Don Giovanni," but he had to stop. He'd been working since June to get "the voice, the placement and the musculature trained," he said earlier, "but it was like going back to the drawing board and starting from scratch." So he couldn't complete the aria.

Bonney understood and praised González for his courage. She explained how the voice should always flow through the sinus passages and be supported from the back. She maintained that his decision to become a tenor was the correct one. He just needed some time.

"Stay true to who you are," she said. That was her advice to all of the singers. Sing the arias and Lieder with your own special brand on them – that was her message. And it was no more evident than with soprano Mariana Ramirez who was a bit lost up there on the stage since she was slightly younger than the others and had never been a resident artist before. She did have a bachelor's degree in music performance, however, and had sung leading roles in small local opera companies. In fact, she had just auditioned for LA Opera's newly created Domingo-Thornton Young Artist Program, which will enable participants to spend two or three years developing their talents before seeking management and embarking on their careers.

Ramariz, 24, sang "Batti, batti, o bel Masetto" from "Don Giovanni." As Zerlina, she was begging Masetto for his forgiveness. "I'd like to hear more colors," Bonney told her when she had finished. "Who is it that you are singing for? Integrate the character into your own personality. It was acted. Come up here and be you."

According to Rebecca Bowne, president of the Opera League of Los Angeles, the event was a success. That's the view she espoused even before the master class began since 150 tickets had been sold to Opera League members and students from local music schools. There was no profit, but then again, the class was not a fundraiser – it was an educational event. The organization was responsible for renting the hall, tuning the piano, and paying for liability insurance, etc. Of primary interest, a videographer was hired to make DVDs for each of the participating artists so that they could remember what the wise experienced sage had told them.

"I learned a lot," said Jessica Swink at the reception at the end of the evening. "She [Barbara Bonney] nailed the right points, to always have that top front forward position."

“From observing the other participants, I could really see the changes as a result of what Ms. Bonney had suggested,” Mariana Ramirez said. “When I sang, I could feel the changes, but they were not as easy for me to detect as when I could watch what she was saying to the other people and then hear and see the results.”

“She made a marked improvement in each of the singers – either their presentation or sound,” said Andrew Wilkowske. “She did it in a way that was completely nonthreatening. That doesn’t happen very often in a master class, especially when you’re talking to someone about technique, which is a touchy subject. There was no ego involved. She was respectful, and she was honestly trying to help us. It was a great experience, not only for the audience, but for us, too.”

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In Her Own Words (Sidebar)

By Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

Barbara Bonney is an internationally-acclaimed opera star and recitalist who sings regularly at the Met, the Wiener Staatsoper, the Royal Opera in Covent Garden, the Salzburg Festival and with most of the major orchestras throughout the world. She certainly doesn’t have to give master classes. She gives them because she wants to.

One of her main goals is to help young university and conservatory-trained singers grow, as she did the end of March in Los Angeles. She is also on a mission to expand the classical music listener base, to secure the longevity of classical music for future generations. Toward that end, she prefers to give her master classes in front of an audience rather than in the confines of a conservatory room.

“I have given classes without an audience but do not find them to be as useful,” she told OperaOnline.us a few hours before her master class in LA. “I prefer giving classes in front of an audience because that is ultimately the environment in which these young singers will be performing. It is also very important to give information to the audience, so that they have a better understanding of what they are listening to. I focus on whatever aspect the singer might need in order to improve. There is not so much a method to my classes or my approach to technique as simply a desire to help the student on their way to vocal discovery and improvement.”

Bonney started teaching in Tanglewood about 12 years ago. Since then, she has given classes at Juilliard, the Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst in Wien and the Royal Academy of Music in London, just to name a few. She has taught in San Francisco, Cleveland, Amsterdam, Australia and Japan.

“Teaching has become an integral element in my own development as a singer and gives me the greatest sense of satisfaction knowing that I can help other singers by passing on

the information I have gathered throughout my career, including the myriad mistakes I have made,” she said.

SOMETHING DIFFERENT

The final words Ms. Bonney uttered at the conclusion of the LA master class were: “Classical music is struggling. Let’s keep it going.”

As a result, she has chosen to do something quite different from the rest of her colleagues. She conducts master classes – for amateurs. At the time we spoke to her, one such class was scheduled to take place in San Francisco the latter part of April.

In a 2004 article in Melbourne’s newspaper, *The Age*, Bonney is quoted as having said that she wanted “to encourage the amateur to make music in the home . . . to offset the fact that it’s not being taught anymore in the schools.” She said she never planned on becoming a singer but thought that she was going to be a music therapist. “I believe I’ve gone through all of this in order to help others and pass it on,” she said.

But how does one conduct a master class for amateurs?

Bonney explained to *OperaOnline.us* that the people who want to participate in the amateur classes put their names in a hat. She pulls out a name; the person selected goes onstage and sings a song. She works with the amateur for about 10 minutes and then goes on to the next. “I simply try to encourage amateurs to have fun with music and give them tips and pointers as to how to improve their singing. The beauty of these classes is that they sing because they love it,” she said.

A STORY TOO GOOD TO PASS UP

“I once taught an amateur class in Wigmore Hall in London,” she continued. “One of the students was so nervous that he could not get any sound out at all and ended up with his back to the audience in a most dreadful state of panic and confusion. He was practically sobbing with terror. I lay down on the floor with him, hugged and stroked him and sang with him, all in front of a transfixed audience, until he felt safe enough to actually make some sounds that resembled singing. By the end of the session, he was standing up and singing pretty well. As a result, he has decided to pursue a career in singing, and has just been accepted at Trinity College in London as a performance major. This remains my greatest achievement.”