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Baritone Paul Armin Edelmann shares some lessons learned on the road to San Diego Opera.

By Carol Jean Delmar  
OperaOnline.us  
April 1, 2006

They say that life often imitates art, and that may very well be true for Austrian baritone Paul Armin Edelmann and Canadian soprano Sipiwe McKenzie. They met last season while rehearsing for a production of San Diego Opera's "Die Fledermaus." She was Adele, he was Dr. Falke, and the two have been a couple ever since. She also had the opportunity to meet Paul's brother Peter, because he was singing the role of Gabriel von Eisenstein. This month, the duo -- Paul and Sipiwe -- are returning to the scene of the crime to rehearse for San Diego Opera's production of "Die Zauberflöte," to be performed at the San Diego Civic Theatre in May.

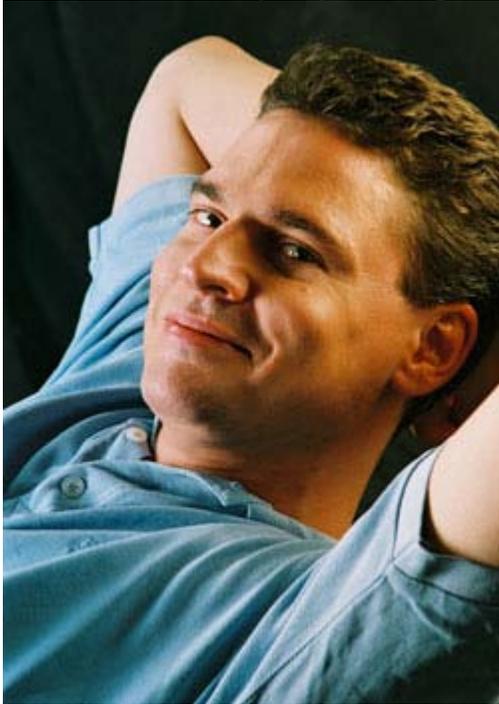
"It's a dream to return to the city where our love began, and to be a love couple onstage as well as off. It's a gift . . . a miracle," Edelmann relayed to OperaOnline.us by telephone from Vienna in February.

This is the first time the duo, who recently announced their engagement, will portray Papageno and Papagena on the same stage at the same time. Papageno is Paul Armin Edelmann's signature role, he says, having played the role in the past at the Wiener Staatsoper, and recently in a new production at the Wiener Volksoper as well. "I was in the finals of a singing competition when Ioan Holender [director of the Vienna State Opera], who was on the jury, first heard me sing," Edelmann recalls. "A year later, he'd learned that I was in Vienna and was freelancing. He liked my voice and asked me if I wanted to sing Papageno at the Staatsoper, and of course, I said yes."

Edelmann's road to the San Diego Opera Company was quite different though. "When Paul auditioned for me [in Vienna], it was an 'information audition,' as I did not have anything specific in mind for him at the time," said Ian Campbell, San Diego Opera's general director. "But as soon as I heard him sing, it was apparent that his warm, lyric

baritone would be perfect for Papageno. The fact that he was extremely musical, personable and charming only added to the impression he made.”

The San Diego Opera is the only company in the United States where Edelman has performed, although he did sing in New York City’s Lincoln Center Festival in 2001, in a production of Salvatore Sciarrino’s “Luci mie traditrici” from the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels. And, yes, he confirms that he would like to sing at other American companies, including the Met. He explains that the more a singer performs in new European productions, the more desirable that singer becomes to companies in the U.S. ”It has to do with my way in Europe,” he says.



Edelman, 37, is not like most young singers who are often unprepared for what the operatic world might thrust upon their shoulders. Born and raised in Vienna, Austria, he is the son of the great bass, Kammersänger Otto Edelman, who died in 2003. “When your father is a singer, you always hear music in the background,” Edelman recounts in English, but with a slight German/Austrian accent. “My mother took me to the theater very early on because my father was singing. And I always listened to him training and vocalizing in the living room, so I was in contact with music and singing at a very young age. My mother always tells me that I was singing earlier than I was talking. I started playing piano before having any training. The piano lessons started later. I just loved music from the very beginning.”

#### ON AN EARLY MUSIC EDUCATION

At the age of 9, his parents took him to be “tested” by the music staff of the Wiener Sängerknaben (the Vienna Boys’ Choir). They liked his voice and made him a chorister. That’s when he began his early education as a singer and musician, studied piano and began to read music, he says. He no longer attended the local public Volksschule (elementary school), but transferred to the private boarding school contained within the

auspices of the Wiener Sängerknaben. The school year was about six or seven months long, and the boys didn't go to school during the touring season. "In this short time, you cannot learn what a normal 9-year-old boy would learn in a regular public school," Edelman says. "I think negatively about this type of boarding school system because it's much too early [for a child] to be parted from the family." Edelman remained with the Vienna Boys' Choir for four years, then graduated from a regular Gymnasium (high school) at 18, and spent five years preparing to become an opera singer at the Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst in Wien (the University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna). And through all of those years, his father, who was a professor at the university, remained his teacher.

"I knew Otto Edelman during his years at the Met," said Marianne Flettner, artistic administrator of the San Diego Opera. "He was the best Ochs in 'Rosenkavalier' and an outstanding Hans Sachs in 'Meistersinger.' When I visited him in Vienna, his children were still small, and he was a very proud father. At Christmas, he would send me a card with a picture of the boys dressed in their Wiener Sängerknaben uniforms. Too bad he didn't live long enough to see them in 'Fledermaus' last season and Paul as Papageno this year."

#### ON THE GERMAN CONTRACT SYSTEM

After graduating from the university in 1992, Edelman's first contract as an opera singer was a fixed engagement at the Stadttheater Koblenz in Germany, where he performed in musicals, operettas and operas. "It was perfect to start there to get a routine, experience and a big repertory," he says. But after five years and 27 roles under his belt, he decided to become a freelance artist, and has never looked back. "I love the freedom," he says. "These fest contracts in Germany or Austria or Switzerland get worse and worse. The singers have to sing more-and-more performances, but also more from the repertory. They are forced to sing often over their capabilities. When they audition, they [the directors] say to the singers, 'We like your voice very much, but can you sing also this Verdi, this Wagner or something else?' A lot of young singers think that if they say no, they will not get the contract. They are sometimes forced to sing too dramatic material, which is often very dangerous for the voice. You have to be very secure as a young singer to defend yourself from these dangers. When you are in the contract, they want you to do everything. But when you get problems two or three years later, they just drop you like nothing. And I think as a freelance singer, you have much more control about what you do and don't do, and also more respect. When you come as a guest to a theater, you are respected more than when you are a part of a theater. So I don't want that anymore. For the beginning years, it was good, but then I decided to have my freedom."

Edelman believes that the Americans have upped the Europeans in certain respects. "I like the efficiency of the work in the United States because you rehearse for a shorter time, but you really work every day," he says. "You have three weeks and then the production goes out. But here in Europe, it's often seven weeks, and it's just like a workshop, and I don't like that. The time goes by and often you have three working days in a week, but you have to pay for the hotel or apartment in a city. That does not happen

in the United States. You work every day; the production goes out and then you go home. It is much more efficient and professional, I think.”



#### ON THE ROLE OF AGENTS

Edelmann also has strong opinions about agents. “I have several agents,” he says. “I’m not connected with one specific agency. That’s a special European thing. I think that in the United States, singers have to sign with one agency, which doesn’t exist in Europe. You can do it, but you don’t have to. I decided to work with a few, especially German and Austrian agencies. They work for me worldwide. Each agency has different contacts: One works more with theaters in Italy, one with those in Germany, and another, with South America. When you sign with one [agency], you actually close doors, which is not very smart, I think.”

As to the differences between European and American agencies, Edelmann believes that the American agencies might be more efficient. “My experiences with European agents are probably not the same as the experiences Americans have with American agents,” he explains. “The European agents get called by theaters to fill a special part. The agents then call several singers and say, ‘Do you have time? Do you have time?’ And then the one who has time and is accepted by the theater [management] gets the job. I think that in America they do things differently. I think that they [the agents] call [the theater directors] and say, ‘Do you have work for my singer?’ They don’t do that so much in Europe; so probably, the American way is more efficient.”

#### ON MODERNIZING OPERA

As for his opinion on the current trend to update and modernize operatic productions, he discloses: “I was in one production of ‘Der Freischütz’ that was a nightmare. It was a

weird production without taste, without respect for the music and story. I just lost the mood to sing as soon as I came onstage. I'm not very conservative, but I like naturalism. I don't believe you attract younger audiences by doing less naturalistic productions. I think you need directors who have a sense for dramatic effect. Opera lives from that, and not just from this minimalism and intellectual stuff. I think the audience shouldn't just sit in the theater and have to think about what the director meant. I think the best effect is when you sit in a theater and you forget about the theater and just dive into the story, like at a good movie. You forget about time, and then after the movie is over, you say, 'Oh, I was sitting in the cinema,' because you were involved in the story. I think that's how it should be with opera, too -- when you just lose the control. As long as the audience sits there and says, 'Oh, he meant this; oh, that's what this symbol meant' -- I think that is not the goal of opera. It shouldn't be."

Edelmann says that he tries to portray his characters realistically. "I like the comic buffo parts very much," he says. "But I like completely different roles as well, like Count Almaviva in 'Le Nozze di Figaro' and Eugene Onegin. The Count is a totally different type of character -- arrogant and powerful. With him, I can show a different part of my personality."

#### ON DEALING WITH A CHANGING VOICE

As for his voice, he says that maintaining a solid vocal technique involves work, flexibility and good coaching. "I had much more from nature," he says, "but the voice develops. I cannot sing my arias or parts like I did 10 years ago because the voice is different -- bigger. I have to adjust the technique to the development of my voice. It's not like you learn a technique and then do it your whole life the same way. That's why a tennis player needs always a coach. . . . You need somebody who really knows your voice and tells you 'Oh, you have to take care not to sing this too full, you're a little low, you have to support the voice more,' or 'you have tension in the body and need to relax it more.'"

Even how a singer projects his or her voice out into the theater varies. "I sing lighter in a big house," Edelmann explains. "In smaller houses I don't hear my voice as well, so I sometimes push." In many instances, whether or not an orchestra drowns out a singer's voice depends on the conductor, he says. "The development of the profession is sad because I cannot compare it to the times of my father. As a singer you had totally different possibilities and much more support from the conductors then. You could work much more with them. Today they come so late that you are just happy to be together. It's not like working together like my father did it with Karajan -- actually studying the parts with the conductor, which is a totally different thing when you are standing onstage and the conductor really knows you, really knows how you sing and notices also when you have problems and is there to support you. That is very rare today; of course, it happens, but it is very rare. Nowadays, the sound of the orchestra is often much more important to the conductors than supporting the singers. The orchestra should accompany the voice, not the other way. The Leoncavallo orchestra is very strong, so you need a conductor who really knows the music perfectly and really reduces the volume. In 'Pagliacci,' all the strings are playing the melody with the singers, so you can be covered

by the orchestra all the time, which is not possible, for example, with Tchaikovsky. With Tchaikovsky, the singer has the melody, and the orchestra is just the carpet under it. It's a totally different orchestration. And with Tchaikovsky, you have much less of a problem with loud orchestras than with the verismo of Mascagni, Leoncavallo and Puccini. You need really good maestri."

#### PHILOSOPHICAL ABOUT HIS FUTURE

Edelmann is very optimistic about the future. His fiancée, Sipiwe McKenzie, will move to Vienna this summer when both have more time. She has had a fixed contract with the Stadttheater Nürnberg since the year 2000, but will only freelance next season. Edelmann said (in February) that he planned to join her in Parma, Italy for her stint as Papagena at the Teatro Regio di Parma. And after their dual engagement in San Diego, she will join him in Tokyo, where he is set to reprise his role as Dr. Falke, with a cast that includes Wolfgang Brendel, Nancy Gustafson and Sergei Leiferkus.

"Now we try to get contracts together," Edelmann says. "When not [possible], each of us supports the other. I believe that in a relationship, you should try to be together as much as possible. In this profession, you are often apart, so when it is possible to be together and live life together, we want to do that; and with singers, you can only do that when you are both freelancing."

#### ON THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY

According to Edelmann, he and his fiancée are very atypical singers. He says that his singing colleagues usually only talk about opera, singing and their careers. "But we have some friends that don't have any idea about opera, and we never talk about it," he says. "We live a normal life. We go to pop concerts and listen to pop music as well as classical. We are not typical serious opera singers. So often when you meet opera singers and you ask them how they are, they tell you about their calendar or schedule, and I find that really ridiculous. I always say then, 'I ask you how you are, not where you sing.' It's inbred in our society today that when you work and earn a lot of money, you are successful and somehow happy. I haven't seen that with a lot of singers. They are often successful, but a lot of them have no home and no family because they invest everything in the career. I learned from my dad that a family and a home are very important, because one day, the career is over, and then what do you do? You listen to your records? Then nothing is left. So I think you cannot invest everything in your career. You have to live your life, too. I think a good balance between professional work, which I love, and family is important. Some weeks you should forget that you are a singer and just be a person and enjoy life."

But how do two opera singers live together under one roof? Do they need separate rooms at opposite ends of the house to work on their roles? Not according to Edelmann, who has turned part of his parents' Vienna Woods home into a separate apartment, where he plans to live with his new bride. "I prefer to study at home, she doesn't," he says. "She goes to the theater or to the coach and sings there, and she doesn't sing at home. Some days the coach comes to me, or I go to the coach or listen to records. She sings most of the time in the theater because she wants to be a private person at home."

Edelmann's brother and sister live near him in Vienna, but in the city. His brother Peter, 43, is also a baritone, but his voice is lower and more dramatic, Edelmann says. "My voice is ideal for Mozart, Rossini and Donizetti." Besides Papageno, roles in his repertoire include: Figaro in Rossini's "Il Barbiere di Siviglia," Guglielmo in Mozart's "Così Fan Tutte," Dr. Malatesta in Donizetti's "Don Pasquale," Valentin in Gounod's "Faust," and the list goes on. He has performed in numerous concerts and Lieder recitals in theaters including the Wiener Konzerthaus and Musikverein, the Salzburger Festspielhaus, and venues in the United States, sometimes double billing with his brother. Most recently, he sang Mozart and Salieri under the baton of Maestro Nikolaus Harnoncourt at the Musikverein.

As for his performance as Papageno with the San Diego Opera, he concludes: "It [San Diego Opera] is a wonderful place with wonderful people. Of course, we work, but it's nearly like being on a holiday."

