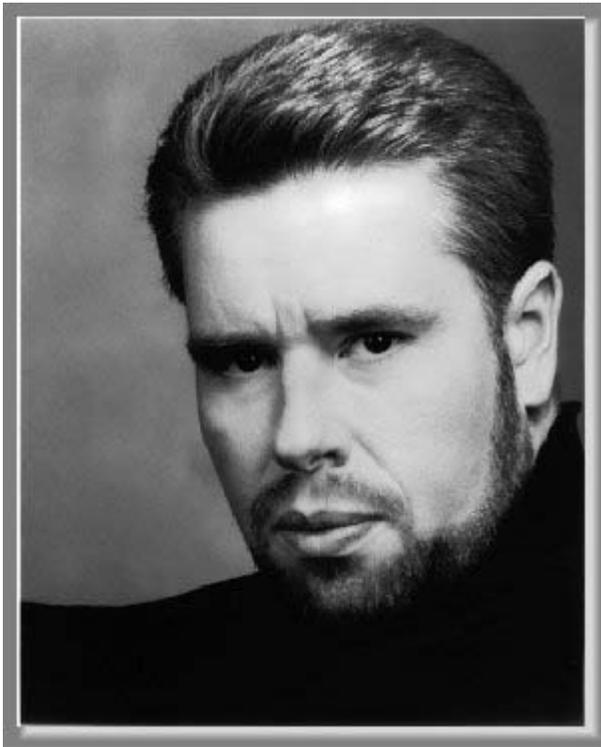




OperaOnline.us
Worldwide reviews for a worldwide audience

He Is Doing It ‘His’ Way, With A Little Help From His Friends.



By Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us
February 1, 2006

James Creswell, 36, fell in love with opera while singing in the Seattle Opera Company’s production of Wagner’s “Götterdämmerung.” He was in the chorus. “From then on I was hooked,” he says. “That’s when I decided I wanted to take voice lessons and absolutely pursue it. That’s when I fell in love with opera.”

And pursue it he did. “Jim is a great colleague,” said acclaimed baritone Rod Gilfry recently, “always kind, perfectly prepared, a real team player. He’s blessed with a first-rate voice that he guides with a wonderful singing technique. I see great things in his future.”

One might say that “Jim”, as he is known to his colleagues, discovered his voice later than most. He was studying studio engineering/sound mixing at Shoreline Community College in Seattle when he joined the college’s chorus, auditioned for the Seattle Opera Company, and was accepted. He was 20 years old then and had very little vocal experience, but did play guitar in a rock band back in his high school days. As a child, he would have never thought of singing as a career, for he was somewhat intimidated by his sisters’ beautiful voices. “I think I was a little bit shy because they were so good,” he remembers.

But once he became a member of the Seattle Opera Company’s chorus, everything changed. The company’s deceased former associate conductor and chorus master, Hans Wolf, had recommended that he study with singer Robert Peterson, who helped him develop “a good fundamental sound,” he says. After four years of training, he began auditioning and singing with the Hawaii Opera Theatre, the Central City Opera in Colorado, the Portland Opera Company in Oregon, and the Wolf Trap Opera in Vienna, Virginia. And then he met a husband-and-wife team who were to change the course of his career: Doris and Richard Cross. They heard him sing with the Central City Opera Company and persuaded him to study on a scholarship at Yale University. Doris Yarick-Cross was [and is] the director of Yale’s opera program; and her husband, Richard Cross, is a professor at Yale and Juilliard. Intensive study coupled with apprenticeship summer programs at Wolf Trap and the Opera Theatre of St. Louis followed. Music history and theory; Russian, Italian, French and German diction; song repertoire; acting and movement – James Creswell devoted three arduous years honing his craft. “I was a fanatic,” he recalls. Afterward, he returned to the Opera Theatre of St. Louis to portray Lodovico in Verdi’s “Otello,” a stint at Opera North as Sarastro in “Die Zauberflöte.” Then in 2000 it was off to the San Francisco Opera’s Merola Program, where he sang Sparafucile in Verdi’s “Rigoletto”, and finally, three years as a resident artist with the Los Angeles Opera.

“Peter Somogye, who was then working at LA Opera [as artistic coordinator], heard me sing in San Francisco while I was in the Merola Program,” Creswell recalls. “Soon [after completion of the program], he called me in New York, where I was living, and asked me if I could come out and sing for Mr. Domingo on the stage [of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion at the Music Center]. And so I did actually – I flew out the next morning, sang for Plácido and got the job as a resident artist. I was up at 4 in the morning and singing for Plácido at 5 or 6 in the evening, exhausted. He was cordial and made me feel at ease because he understands how it feels to be in a similar situation.”

As part of Los Angeles Opera’s Resident Artist Program, Creswell has appeared as Antonio in Mozart’s “Le Nozze di Figaro,” Achilla in Handel’s “Giulio Cesare,” Angelotti in Puccini’s “Tosca,” the Speaker in Mozart’s “Die Zauberflöte” and Basilio in

Rossini's "Il Barbiere di Siviglia." Since completing the program, he has returned to Los Angeles Opera to play other roles, including Tituel in this season's production of Wagner's "Parsifal," with Plácido Domingo as Parsifal, Matti Salminen as Gurnemanz, Albert Hohmen as Amfortas and Hartmut Welker as Klingsor. "It's wonderful to be able to sing with these amazing singers," he says, naming each artist, plus bass Samuel Ramey. "Singing with a stronger player improves your game."

He credits Los Angeles Opera's artistic director Edgar Baitzel for guiding his career and acting as a mentor. "He helped me attain a scholarship to the Goethe Institute while I was a resident artist, so I went to Berlin for a month in the summer and worked on my German, and the following year, I went back to audition."

The result: an engagement with the Komische Oper Berlin to play Sarastro in the company's production of "Die Zauberflöte," and a position as a member of the company for the 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 seasons as well. "You know, LA Opera is a big company and they hire big stars," Creswell explains with a deep melodious speaking voice. "The way a lot of singers do it, and the way I decided to do it as well, is to come over here, sing bigger roles in a smaller house and increase my repertoire." This season, Creswell is singing Figaro in "Die Hochzeit des Figaro," Prince Gremin in Tchaikovsky's "Eugene Onegin," General Polkan in Rimsky-Korsakov's "Le Coq d'Or," Pope in Shostakovich's "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk," Eremit in Weber's "Der Freischütz," and Toante in a new production of Handel's "Oreste."

"I first heard Jim when coming through LA to hear some of the resident artists," says artist manager Robert Gilder of Robert Gilder & Co., which is based in London with offices in New York and Paris. Gilder told OperaOnline.us, "I was immediately struck by the beauty of the voice, by its focus and the musicality of the man behind it. I became very interested in representing him because of his level headed attitude toward life and work, his evident rapport with all of his colleagues, and the fact that he wanted to work more in Europe. I have never regretted my decision."

According to Nicholas Netos, the U.S. representative in the New York office, "Without management and advice, some young singers could get themselves into trouble. They could sing roles that are inappropriate [for their voices] or commit to companies that expect them to sing, for example, "Aida" one night and "Lucia" the next, thus causing undue wear-and-tear on their voices. Jim has been nurtured, and he has been smart about what he has accepted."

As for his vocal technique, Creswell says: "My voice was pretty natural. I just had to get it out there more and develop it. Everybody has a different language about how the voice works. That's why different teachers work better with certain students. I think that most good singers end up doing it in about the same way. It's just the way they think about it to get there [that might be different]. I think about some of the things that my first teacher, Robert Peterson, told me over-and-over again, and I'm just understanding some of them now. I just keep learning."

In an era when good acting proves advantageous in every young singer's career, Creswell admits that at first, he was shy about it. "I had a better handle on the singing," he says. "But I've done a lot of acting and singing since then, and now I like to act. I see how one can enhance the other."

And speaking of compatibility of another sort, Jim was recently married, and even that, he owes to Los Angeles Opera. He and his wife, Norma, a linguist and teacher born in Madrid and raised in Seville, met when both were working on one of LA Opera's productions of Verdi's "La Traviata." "She was a supernumerary," he says. "She is a huge opera fan, and she was just doing it for fun. We met there and fell in love. She is very supportive and likes to accompany me wherever I go. I really got lucky. Norma is an amazing woman. We share our love of opera together, and it's really perfect. She is the love of my life."

As for the future he says: "I'm not sure how long I'll stay at this theater. My goal is to eventually freelance, but being fixed at one house also has its advantages. It [the Komische Oper Berlin] is a good opera company in a good location. Being based in Berlin, I find that people actually come through here and hear you. I would eventually like to work at all the big houses here, but it takes time. Germany is really a good place for a singer to increase his or her repertoire – there are three opera houses here in Berlin [the Deutsche Oper Berlin; the Staatsoper Unter den Linden, also known as the Berlin State Opera; and the Komische Opera Berlin]. The opportunities are many."

[Sidebar Overture: I first heard James Creswell sing at a musicale presented by the Opera League of Los Angeles, an organization that supports the Los Angeles Opera Company with funding and volunteerism. It also enables opera enthusiasts the opportunity to socialize together and hear the new crop of talented singers in the company's Resident Artist Program. Mr. Creswell had a beautiful deep bass voice, and I wanted to hear more. Next I heard him sing Leporello's "Catalogue Song" from Mozart's "Don Giovanni" at an outdoor summer concert sponsored by the City of Beverly Hills Community Services Department. The Beverly Hills Civic Center Plaza was packed that evening. By the time I arrived there, it was standing room only. And somewhere along the way, he participated in two master classes that I attended: one given by mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves, and one by baritone Rod Gilfry. What struck me most about this young bass was, of course, the voice. But I could also see in this talented singer's young eyes, a seriousness that led me to believe he had the determination to forge a successful career in opera. So last month, when I began writing for OperaOnline.us, I knew that I wanted to interview this artist to follow the path of his career. I caught up with him (by telephone) between his exhausting rehearsal and performance schedule at the Komische Oper Berlin, where he is currently playing Figaro in Mozart's "Le Nozze di Figaro," or rather, Mozart's "Die Hochzeit des Figaro," since he is singing the opera in German. We were both tired, or at least, I was. For me, it was midnight. For him, nine a.m.]



Komische Oper Berlin