



Features

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## Screen Tests

Four years into the Met's *Live in HD* initiative, BARRY SINGER looks at the results, the implications and the future of the project's success.



Marquee of Bardavon, a venue for the Met simulcasts in Poughkeepsie, NY  
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**Fleming in *Armida*: ready for her close-up**

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Fleming in *Armida*: ready for her close-up

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Take a Sunday evening last February during the just concluded season. On this night, *Carmen* returns to the Pollak for an encore broadcast, after practically selling out the 700-seat auditorium "live" just a month ago. The incongruities are delectable — precisely what the Met was aiming for when it launched *Live in HD*, bringing opera onscreen to the masses. But where are the surfers? One scans the crowd in search of a single damp, tousled head, only to confront a sea of grey and/or hairless noggins. At length, a tiny youth cluster is actually spotted, huddled in hoodies, dead center — Monmouth students all, as it turns out (Class FS403, mostly: Spanish Literature of the 18th and 19th Centuries). This broadcast is their homework assignment (compare and contrast Bizet's *Carmen* and Zorrilla's *Don Juan*, two rebellious Spanish characters of the Romantic period).

For just about everyone in attendance, though — old and young, opera veterans and surf wannabes alike — *Carmen* proves a revelation, as breathtaking in HD as it was onstage at the Met. All eyes are riveted by Elina Garanca's savagely seductive Carmen, by Richard Eyre's gripping new staging, and by the cinematic eloquence of it all as translated to the wide screen.

In fact, one might say that *Carmen* is an HD apotheosis — perhaps the most perfect expression yet of the ever-evolving aesthetic behind the Met's now-four-year-old broadcast

The distance between the Metropolitan Opera and MTV can be measured these days along a tangent that runs straight through the New Jersey-shore college campus of Monmouth University — the school's Pollak Theatre, to be precise, just blocks from the beach. Here, where surfers outnumber opera-lovers by a teeming majority and MTV's skeezy hit reality show *Jersey Shore* is an inescapable point of reference, one may nevertheless commune with *The Met: Live in HD*.

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**Elina Garanca and Roberto Alagna, stars of the 2009 *Live in HD* simulcast of *Carmen***

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Elina Garanca and Roberto Alagna, stars of the 2009 *Live in HD* simulcast of *Carmen*

© Beth Bergman 2010

venture. The relentless close-ups, a series signature, never have seemed more revealing than when lingering on Garanca in vivid reaction shots. The swirling camera moves never have felt more organic, more fluidly in tune with the music and the drama, practically disappearing into them. Even the backstage intermission sequences that have made demi-screen-stars out of stagehands, wardrobe mistresses and prop masters do not shatter the dramatic mood. Few audience members can tear themselves away during the first intermission, and those who do during the second eagerly race back to their seats, quite unlike many of their audience peers at the Met proper.

The ovation at evening's end is fervent and prolonged. Moreover, it appears to be echoed worldwide. According to the Met, the numbers for *The Met: Live in HD* are impressive and growing — from six transmissions in 2006–07, the series' debut season, to nine in 2009–10, with eleven scheduled for next year; from 248 venues worldwide to more than 1,200 today; from paid attendance of 325,000 for the first season to more than 2.2 million this year, so far. Unsurprisingly, seventy-two percent of the tickets sold are for the "live" simulcasts, which makes the 350-plus turnout at Monmouth University for *Carmen's* rebroadcast that much more impressive. The Met says that the enterprise is in the black. Revenue reports are not available for last season, but according to an article in *The New York Times* in February 2009, the HD program generated a small profit of roughly \$1 million in the 2008–09 season — not a life-saving new revenue source when you consider that the Met's budget at that time was \$271 million, but a sizable sliver of good news in a still bleak financial universe.

"It has been successful beyond what anyone imagined, including me," insists the Met's general manager, Peter Gelb, when interviewed a short time after *Carmen* in his office at the Met. "Yet I believe it can be even more successful. As more and more theaters in Europe and America are digitally enabled, there will be an even greater audience for these shows. U.S. ticket sales can still be two or three times what they are, and in Europe — in territories like Spain, where we have eager opera audiences — we haven't even launched yet."

It costs about \$1 million for the Met to broadcast an HD transmission. The money goes primarily for labor, equipment and technology, both in the opera house and out along the satellite trail, along with a hefty dose for advertising. Almost beyond price, though, is the preparation and then the blink-of-an-eye choices that make each broadcast both an idealized replica of what you see and hear in the house and a wholly new screen creation.



**Patricia Racette sang Cio-Cio-San in the Met's 2009 HD simulcast of *Madama Butterfly***

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Patricia Racette sang Cio-Cio-San in the Met's 2009 HD simulcast of *Madama Butterfly*

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Gary Halvorson knows all about that. One of three camera directors who handle HD for the Met (the others are Brian Large and Barbara Willis Sweete), Halvorson was the first hired by Gelb to direct the series premiere, Julie Taymor's *The Magic Flute*. A onetime piano student, who cut his teeth score-reading for the legendary television director Kirk Browning on PBS's *Great Performances*, Halvorson went on to spend years in Hollywood directing episodes of *Friends*, *Everybody Loves Raymond* and *Two and a Half Men*, before coming to the Met.

"The old telecasts were shot using static camera positions," notes Halvorson, by phone from L.A. — "six or seven angles, all out in the house. You were not to be seen by the audience, the camera couldn't move, you couldn't make a sound. I knew there had to be a way to move a camera that didn't impact the audience. Peter and I had our first meeting, and we both got so excited, because we had the same idea. We were totally in agreement. Together, we found ways to make that moving camera disappear. It all comes from sports, of course — the cranes, the gyros. Peter also advocated breaking the fourth wall, which was vital to me too — getting the reverse shots that remind us we're in this wonderful opera house. 'What can we show you that you couldn't see if you were here?' — that's what we're looking for. Opera is an event. It's important to keep that

feeling."

After Peter Gelb took over as general manager, he stated as his goal putting an end to the static, "park and bark" performing style that he felt weighed down so many Met productions. Longtime Met operagoers argued that this characterization was at best inaccurate and at worst unfair. The success of HD has, however, contributed forcefully to the perception of a reorientation under Gelb. "Most great singers don't want to just stand and sing, most want to act," he insists. "And it's not that they have to be skinny. Even in a 4,000-seat theater, clichéd, mannered acting is noticed. You cannot separate great singing from great acting in great opera."

"You know, it's a lot of work to sing," laughs Halvorson. "And when you push that camera in close, those singers have to be aware — not only to hit their notes and their marks, to nail stuff vocally and technically, but also that they're being shot in close-up. That is a really big deal. I make huge adjustments for every singer depending on how good or bad they are at that."

"One of the misunderstandings about HD," Gelb nevertheless maintains, "is that we're somehow trying to change performances for the camera. We're not. Quite frankly, we don't have the time. I have never said to any stage director, 'Think about HD when you design your production.' The fact of the matter is, some things work better on camera, and some things work better onstage, but everything we do is to make it the best it can be onstage and then adapt the cameras to the action. That's why our broadcasts are so successful, ironically — because we're not trying to create some pseudo-film experience. What we're presenting is reportage of live events. No broadcast has ever been camera-perfect. Something always goes wrong. Still, like great athletes, when the pressure is at its height, the truly great artists — and we have a lot of them — rise to the occasion. They deliver their best performances when the cameras are on them."

Patricia Racette is one of those artists. Her onstage brilliance at the Met has been captured onscreen twice in HD, as the lead in *Madama Butterfly* and as Ellen Orford in *Peter Grimes*. (She has also hosted broadcasts on occasion.) "Gone are the days of non-subtleties!" Racette exults. "I get to be super specific, and the camera captures my most intricate reactions. Cameras close to my face are not really a problem — it's that camera at my feet, scurrying back and forth along the footlights. I find those angles the least flattering. Being shot from below is just a whole other ballgame. I much prefer being shot 'head-on' — up close and very personal."



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"They all watch the tapes," points out Halvorson. "I encourage that greatly. So does Peter. It protects them but also helps them. At the dress rehearsal, we make what is called a three-camera-lighting-scratch tape, so I can prepare a camera script. We go into the house with three cameras — left side, center and right. A week later, there's a performance, usually on a Tuesday or Wednesday, before the Saturday transmission. That's our lone rehearsal. We go in with all fourteen cameras and try all those angles I've been sketching in my notebook. Elina Garanca watched her *Carmen* rehearsal tapes, and we discussed everything — certain angles that she suggested I shift so they would be more flattering for her, adjustments that she proposed making to accommodate things that I couldn't do with the camera. She's not the only one. Renée Fleming usually gives me lots of input. Anna Netrebko, too. And it's amazing, between my scratch test and the live broadcast, how much they all adjust their performance for the cameras."

Will opera, as some purists fear, devolve into a screen-friendly art form where the preeminence of the human voice is devalued? For now, close-ups aside, there is a monochromatic flatness to the vocal mix in HD that pales beside the vibrancy of live sound. Technology will doubtless erase this disparity one day. HD nevertheless seems a long shot for supplanting altogether the glory of a live voice singing — at least so long as there are audiences with ears discriminating enough to tell the difference.

For any listener, though, HD is already way more affordable than the real thing. The cost of individual tickets will go up eleven percent at the Met next season, rising from the company's current \$20–\$375 range to \$25–\$420. Subscription tickets will climb an average of six percent. Overall attendance has also risen in the Gelb era, but skeptics wonder whether the success of twenty-dollar-a-ticket HD only robs the Met of ticket-buyers in the long term.

Gelb scoffs at this notion. "Our success in HD has, in fact, had a positive effect not only on the Met but on opera generally around the world. This is not just my bold claim. OPERA America recently reported that they have been surveying opera companies across the country, and the vast majority of them believe they have been helped by our HD broadcasts."

Marc A. Scorca, president and CEO of OPERA America, essentially confirms this, with a caveat. "We have not actually done a formal survey," he says, "though we do plan to. We have, however, received significant positive anecdotal response from a lot of the mid-size and smaller companies."

Still, *The New York Times* last year quoted at least one regional general manager, Reed Smith of Tri-Cities Opera in Binghamton, New York, to the effect that "two busloads of new subscribers who had planned to travel from Ithaca and Syracuse canceled their subscriptions," deciding instead, according to Smith, that "they would just go to the movies to see their opera. [The Met] is invading our space," Smith fumed, "to put it bluntly."

"I'm sure there are dissenting opinions," concedes Gelb. "But the majority believe HD has had a positive impact on their attendance. We just had a meeting of the European Broadcasting Union here at the Met, and a number of the European radio broadcasters said that they felt that radio listenership for opera is going up in Europe, and they believe it is because of the higher profile opera has achieved over the last couple of years. Now, you'd have to have your head in the sand if you didn't notice that it's the Met that is leading this charge. The Met has become again, as it once was, the leading force in opera, worldwide."

Still, after the projector has been switched off at the Pollak Theatre on the Jersey shore and the *Carmen* applause has died away, the words of two ladies overheard in an aisle echo in memory. "Wow," said the first, "I've never seen opera that close." "Me neither," said the second. "It's spoiled me. I think I'm gonna cut down on my Met subscription but get better seats — you know, go less but sit closer." "Me too," nodded the other. "Me too." □

BARRY SINGER *is writing a new book, to be published next year, entitled Churchill Style: The Art of Being Winston Churchill.*