

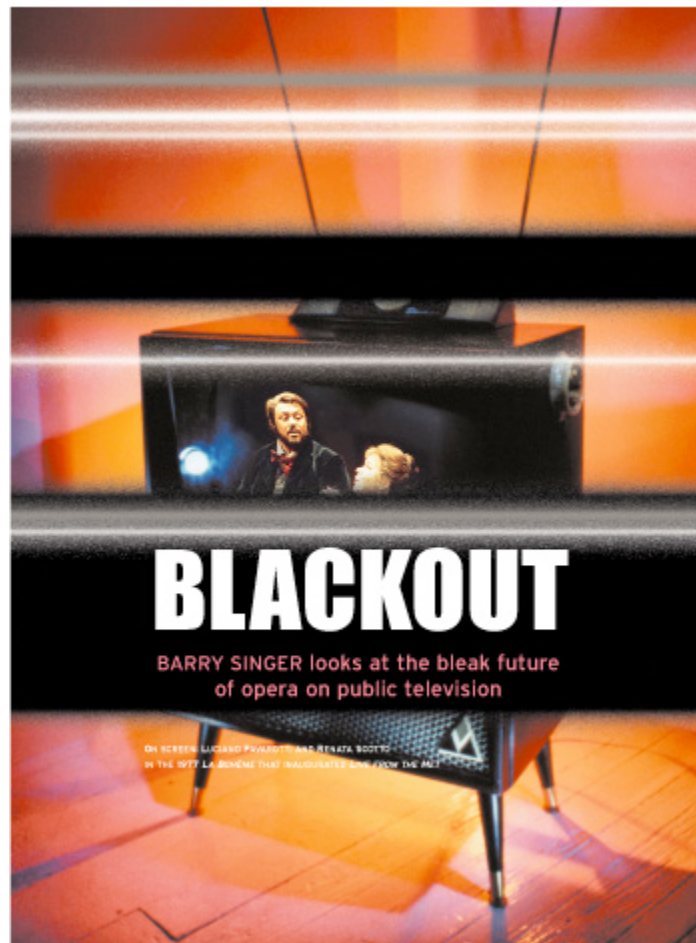


Features

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Blackout

Will opera disappear from public TV? **BARRY SINGER** reports.



Ask William Mason, general director of Lyric Opera of Chicago, about the future of opera on public television, and you get a one-word answer:

“Yeeesh.”

Why mince words?

The prospect is not a pretty one for full-length opera on PBS. Shadowed by ever-diminishing ratings, opera telecasts are being chased even from the not-for-profit airwaves. This coming season, the most familiar, and once constant, "content providers" -- the Metropolitan and New York City Operas, respectively -- find their programming plans in disarray. After twenty-five years of televising three to four operas a year, the Met has only one scheduled for 2002-2003 -- a December 26 telecast of *Fidelio*, taped two years ago in the production's first season. City Opera, which yearly, over the same twenty-five-year period, had broadcast at least one opera (and on occasion even two) via *Live from Lincoln Center* over PBS, still has not reached agreement (as of mid-December) with its two broadcasting partners on a suitable opera to show this season.



IN 1999, THE MET
TELECAST
NOZZE DI FIGARO
WITH CECILIA BARTOLI

PBS has meanwhile begun celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of *Great Performances*, its pioneering performing-arts series, which, over the years, has presented an average of at least four operas and many opera-related programs each season. The season's anniversary schedule calls for just one -- and a half: a December 25 airing of *The Merry Widow*, taped at San Francisco Opera, supplemented by a spring special starring Renée Fleming and Bryn Terfel, entitled *Music Under the*

Stars.

"Remember," notes Jac Venza, *Great Performances*'s longtime executive producer who created the series, "originally we were on every week, with about thirty-five different programs in a fifty-two week season. We now have maybe ten programs, and four or five are pledge shows. That's just a function of our diminishing funds -- a reflection of the lesser amounts now going to the NEA in general, plus all that money we lost directly from our one-time sponsor, Exxon. Still, I don't feel that depressed. Back in the twentieth century, just getting a camera into an opera house was a big deal."

The very first opera telecast in this country was beamed over an experimental station belonging to NBC, W2XBS, in November 1939, with scenes from *Carmen* performed by a twelve-year-old soprano and a nine-year-old coloratura, together dubbed the Miniature Opera Company. All of opera telecasting thereafter could be viewed as one tortuous variation on a miniaturized opera theme. Throughout the latter-1940s, *Opening Night from the Met* broadcasts on ABC were marred by

inadequate camera work and lighting that reduced the singers -- as opera news wrote at the time -- "to pinpricks on the screen." During the 1950s, studio telecasts became the vogue -- abridged, all-English-language, small-screen productions pioneered by CBS's *Opera Television Theater* and perfected by *NBC Opera Theatre* under the innovative auspices of music and artistic director Peter Herman Adler, producer Samuel Chotzinoff and director Kirk Browning.

"We used to cut the operas all the time," acknowledges Browning, who remains active as a director of opera telecasts to this day. "I don't think opera is sacrosanct. I think it's much fairer to be honest and say we're just doing scenes, so that the piece works on the medium, rather than reproduce an opera the way it was onstage. Television is a different space, it's a different scale.



FRANCO ZEFFIRELLI'S LAVISH 1987 *TURANDOT* WAS AIRED ON
LIVE FROM THE MET IN 1988, WITH EVA MARTON AND PLÁCIDO DOMINGO

"I'm not sure that television audiences are willing to give themselves to an opera anymore," Browning adds, pensively. "The television set itself no longer has any authority. God, I remember in the beginning I used to turn the set on just to look at the test pattern! It was such a magical instrument. People are so insulated today from that whole miracle. I don't know what we can do to get it back."

Browning's observation is an interesting one. Could it be that opera no longer works on television because viewers no longer watch television with the sense of wonder and concentration that opera particularly demands?

The first *Live from Lincoln Center* telecast on PBS -- the New York Philharmonic

from the stage of Avery Fisher Hall -- appeared on television screens across America in January 1976, followed three months later by Douglas Moore's *The Ballad of Baby Doe* (directed by Browning), live from City Opera's State Theater home. The next year, *Live from the Met* was inaugurated, with a *La Bohème* that cost roughly \$275,000 to televise and wound up netting PBS an astonishing \$1 million during the network's fund-raising drive, after drawing one of PBS's largest audiences ever, more than one-and-a-half million viewers in New York City alone.

"I believe that first *Bohème* from the Met, with Pavarotti, remains the highest-rated opera on television," notes John Goberman, the original, and still reigning, executive producer of *Live from Lincoln Center*. "I hesitate to say what our lowest was. There have been some broadcasts over the years where we'd have been better served to have made videocassettes and just sent them to the people who actually wound up watching."

But why should Lincoln Center and PBS care about ratings? Don't their not-for-profit programming concerns transcend such commercial considerations?

Hardly, says Goberman. "In a way, we're denying the use of our airwaves to a gigantic number of people by not offering something that more will find appealing," he insists. "I'm not necessarily talking about pandering. I just feel it's my obligation to deal *realistically* with our potential audience. I wouldn't put an opera on that I thought would appeal to practically no one, or even an opera people thought they might want to see but if they saw it, I thought they would hate it. Is *Porgy and Bess* an easier sell than *Dead Man Walking*? Yes. With television, you have to keep in mind that you're dealing with access to the greatest number of people. In the same way that you wouldn't put on a specialized opera in Madison Square Garden or at Yankee Stadium, there is the same sort of calculation with what we're doing here. The difference between television and being present in the opera house is you can turn your television set off. We are a guest in somebody's living room, and we are the weakest link in the room."

For Paul Kellogg, City Opera's general and artistic director, the constricting exigencies governing opera telecasts are a constant source of exasperation. "Our problem with *Live from Lincoln Center*," he says, "is that we're entirely dependent on what we can program from 8 to 11 on a Wednesday night in whatever season we're in, fitting into a slot that does not conflict with PBS fund-raising activities. We can't put on *Il Trittico*, which runs longer than three hours. And, not surprisingly, Lincoln Center and *Live from Lincoln Center* and PBS are all interested in works that have a very broad public appeal.

"When I first came here, six years ago, John Goberman said we would have the final word on what we would broadcast," Kellogg maintains. "Well, we did wind up broadcasting a couple of things that were not of huge public interest -- *Lizzie Borden* and *Paul Bunyan*. I was idealistic in those days. I still am, but back then I certainly thought these operas would have an audience, that a loyal audience that turned on

Live from Lincoln Center for whatever was on would become involved. But that is not how this works. So, increasingly, what television audiences are asking for -- and this is being responded to by the network and the sponsors and the whole enterprise of *Live from Lincoln Center*-- are operas that have a name and a broad public appeal. I don't use the word 'warhorses.' I would say, things that are generally known to a wide public."

Kellogg pauses, with resignation. "This year there's just nothing in our repertory that works. I would love to broadcast *Dead Man Walking*. It is and would be TV-friendly. But we are one of many constituents who make up Lincoln Center. And *Live from Lincoln Center* now determines what it is that it wants to broadcast."



NYCO'S *PORGY AND BESS*, WHICH WAS TELEVIEWED IN 2002, LIVE FROM LINCOLN CENTER'S TWENTY-FIFTH BROADCAST SEASON

Live from Lincoln Center's principal corporate sponsor is the insurance company MetLife. Speaking to MetLife spokesperson Sibyl Jacobson on the subject of opera funding and public television is not an encouraging experience. "We are not supporters of opera on television," Jacobson announces bluntly. "We are supporters of *Live from Lincoln Center*. Opera just happens to be part of the programming package. I don't think that we would ever support a purely opera show on television."

Perhaps no opera-company director in America has approached television more adventurously than has David Gockley at Houston Grand Opera. Gockley installed television monitors in his balconies, providing close-ups to the cheap seats; he

telecast his operas on wide screens, for free, on the plaza outside the opera house. Yet, where PBS is concerned, Gockley remains uncharacteristically wary.

"With all the bang that PBS needs to get for their funders, opera is a tough thing to sell," he points out. "A full-length opera takes up an entire evening that PBS can otherwise fill showing some wonderful science programs and antique auctions."

Is Gockley suggesting that opera could one day soon be squeezed off the PBS airwaves altogether? "No," he replies, "opera will fitfully continue on PBS, but I don't think as frequently as it has. And every once in a while a regional company like ourselves will slip something in, as we did last year with *Little Women*. This year we're also premiering *The Little Prince*, which I think would be stupendous on TV. What PBS said to us -- which they didn't say in years past when they had more money -- was, 'We'll consider it if you guys deliver the majority of the funding.' That puts us in the situation of having to go wring our donors for another quarter of a million dollars, donors who are already strapped because of the general economic condition of the country. Donors," Gockley adds, "can also be very sensitive to ratings."

The Metropolitan Opera never has been part of *Live from Lincoln Center*. From the beginning, it opted to go its own way, televising its own operas and raising its own funds to do so. Most of the funding today for television at the Met comes from the company's endowment income. There are no living, big private funders who support television broadcasts regularly, nor are there any large corporate sponsors. Texaco used to support the Met's television efforts, but over time, they cut back to radio only.

Of course, any endowment is dependent on the stock market. Wall Street's recent plunges help explain why there will be only one Metropolitan Opera telecast this season, down from two last year and the preceding average yearly complement of four.

One of the Met's major television funders in the past was Sybil Harrington, who died in 1998. Harrington had very strong ideas about the kinds of opera she liked: traditional, representational productions set in their original time and place. While she did leave behind a fund for continued television broadcasting, Harrington's money may be used only for productions that posthumously meet her exacting tastes. On Harrington's dime, for example, the Met has taped a *Die Meistersinger* for future telecast. It also intends later this year to tape *Ariadne auf Naxos*. Until the economy improves, though, these programs will remain "in inventory." Despite paying out the bulk of the estimated \$1 million or so that it takes to record an opera for television, the Met will keep these operas off the air and thereby off its books until a more propitious financial moment.

The Met would not comment on the record about any of this. Its management did, however, consider our inquiry very carefully, and for a good long time, before first commenting unofficially, then finally demurring.

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BS's growing lack of interest in full-length opera does inspire one very important question. Are there alternatives to public television for opera telecasting?

"We are moving into an era of home theater," notes David Gockley, as if offering up a potential consolation prize. "Maybe opera will find itself a bit more impacting in that context of surround-sound, high definition, big screens, than it has on the little screen. We are also in discussions right now with Andante, the new classical-music website. They're interested in video as well audio product."

Paul Kellogg, too, has been surfing Andante. "I would love to see a channel available nationwide -- on cable or satellite -- that features classical music, including opera," he readily acknowledges. "Do I see it happening? No. Not now. But with websites like Andante, it could be that TV will one day be sidestepped altogether by internet technology. Even the national unions -- not necessarily the locals, but at least the nationals -- are acknowledging the advantages of streaming and are making concessions."

Venza notes, "The fact that people are getting accustomed to DVDs means that we're seeing a little bit more money coming in for opera telecasting and the like, because of the potential for later home-DVD sales. With income coming not solely from getting all the eyeballs in the country watching at the same time, investors will have a longer range and greater potential to earn back their investment."

Goberman, however, scoffs at this notion. "Have they figured out the cost of such DVDs?" he asks. "I would think it's staggering. I don't think we're in any different position than we were when we failed with videocassettes. Very little of *Live from Lincoln Center* is on DVD or cassette. Why? Because by the time you pay everybody involved, you're sunk."

The pertinence of this harsh economic truth resonates most poignantly just now for William Mason and Lyric Opera of Chicago. After thirty years broadcasting over radio station WFMT, the company recently announced that the tradition was at an end. "Our radio thing had gotten to the point where it was necessary to charge sponsors more than the market will bear," Mason explains. "Sponsorship ran about \$50,000 per broadcast. To buy a local opera broadcast for that kind of money and have such a limited audience for your advertising makes no sense. Our gut feeling was that we could find sponsors for \$10,000 to \$15,000, but that required that our personnel be willing to take some fairly substantial reductions. More than 80 percent of our radio expense was for performers and orchestra.

"Some of the major orchestras who've been off the air for a while are now accepting even a pittance in sponsorship to get their product back on radio. There's no reason in Chicago why we should be paying \$165 an hour when the Big Five orchestras [New

York Philharmonic, Cleveland Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Chicago Symphony] are paying \$30. It's a shame, but that's the reality, at least as it exists at this moment. To get back on the air, our unions will have to accept concessions."

And what about television? Mason laughs. "With so many other things vying for one's attention, particularly in this economy, I don't see any reason to go charging off trying to get us on television. I find it's one thing to listen to an opera on the radio. Watching opera on TV, I've gotta say, has never given me, personally, the same kind of satisfaction. I don't think it translates well.

"Besides, you're spending a million dollars to telecast a full-length opera. How many people are going to watch you who weren't predisposed to watch already? Honestly -- how many new people will tune in? And how can you hope to capture for them the experience of being in an opera house? I hate to sound like whatever I'm sounding like. There's no question some people have been turned on to opera by seeing it on TV. But I doubt it's greater than the number who've been turned on by hearing a broadcast on radio."

Kellogg, for one, disagrees. "TV broadcasts are very important to us, because they awaken a nationwide awareness of what we're doing. It's also important because there is a hunger for opera in the nation at large. As opportunities for satisfying that hunger are increasingly diminished, our telecasts become more necessary. It's important for the health of opera generally that there be operas telecast, and I mean whole operas, not just excerpts and acts."

But Mason remains unconvinced. "It just seems to me," he concludes, "if you want to bring new audiences to opera, you're better off taking that million dollars of television money and giving 10,000 people a hundred bucks to come sit through an opera. At least they'd get the total experience. They won't just be looking at a box some fifteen inches wide and asking, 'So, this is opera?'"

BARRY SINGER *writes about music and theater for The New York Times. His new book, Ever After: The Last Years of Musical Theater and Beyond, will be published this fall by Applause Books.*

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BLACKOUT

BARRY SINGER looks at the bleak future of opera on public television

In 1999, the Met telecast *Nozze di Figaro* with Cecilia Bartoli

On screen: Luciano Pavarotti and Renata Scotto in the 1977 *La Bohème* that inaugurated *Live from the Met*

Franco Zeffirelli's lavish 1987 *Turandot* was aired on *Live from the Met* in 1988, with Eva Marton and Plácido Domingo

John Gوبرman:

"The difference between television and

being present in the opera house is you can turn your television set off.

We are a guest in somebody's living room,

and we are the weakest link in the room."

NYCO's *Porgy and Bess*, which was televised in 2002, *Live from Lincoln Center's* twenty-fifth broadcast season