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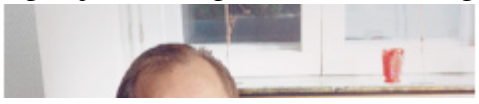
Fearless

Thomas Quasthoff has a thriving career as one of classical music's most in-demand recitalists. Now, the bass-baritone has decided that it's time to meet the daunting challenges of the opera stage. BARRY SINGER reports.

BY BARRY SINGER

Thomas Quasthoff sits enthroned in a straightback chair atop a steel riser, centerstage, at Carnegie Hall, his bearing regal, his feet crossed and swinging mischievously. Behind him, Daniel Barenboim is struggling to see the music splayed across his Steinway grand. Not enough overhead light. Before this sound-check can begin, just hours prior to their Carnegie recital with soprano Angela Denoke, the piano will have to be repositioned.



QUASTHOFF PHOTOGRAPHED IN DETMOLD, GERMANY, BY HANSGEORG SCHÖNER

Quickly Quasthoff is out of his chair and down off the riser, which is nearly as tall as he is. Wickedly grinning, he kicks the riser forward with one foot, then with his behind, then with his foot and again with his behind, thrusting the riser closer to the lip of the stage, making way for Barenboim's piano.

"Tommy!" Barenboim calls out, in mock horror and genuine bemusement. "You're not in the union, for God's sake!"

Encountering German bass-baritone Thomas Quasthoff in person for the first time is an experience to remember. Two things guarantee this. The first is Quasthoff's voice -- a wondrous instrument -- resonant, lustrous, even when deployed sotto voce for a sound-check. The second is Quasthoff's stunning physical disability -- at forty-three, he stands perhaps four feet tall, the tragic consequence of his mother's having taken the drug thalidomide while pregnant with him.

Factor in Quasthoff's vivid personality -- spontaneous, often (the word is inescapable) impish -- and you have the ingredients for quite an explosive first impression. Still, it is the dichotomy between Quasthoff's stature and the dimension and depth of his sound that is most astonishing. How can a singer of such physical proportions project a voice of such power and beauty?

Quasthoff will later shrug this question off with characteristic bluntness: "My head is normal size, and my chest is no smaller than most. Who needs a big body to make a big sound?"

The concert at Carnegie Hall is a gamble, in part, that pays off -- Hugo Wolf's *Italienisches Liederbuch*, programmed in its entirety. A series of vivid, often melodramatic musical vignettes, these savvy old Italian folk lyrics, translated into German by the now-forgotten Nobel Prize-winning author, Paul Heyse, trace the ebb and flow of passion, betrayal and love with stiletto-sharp piquancy. It is easy to see why Quasthoff is drawn to them. Seated before his music stand, elevated above the blonde, willowy Denoke, he is a romantic leading man, navigating, as both actor and singer, the twists and turns of Wolf's eloquently quixotic word painting. Modulating his voice in exquisite conversational tones, Quasthoff draws the sold-out Carnegie Hall audience into a cocoon of intimacy, shattering the mood periodically with outrageous mugging. The audience loves it -- almost as much, seemingly, as the ebullient singer himself.

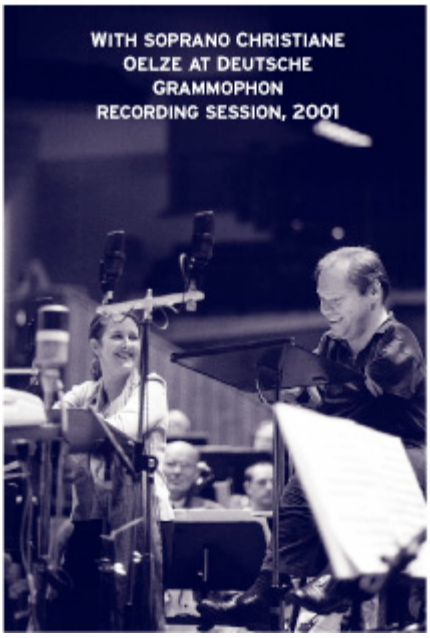
"Yesterday I was very tired, believe me," Quasthoff allows a day later, speaking comfortably in slightly accented English, curled up on a sofa in the home of a friend with whom he regularly stays while visiting New York. "A concert of that quality is heavy stuff. I take a lot of positive power out of the music, though. My energy level is very high. It's like a physical training, like training to run the 100-meter dash."

"He lives alone," remarks Quasthoff's host, "in a new house that he himself found, ready-made with a heated pool that has a lid on it lifted by pulleys and weights."

"I swim," Quasthoff confirms. "I also smoke. I'm Häagen-Dazs-addicted. And I love a good glass of red wine, but only after a performance. With the new house, I have to move more, which is great! I had huge problems with my right leg, which are now gone because of my physical activity and training. I'll never become an athlete. I'm too lazy. But I do take a bit more care now."

Quasthoff was born in Hildesheim, Germany, in 1959. "You know my childhood was not as the childhood of others," he freely acknowledges. "When I was born, my foot was facing backwards, so I spent one-and-a-half years in a cast to move the foot back into the right position. Then I was in a school, a residential institution, where they didn't separate the brain-diseased from the physically diseased. So, for the first three years, including kindergarten, I slept with fifteen little kids in one room, and 70 percent of them were severely brain-damaged. They cried in the night -- it was really a very hard time. Normal childhood started for me only after my parents finally took me out and put me into a regular school, which was also very difficult. Children are very honest. And they can be very brutal. My parents took me everywhere, though -- my older brother, too. I was not hidden away."

Quasthoff pauses, smiling. "It was so nice to be home. That was from age seven. Even then, you realize people look at you, make stupid comments. My puberty also was a very complicated time. Everybody got girlfriends except me. So I became the school clown. I think I played the role, it wasn't really imposed on me, though I guess there was a little bit of both. I always had nice friends, however, who were interested in me as a human being, and they said, 'Tommy, why are you doing this?' Eventually



I stopped."

At thirteen, Quasthoff received his first voice lesson. Quasthoff's father had harbored singing aspirations of his own. "But, you know, it was the time after the Second World War, when every theater in Germany was damaged or destroyed. Still, I think my father wouldn't have had the mental strength to do this. So he moved on to another career. Did he pour his ambitions into me? Not in a bad way. He never said, 'Okay, I wasn't able to handle this, so you have to.' Never. I was a lazy guy in the beginning. At thirteen, it's just a game. I learned what I had to learn, and that's all. But I never heard from my parents, 'Do more.'

"I had grown up with music. I started very early to listen to lieder, and I had my heroes, like Fischer-Dieskau and, of course, Schwarzkopf. Well, I was never really a Schwarzkopf fan, but I listened to the records. Why not? Because I think -- and this is very subjective, what I'm saying -- that she never let the music naturally flow into her. It was always kind of an artificial singing. I didn't trust her emotions very much. For me, music has to be natural, not mannered, and she always seemed to me a 'made' artist, made by her husband [record producer Walter Legge]. If you see her now, she is a bad person, really she is. Sad, it's sad to watch. She must be very, very lonely; otherwise it is just not possible that you are like this. I saw master classes of hers, and she has a lot of experience, of course, but I think to be a good teacher means you explore the individual abilities of a student. You can't just say, 'Okay, I have my technique, and I'm going to put it over you like a complete body condom.' You have to listen to the individual voice. Every singer I've heard who studied with her sounds the same. And I think that's wrong."

Quasthoff's father approached the head of the chamber-music department at the NDR (North German Broadcasting) network in Hamburg about lessons for his son. Quasthoff laughs now at the memory.

"The man's first reaction was 'What? Thirteen! And a disabled boy! What do you want from me? Okay, you've got five minutes,' he finally said. 'I haven't more time.' He wound up prolonging those five minutes to two hours. And I did everything -- imitations. Yodeling! 'You have to do something with this little boy,' he told my father in the end. 'I have a young lady who is, I think, a very good teacher.' Quasthoff nods. "I wound up studying with her in Hannover for seventeen years."

Charlotte Lehmann instructed her young pupil rigorously. "I also worked with her husband on musicology, music theory. All private. Four, five, six, seven hours some days. It was quite intense but also very, very nice, because I had much more time to

develop, as compared with university study."

Still, at eighteen, Quasthoff yearned to enter a conservatory. His application was rejected out of hand. "It's a fact, it's true, it's been written everywhere, that I was not admitted to conservatory because I could not play an instrument due to my disability," he says. "They didn't even give me the chance to sing for them. So I studied law. Well, I can now be honest about that: it's also been written everywhere that I studied law. I really used those three years to freak out a little bit and enjoy my life, because I'd been permanently at home with my very protective parents -- 'Where are you going? With who? When are you coming home?' So I spent three years where I just closed the door and went wherever I liked with whomever I liked. It was a three-year party."

Between partying, Quasthoff discovered jazz. "For a while, I even sang with a jazz group, touring all over, some of the worst toilets you ever saw. I listened to Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan and, especially, Frank Sinatra." (At this, Quasthoff croons, unprompted, a verse from "One for My Baby" in spot-on Sinatra-ese. "My Way," the Sinatra anthem, has served as an encore in his recitals for years.)

"I just spoke with the people at Carnegie Hall about a big-band jazz concert that I will definitely do," he interjects. "I don't know when, but it will happen -- popular American songs with a big band and maybe some strings. Yeah! Very exciting. I know I can do both sides. And who else can? Tell me. Even the recordings of Bryn Terfel, which I love very, very much -- but it's an opera voice he's using. You have to use a totally different voice to sing this music. Excuse me when I say this, but the worst example of all are the jazz recordings of Te Kanawa. Wee-oh!"

The arc of Quasthoff's ascendancy as a world-class singer was gradual yet, of course, spectacular. In 1988, at the age of twenty-nine, he won first prize in the ARD International Music Competition in Munich. Shortly thereafter, he ended his studies with Lehmann for good. "It's important to reach that point when you say, 'I want to take care of my own life, find my own interpretations, make my own mistakes," he reflects. "After the 1988 competition, I decided this. I worked two more years and then left in 1990. I haven't had a lesson with a teacher since."

Still, Quasthoff did hold on to his day job as a popular Hannover radio announcer for six more years. In 1996, he won the Shostakovich Prize in Moscow and Hamada Trust/Scotsman Festival Prize in Edinburgh. In 1997, he made his debut with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, singing in Haydn's *The Creation* under guest conductor Simon Rattle. The following year, he appeared with the New York Philharmonic for the first time, performing Mahler's *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* under Colin Davis. In 1999, Deutsche Grammophon signed him to an exclusive contract. His first recording for them, *Wunderhorn*, with Anne Sofie von Otter and the Berlin Philharmonic conducted by Claudio Abbado, won a Grammy Award.

"To realize the level that I've reached, to work with people like Maazel and Barenboim and Simon Rattle and Colin Davis and Kurt Masur -- that's great," he grins. "If you have a disability, you've got to be a little bit better than the others. Because if you're on the same level, they'll take the better-looking one -- or at least the not-disabled."

Since 1996, Quasthoff has also been a professor in the vocal department of the Music Academy in Detmold, Germany, maintaining an exhausting schedule. "For the first three years, I had to juggle eighty concerts a year with my teaching. I was a total crazy person. I'm still at the university a minimum of two weeks every month -- which, by the way, also gives me the chance to say, 'Sorry, I'm not available, I have to teach.'"

Change, however, at least geographically, is imminent. "If everything goes as I expect," says Quasthoff, "I will soon be moving my teaching base to Berlin. Why? If you go in winter from Hannover to Detmold, it takes two-and-a-half hours by train. The station does not have elevators or escalators, just slippery, ice-covered stairs. To get to Berlin, I enter a fast train that has two steps, very easy, and I'm in Berlin in one-and-a-half hours. That's one thing. Secondly, Detmold is a very nice, small, provincial, high-level university, but I need a good quality of art, music, theater, and you cannot find this in Detmold. Third point -- as a very successful artist in a very small university, you have no privacy. I need my privacy. Plus, I'm close to my favorite band, the Berlin Philharmonic. Simon Rattle is, I think, a revolutionary, and it's very nice to be part of that. The orchestra adores him. It's pure fun.

"I'm cutting back on my concertizing," Quasthoff adds suddenly. "Forty concerts a year is quite enough. I want to do this maybe until I'm sixty, who knows? I think, on the technical level, I'm not too much in danger. In fact, I have the feeling that my voice is growing into bigger roles. I didn't do opera before, because I thought, I want to be ready to do this -- vocally and mentally -- my psyche had to be ready. I also didn't want my disability to be too much in the view of people. I didn't want to invoke this medical sensation, that this disabled person is doing opera. But I've had many friends tell me it's time."

In December 1999, Quasthoff was touring with Rattle and the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, performing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. The tour's final performance was in London. "That's when Simon said to me, 'Tommy, we have to do opera together.' I looked at him -- 'Are you kidding?' 'You are invited to do Don Fernando in *Fidelio* with me in Salzburg,' he said. 'Well,' I said, 'if you trust me, I will do it.'" (Quasthoff had recorded the role with Colin Davis in 1995.)

Quasthoff's opera debut, with Rattle conducting the Berlin Philharmonic, occurs this month: four performances of *Fidelio*-- two in Salzburg at the Grosses Festspielhaus, then two in concert in Berlin at the Philharmonie. "When that was officially announced," Quasthoff adds, "the Vienna State Opera contacted me and invited me to do, in 2004, Amfortas in *Parsifal*. They also asked me to do *Rigoletto*, but I said,

'Sorry. Not my role.'"

The question hangs in the room for a moment, unasked. "Typecasting," says Quasthoff finally. "I know that putting on a costume is different than concertizing. But I can move *and* sing. Plus, Amfortas -- he's wounded, he will not dance around. In 2006, I'm going to do *Falstaff* in concert with the Cleveland Orchestra. If I have a stage director who really likes me as a person and an artist, there will be other operas onstage.

"Look," says Quasthoff, pushing himself to the very edge of the sofa on which he has been lounging. "I've listened to great singers produce beautiful sounds, and I've been so bored. 'But what do you have to say?' I find myself thinking. I also want to hear an ugly note, if it's necessary. *Only* beauty is *boring*. There has got to be more than that. Why use your voice permanently in the same way -- smoothly? Ahh! I want to be thrilled, shocked! Like my life! It's a film, so far, my life. A very nice movie. And I hope it will never stop."

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*.

Choice Cuts

Evening Star, a program of German Romantic arias led with pellucid grace by Christian Thielemann (DG 471493), is essential Quasthoff. Other Quasthoff must-haves are his discs of Brahms and Liszt lieder (DG 463183) and Schubert's _Schwanengesang_ (DG 471030), both with pianist Justus Zeyen, and Mahler's _Des Knaben Wunderhorn_, with Claudio Abbado pacing Quasthoff and Anne Sofie von Otter (DG 259646). Von Otter and Abbado are also Quasthoff's colleagues on his newest release, a program of Schubert songs orchestrated by a range of composers from Britten to Offenbach (DG 471586). Other Quasthoff performances of note are Schubert's _Winterreise_, with Charles Spencer (RCA 63147) and _Mozart Arias_, led by Jörg Faerber (RCA 61428). F.P.D.

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With soprano Christiane Oelze at Deutsche Grammophon recording session, 2Quasthoff photographed in Detmold, Germany, by Hansgeorg Schöner

In Carnegie Hall recital of Wolf lieder, 2002

"If you have a disability, you've got to be a little bit better than the others.

Because if you're on the same level, they'll take the better-looking one."

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BY BARRY SINGER

Thomas Quasthoff's life and career have been marked by incredible daring. Now he takes his biggest gamble yet by moving into opera