



Voices From the Pit

*Members of the renowned Lyric Opera Orchestra
talk about their greatest joys and challenges*

Edited by Roger Pines



ALL PHOTOS: TODD ROSENBERG



Das Rheingold bows



Throughout each Lyric season, every performance is immeasurably enhanced and enriched by the contribution of all members of the company’s orchestra. Year after year, in one formidable work after another, they combine authoritative style with impressive technical prowess and emotional commitment. Here are some of their voices, giving us a first-hand look at life in the orchestra pit.

WHAT ELEMENTS OF PLAYING OPERATIC REPERTOIRE ARE MOST SATISFYING TO YOU?



ANDREW HESSE

LEWIS KIRK, Assistant Principal Bassoon/Contrabassoon
Telling a story through music.

Something about the pit is also part of this: down there in the dark, we’re not the center of attention; we’re not under hot lights and the audience’s gaze, so it’s easier to relax and give in to the flow of the music and the performance.

It’s also a little more “human” in the pit than onstage, because we have the freedom to smile at a colleague, share a quiet joke, wriggle in our chairs, scratch an itch, etc. Playing great opera with a great orchestra, in a wonderful house, and with thrilling, world-class singers – it’s about as good as it gets!



PREMAN TILSON, Bassoon

I’ve always had a special love for accompanying other musicians. There’s something deeply satisfying, both musically and emotionally, about supporting someone who’s giving a great performance.

It entails a sense of community and of letting go of the ego to be submerged in something much larger. This, of course, happens in purely orchestral playing as well, but it’s an even larger experience with opera.



ANDREW HESSE

TERESA FREAM, Violin

The emotional content of operatic music is unlike any other – I especially love the through-composed works in that respect. It’s like a long, uninterrupted ride through the whole range of the human experience.

DEL HALL



Operatic repertoire is satisfying in many ways but, to me, there are three standout elements: emotion, the combined efforts of many artists, and the sharing of what is best in mankind.

To be able to add to what happens onstage with nuance and color is the orchestra's mission. The understanding by the audience of what each scene means is enhanced by what the orchestra plays. This gives a deeper meaning to the plot and helps the listener know the story and the characters better.

Opera combines the efforts of many people and many different skills: acting, singing, orchestra, chorus, costumes, lighting, conducting, stagehands, stage manager, dressers, dance, wigs, make-up, props, etc. All of these elements are in concert with one another during each performance, and that is an awesome experience for everyone who attends or anyone who participates in the show.

Opera is one art form that shows the best of what mankind can offer. Opera can mimic all human experiences and uplifts those who partake in it. What more could you ask for?

CHARLENE ZIMMERMAN, *Principal Clarinet*

ANDREW HESSE



JEREMY MOELLER,
Principal Trombone

I find the chamber-ensemble aspect of performing operatic repertoire most satisfying. It's different from playing in a symphony

orchestra, in that the communication between the stage and the orchestra pit is the most important part of what we do. We work best when we play like a large chamber ensemble, working with the singing and acting onstage. We're all a part of something bigger than ourselves.

ANN PALEN,
Violin

One of the most satisfying elements of playing opera occurs when everyone in the orchestra is listening intently to the stage, so that when we need to adjust to the singer, the entire orchestra



DEVON CASS

of 80-plus musicians catches the singer perfectly. I've been in the orchestra for 25 years and that still amazes me.

FRANK BABBITT, *Viola*

I've always found the rehearsal process, especially the period when the singers join the orchestra, to be satisfying in a different way from actual performances. I'll never forget watching Natalie Dessay during the *Sitzprobe* [the singers' first rehearsal with the orchestra] for *Alcina*, practically dancing during her arias, moving, conducting herself as we played together for the first time. Seeing the great singers at close range, going about their work, has always been inspiring and rewarding to me.



TERRI VAN VALKINBURGH,
Assistant Principal Viola

I like being a part of a large ensemble (meaning orchestra, chorus, solo voices, sometimes backstage musicians, stage crew, et al.) creating a story that, when done well, takes the audience to a

whole new place and time, all while physically remaining in the middle of downtown Chicago. Also, the characters usually make such horrible life choices that I feel a bit better about myself by the end of the evening.



DEVON CASS



MELISSA TRIER KIRK, *Viola*

As a string player, I have learned so much from listening to and accompanying the magnificent singers we work with at Lyric. My first two seasons included

performances by Jon Vickers, Plácido Domingo, Mirella Freni, Luciano Pavarotti, and Alfredo Kraus. I was relatively new to opera at the time and quickly fell in love with the beauty and magic of the repertoire and the operatic voice.

MARK BRANDFONBRENER, Cello

I've always found the collaborative elements most exciting in working in the opera world. In addition to the large orchestra, we regularly come in contact with conductors and their assistants, singers, dancers, stage managers, costumers, stagehands, designers, choreographers, and the many support staff that manage the company and raise the money to keep it all going. I also enjoy the many languages we hear in the operas and around the opera house.



DEVON CASS

HOW DO YOU PREPARE FOR AN OPERA YOU'VE DONE BEFORE?



ANDREW HESSE

CHANNING P. PHILBRICK, Co-Assistant Principal Trumpet

The amazing music librarians at Lyric provide each orchestra member with practice parts for each opera. I keep my practice parts for future reference. When the opera comes up the second time for me, I refer to my practice part in which I've made tempo, dynamic, mute choices, and other indications that are very helpful.



WILLIAM CERNOTA, Cello

Handing off and receiving melodies from the pit to the stage and stage to the pit is most satisfying to me. The feeling is one of connection and mutual support – a visceral reaction with a palpable sense of energy-transfer at its strongest. This leaves a lasting impression even for performing outside of the pit. The vocal resonance of a fine bass, baritone, or tenor is directly related to the resonance from a cello. Movement throughout the vocal range is a natural correspondence to movement throughout the range of the cello. Vocal articulations correspond to the attack of the bow on the string.



VILMA JOVAISA

ALYCE JOHNSON, Flute/Piccolo

I really enjoy going to the piano run-throughs at Lyric. In our orchestra, the piccolo player typically sits in the middle, just below the stage, so I'm

not able to see anything onstage during the opera. The way we interpret our music is directly affected by the actions onstage. Seeing each opera's piano run-through helps me to understand which style and emotion would be appropriate at any given time in the production.

LEWIS KIRK, Assistant Principal Bassoon/Contrabassoon

Having the music to be able to practice the hard bits. If you've done it before, you have a pretty good idea what is needed in terms of reeds (I'm a woodwind player). *Eugene Onegin* requires a different sound than, say, *The Magic Flute*, and the reed you use has a lot to do with that.

PAULI EWING, Violin

Preparing for a *Ring* cycle is a little different than for most operas. It takes tons of practice for the massive amount of very difficult music balanced with careful calculation to conserve and have enough energy for performances. For me it's a bit like going into training. Stretching, meditation, practicing, swimming, eating well and preparing food to take to performances.



HOW DO YOU PREPARE AN OPERA YOU'RE DOING FOR THE FIRST TIME?

DIONNE JACKSON, Assistant Principal Flute

I always go to the library to get a score and a video if possible, because knowing the story line helps me to prepare the music and it gives me a better understanding of how the music serves the story line.



TODD ROSENBERG

AMY HESS, Viola



When I'm preparing a new opera (which is essentially all of them for me), I start by watching a video and following along in my part. If there aren't English subtitles, I'm also juggling a libretto!

This gives me a good overview of the story and how the violas fit into the storytelling. I'll continue to reference a recording or video throughout my practice to make sure I have correct tempi, and for

complicated passages I'll look at a score so I make sure I know exactly how my part fits in with the other instruments.

IAN HALLAS, *Double Bass*

I usually have everything I'm going to practice laid out the day before, and I've found that especially helpful when dealing with a 40- or 50-page part. Otherwise, it would be extremely overwhelming to simply start at page one every day and try to work through the book – even when not everything needs



DEL HALL

prioritizing the truly difficult or exposed passages.

to be looked at. On top of that, it can be hard to remember that a few of these productions need to be under the fingers at all times. It really comes down to organization and

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE DEBUTING CONDUCTORS AND SINGERS TO KNOW ABOUT THIS ORCHESTRA, IN ORDER TO ENSURE A FRUITFUL COLLABORATION?



ANDREW HESSE

WILLIAM DENTON, *Principal Trumpet*

I think the singers realize that they aren't singing in a bubble. While it's true we mostly fill an accompaniment role, like in great visual art, the background is every bit as important as the subject. For conductors, clarity while preserving the music is very important. There are conductors who are good technicians and easy to follow but have a dry interpretation. Others are very emotive but very difficult to decipher.

TERESA FREAM, *Violin*

I would like for them to know and understand the rich history this company enjoys, and our deep ties to Italian tradition.

MELISSA TRIER KIRK, *Viola*

The Lyric Opera Orchestra has excellent ears and is used to accompanying singers. You are in good hands!

WILLIAM CERNOTA, *Cello*

This orchestra has an incredibly high morale, closeness, mutual respect and support – the highest I have experienced in my orchestral

career. It's also an ensemble that values a conductor who raises the bar as high as the group can go and values a singer who is willing to take risks and can have a dramatic impact on our 74 members and the audience. Have trust in our flexibility and take risks that you may not feel comfortable taking with other orchestras. We listen carefully and can turn on a dime when necessary. My first experience of this was when a singer skipped several measures: the orchestra intuitively became quiet and jumped as one to the correct place in the music. On a more microscopic level, this happens in every performance.

FRANK BABBITT, *Viola*

I'm extraordinarily proud of the work ethic of this orchestra; nothing is more important than sounding our absolute best at all times throughout the run of any production. This orchestra truly loves to work and will give all it can to whomever is on the podium, regardless of whether they are internationally famous or just beginning their careers.

LEWIS KIRK, *Assistant Principal Bassoon/Contrabassoon*

There's a lot of collected experience in our orchestra. A conductor or singer can learn a great deal from us about how Davis, Gatti, Elder, or Bartoletti conducted a particular piece, or how Terfel or Te Kanawa sang it. Also we'd like them to know that we want, just as much as they do, for this to be the greatest performance possible.

HOW DO YOU COPE WITH EXTREMES OF STYLE IN THE SAME SEASON, SOMETIMES BACK TO BACK ON CONSECUTIVE DAYS?

TERESA FREAM, *Violin*

This is part of our training. I believe you must be very aware of what defines a particular musical style, and dive into that wholly and completely. It goes way, way beyond playing the right notes at the right time – which itself can be quite difficult – and is the thing that makes a good orchestra great. I think we have a great orchestra.

JEREMY MOELLER, *Principal Trombone*

Going from one extreme style to another is just part of our job. Two years ago, we were rotating between *Tannhäuser*, *Tosca*, and *The Passenger* back to back to back. That got tough, but it was actually toughest just to remember which opera we were playing that night. Once the music gets started, it gets easy to get into the part!

IF YOU WERE AN OPERA SINGER, WHAT CHARACTER IN ONE OF THE 2016-17 OPERAS WOULD YOU MOST LIKE TO PORTRAY AND WHY?

WILLIAM DENTON, *Principal Trumpet*

I don't have any idea. From where I sit, I get to be all the characters in a small way.

MELISSA TRIER KIRK, *Viola*

I'm ready for a good mad scene, so I would be Lucia in *Lucia di Lammermoor*!

JEREMY MOELLER, *Principal Trombone*

If I had to pick one character from this season's operas, it would probably have to be Donner in *Das Rheingold*. He certainly doesn't have the biggest part in the opera, but I can't think of any trombone player who wouldn't want to be "God of Thunder" for a day!