

26

cover story

November 2011
Volume 24 Issue 10Robert Orth: Forging A Distinctive
Niche in New OperaNovember 2011
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features

20 The Family Business

Texas is not the first state that may come to mind when you think about American opera, but perhaps it should be. With a number of major opera companies hosting significant U.S. debuts and world premieres, just what is the allure of the Lone Star State?

by Olivia Giovetti

36 A Soprano Whose Irish
Eyes Are Smiling

Kiera Duffy stepped into the limelight when she became a finalist at the Met's 2007 National Council Auditions and was featured in *The Audition*. Four years later she is known for her stellar musicianship and the ability to sing contemporary music with both elegance and ease.

by Stephanie Adrian

42 La Forme Fatale: Composers
John Corigliano and Mark
Adamo on Writing Opera

Two living composers discuss their first forays into writing opera, the challenges they faced, and how their lives and careers came together to better their work.

by Olivia Giovetti

46 Shaping Her Own Path:
Soprano Tony Arnold

Tony Arnold has made a name for herself as a sparkling performer of some of the most daunting new music. Here she shares how you can do the same.

by Amanda Keil

36




photo by Steven Laxton

42



46

A close-up portrait of soprano Tony Arnold, a woman with short reddish-brown hair, smiling slightly. She is wearing a dark, possibly black, top. The background is softly blurred, showing what appears to be a window with light coming through.

Shaping Her Own Path:

Soprano Tony Arnold

BY AMANDA KEIL

Tony Arnold has made a name for herself as a sparkling performer of some of the most daunting new music. A soprano who was a conductor first, Arnold built her career around her favorite composers and collaborators. Here she shares how you can do the same.

across the country. On the day of a Kurtág concert with the Either/Or Ensemble, Tony Arnold spoke with *Classical Singer* about her career in contemporary music.

You came to singing late. Tell me about that.

I played every instrument I could get my hands on when I was a kid, and I always took piano lessons. When I was at Oberlin, it was confirmed that I didn't want to be a pianist because I had so many things to fix. I also still wanted to sing and I loved conducting. I auditioned twice for the vocal program, then I finally got in on my third try.

Oberlin is a place of very fine voices. I was not one of them. But I learned a lot, and by the time I graduated, I decided that conducting was what I would pursue. I continued singing just for me. I found a great [conducting] teacher when I was in Chicago, did my master's degree at Northwestern, and I had a career as a conductor for 10 years.

I went back to do my doctorate in conducting, thinking I just needed better conducting jobs (I wasn't terribly happy). Just for fun, I sang Lukas Foss' *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* with eighth blackbird. I had just sung it on my senior recital at Oberlin with the percussionist, Matthew Duval, from the ensemble. Within three weeks I had quit school, I had started to resign my conducting positions, and in a letter to the dean and to my teacher I wrote that I'm withdrawing from school to pursue a career in contemporary vocal music. I look back at that now and I laugh. I'm sure that they not only laughed but they must have been concerned for my future. From that point, I never looked back. I basically said to myself, if I can break even singing the music that I want to sing and only that music, then I'll keep doing it.

Photo by: Liz Linder

If you haven't heard much music outside the opera house, you might not have heard of Tony Arnold. But the Baltimore-born soprano has been on the international contemporary music scene since 2001, when she became the only vocalist to win first prize at the prestigious Gaudeamus International Interpreters Competition and shortly thereafter also won the Louise D. McMahon International Music Competition. Since then, she has performed with leading new music groups across the globe, including the International Contemporary Ensemble, Chicago Symphony Orchestra's MusicNOW, Darmstadt International Music Festival, and eighth blackbird. Along the way, she acquired a reputation for her insightful interpretations of music by György Kurtág, George Crumb, Iannis Xenakis, and many other important composers of today.

But the career of a singer of contemporary music happens largely outside of competitions and Young Artist Programs. Originally a pianist, then a practicing conductor, Arnold leveraged her numerous connections with performers and her earnest love of singing to create a career on her own terms. Today she balances performing with teaching, including faculty positions at SUNY Buffalo, the soundSCAPE new music festival in Italy, and frequent guest residencies at conservatories

How did you get interested in contemporary chamber music, especially the more challenging works?

Since my background is really with players, I was doing concert music all the time. In terms of the thornier stuff, I do have a bent and an interest in rigor, and probably my best asset is my, quote, “perfect pitch.” The better I get as a musician, the less [of an asset] my perfect pitch reveals itself to be. It’s a great short cut, it’s a great thing on the front end for learning music, [but] it’s actually in the way a lot, expressively.

How so?

You’re busy trying to sing notes. You’re not singing gestures, you’re not singing phrases, you’re not singing harmonies. And so I’ve had to work very hard on my relationship to everything else that’s going on around me.

Is perfect pitch the first thing you need in order to sing contemporary music?

I think a wonderful sense of relative pitch is what you need.

languages, Hungarian and Russian, and two completely different coloristic worlds. And what’s interesting is that the same composer treats the languages differently even though the orchestration is somewhat similar. An “oh” vowel in Russian is totally different than the “oh” vowel of Italian. When you start to examine your vocal color in your native language and how you deal with things when you’re excited, when you’re devastated, when you’re angry, you notice the range of color that’s there and what’s available to you.

[My teacher Carmen Mehta] was enormously curious about sound and the relationship to the body. And it got all of my attention off of things like worrying about whether my vibrato is too fast or worrying about whether my “ah” vowel is supported or not. It was about sound in relationship to the music. And then you adjusted all those things in service of that. There was no vocalizing as some kind of isolated exercise—it was all related to music. And that gave me a real freedom to start from the music and pull out my technical bag of tricks. When I start from the music, I can solve the



Left: Tony Arnold (left) with Susan Grace and composer George Crumb at the recording session of *Ancient Voices of Children*, 2005



Center: Arnold with pianist and duo partner Jacob Greenberg



Right: Arnold with producer Adam Abeshouse in Recording Session of *Ancient Voices of Children*, 2005

Ultimately, pitch is not the be all and end all. The be all and end all is timbre. In order to make it successful you have to be able to mimic the other sounds that you hear around you. You have to find yourself in the middle of a clarinet sound and arise perceptibly out of it, and disappear then into the timbre of a violin. The sense of color is what guides you, and pitch is a very small slice of that. You have to have an enormous sense of it in your body and relaxed ears, not ears that are trying to nail something. If your ears are trying to nail something, then your body is rigid.

How do you use technique to achieve vocal color?

A lot of color comes from language, and every language has its own color. For instance, tonight I’m singing two different

problems. If I start from the technical side, I can’t solve the problems.

Can you give some examples?

I do very little vocalizing on scales and arpeggios. I take passages from the music and I try them on different vowels. I take the words from the music and just speak them, intone them. It’s not that I get warmed up and ready to sing—I’m singing all the time. The goal is that every vocal sound I make is a sound with intention, with musical purpose—it’s all music.

Do you do any other physical things to prepare yourself to sing?

I have started in earnest with Alexander Technique, and I find

that the whole way of being is completely congruent with singing.

How is a career in contemporary music different than the opera career path?

Contemporary music is not one path. There's a lot that's going in New York that's very opera oriented: American Opera Projects and Center for Contemporary Opera. So that's one avenue. For me it was really just collaborating with friends. It's all who you are committed to doing projects with; it's not about who you know about getting jobs.

I did the Gaudeamus competition with my friend Jacob Greenberg, who's a fantastic pianist. And because of that competition and subsequent recitals, we've become longtime collaborators—and there's nothing more rewarding than working with your friend. When I went back and did the recital with Bob Spano

at Oberlin in 1999, my relationship with International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE) began.

You mean, Robert Spano?

Bob was my conducting teacher, and we kept in contact. I asked him to do a recital at Oberlin sometime and I thought for sure he wouldn't say yes, but he said, "Let's do it." So we did this incredible program of works of Oliver Knussen, Kurtág, [Olivier] Messiaen, [György] Ligeti, and some Sibelius songs.

A year and a half later, Jacob and I used much of that material for the Gaudeamus competition. I entered that on a lark. By the time the competition came along, I was 34 and I was too old for pretty much every competition out there. Winning Gaudeamus was a huge surprise. I never made it out of the semi-finals in Concert Artists Guild, and I think that it's because all of the

semi-final rounds are judged only by singers.

My voice's beauty is in the way I use it, not in what the voice is itself. And so, when I compete against other singers and I'm heard by singers, people hear singer things. In the Gaudeamus and McMahon Competitions, I competed against instrumentalists. People hear voices differently when they actually have to start comparing the musicians who are behind those instruments.

My sense is that chamber music is one of the tougher sells—that if you're not Renée Fleming, it's hard to find places that will present you.

Well, I think there's this perception about institutions like orchestras and opera companies that that is validity. But that's only about 2 percent of the musical world. I think what's really going on is chamber music. Especially now with the

economic crisis, we're only starting to see the cracks in the institutional walls: Detroit, Louisville, New York City Opera. Musical life is happening in small ways. It always has been, but now there seems to be more opportunity. If your expectations are to make \$100,000 a year and have full benefits, there are not going to be many jobs for you. If you expect to have a very rich artistic life, there's a lot of room for that, and a lot of work for that.

With so much new music happening in bars and clubs (Le Poisson Rouge in New York, The Velvet Lounge in Chicago), would you say the audience for contemporary music overlaps more with the club-going crowd than it does with opera-goers?

I think that the chamber music crowd overlaps not just with the club scene but with the theater audience. And now there are a number of more multimedia projects. I think it's just a cultural crowd that's willing to show up and not know what they're hearing, and there are a lot of people like that. They'll walk away with their senses flooded with something unexpected—they might like it, they might not, but they'll like the new experience, the experience of the unknown.

In the beginning, how were you able to collaborate with people if you also had limited ability to pay them?

I think that you have to find people who are as passionate as you are. If you

Shaping Her Own Path: Soprano Tony Arnold

Arnold with Claudia Hoca (piano) in recital at the Kavinoky Theatre, 2007



Photo by: Irene Haupt



Movses Pogossian (violin) and Arnold rehearse for György Kurtág's *Kafka Fragments*, 2010
photo by Aleksandr Karjaka

don't feel that passion coming back to you, then you need to look elsewhere for collaborators. But I do think that people who share artistic visions can find a way to collaborate together. If you keep doing what you're doing and seeking fertile ground, you'll find it. It may take time, but eventually it kind of shakes down. And it may look very different than you think it's going to look.

My impression is that if you take interest in a composer's music, they might want to work with you.

Absolutely, yes. If you find a composer you like, then just offer. You'll have more opportunities to do things than you can imagine. Maybe none of them will pay any money. There are ways to work with that. When you invest yourself

in what you believe in, there's energy there, and that kind of energy attracts like-minded people, funding, whatever. If you can invest yourself wholeheartedly, it's not a guarantee but you have a much better chance at attracting the kind of support you need to make it come to life.

Do you see the contemporary music audience as growing, shrinking, or changing?

Growing. Absolutely, there's no doubt. Some of it is that there is now a canon and players hungry to play. They're the ones who make it, and so the music is more visible than it ever has been and, therefore, it's attracting more people. In Chicago it used to be that there were two groups who played contemporary music and 25 people in every audience. Now, there are 10 new music groups in Chicago, and the most prominent ones are drawing 2,000 people to their concerts. I think it's also

the fact that contemporary music isn't one thing. It's a dozen things and its appeal is much more wide.

What was your experience with standard repertoire?

I didn't learn to sing that music until I started singing contemporary music. Because my whole approach to the canon was through everything I heard—all those great performances and great performers—I was trying to be them, so I wasn't particularly successful. When I would learn to sing something like George Crumb's *Ancient Voices of Children*, all of a sudden I didn't have to sing notes, I had to sing sounds. Make a noise if it means something. And my body responded by relaxing. I found my voice by singing things that few people had sung and that few people had any expectations for what they are supposed to sound like. Because of that, you would

find few people who would be willing to teach them to you.

What kind of soprano are you?

Generic soprano [laughs]. You know, the idea of Fach really is not helpful in any way in doing chamber music—it's not necessary, even. I sing things that mezzos sing, that coloraturas sing. With chamber music and with Lieder, you can tailor balances to suit your voice.

What would you advise singers who'd like to sing more contemporary music?

Find people you love to work with and find repertoire that means something to you. And commit yourself to that. You reach a certain point in your career and you realize that the only thing that matters is who you're working with. Not every piece that you're going to do is going to be a great piece. But if you're working those things out with people you

love to work with, you're going to make those pieces the best they're ever going to be, you're going to feel great about that, and you're going to make a composer's day because you're going to give a committed performance. And they're going to compose differently because of the experience of working with you.

Music does not happen without the performer. We are the realizers—and as the realizers, we do have a great deal to say about the quality of what's being done, not only in terms of the performance but in terms of what we attract to us. If you stay really engaged with composers, you will be rewarded with music and experiences that will be food for a long time.

Amanda Keil blogs about music at thousandfoldecho.com, and has written for OPERA America, NewMusicBox, and Classical Singer. CS