



SIMON ESTES AWARDED SAN FRANCISCO OPERA MEDAL

Renowned American Bass-Baritone Performed
with the Company from 1967–1981 in 10 Productions



Simon Estes at the War Memorial Opera House with sculpture of General Director Kurt Herbert Adler; master class with the San Francisco Opera Adler Fellows; receiving the Opera Medal.

Photos: Kristen Loken/San Francisco Opera

SAN FRANCISCO, CA (March 13, 2023) — Renowned bass-baritone, educator and humanitarian activist Simon Estes received the San Francisco Opera Medal at the Company's Medallion Society luncheon in the ballroom of the Ritz-Carlton on Wednesday, March 8. San Francisco Opera Tad and Dianne Taube General Director Matthew Shilvock presented the award, the Company's highest honor, to Estes who spoke to the gathering about his trailblazing career in American music and the importance of art in our time.

While in San Francisco, Estes also worked with the Company's Adler Fellows in a master class at the Diane B. Wilsey Center for Opera and revisited the War Memorial Opera House, the site of many past triumphs.

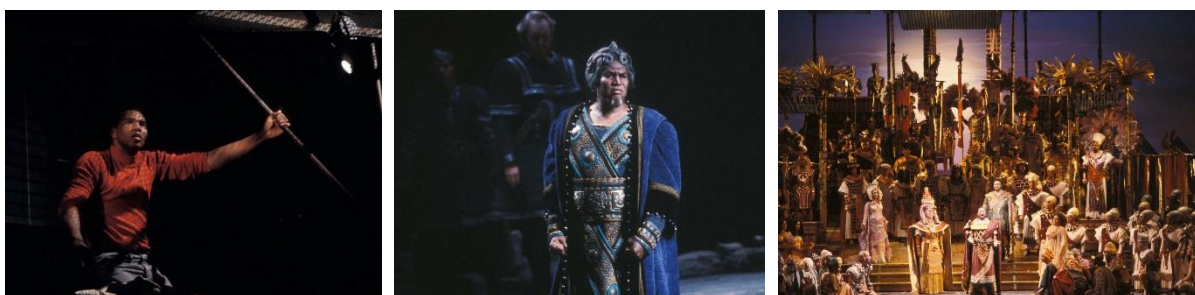
Estes said: "Opera is such an important form of art. It helps people all over the world because music is the international language that brings all of us together. I never dreamed I would go to Russia, China, Japan, Australia and New Zealand, but I have

because of opera. You have a great opera company. I will always be grateful to [former general director] Mr. Adler for having invited me here."

Born in Centerville, Iowa, in 1938, Simon Estes is among the first African American artists to achieve worldwide success in opera, appearing in 85 opera houses and with 115 symphony orchestras across Europe, Asia, Australia and North America. His operatic repertoire of 104 roles includes many interpretations such as the Dutchman in Wagner's *Der Fliegende Holländer* and Porgy in Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* where Estes set a standard for generations of artists and audiences.

Estes has sung for six American presidents and other global leaders including Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu and Pope John Paul II. Along with his work on the stage and as an educator, he has set up foundations and raised millions at home and abroad to better the lives of children through scholarships, malaria protection and other humanitarian interventions. He holds 13 honorary doctorate degrees, including one from the Juilliard School, and is the recipient of numerous awards and honors. Last year, Estes was inducted into the Opera America Hall of Fame.

Estes' career began in Europe with victories at prestigious voice competitions in Munich and Moscow and successful opera debuts in Berlin, Stuttgart, Hamburg, Vienna and Lübeck. As one of the few American artists to win an award at the 1966 Tchaikovsky Competition, Estes was invited to a reception at the White House where he met San Francisco Opera General Director Kurt Herbert Adler.



Simon Estes' San Francisco Opera debut in *The Visitation* (1967); as King Marke in *Tristan und Isolde* (1980); as Amonasro (center) in *Aida* (1981). Photos: Robert Cahen (left, right), Ron Scherl (center).

San Francisco Opera was the first major American opera company to engage Estes when Adler invited him to sing the four villains in Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* with Spring Opera, a San Francisco Opera affiliate, followed by his 1967 Company debut in Gunther Schuller's *The Visitation*, a work based on Kafka's *The Trial*. During his first season

with the Company, Estes also performed Colline in Puccini's *La Bohème* alongside two other rising stars making Company debuts: Luciano Pavarotti and Mirella Freni. Estes returned to San Francisco Opera in 1972 for the Company's 50th season and performed Ramfis in Verdi's *Aida*, Don Pedro in Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine* and Raimondo in *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

In 1978, Estes starred in Wagner's *Der Fliegende Holländer* at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, becoming the first male African American artist to perform at the theater built for the performance of the composer's works. Wagner would become an important part of Estes' stage repertoire throughout the operatic world. With San Francisco Opera, he sang the Dutchman in *Der Fliegende Holländer* in 1979 and returned the following season as King Marke in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*.

In 1981, his final San Francisco Opera season, Estes appeared in Bizet's *Carmen* as Escamillo with Teresa Berganza in the title role and as Amonasro in *Aida* in a new production that also featured Margaret Price, Ferruccio Furlanetto, Stefania Toczyska, and Pavarotti singing his first-ever Radames.

The *Aida* production was shared by closed-circuit TV to an audience in the Civic Auditorium and telecast via satellite live to Europe. Though not part of the telecast, the third performance in the run is regarded as one of the most memorable nights of San Francisco Opera's first century. Suffering from illness, Margaret Price was unable to go on so Adler implored Leontyne Price to sing *Aida* on short notice. With the house packed to capacity, Price, Pavarotti, Estes and the entire artistic forces of the Company gave a performance of Verdi's work for the ages.

When Simon Estes was a student at the University of Iowa in the early 1960s, he pursued a pre-med path to become a doctor. Following his heart, he changed majors to vocal music and embarked on one of the pivotal careers in American music. Through his talent and example, Estes embodied excellence on the concert and opera stage and was instrumental in challenging barriers of racial prejudice in classical music. As an educator and mentor, he continues to help young artists develop their artistry and become leaders in the field.

ABOUT THE SAN FRANCISCO OPERA MEDAL

The San Francisco Opera Medal was inaugurated in 1970 when then General Director Kurt Herbert Adler awarded the first medal to soprano and Company prima donna Dorothy Kirsten. The Opera Medal is the Company's highest honor and awarded for distinguished service to San Francisco Opera. Past awardees include vocal soloists Thomas Stewart, James Morris and Leontyne Price; conductors Sir Charles Mackerras, Sir Donald Runnicles and Nicola Luisotti; principal cellist David Kadarrauch; and artist David Hockney.

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For further press information, including photographs of Simon Estes receiving the San Francisco Opera Medal, working with the Adler Fellows in a master class and archival photos of his roles with San Francisco Opera since 1967, please visit sfopera.com/press:

San Francisco Opera Communications:

Julia Inouye (415) 565-6430 / jinouye@sfopera.com

Jeffery McMillan (415) 565-6451 / jmcmillan@sfopera.com

Teresa Concepcion (415) 565-6470 / tconcepcion@sfopera.com