



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

SESSION 3: Italian Roots

CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE: Aryeh Nussbaum Cohen on Russell Oberlin

Russell Oberlin and the Rise of the Countertenor

BY ARYEH NUSSBAUM COHEN

(read time ~ 6 minutes)

San Francisco Opera's rich history of countertenor singing began with the American premiere of one of the great operatic masterpieces of the 20th Century, Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, starring Russell Oberlin as Oberon. Countertenors are male singers who sing in the vocal range traditionally associated with a woman, generally that of mezzo-sopranos. Today, countertenors are heard around the world singing roles originally written for castrati, and increasingly, roles written specifically for us. Drawn to the otherworldly and unique possibilities of the countertenor sound, most of today's leading composers, including Glass, Adams, Ades and Dove, have frequently featured them in their compositions. When San Francisco Opera audiences were first introduced to the voice type in 1961, it was not at all common sound even for Baroque or contemporary music. The barrier-breaking artist was Russell Oberlin, "America's first star countertenor" (*The New Yorker*). Oberlin was a beautiful singer with remarkable tonal consistency throughout his range, and a lovely man.

I had the good fortune of meeting Oberlin and sitting with him for a series of conversations in spring 2015, a little more than a year before he passed in November 2016. In the fall of 2012, I read a *New York Times* article that discussed the challenges faced by homebound patients in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, and the article included discussion of a Russell Oberlin who lived on East 22nd Street in New York City. I thought it had to be *the* Russell Oberlin and, after some white-pages research, I mustered up the courage to write him; I was delighted to receive a phone call back a few weeks later—thus began our friendship. We had a series of phone conversations and then we gathered in New York through spring 2015. I was awed as I heard stories and received advice from one of the original pioneers in my voice type. He told me about his journey, discussed his interpretation of the character of Oberon (a role I dreamt of singing and have now taken on myself), advised me on repertoire to explore, and gave me great practical advice as I started to think about embarking on this rather unconventional career. Having not grown up in a musical family, receiving this advice from one of the pioneers was invaluable and inspiring.

Oberlin was born in Akron, Ohio, and he first trained as a tenor. It wasn't until after he graduated from Juilliard that he experimented and found that he had a rather unique voice, with a very high extension

previously unheard of for a male singer in the United States. When Oberlin began singing in the countertenor range with New York Pro Musica Antiqua around 1950, he was (as far as we know) the first and only person performing in that vocal range on this side of the Atlantic – Oberlin was the American counterpart to the great Alfred Deller, who had quickly become the main figure reintroducing the public to the countertenor voice in Europe. Oberlin was a leading figure in the early music revival, helping vocal works by composers like Bach, Handel, Dowland, and Purcell come to the attention of the public after centuries of collecting dust. When Pro Musica had a hit with their telling of the *Play Of Daniel* in 1958, Oberlin was front and center, and he soon became well known through America and Europe. *The Play of Daniel* became an annual Christmas telecast on public television and a series of recordings followed for Oberlin. His stunning singing—marked by particularly striking tonal consistency from the bottom of his range to the top—can still be heard widely, including in a series of videos on YouTube, featuring selections from televised performances that he gave in the prime of his career. But the story of how Oberlin came to star in the American premiere of *Midsummer* wasn't without strife.

Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was written with Alfred Deller in mind, starring as Oberon, the king of the fairies. Deller had helped reintroduce the countertenor voice to the general public, but he was not the first in the annals of opera. Historical records show that there were many countertenors performing alongside the castrati during the Baroque era, but as the public's preference for the castrati faded, countertenors fell to the history books along with them – but only temporarily. The first monumental work written for a modern countertenor was *Midsummer*, and it played a significant role in showing the world that this high male singing could be very impactful on the opera stage once again. *Midsummer* premiered at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1960 and it was a huge hit, though critics lamented Deller's stiffness and lack of dramatic presence on stage. When the production transferred to Covent Garden later that year, Oberlin, the emerging American countertenor, was asked to take on the leading role of Oberon. When the piece came to San Francisco the next year, Oberlin starred as Oberon, becoming the first countertenor to sing on the War Memorial stage, performing in this landmark production alongside Mary Costa as Tytania and a young Marilyn Horne as Hermia, in just her second season with the Company.

It would be another twenty-seven years until a countertenor appeared at the Metropolitan Opera, by which point they had already appeared in ten productions in San Francisco. Since Oberlin's debut, thirteen other countertenors have performed with the Company—including James Bowman, Jeffrey Gall, Michael Chance, David Daniels, and Bejun Mehta (the latter two singers Oberlin cited as particularly admiring in my conversations with him), Anthony Roth Costanzo, and yours truly.

San Francisco Opera was also the first company in the United States (and perhaps the world) to admit a countertenor into its training program, propelling Brian Asawa to his international career when he participated in the Merola Opera Program in 1991 and then the Adler Fellowship in 1992. I was honored to be the fifth countertenor to participate in Merola and the fourth to become an Adler—still today, San Francisco Opera is just one of two major opera houses in the United States to have trained a countertenor (Houston Grand Opera being the other, where I was honored to be the first in the history of the HGO Studio in 2017–18).

As San Francisco Opera enters its second century, it is assured that the thriving relationship between countertenors and this wonderful company, which began more than six decades ago with the 1961

premiere of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, will continue apace. This Centennial Season, Jakub Józef Orliński is set to make his company debut as Orpheus in *Gluck's Orpheus and Eurydice*, and surely, many more countertenors will follow in the decades to come! We are all indebted to the great Russell Oberlin who broke barriers in this country, showing America that countertenors have a firm place on the operatic stage.