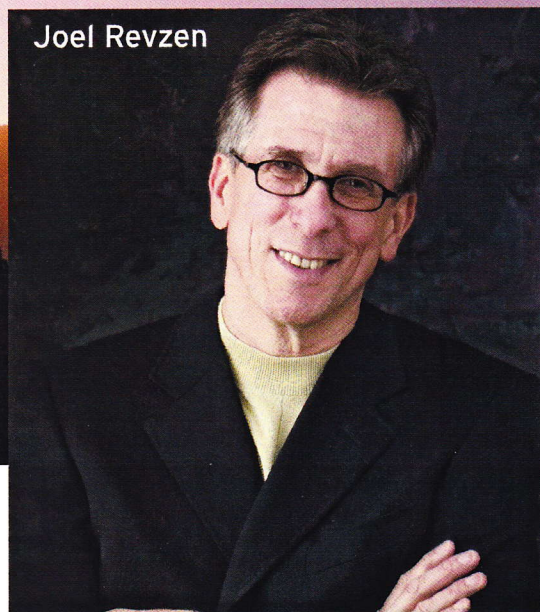


# Desert Song:

Joel Revzen Sees Sunny Future for Arizona Opera

by Maria Nockin



Joel Revzen

Joel Revzen, the new artistic director of Arizona Opera, is a frequent guest conductor with major symphony orchestras, opera companies, and chamber groups. A member of the Metropolitan Opera conducting staff, he is also the artistic director of the Berkshire Opera in western Massachusetts, where he has received high praise for his innovative programming.

Revzen spoke with *Classical Singer's* Maria Nockin by telephone from his office in Phoenix.

## Were you born into a musical family?

Absolutely! Our home in Chicago was quite musical. My mother was a violinist, an amateur, but she had been concertmaster of her high school orchestra. Although she did not pursue music professionally and she became a businesswoman, in her spare time she would get together with other accomplished amateur musicians to play string quartets.

We were always surrounded by music at home. My parents often went to the Chicago

Lyric Opera, and the symphony, too. I can remember, as a youngster, getting to see Fritz Reiner conduct the Chicago Symphony.

## What languages do you speak?

I speak German. I studied it both in high school and at Juilliard, from which I have both my conducting degrees. I've quite often conducted opera in Germany, particularly at the National Theater in Mannheim, where I did my first *Parsifal*. Because I don't speak Czech, I've also used my German in Prague where I conducted the symphony, the philharmonic and the chamber orchestra.

I speak some French and Italian, but I need to become more fluent. Of course, I've taken diction in all the Romance languages. I've learned some Russian because I've made six trips there to conduct at the Kirov. Since my father came to the United States when he was 2 years old, he did not speak Russian, but it is my family's heritage.

## What aspects of performing opera do you find most important?

Everything can be found by searching the score. It's where I find all my interpretive ideas. Hopefully, here at Arizona Opera, we will engage stage directors who also know how to look into what the composer intended when he set the story to music. I prefer that they get their concepts organically from the music itself, rather than impose some external idea on it.

## How do you go about choosing a director?

As with anything else, I choose people who share my musical values and who know how to glean the essence of characterization from a score.

## How do you choose guest conductors?

I am interested in people who are actually willing to risk bringing music to life off of the page, who have strong musical convictions





2001 production of *Don Giovanni* with Scott Hendricks in the title role (toasting).

but also believe in collaboration with their artists. As well, they must be people who understand the role of an accompanist, when appropriate.

#### What qualities impress you most in a singer?

I look for those singers who are willing to reach inside themselves to come up with an interpretive conclusion. I don't go to an audition with a specific voice sound or voice type in mind—but again, it comes down to interpretive conviction.

#### How important is a singer's appearance?

It is not of primary importance. Obviously, singers have to be believable on the stage, but believability is a very general term. I certainly don't go in saying someone has to be 126 pounds and blonde. I go into the audition wanting to be moved. I also engage artists that I've worked with before who can convincingly portray characterization.

Also, I try to engage singers that know how to look into a score and to derive their interpretive conclusions from it. I particularly like singers who understand phrase, direction of line and harmonic tension. Basically, I want singers who understand all of this and who also have good musicianship.

#### What are your plans for Arizona Opera's future? How will you insure its future?

My plan is to continue to enhance the quality of what we put on stage, and to create a balanced repertoire, not only of late 19<sup>th</sup> century

works like those of Puccini and Verdi, but also including music of all periods. I will try to do the less-often-played works of well-known composers, for example, *La Rondine* instead of *La Bohème*. Instead of Massenet's *Werther*, we could do his *Cherubin* and link it to Mozart's "Figaro," if it were done in the same season. There should be a point to a season, a framework for it. It should not be just any five operas.

If we cannot afford to do *Aida* well, we will do something else of that same genre that we can do well. The quality of each performance is of paramount importance to me.

#### Are you planning to perform for more school children?

We now play to some 20,000 [school children] each year, but we want to continually expand that number. They will continue to be invited to our dress rehearsals, in addition to our expanded school tour program.

We want to reach as many people in every age group as we can. We've initiated a "Talk Back" program this year, which allows people to ask questions after each show. It's getting a wonderful response. The last time we did it, we had approximately 300 people in attendance. It gives the audience a chance to meet some of the artists personally and ask questions about what they have just seen. We want to educate people and turn them on to this art form, this synthesis of all other art forms.

The one missing piece at Arizona Opera is a resident young artists'





Left: Amy Johnson as title role, *Salome*, Arizona Opera, 2003

Right: Stephen Powell as the title role, *Sweeney Todd* in Arizona Opera, 2004

training program. Right now, we need to be involved in training the artists of the future. We will probably begin with six or seven singers, and never have more than 10 or 12. Our program will be comprehensive, and each singer will get truly individual attention. I started such a program four years ago in the Berkshires, and it has become the ideal transition between graduate school and a serious career. Many young artists leave school not knowing how to start their careers. The Resident Young Artists' Training Program should be a finishing program that fills in the gaps of their education. It needs to include classes in movement, diction, interpretation, combat, etc.

Auditions for the Arizona program will be national, but we will give local artists the first chances at the program. After that, we will listen to singers on both coasts.

**CLASSICAL SINGER**  
The Singer's Source... for Career & Life

Reprinted with permission from Classical Singer Corp.