

Diálogo



Exploring Cultural Differences: A Conversation with Arizona Opera General and Artistic Director Joel Revzen

Music, it is often said, is a universal language. But whether written, played or sung, people of diverse cultural backgrounds understand and process what they experience musically in different ways. European audiences and American audiences, for example, bring different levels of appreciation to music, which is not surprising. However, even within the United States, audiences exhibit dramatic differences based on geography, which is surprising. Joel Revzen, Arizona Opera's General and Artistic Director spoke with MPAC's Dolores Valdes-Zacky about the challenges of reaching culturally diverse audiences, both in the U.S. and abroad, and what lies ahead for the Arizona Opera, now celebrating its 35th Anniversary Season.

At the time of the interview, Revzen had just returned from Russia after conducting concerts devoted to the music of Leonard Bernstein at the Marinsky (Kirov) Opera and Ballet Theater, so cultural differences among audiences were familiar terrain to him.

* * *

DVZ: Joel, you have maintained an active career in the opera houses of Europe. How did you get invited to the Marinsky (Kirov) in Russia?

JR: [The renowned conductor] Valery Gergiev invited me to return to the White Nights Festival and to conduct concerts for a Bernstein Gala. I have done Figaro and other classics. This time they wanted me to do something American-and what is more American than Bernstein!

People in Russia never saw West Side Story. We put it together for The White Night Festival—13th, 14th year of the festival. The program, which featured soloists from the Marinsky Academy of Young Singers, included “Glitter and Be Gay” (from Candide), “Three Dance Episodes” (from the musical On the Town), and the “Serenade for Violin and Orchestra.” After an intermission we did two suites from West Side Story.

DVZ: Was it difficult to work with Russian singers? What cultural challenges did you face?

JR: Singing in English was difficult for them. The biggest challenge, though, was getting the American Jazz. The syncopated rhythms were very hard for them to get. It took 4 ½ weeks to put it together. Russians are much more angular and I had to learn a lot of musical expressions in Russian. The singers and the orchestra players loved it!

DVZ: What would you say is the main difference between the European audience and our nation's audience?

JR: Unlike the European audience whose children grew up with classical music, our American children grew up with sports. The enthusiasm for playing sports is a natural part of our children's upbringing.

In Europe, attending the ballet, opera and/or the symphony is a normal occurrence regardless of age; classical musical is part of their family life. In the U.S., the students, at best, might play in a school opera, but there isn't a family immersion. The appreciation for this type of entertainment has to be acquired later in life.

DVZ: You have conducted many productions over the years at Berkshire Opera. Do you see any cultural differences between the East Coast and the Southwest audiences?

JR: There is a slight difference between our region and that of the East Coast. The East Coast cities are more contiguous and there is much more proliferation of arts and culture in a city like New York or Boston. Also, they have the sense of philanthropy that our region lacks. Generations after generations have been supporting the arts.

DVZ: I see that you are passionately committed to making opera more and more accessible to all audiences. How do you go about making it enjoyable?

JR: For starters, subtitles were introduced to Arizona Opera. These are critical for the audience. When done tastefully and subtly, subtitles far from being a distraction, they add to the experience. Also, the 30 minute Pre-Performance Lectures one hour prior to curtain. Opera professionals offer insight and perspective that contribute to an educated and enjoyable evening. Once the curtain goes down, our Opera Talkbacks gives the audience an opportunity to get production insights directly from the artistic director, stage director or cast.

* * *

Since joining the Arizona Opera in 2003, Joel Revzen has drawn upon his considerable administrative and artistic experiences to build a stronger and more vibrant company. As he continues to work on attracting new and culturally diverse audiences to the art form, he looks forward to the day when Arizona Opera can take its place, not just as a cultural cornerstone of the Phoenix and Tucson communities, but as a national and international opera destination.