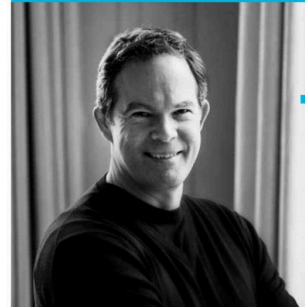


Conversations

In this series of candid conversations pairing notable Canadian singers, administrators, conductors, and designers, you'll get an insider's look into the opera industry's past and present.

CONVERSATIONS

Gerald Finley



Joshua Hopkins

In the spring, **Gerald Finley**, one of the most acclaimed bass-baritones of his generation, spoke with one of Canada's leading young baritones, **Joshua Hopkins**, about their respective career trajectories, Europe vs. North America, and how they both got their musical starts growing up in the Ottawa region.

GERALD FINLEY: One of the things that is interesting is the fact that you live in the United States—does that impact your choice of role progression into what would be considered bigger or more developed repertoire? Is something like *Tannhäuser*—which I have to say you'd be perfect for in a European house, no doubt—is that something that you then think, "It's all very well doing that in the European house, but how would it be in the places where I would really want to work in the US?"

JOSHUA HOPKINS: I think that's a huge consideration. Most US and Canadian houses are larger than normal. The majority are built for multi-purpose events and most of those events are amplified. So I think it's a particular challenge singing in North America that you need a certain size of voice to be able to be heard in those houses, especially if their acoustics, more often than not, are less than...



G: Optimal!

J: "Optimal!" Thank you. And so it does play into the consideration of what roles I am able to grow into as a young singer—well not so young now—who's enjoying mainly a North American career. Do I feel limited by the size of house, in terms of what I can grow into? Yes, I think I do in many ways and the best way for me to expand the repertoire that I'm singing is to work more frequently in European-sized houses. And I don't work in Europe very often. It's mainly a US-based career with some work in Canada as well. But I would like to change that.

G: That's actually my most, shall I say, provocative question to you: How much more can we see you over in Europe than we are? Is that something you have a desire to do?

J: Absolutely. It has been challenging for me so far because even though I have worked with a couple of European managers, it has been very hard for them to sell me in Europe. I'm not known there and because I don't live in Europe, I'm not sure if that's a hindrance to me in terms of opportunities—I've been told that it's not. I think it comes down to having the right opportunity and a specific project that garners interest, whether it's a new piece or a new production that features my strengths.

G: I think that's really important and interesting, especially for younger singers, to understand that the opportunities you create for yourself will crack open the door to who knows what.

J: I was very curious about whether you felt you had the choice to curate your career...or if it was more of a "take what you can get to fill the seasons" and then build on that over time.

G: First of all, it has to do with one's own personality, whether one has the confidence and awareness of one's own talent potential, how hard one is listening to those who have experience and are offering guiding advice, and how much of that rings true with your own sense of ambition. If we're honest with ourselves, agents like saleable commodities. If you're baked beans and you feel like baked beans, then they're going to love you because they can sell baked beans. This comes directly from the first major agent that I had; they said, "Listen, don't think that you can do more than I can sell you as." That was sobering and I was a little miffed by that. But it was a further example of the sort of things in

my career that have galvanized me a little bit and made me think "well, I'm not just baked beans. I may look like baked beans and I may taste like baked beans but actually—"

J: "But I'm Frankenbeans!"

G: Yes, Frankenbeans! There were operas cast by one agent in those days, package deals and that sort of bargaining. And the European agents in those days had the top houses wrapped up. That was sobering for me. What advice would you give to your younger self just starting out?

J: I would definitely tell my younger self that consistent study with a voice teacher that you trust and you can continue learning from is essential to continue growing your artistry and understanding of technique. And I kind of stumbled onto that, because when I finished the Houston Grand Opera Studio, one of the suggestions from my wife, Zoe—whom I consider number one on my support team—was to continue working with Dr. Stephen King, my current teacher. Suddenly I was out in the world, singing some smaller roles with different companies in North America, and the mindset for a lot of young artists can be, "I'm free now! I've got all the tools that I need." Not that I necessarily felt that I didn't have anywhere to grow, but I've been working with Dr. King now for 17 years...It has been an incredible journey so far and I look forward to discovering so many more things with him as the type of repertoire that I sing continues to expand and grow.

G: I completely agree that the idea of having a relationship with your "vocal principal," I would call it, is something that I had no idea would be so vital to me.

J: At what point do you say, "I feel ready for this?" Is there a certain amount of time that you need to work on a role, to get into it? Are you able to plan that far ahead?

G: I do have my list. It's usually handwritten on the back of an envelope. It only gets to the agent's shopping list screen when I've had a really good chance to look through the role, look at the elements of the demands, work with a coach who knows the repertoire really well. For instance, in my mind since I was 33 or 34, when George Christie at Glyndebourne was travelling with me to London on the train once, and he said, "I do envisage you as Simon Boccanegra in the future" and I thought, "Well, he knows his opera, I should look at this." I kept looking at it and it got on my list, and everyone kept saying "What's a Verdi role doing on your list?" And then in my mid-40s when I started to realign my life, I thought, "Does Simon Boccanegra really figure in that list?" I went through it with John Fisher at the Met and he said, "Look, if you're

really seriously thinking about this, you're going to have to think about Macbeth, you're going to have to think about Rigoletto." And I was thinking, "But Rigoletto is high." But Boccanegra is lyrical, it's compassionate, it's kind of like a big man's Tito [in Mozart's *La clemenza di Tito*]. And as much as I hated to admit it, it's actually too much. And José van Dam can do it, and Piero Cappuccilli—my hero, the one I really wanted to emulate as an Italian singer. But I ain't got it. It's taken me until this past year to say, "Okay, strike him off the list." That's a hard journey.

I made my list when I was 47 or 46, [when] I had a vocal crisis and I needed to learn how to sing again. But suddenly there was Hans Sachs [in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*]. So how would I, as a Mozart and contemporary singer, think about Wagner? And then somebody says, "Why isn't Wotan on your list?" And I'm thinking, "Woah! Which Wotan? Is it *Rheingold*, is it the Wanderer? Let's not count our chickens!" And then people say, "Wagner? Why don't you do Wolfram for goodness sake? Start with Wolfram." I kind of did it backwards. I did Hans Sachs first. People thought it was madness—of course, it was madness—but I was so convinced that I could do it.

Then there's Don Alfonso, of course. It's a big sing and recitatives in the Met are a big problem, so I'm using all my Hans Sachs formation to try and deliver sound and clarity and impact to the 3,800 seats there. We talked earlier about the size of houses and how that influences role choice. And, of course, at the Met I'm not going to be singing Wagner or Verdi.

J: Is that a decision that you've made or that somebody said, "That's the way it's going to be?"

G: Put it this way: I think the things where I'm going to have the most impact are the things that I can expand from where I feel very comfortable. So Mozart, modern, slightly unusual repertoire. You've sung Athanaël?

J: I have!

G: And you know that the opera should not be called *Thais*, it should be called *Athanaël*? Because it's one of the biggest sings you can do.

J: [He] never leaves the stage.

G: Never leaves the stage. And so there I was at the Met [during] the dress rehearsal thinking, "I'm tired and we're only at the end of Act II." You've got the wonderful aria at the beginning of Act II...that went as well as it could have gone but it was probably the limit of what I would call my resources in a place like the Met.

J: It's fascinating to hear that story and how you go about it. Because I think for each singer it's an individual journey. As much as you compare yourself to somebody else and say, "My voice is

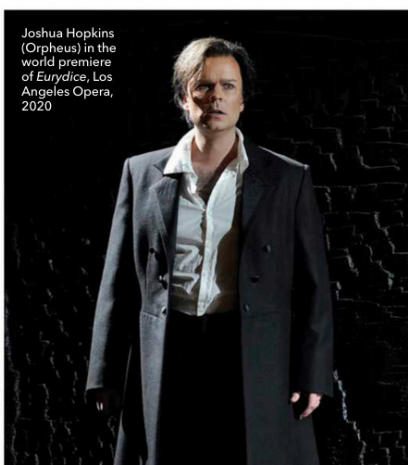
very similar” or “I want to try to emulate that path,” it will never be the same.

G: You’ve been fortunate to be involved in world premieres now, which a lot of singers never get to do. What did you feel about that responsibility, for yourself and the people that were creating it? Did you feel there was more pressure for yourself? Were you excited?

J: I treat world premieres the same as approaching any other piece in that I always try to find the nuggets of truth behind the characters. So I don’t feel like there’s any extra pressure unless I feel my preparation has been lacking in any sort of way. There’s so much excitement around world premieres. They’re integral to our artistry and the development of the business that we’re in. With *Eurydice* [Los Angeles Opera, 2020], it was just so exciting to hear the orchestration...hearing that entire piece fleshed out for the first time during the Sitzprobe was incredible, since we’d already been working on the staging for weeks with piano. It suddenly became a completely new piece and we finally heard what [composer] Matthew Aucoin had intended in his head. It was an amazing experience. *It’s a Wonderful Life* premiered in Houston in 2016 and it went to San Francisco after that, with a number of revisions that told the story in a more fluid way. I’ve known [composer] Jake [Heggie] for a long time—we hadn’t worked together closely until *It’s a Wonderful Life* and he wrote the role of Harry Bailey for me—but he has written a new song cycle for me, which Margaret Atwood has written new poetry for, entitled *Songs for Murdered Sisters*.

G: Come on! That’s wonderful.

J: Yeah, collaborating with him and Margaret on this new song cycle has definitely been a learning experience. I’ve never approached a composer specifically for a project that came from my brain or asked someone to write something so personal for me. It’s a really exciting process to watch a new piece come alive from its beginning stages through to its premiere.



Joshua Hopkins (Orpheus) in the world premiere of *Eurydice*, Los Angeles Opera, 2020

G: I’m so enthusiastic for you to be a creator as well as an interpreter because I think that’s part of our responsibility in what we do—to be not just a catalyst, but to be a fine deliverer, a fount for the musicians and poets of our time to channel out. We become their voice, literally.

J: We both grew up very close, physically, to one another: you in the national capital region and I in the town of Petawawa, just an hour and a half west of Ottawa. And we were both members of the Ottawa Regional Youth Choir in our teens. So, in Ottawa, what other opportunities were there for a young singer that helped build your confidence and path?

G: I grew up in the golden age of arts funding. It was the elder Trudeau era and he understood that investment in the arts was a hugely valuable thing. But, honestly, the investment that went into Ottawa with the National Arts Centre and the National Gallery, effectively, made Ottawa the centre of the arts in Canada. That then branched out into other things, like the Banff Centre and support for opera companies generally: Opéra de Québec, Opéra de Montréal, even Canadian Opera Company and Vancouver Opera. But, also, music education in schools and the Ottawa Central Choir, which was the school choir of kids. I remember Barbara Clark—who was the amazing leader of children’s singing in Ottawa during my life as a kid, and for many

years afterwards—coming to my public school when I was 11...I have to confess, though, that I actually failed my audition for the Ottawa Central Choir. I was so nervous. I was [already] a member of St. Matthew’s Choir, where I began singing, but I got so nervous for my audition that I couldn’t hold a tune. I cracked all over the place. It was horrible!

I made my debut as a “peasant girl” in a production of *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Pagliacci* from Opéra de Québec, which came as a touring enterprise to Ottawa and used local kids. It was my first time singing Italian. They ran out of boy costumes, so, there I was – there’s a very incriminating photo of me in a really, really fine peasant girl outfit. So, I sang on Canada Day at Parliament Hill. This is dating me, but we sang as part of the Ontario Exhibition...and there was the opening of Ontario Place! These were professional

gigs and felt pretty extraordinary...it seemed the availability for children to sing was pretty phenomenal in those years.

J: It sounds like it! [Music is] such a wonderful outlet for students to have access to have outside of school.

G: Did you have to give up anything to keep your singing active? And, I confess, I had to give up, not reluctantly anyway, hockey practice at school because I was never going to make the team. But I was saved by the fact that choir practice happened on the same day and time.

J: Convenient!

G: Yeah. So, Canada didn’t lose one of its potential hockey players.

J: I knew that I was not going to be exploring any sports activities and, thankfully, both my parents were so involved in the community in theatre and in music that it was natural for us, as a family, to be involved in all these activities together. So, my parents ran the Pembroke Little Theatre and they were also musicians in three different concert bands. When I first discovered I even had a singing voice, I didn’t think I would be pursuing opera or concert or seeking classical training. I was really introduced to singing through musical theatre, that was a huge influence for me. Thankfully, I was able to follow my passion.

G: I was all ready to be a scientist and go to Toronto as a biochemist, but gave that up and said, “I’ll give myself three years and see what happens!” I had no great ambition, certainly not to be an opera singer, and that was the thing: I kind of backed into the opera world because there was nowhere else to go... And then I just kept singing. I had the chance to do Figaro in a little organization in the middle of London and, suddenly, the scales fell from my eyes. I had been part of the chorus in Ottawa during those festival times in the late 70s, and I had heard Jon Vickers sing in *The Queen of Spades* and Frederica von Stade in *Cendrillon*, and Joseph Rouleau and Louis Quilico. In fact, Louis Quilico was really responsible for me having the ambition because, when I was 17 or 18, he did a little class for really young choristers and said, “Look, none of you know how to sing; it’s just impossible! None of you can breathe, you can’t sing, you have no sense of what it is. Anyway, I encourage you to do something else.”

J: Positive!

G: So, that lit the fire under me, wow. Anyway, I still admire everything he ever did as a singer and am, sort of, perversely grateful for those comments because I really didn’t know what I was doing at that time.

J: I don’t think any of us do. I mean, we’re all trying to find our way, really.

G: Absolutely!

J: ...and hopefully be paired up with the people who will guide us to success. And the world is thankful that you pursued a solo career because we are all the much better for it, enjoying your dynamic performances.

G: Well, you know, I’ve enjoyed every step of the way as I’m sure you are and, yeah, it’s thrilling. When it works out it’s unbelievable. I still pinch myself at the blessings and the encounters and the circumstances that I’ve been lucky enough to have. Honestly, from what I can see of your schedule...I’m thrilled for you and hopefully we’ll see each other sometime.

J: I also hope that we can continue these discussions. It’s been such a pleasure to chat with you, I have such respect for your artistry, and I look forward to continuing the conversation next year.

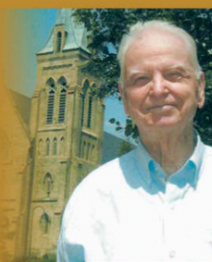
G: As you say, “This is only chapter two of a very long novel.”

This interview has been edited and condensed.

Father OWEN LEE at www.opera-is.com

Admired by millions around the world for his brilliant intermission commentaries in radio broadcasts for the Metropolitan Opera in New York and for many decades of knowledgeable and witty appearances on the Texaco Opera Quiz broadcasts, Father Owen Lee passed away in 2019, just shy of his 90th birthday.

This memorial site, curated by Iain Scott, includes seven video interviews; a wide selection of Lee’s Met radio broadcasts; audio playlists exploring his musical and dramatic analyses and commentaries; a brief introduction to each of his 21 books; lists of his published articles and public lectures; biographies, his eulogy and several obituaries.



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