

Current Q&A | Peter Gelb

Media veteran brings wary revolution to a fortress of tradition

In the 1980s, Peter Gelb produced 25 Metropolitan Opera broadcasts for PBS. Now, as the Met's general manager, he runs the red-carpeted center of the opera world.

The first media guy to run the hallowed New York institution has begun an ambitious but carefully modulated makeover of the Met. He's putting its operas on more media platforms than ever before but using electronic media to reproduce the gilded in-theater experience. He's bringing in a new breed of directors for fresh staging but relying largely on the beloved music of the past.

Hired two years ago, Gelb was off to a running start in August when he took charge.

■ The Met's unions agreed to accept royalties from new-media exposure rather than demand up-front payments, bucking a tradition that had restricted the company's media outings to a waning presence in broadcast-

ing.

■ Starting with the Met's season premiere last month, Sirius Satellite Radio Channel 85 is all-Met, carrying about four live operas a week (including the Saturday matinee that airs on many pubradio stations) plus hundreds of taped operas from the Met's archives. Live operas also will be streamed on the Internet by RealNetworks.

■ Starting with an abridged 90-minute *Magic Flute* on Dec. 30, six Met productions will be transmitted, live and high-def, to specially equipped movie theaters around the world. The same shows will come to PBS a month later.

"We want to make the Met as available electronically to its followers as the Yankees are to theirs," Gelb has said in interviews.

Gelb had a long apprenticeship for the job, serving as an office boy for famed impresario Sol Hurok; chief of in-house video

production for the powerful Columbia Artists Management agency and the Met; and president of Sony Classical for 10 years. Along the way he produced the Emmy-winning *Vladimir Horowitz: The Last Romantic*, the Peabody-winning four-part television series *Marsalis on Music*, and *Recording The Producers: A Musical Romp with Mel Brooks*, among many other programs.

For this Q&A, Gelb spoke with Wesley Horner, a longtime producer of national programs for public radio and television, and *Current* Editor Steve Behrens. This is an edited transcript.

Current: As an institution, public broadcasting is much younger than the Metropolitan Opera, but it's also trying various things to invigorate itself and bring in younger audiences, as you are. Could you discuss your strategy?

Peter Gelb: Our challenge is to find the vehicles to breathe dynamic new life into the aging art form of opera and to see if it's possible to broaden the audience and make it younger at the same time.

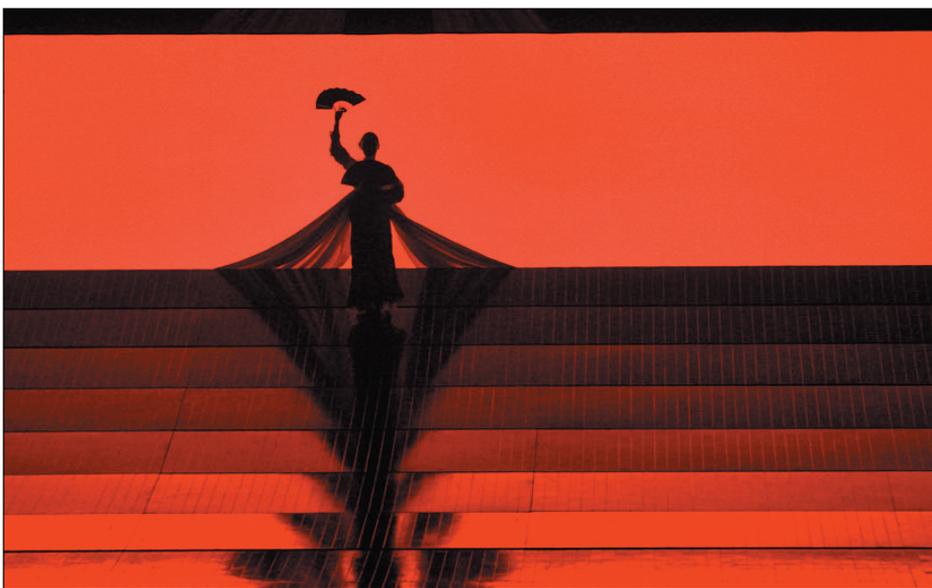
We were successful in the short term with our season's initial offering, a new production of *Madama Butterfly*. It captivated the imagination of the public through transmission to giant screens in Times Square and in the Lincoln Center plaza and distribution of 5,000 dress-rehearsal tickets.

That was in strong contrast with the Met the public has known in recent years. What made it possible, so it wasn't just hype, was the artistic integrity of this wonderful production by Anthony Minghella, which demonstrated that one does not have to compromise the musical qualities of opera to achieve theatrical greatness.

Let's begin with a blunt question: Met Opera broadcasts were on public radio before it was public radio and have been on public television for decades. Why does the Met Opera still belong on public radio and television?

The question is not whether it *belongs* but how to present it in a manner that is appropriate for modern listening and viewing habits. The fact that it belongs has been long established. A hundred television broadcasts have commanded significant audiences on PBS over the years. The radio broadcasts have a faithful audience of 2.5 million during the season, December through May.

By working with the world's greatest directors, I'm trying to make the theatrical



Opening more than an opera season at the Metropolitan Opera: In a *Current* Q&A, the company's new general manager, Peter Gelb, tells what he's doing—and certainly not doing—about challenges facing the institution and the artform. Pictured: a new Met production of *Madama Butterfly*. (Photo: Ken Howard/Metropolitan Opera.)

experience in the opera house equal to the Met's already-high musical standards.

The TV and radio broadcasts have been in the same format for a very long time. Could you talk about how the Met might shift its production values to more contemporary standards?

What's unique about grand opera is that it is a real true spectator experience. When a great tenor has to hit his high C, it's an event that goes beyond dramatic interpretation and enters the realm of athleticism.

Our approach for the broadcasts is to treat them as live spectacles. We will imbue the broadcasts with the on-the-scene perspective you get with sporting events. We're not creating movies here. We're creating a portal to live musical theater.

There will always be certain limitations in reproducing live events on television. Operas are meant to be viewed from the audience in the theater. They're not staged for television. Camera positions are limited because we don't want to disturb the audience in the theater with cameras moving on dollies or cranes.

Would it be economically viable to put on an extra performance just for the cameras—so you could use cranes, for instance?

Not in the opera house, because there's no time. We have performances going on all the time.

However, all of the six programs we're producing this year will be shot in high-def, and we're thinking about adding unobtrusive robotic cameras that might track along the pit rail, for example.

It's notable that the Met is producing Julie Taymor's abridged, 90-minute version of *The Magic Flute*. Though many hard-core opera fans hate abridgements, do you see opportunities for shorter operas, new or old?

It's not our intention. *The Magic Flute* is unique. It has been abridged in the past and performed in English. It was Mozart's one attempt to be popular. This is not the beginning of a trend.

I am sympathetic, though, with making performances shorter. The only way we can do that is through modern stagecraft that lets us reduce the number of intermissions. In a house as big as the Met, an extra break adds 25 or 30 minutes to the running time of a show. For our revival of the Met's production of *Aida*, a few years from now, we'll save 35 minutes, eliminating the third intermission by rebuilding the scenery for the Nile scene.



"We're not creating movies here," says Gelb. "We're creating a portal to live musical theater." He compares broadcasts to sports shows, bringing the spectacle from Lincoln Center, complete with live dressing room interviews. (Photo: Steve Behrens, Current.)

Let's talk about radio. There are program directors who believe opera belongs in some daypart other than Saturday afternoons, but the Met offers its productions only for live broadcast. Is live broadcast non-negotiable for you—take it live or don't take it at all?

That's been the position of the Met, and I think it's a good position. Clearly the public wants it. There are 2.5 million people in the U.S. and Canada who are listening live.

Now that the live Met is available on Sirius and on the Web, does that reduce the need for public radio to carry it?

The need is established by whether the stations satisfy their audiences. That's up to the local stations.

How will the radio broadcasts sound different when the season begins in December?

The performances themselves won't sound different, although we're looking at the possibility of using wireless mikes to get better sound.

In presentation, there *will* be dramatic changes. Even though I've been associated with the Met for years, I was somewhat taken aback when I tuned in, after I was appointed to this position in fall 2004. I was quite surprised at how dated the broadcasts sounded. My main objective is to make the

broadcasts feel more immediate and live. That will be accomplished by having more live reports, live interviews.

Some in public television will tell you that releases in other media only hurt the case for Met Opera broadcasts on PBS.

They should talk to the president of PBS, Paula Kerger, who was extremely enthusiastic. She and her top aides, John Boland and John Wilson, are unanimously enthusiastic about our plans. It was over breakfast with Paula Kerger last spring that I first met her and told her about my plans.

She saw this as a way PBS could embrace opera broadcasts once again. She immediately suggested cross-promotional possibilities between the theater exhibitions and the public television pledge drives. The publicity and excitement generated by the live showings in theaters—one live showing and a repeat for limited audiences—is only going to serve as a promotional tool for the broadcast that comes afterwards.

So your paths didn't cross when you both worked at the Met?

She was in the Met's development office in the early '80s, when I was at the Boston Symphony and at Columbia Artists Management.

Let's say this 25-year-old couple from out of town is planning a trip to New York. They have tickets to Letterman. They're seeing a Broadway show and planning to stand outside *The Today Show*. What would they have heard on a Met Opera broadcast on public radio or seen on PBS that would make them want to come to a performance at the Met?

At the moment, it's what they've heard about *Madama Butterfly*. It's been in *Vogue*, *Us* magazine and all the other media. Our red carpet on opening night was filled with movie celebrities. The Met for the first time is in the consciousness of New Yorkers in a way it hasn't been for years.

For ticket buyers, although we increased prices for the most desirable seats, we reduced the prices for Family Circle [top balcony] seats from \$25 to \$15, which made 90,000 tickets a season available for \$15. Then recently, thanks to a board member, Agnes Varis, there are now 200 orchestra seats reduced from \$100 to \$20, available Monday through Thursday, two hours before curtain time.

We're fomenting a kind of creative revolution here. It's a very delicate operation, though. It has to be achieved without turning

off the audience we currently have. Our next new production is *The Barber of Seville*, directed by Bart Sher with the same team that created the Tony Award-winning *Light in the Piazza* and *Awake and Sing*.

I'm doubling the number of new productions and concentrating on reviving the most famous pieces with the greatest singers. The idea is that people will want to come to the Met once they hear this is a captivating musical and theatrical experience.

For the PBS broadcasts we're selecting those new productions and others that have something that will appeal to a broader public. *I Puritani* will have Anna Netrebko, the hottest new opera star in the world today. In December, we will have the world premiere of a very dramatic contemporary opera full of sex and violence—*The First Emperor*, written by Tan Dun, who wrote the score for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, a project I was responsible for when I was with Sony.

You've commissioned works from some composers not ordinarily associated with opera. What would you hope, some day in the future, would be the proportion of Met operas written in the 21st century? Maybe half?

In the immediate future that proportion certainly will not be anything like half. One of the great achievements of opera is that the music has a timeless appeal. The challenge for the Met is to make these pieces fresh theatrically, through new stage productions, which the Met has not done often enough or successfully enough in recent decades. Some of the great stage productions of Zeffirelli or Jean-Pierre Ponnelle feel very dated today after 20 or 30 years. That's why I'm doubling the number of productions from four a year to seven or eight. But most will come from the standard repertory.

Opera lovers may be content if an opera is great musically but not theatrically. That's not enough for the broader audience we need to bring to the Met.

At the same time, we're dramatically expanding the number of commissions to composers, to give us a chance of finding new works that can expand the repertory. Hopefully some will actually get to the stage. I'm only interested in producing works that have a chance for great success with the public.

You've opened the floodgates, making the Met available in a lot of new media. How do you decide which platform will be free and which will be for a fee?

We're experimenting, learning as we go along, looking at patterns in the entertainment business. We're in a wonderful posi-

tion, thanks to our unions, which allow us to experiment.

We're trying to create our own Metropolitan Opera model. For example, we have live, high-definition transmissions into movie theaters in this country and abroad, with a window of 30 days or so, possibly with video on demand or live video streaming, followed by public television broadcasts.

When would you release DVDs?

DVDs would follow, 90 days or 100 days later.

The great thing is that we're in a position to learn and experiment. Without our new union agreements, we would be handcuffed as we were in the past.

Last month in Chicago, the Lyric Opera and its unions concluded a revenue-sharing agreement, apparently inspired by yours, that will let the Lyric return to radio broadcasts after an absence of five years. For the Met, the new union pact lets you enter new media. Other opera companies and orchestras are beginning to follow the Met's revenue-sharing model. You've created a ripple effect, breaking the logjam.

It was high time. Quite frankly, it was only possible because the unions understood that the art form is aging, the audiences have been declining.

In your decade at Sony Classical, you probably got very tired of having the term "crossover" attached to your name, but aren't there some intrinsic merits to breaking down the barriers between genres of music? Now you're bringing in directors and possibly composers from outside of opera.

It's dangerous to relate one to the other. When I was working for Sony Classical, I was charged with making profitable recordings. To succeed in a for-profit environment, I was pushing the envelope in terms of the types of recordings my label released. Some had great artistic merit, like Tan Dun's score for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* or John Corigliano's score for *The Red Violin*. They are wonderful examples of stretching the audience and art form of modern classical composition and making composers more accessible.

My challenge as general manager of the Met is completely different. I see the role as a chief producer. I have to think with both the left and right sides of my brain at all times. Art in a vacuum cannot make a successful opera house. We have 3,800 seats that we have to fill. It would be irresponsible

of me to conceive of productions that don't have the potential to fill those seats.

You're making a point of bringing in directors from outside the narrowly defined field of opera.

I don't think opera should be pigeon-holed in terms of the talent pool it draws from. In my position, I have to be responsible and careful about what I do.

It's inappropriate to bring crossover pop artists to sing at the Met, for example, or to produce musicals with amplification, as some opera houses have done. Those are last-ditch efforts that indicate failure in running an opera house in the manner they are meant to be run. The natural acoustics in that opera house are a miracle. You can hear glorious voices without amplification. There's a lot to be done in expanding the creative horizons of legitimate opera performances without having to resort to inartistic marketing gimmicks.

You were an usher at the Met when you were a teenager. Do you recall hearing Met broadcasts when you were even younger?

I did not listen to the Met when I was a kid. I listened to classical radio a lot, but I didn't have the time or patience to sit through an opera performance on the radio.

Will kids today have the time or patience to listen to the newly revamped broadcasts?

I think you have to be an opera lover with the time to enjoy the art form. No matter how good intermissions are, they aren't going to make people sit by their radios for three hours or more.

What we want to do through radio and TV is make the experience more compelling for the confirmed opera lover and make it appealing for those who wish to be introduced to this art form. ■

Interviewer Wesley Horner has been an executive producer of national programming for WGBH, NPR and the Smithsonian Institution and now serves as an independent consultant for television and radio program development and production. E-mail: HornerProductions@isp.com.

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