

THE TMC VOCAL PROGRAM AT 75— VOICES CONSTANT YET CHANGING

by Richard Dyer

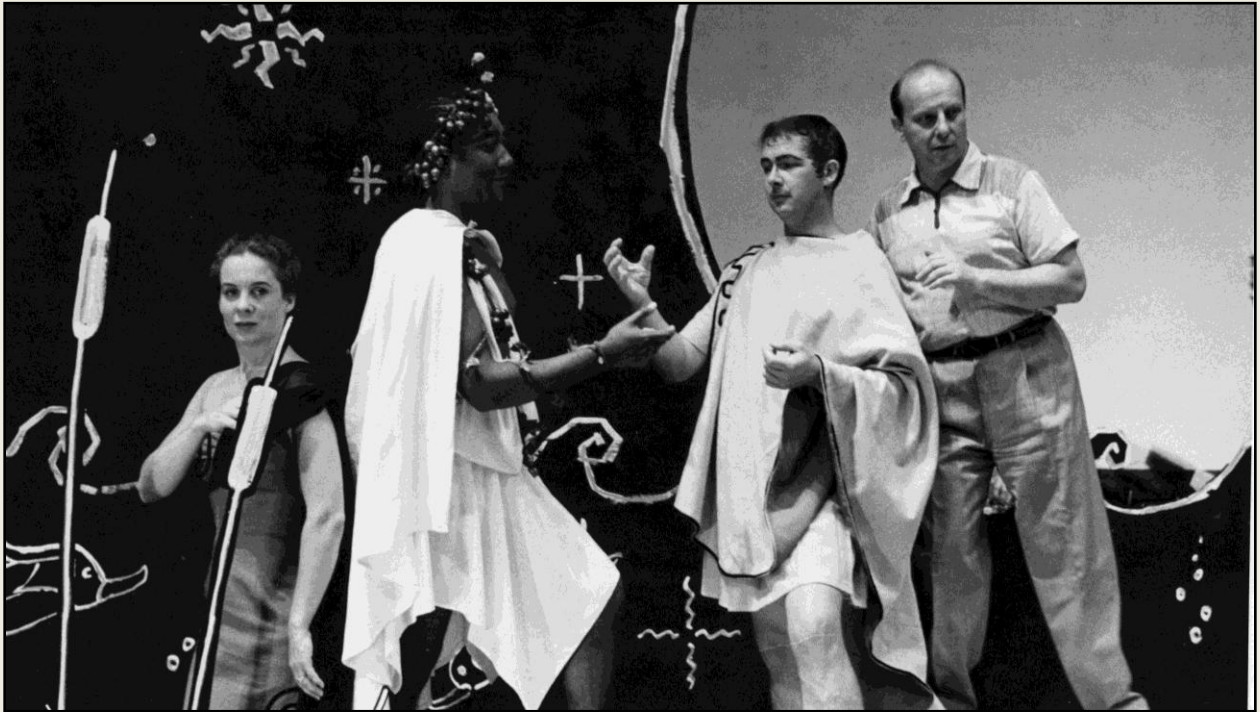
Written in 2015 in honor of the 75th anniversary of the Tanglewood Music Center

To make music is a basic human instinct and the first musical instrument was the human voice; singing was the first strand in the DNA of music. So it was only natural for the Boston Symphony Orchestra's music director Serge Koussevitzky to include vocal music on his agenda for his new summer academy for advanced musical training that he opened at Tanglewood in the summer of 1940, thanks to the generous support of the orchestra and its board.

When Koussevitzky spoke of his artistic goals for the Berkshire Music Center—now the Tanglewood Music Center—he invoked a scientific metaphor: the academy would be a “laboratory” in which the future of music would be discovered, especially music in America. At a perilous moment when the world was hurtling toward a cataclysmic war, the TMC would help preserve and advance culture. Koussevitzky's aim was to represent many dimensions of musical life, a complete interdependent ecology—the presence of composers was a priority, alongside conductors, orchestral and chamber-music musicians, individual singers and choruses, working and learning together, and from each other. The concept was both idealistic and eminently practical. It would draw the best and brightest young musicians into the orbit of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and some of them would spend their entire careers in the orchestra, or frequently appear as guest conductors or soloists. In the early years there was also a major music-appreciation program to sustain and grow audiences.

The vocal programs at Tanglewood have taken on many guises over the last three-quarters of a century, depending on the interests and emphases of the BSO music director, the TMC administration, and the TMC faculty, not to mention the available facilities—and the budget. There have been difficult disruptions in this history, and heartwarming continuities. One of the most famous and influential TMC programs has also been one of the most controversial—the opera program. That first summer one of the composers-in-residence, Paul Hindemith, murmured darkly, “[Opera] will develop an insatiable appetite and devour everything else around here,” and that has sometimes happened. Questions intermittently come up about what business a symphony orchestra has in subsidizing an opera studies program. On the other side of the argument is the view that training in opera is both essential and beneficial to orchestral musicians.

The opera program was launched in the first TMC season, but it may not have been part of Koussevitzky's original plan. He was not known as an opera conductor, although he led occasional performances in France and Spain before coming to America. Nevertheless, his knowledge of the operatic repertory must have been substantial. As a young double bass virtuoso, he joined the orchestra of Moscow's Bolshoi Theater, remaining for more than a decade before his marriage to a wealthy heiress made it possible for him to pursue his conducting ambitions.



Boris Goldovsky coaches TMC students in an unidentified opera production.

The stage director Herbert Graf claimed credit for proposing opera at Tanglewood to Koussevitzky, who immediately agreed it was a good idea. Graf was a colorful character, born into a prominent Viennese family—he was the first child studied by Sigmund Freud. He fled from Europe after Hitler came to power, and staged his first opera in this country in 1936 at the Metropolitan Opera, ultimately producing more than forty operas there. On his recommendation, Tanglewood engaged Boris Goldovsky to prepare the music.

That first summer there was no theater and there was no budget. The first Tanglewood opera was Paul Hindemith's twelve-minute palindromic musical and theatrical joke, *Hin und Zurück*. Goldovsky and the composer played the piano parts, and Goldovsky hated it. There were also staged scenes from repertory operas and a full production of Handel's *Acis and Galatea*. This took place on an open-air platform in the formal garden with the orchestra tucked behind a hedge. In his autobiography Goldovsky writes

amusingly about the conditions: at rehearsals each player, wearing sunglasses, had two assistants—one to secure the music on the stand and turn the pages, another to hold an umbrella against the sun.

Koussevitzky realized that the opera department could not go far without a theater, so he promised one to Graf and Goldovsky. He was able to deliver with a \$10,000 donation from Mrs. Curtis Bok, one of the most prominent music patrons of the period. The eminent Finnish architects Eliel and Eero Saarinen designed the structure, which has seen many changes over the last seventy-four years. The feature most admired when the Theatre-Concert Hall was new—the roof, suspended from five spectacular orange trusses—is long gone.

The second summer—the first summer in the Theatre-Concert Hall—brought a full production of Mozart's then little-known *Così fan tutte*. The next summer's opera was Nicolai's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, featuring a young tenor named Alfredo Coccozza, whom Koussevitzky had overheard vocalizing in an adjacent hotel room in Philadelphia. Koussevitzky felt the young truck driver boasted the finest tenor voice since Enrico Caruso and invited him to Tanglewood. Goldovsky found Coccozza unable to match pitches or read music, but ultimately he did learn Fenton's serenade in Nicolai's opera and created quite a stir. When he subsequently changed his name to Mario Lanza and went to Hollywood, he became a world celebrity.

Following the TMC's 1943-45 hiatus during World War II, 1946 brought the most celebrated event in TMC history—the American premiere of Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes*, commissioned by Koussevitzky. Graf was gone by then, lured to Hollywood to stage the opera sequences in an Esther Williams movie, so *Peter Grimes* was staged by the London director Eric Crozier. Koussevitzky's brilliant young protégé, Leonard Bernstein, conducted; the cast was all young Americans, and Britten himself was present. In the supporting role of a "niece" in Auntie's tavern was a soprano named Phyllis Smith, soon to become known as Phyllis Curtin, whose association with Tanglewood now spans sixty-nine seasons as singer and teacher. She recalls everyone running around the campus singing the tricky 7/4 rhythms of Britten's sea shanty "Old Joe has gone fishing." Managing multiple tasks backstage was a violist who became Goldovsky's most notable protégé and, in time, an operatic legend herself—Sarah Caldwell.

1948 brought a major triumph for Goldovsky, the much-delayed American premiere of Mozart's *Idomeneo*, 167 years after its premiere in Munich (it was not staged at the Met for another thirty-five years). Other American premieres included Britten's *Albert Herring*, as well as unfamiliar operas by Gluck, Rossini, Grétry, Pergolesi, Chabrier,

Puccini, Richard Strauss (*Ariadne auf Naxos*), Tchaikovsky (*Eugene Onegin* and *The Queen of Spades*, both with Curtin; Koussevitzky was supposed to conduct the latter, but fell ill and died that summer). Jacques Ibert was on hand for his *Angélique* and *Le Roi d'Yvetôt*. There were new operas by Robert Middleton, Luigi Mennini, Mark Bucci, Lukas Foss, Jan Meyerowitz, Joseph Horowitz, and Leonard Bernstein. Some of these works, like Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos*, have since become repertory pieces, sometimes, like *Idomeneo*, decades later. The title role in *Ariadne*, incidentally, was taken by a twenty-two-year-old soprano from Mississippi named Leontyne Price.



Benjamin Britten, Leonard Bernstein, and cast onstage for the American premiere of *Peter Grimes* at the Tanglewood Music Center in 1946.

Price was one of the major international opera stars that passed through the vocal programs at Tanglewood, along with Sherrill Milnes, Thomas Stewart, Shirley Verrett, Dawn Upshaw, and, more recently, Stephanie Blythe and Sondra Radvanovsky. Of course Koussevitzky and Goldovsky were not primarily interested in creating superstars; they wanted to produce skillful and versatile musicians. Nevertheless on a Metropolitan Opera intermission in the 1960s, Goldovsky boasted that seventeen members of the company were Tanglewood alumni. Looking today at the names of more than 1500 singers who have passed through, one is amazed at how many enjoyed prominent

careers in many dimensions of music. Ron Holgate wound up on Broadway along with Robert Rounseville; Burt Bacharach became a legendary songwriter and arranger; Marni Nixon sang new music and dubbed soundtracks for classic Hollywood musicals. Many enjoyed important careers in Europe: Claire Watson in Munich, Annabelle Bernard in Berlin, James Pease in Hamburg, Jean Cox at Bayreuth, William Cochran, Cheryl Studer. Some became adventurous new music or early music specialists, and there were versatile, all-around performers who form the backbone of any opera company—singers like Mack Harrell, Frank Guarrera, Richard Cassilly, Kenneth Riegel, Justino Diaz, John Macurdy, and Rosalind Elias at the Met and elsewhere, or Eunice Alberts in Boston. Sanford Sylvan is a more recent characteristic Tanglewood product: a singer who excels in operas by Mozart and contemporary composers, as well as in French, German, and American recital literature; he has returned to join the TMC faculty. On another level of continuity, conductors often remained loyal to singers they met at Tanglewood; many of Bernstein's preferred vocal soloists were singers he encountered in the vocal program.

Goldovsky's ideas about training singing actors became pervasive because of his books, his teaching, and the successes of his alumni. He commanded a national audience because of his touring companies and because of his regular participation in the weekly Metropolitan Opera broadcasts, where he offered the kind of detailed, but still highly entertaining, musical analysis virtually unheard of today. His approach, influenced by his youthful experience of the Moscow Opera Theater, was to "treat opera singers like full-fledged artists and not like unmusical and clumsy marionettes who cannot be trusted to think for themselves." When Tanglewood ran out of money to support the opera program in Goldovsky's last years, he paid for it himself; he was the emperor of his own domain. He lasted through Charles Munch's era, but when Erich Leinsdorf was chosen as the new music director, Goldovsky resigned; he knew there was no place for a second emperor. 1961 was his final Tanglewood summer. By that time, opera programs inspired by the TMC had begun to spring up all over the country. (This writer used to observe that the real founder of Santa Fe's famous apprentice program was not John Crosby but Erich Leinsdorf.)

During Leinsdorf's time, the vocal program continued, mostly on a less prominent basis. The pit in the Theatre-Concert Hall was closed up and many of the stage facilities removed; the space was used for recitals and TMC Orchestra rehearsals. In 1969, his final summer at Tanglewood, Leinsdorf did lead the Vocal Fellows and TMC Orchestra in a concert performance of Berg's *Wozzeck*, which he later spoke of as his proudest achievement in the Berkshires; the young Michael Tilson Thomas assisted in the musical preparation. Leinsdorf also led concert performances of operas by Mozart,

Verdi, and Wagner with the BSO in the Koussevitzky Music Shed, occasionally casting the Vocal Fellows in smaller roles.

The American premiere of Britten's *War Requiem* at Tangle-wood in 1963 launched another great era in the vocal history of the TMC. Harry Kraut, then running the Music Center, lamented to soprano soloist Phyllis Curtin that the TMC singers had grown restive because there wasn't enough for them to do. She suggested that the singers all get together in a group to talk about singing, and thus began the master classes that she led for fifty years. These were always inspiring; Seiji Ozawa annually urged the instrumentalists to attend alongside the vocalists. In her classes she offered encouragement and counsel about music, text, enunciation, technique, interpretation, and audience communication; she encouraged fearlessness and independence in every dimension. Dawn Upshaw recently spoke about her experiences in 1983. "My mother is a very strong woman, but Phyllis was the strongest female I had come across yet in any life experience. I was in awe of her, and I credit her for really giving me the sense that I could do anything I wanted to. I had never seen anything like her integrity and respect for her students—that fierce commitment to her art is something really rare."



Phyllis Curtin teaches in her master-class

As a young baritone and an aspiring choral conductor John Oliver sang in some of Curtin's first classes. He was mentored by Leinsdorf's assistant conductor Charles

Wendelken-Wilson, who directed choral activities at Tangle-wood from 1966 to 1969. When Wendelken-Wilson left, Oliver became head of the vocal and choral programs at the TMC. “We kept the two programs going for three years, but then the management said it could no longer afford both, so with great regret, we closed down the choral program.” He headed the vocal program for twenty years. At the start of this tenure, opera-focused young singers were going elsewhere, so Oliver, the collaborative pianist Dennis Helmrich, and Curtin created a new emphasis on the international art song repertory and contemporary music. “This was not being done anywhere back then,” Oliver says. “Opera still came along once in a while, but there was never the money to sustain it.”

Each summer’s programming was highly varied but sometimes centered on a national style and on new music, often by the composer in residence—Hans Werner Henze, for example, or Olivier Messiaen. Since Oliver’s day most of the heads of the vocal program have been collaborative pianists, including Margo Garrett, Kayo Iwama, Alan Smith, and others. On any random night a music-lover could run into something interesting or significant, like a program of the complete solo vocal music of Stravinsky curated by longtime faculty member and contemporary-music specialist Lucy Shelton. Or Russian song. Or Debussy and Messiaen, or Schumann....

Opera was intermittent during the 1960s, but at the end of the decade there was an ambitious three-year music-theater project funded by special grants. Ian Strasfogel directed the enterprise, which concentrated on chamber operas performed in the West Barn—the Theatre-Concert Hall was always busy and most of the lighting and technical equipment was long gone. The repertory was eclectic, ranging from Monteverdi and Offenbach to Bruno Maderna (the American premiere of *Satyricon*) and Harrison Birtwistle. This ended when the funding lapsed.

Ozawa’s interest in opera grew over the course of his long tenure as music director. In the early years, in larger works like Schoenberg’s *Gurrelieder* and Mahler’s Symphony No. 8, he would occasionally feature Vocal Fellows in smaller roles. In the mid-1970s an ambitious opera program under the direction of Tanglewood alum Nathaniel Merrill was announced, but the money didn’t materialize. In 1980, however, Ozawa began an ambitious series of semi-staged concert operas in the Shed beginning with Puccini’s *Tosca* starring two TMC alumni, Shirley Verrett and Sherrill Milnes. Sometimes Vocal Fellows would participate—Upshaw, for example, sang in the chorus for Gluck’s *Orfeo ed Euridice* with Marilyn Horne.

Opera came back in a big way in 1996, the 50th anniversary of the TMC’s American premiere of *Peter Grimes*. The orchestra pit was reopened in the Theatre-Concert Hall

and the stage retrofitted, and the performance was a high point of Ozawa's career. The young tenor Anthony Dean Griffey sprang into national prominence in the title role, which he later sang at the Met. Sarah Caldwell was in the audience, as was Jon Vickers, the most celebrated Grimes of his generation. (An eager outdoorsman, Vickers camped out on the shore of the Stockbridge Bowl.)



Scene from the TMC's 1996 production of *Peter Grimes* led by Seiji Ozawa, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the American premiere.

After that triumph, there were full-scale productions with the Fellows every summer, most conducted by Ozawa, including a Ravel double bill, Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*, Verdi's *Falstaff*. Other conductors included Stefan Asbury and Ludovic Morlot, and the production team was usually headed by the Met's David Kneuss. 2003 brought one of the most ambitious events at the TMC since the first *Peter Grimes*—the world premieres of two operas commissioned by the TMC, Osvaldo Golijov's *Ainadamar* and Rob Zuidam's *Rage d'amours*. Both have seen success elsewhere; *Ainadamar*, partly based on the life of Federico García Lorca, has become one of the most frequently performed contemporary operas.

The music directorship of Ozawa's successor, James Levine, was clouded by injury and illness, leading to many cancellations. But as one of the most important opera conductors in history, Levine wanted opera at Tanglewood, and he got it. In the Theatre-Concert Hall there were productions of *Don Giovanni*, *Così fan tutte*, and the

American stage premiere of Elliott Carter's *What Next?* He was scheduled to conduct Weill's *Mahagonny* and Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos* but these were taken over by Eric Nielsen, a Con-ducting Fellow, and Christoph von Dohnanyi, respectively. No less enthralling were Levine's classes with the singers and other closed events, such as a rehearsal of Act I of *Don Giovanni* with the Vocal Fellows, the TMC Orchestra, and that summer's Conducting Fellows. He also brought along two pianists and coaches from the Met who have become helpful and challenging presences, Linda Hall and Howard Watkins. Levine naturally attracted to Tangle-wood a different group of singers, on the whole more advanced and older than their recent predecessors; one example is the soprano Layla Clare, now singing major roles at the Met. The list of accomplishments by Vocal Fellows goes on and on—they have collaborated on Broadway evenings with Keith Lockhart and the Boston Pops both in Boston and at Tanglewood, and in recent years they have worked more often with the TMC Orchestra. Summer 2014, for example, brought a performance of Berlioz's song cycle *Les Nuits d'été*. The choreographer Mark Morris has enlisted the Vocal Fellows in special programs, including imaginative new productions of Britten's *Curlew River* and Stravinsky's *Renard*, among other projects.



Curtain call for a 2009 production of *Don Giovanni* on the baton of then BSO Music Director James Levine and stage director Ira Siff

In the fall of 2014 Dawn Upshaw was named head of the vocal arts program. Her goals for the program are based both on her professional experience and her recognition of Tangle-wood's special context. "I want every singer to have a bit of everything we do and I want to offer the singers the time and the luxury of being able to focus deeply on

something in solitude, not always rushing off to the next thing. When I was a Fellow, I valued the time I had alone with myself in one of the most beautiful settings you can imagine, time when I could be alone with my music, figuring out what I was trying to say.” There will be some changes—the emphasis will remain on recital literature, vocal chamber music, and new music, but Upshaw has expanded the list of guest faculty who will be on hand for longer residencies, including baritone Sanford Sylvan. Fully staged opera is currently off the table, again, in part because the Theatre-Concert Hall is in need of drastic repair. Also there is a new BSO Music Director, Andris Nelsons, himself a busy opera conductor whose plans for the TMC may include opera—and, after all, he is married to a soprano, Kristine Opolais.



A TMC Vocal Fellow performing art song

Finally we should have a word about the choral programs, which were such an important dimension of the TMC in the first third of its history. Koussevitzky may not have had opera in his original plan, but he did want and need a chorus. For his Symphony Hall concerts, he had access to the Harvard Glee Club and the Radcliffe Choral Society; the conductor of both during most of Koussevitzky’s tenure was G. Wallace Woodworth. Before the BSO acquired Tanglewood, Koussevitzky had had conversations with Woodworth about a collaboration between the orchestra and Harvard on some kind of summer academy, and Woodworth was one of the original faculty members at the TMC. That summer Woodworth had prepared the chorus for a performance of Bach’s B minor Mass, as he had done several times for Symphony Hall.

All the Fellows were expected to sing in the chorus if their services as instrumentalists were not needed; Leonard Bernstein was one of the Bach choristers. The first chorus performance came during the initial opening exercises, when Woodworth led the world premiere of Randall Thompson's *Alleluia*, commissioned for the occasion. The printed music arrived on the Tanglewood grounds less than an hour before the event. Woodworth played it through on the piano and then rehearsed the assembled Fellows for forty-five minutes before heading off to the Shed for the premiere of what remains to this day the Tanglewood anthem.



Erich Leinsdorf conducts a rehearsal of the choral students

Woodworth's association with the BSO continued for decades, but he did not remain long at Tanglewood because of a spiky relationship with the other resident choral conductor, the British-born Hugh Ross. In later years Lorna Cooke deVaron became Ross's assistant as her first job on the TMC faculty. She went on to a long and distinguished career at New England Conservatory, and her choruses frequently collaborated with the BSO in performances and recordings, especially in the Munch era. Still alarmingly alert at ninety-five, she says she came to Tanglewood in 1946 to study with Robert Shaw. "He was a new young man, a hot shot, reportedly, and he was turning the choral world on its ear. So I enrolled in the choral conducting program—there were sixteen men and me in that class. Someone said he didn't want to see a woman sweat, and that struck me dumb. But by the end of the summer Shaw had asked me to conduct a piece on one of his programs, the only Fellow he had asked. So

I felt exonerated. There was a real magic about that summer—we would work four or five hours rehearsing with the full chorus, then go for swim before coming back to work the rest of the afternoon with Shaw.”

In 1946, Ross prepared the chorus for *Peter Grimes* and every week Shaw’s chorus sang a program in a Lenox church, which developed a loyal and enthusiastic following. Lorna Cooke deVaron worked with Shaw for the three summers he was in the Berk-shires. After Shaw’s departure Ross kept the program going until 1963. In the Leinsdorf years, deVaron and Alfred Nash Patterson took over. “We did some wonderful things, especially with contemporary music,” deVaron recalls. “We once put Stravinsky’s *Les Noces* and Dallapiccola’s *Canti di prigionia* on the same program.” Iva Dee Hiatt succeeded deVaron, and then Charles Wendelken-Wilson, assisted by John Oliver. And then, in 1969, Oliver approached the BSO management with a proposition. “ ‘You need a chorus. This is my proposal and I am the guy.’ The BSO took me up on it. At the time I wasn’t surprised; now, when I think about it, I am very surprised.”

This was the start of the Tanglewood Festival Chorus, which is another story. This spring Oliver announced his retirement from the TFC after forty-five years, but he is not leaving Tanglewood. Hearing the Robert Shaw Chorale when he was a college student confirmed his desire to become a choral conductor, and at New England Conservatory he studied with Lorna Cooke deVaron, who studied with Shaw; his trajectory parallels that of Dawn Upshaw, who studied with Phyllis Curtin, who studied with Boris Goldovsky. The TMC is blessed with continuities that stretch back to the visionary Koussevitzky, and it has always been peopled with people who believe, with Koussevitzky, that the only way to assure continuity is to be receptive to the new, and to embrace constant, renewing change.

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