

Is DVD Opera Ready for Prime Time?

By Jesse W. Knight

The opera world is in a great state of flux due to the impact of DVD. Not everyone is pleased by the new video trend, as it might make sound-only recordings obsolete. Witness how quickly digital cameras have taken over. Digital cameras, it was believed, would never meet fine art requirements. Film is now a specialty and digital photos are mainstream. Sometimes complex technology really does improve an art form. After all, trumpets could only play notes in the harmonic series until instrument makers borrowed steam valve technology from locomotives in the 19th century. Other than a few historically informed performance fans, there is no big call for valveless trumpets. What singers have learned from medical research has improved singing as well.

WILL DVD HURT SINGERS WHO ARE NOT PHOTOGENIC?

Maybe video will help more than it hurts. Look at portraits of Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and Elisabeth Grummer. Most people would have no trouble picking Schwarzkopf as the beauty queen. Like it or not, Schwarzkopf's face helped sell her records despite her Nazi baggage. Looking at these singers again on DVD, singing and acting on stage, I find them both marvelous in their own ways as singing actresses. DVD may be fairer than LP cover photos. Portraits convey very little about stage presence. For singers who can't

act, or control their weight, DVD is bad news.

SOPRANO MALIN HARTELIUS, MORE DVDS THAN CDS

One statistic for anyone who thinks DVD is not important to music—Malin Hartelius appears on seven DVDs and only four CDs. She has received great praise for her live (sound only) recording of Bach's cantata #51, arguably the most treacherous vocal piece of all time. That she can also portray characters half her actual age convincingly in the video realm puts her in a special category with even less competition. How we image sound with speakers now should correlate with a picture. It is a call to action. What action you should take is a matter of opinion, I am only attempting to pass on a thought process here.

When I was young, you went to "hear" an opera, not "see" it. Recordings were considered a poor substitute for a live performance. London's Wagner Ring recordings with their "sound stage" stereo were just coming out. This conveyed stage action by having the singers move as they sang, thus producing a stereo image of left to right with depth conveyed by a variation of reverberation. Conservatives with inadequate sound systems considered this a gimmick.

In high school music class we were able to get a few brief clips of 16mm film from the famous Salzburg Festival Don Giovanni filmed by Paul Czinner in

1954. A 16mm optical soundtrack played on a Bell and Howell projector, with its single cone speaker on a half shell, is positively the worst possible introduction to opera. Needless to say no new opera fans were hooked that day. I was already addicted and tried to explain, to no avail, that opera is worthwhile when you can hear the music without double-digit harmonic distortion. Once, I took several people to an opera at great expense. All indications were that the performance was going to be great. The conductor was very well known, unfortunately he was not well that night. None of my guests ever returned to opera and blamed me for a boring evening, even though it was at my considerable expense. I never dared to introduce anyone to opera after this. This has undoubtedly happened to other well-meaning people.

DVD is changing all these perceptions very quickly among adventurous listeners. Opera is very popular in Asia, and some DVD opera has Chinese or Japanese subtitles, along with the English ones. Subtitles are selectable as the disc plays and can be turned off completely. Subtitles are not a total replacement for a libretto, but are much more user friendly. I have not given up following an opera with a full conductor's score. Just because I learned operas the hard way does not make the "hard way" right for every new listener, and there is much to be said for a wider customer base for opera.

Soundwise, things are quite good but may not be up to CD standard yet. Problems fall into two categories: picture-sound conflict, and good old Murphy's law.

SOUND – PICTURE CONFLICT

In a “sound only” recording, singers can move in whatever way is required to produce a convincing stereo image. The trend now is to record live for DVD. Staging must look good to the live audience and the DVD audience as well. Opera is so expensive to stage, with the best sets and singers that separate productions are not practical. This is not a bad thing as many singers and conductors only come to life when they smell the grease paint and see an audience. Trying to pan voices left to right as cameras pan is not only impractical but would make musical nonsense as well, given that live staging does not allow for constant cuts for repositioning the singers. The solution seems to be to mike the stage almost monophonically and mike the orchestra pit in stereo. Most DVD operas follow the almost mono voices with stereo orchestra pattern. This is a fairly elegant solution in my opinion. It allows you to set up a pair of speakers for best sound rather than a specific spacing related to screen size. Keeping the voices centered with the TV is very important, however.

I have done nothing when it comes to the 5.1 option on some opera DVD. For me 5.1 would so disrupt room décor that I am just not interested at this point. Many opera DVDs do not come with 5.1 or DTS options. Microphone setup for opera in multi channel is not a straightforward process; some engineers are not convinced that it is worth the trouble. The Boston chapter of the Audio Engineering Society conducted some tests (in the '90s) of quadraphonic microphone techniques for classical music, but nothing spectacular (like the Decca Tree) emerged from it. A strong case can be made for three-channel stereo (left-center-right), but more channels just produce more problems. Using 5.1 or DTS without the rear channels is worth investigating.

IN OPERA, MURPHY'S LAW RULES

Murphy's law states that anything that

can go wrong will go wrong. Opera productions are never “perfect,” like some orchestras. Good opera productions are the result of excellent damage control and significant compromises. Minimalist staging is one such compromise, which angers purists, when stage instructions in the libretto are altered. Sometimes this is just a stage management ego trip, but in other cases minimalist staging solves problems.

Opera on a large stage is subject to the laws of physics. Sound only travels at 1100' per second. Voices and orchestra cannot be in perfect sync at all times for all seats. If this sounds like relativity theory you are right to explore this as Einstein would, but add in the effects of early and late reflections. It is tempting for an opera conductor to go for a slow rigid beat to assure precision at the expense of expression. Minimalist staging that keeps singers near the pit is a better compromise in many cases; what's more, many operas depend on our seeing facial expressions clearly. In this respect, DVD opera is better than live. This does not mean I am lusting after opera on H/DTV. Too high a resolution might reveal an ugly aspect of opera; this is the fact that when you are singing a love duet face to face, you will spit on your partner and your partner will return fire. Pixelation of standard TV does a good job of hiding this mess.

Soundwise, I believe that simple is always better as two or three channels of clean sound produce less listener fatigue and sonic allergy than five channels of distorted sound. Two excellent large speakers are superior to five smaller lower-quality speakers. Remember that operatic basses sing an octave lower than popular male singers, so do not cheat the low end. An F3 at the low end of 32Hz is ideal. Voices can go down to 64Hz and woofer performance starts deteriorating at three times the F3 frequency. All bass singers reach 96Hz. Some Russian basses sing below 64Hz. An F3 below 32Hz via bandpass alignments seems to cause more problems due to distortion than good old QB3 single port alignments with 10 to 18" woofers.

HEADPHONES

Currently I am using AKG K 240 M headphones to study DVD sound as I am very familiar with their sound. The upper crossover point at 3-5kHz in speakers has a bad effect on soprano voices some-

times. Making judgments of sopranos via speakers is, in my opinion, very unfair. On the other hand, a bass can sound weak due to the low frequency deficiency of phones. I have no problem mentally compensating for this. Phones will reveal small amounts of clipping when voices are over-recorded or playback amplifier clipping takes place. All I can state now is that this is happening before the volume control in my TV (with built-in DVD), as the clipping is not related to volume control setting. It is possible that my TV D to A converter is overloading the first stage of analog circuitry before the volume control.

A second, less desirable possibility is that TV sound people are still setting their levels too high out of habit. This is a leftover fear of noise from analog recording technology. In any case, this breakup on the Rosenkavalier disc is not frequent enough to spoil the listening experience. On many DVDs that I sampled from our well-stocked library network, the overload is too frequent and too severe to ignore. DVD from older videotapes and films have very restricted dynamics—newer is definitely better, soundwise.

MOZART, THE MAGIC FLUTE, ZUR-ICH OPERA. (LIVE) KULTUR DVD VIDEO D2910

For best sound, conducting, and singing, this DVD is ideal. People who object to singers who push their voices too far for dramatic effect will find only a very few raw notes. I am hard-pressed to find better singing in any recorded format from any decade, making this an ideal DVD for anyone who thinks that all opera singers are poor musicians. Malin Hartelius (Pamina) and Anton Scharinger (Papageno), along with the three boy sopranos, are unequalled in my collection of recordings that goes back to acoustic 78 RPM CD reissues. The other singers are not far behind, and when I say this I make this judgement using vocal standards of the Church of England (Anglican Church), not typical opera productions.

On the other hand, some will find the dynamic range a bit short. This is not the result of the perceptually encoded Dolby Digital Stereo sound, but rather the conductor's desire to keep the orches-



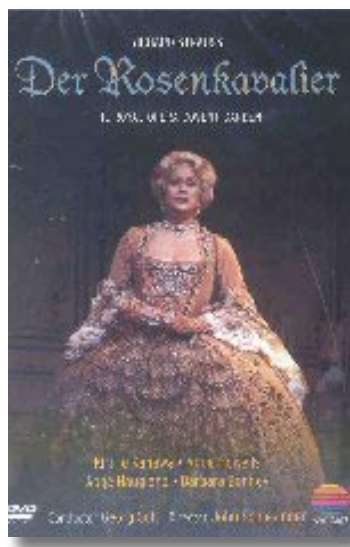
tra under tight control so as not to force the singers' voices. Flexible tempi on occasion cause the singers and orchestra to fall slightly out of sync here and there; again a decision has been made to put expressive phrasing above perfect timing. Conductor Franz Welser-Most achieves what eluded Furtwangler when it comes to unifying the serious and comic elements of this opera. I find nothing objectionable in the sound encoding which throws away masked sounds that cannot be heard, thus increasing disc capacity. Not surprisingly, I get the sense that this sound is too clean and too easy to listen to. Should we worry about DVD becoming cleaner than live? I think it is time to ponder this. The combination of unforced singing and perceptual encoding makes for the lowest listening fatigue I have ever experienced. This DVD gets a great deal of use as I am studying this opera, if any sonic allergy was going to occur, it would have happened by now.

One sore point is a very short scene with a topless serpent bearer, which if opera DVD were rated, would give this one an R rating. This occurs immediately after the conclusion of the overture. Deliberate "wardrobe malfunctions" are rampant in opera DVD from Europe—consider yourself warned.

The subtitles were not proofread and contain numerous misspellings and untranslated German words here and there. If this bothers you, buy a vocal score—it is not expensive. Some of this opera can and should be sung by amateur singers, a great way to learn about opera. Opera before recordings was not

just a spectator sport.

RICHARD STRAUSS DER ROSENKAVALIER EMI DVA 5 44258 9



This is also from Zurich Opera (2004 production) and will appeal to those who want something more dynamic and dramatic than the Magic Flute. Not all the singing here has the dead-on pitch accuracy of the first DVD, but the singing is excellent by the standards for this type of opera. The staging is a bit strange, but I don't find this annoying, as it adds to the mayhem that makes this opera so much fun.

Unlike the Magic Flute, this is a two disc set with three sound options: linear PCM stereo, Dolby 5.1, and DTS 5.1. I have only checked out the linear PCM option, which is excellent except for occasional breakup (which, as I noted, may be due to my DVD/TV). Subtitles are much better and there is no nudity. This opera is an ideal DVD opera as there is an unusual amount of humorous action full of gender bending and an arranged marriage from Hell that unravels in a delightful way before it can begin. No one can get all the humor out of this opera in less than five showings. Rosenkavalier may have inspired the creator of Victor/Victoria.

MOZART, DON GIOVANNI, 1954 SALZBURG FESTIVAL DGG DVD 073 019-9

The visually stunning production complete with two dangerous stunts would scare today's liability lawyers. In addition, this expensive film production would bankrupt any opera company in

today's economy. Compared to 16mm film and VHS releases, this DVD is a miraculous improvement in picture and sound. The sound is by no means good by audiophile standards but good enough for some to enjoy. If you want to experiment with limited range speakers for antique sound recordings, this is a great test disc and last visual record of conductor Wilhelm Furtwangler. Many of the singers in the film were still in good voice at the dawn of the stereo era. For collectors of Elisabeth Grummer, Cesare Siepi, Lisa Della Casa, Otto Edelmann, and Anton Dermota recordings, this is a way to see these singers perform in a spectacular environment. These excellent singers inspired my interest in opera at an early age. Music fans too young to have heard these musicians live put the sound issues aside showing that this film is of lasting interest, not just a sentimental journey for old timers. There are no "wardrobe malfunctions." Sound is PCM mono.

ANNA NETREBKO THE WOMAN—THE VOICE DGG B0003705-09

This controversial video that mixes real opera with MTV-style lip sync opera video is highly recommended and self-explanatory. I find it refreshing and creative in its approach to making opera relevant to MTV viewers. There is no nudity, and only bitter hard-core opera fans will be offended. Sound options are PCM stereo, DTS 5.1, and Dolby Digital 5.1. Some breakup is audible on my setup, but this may not be the fault of the recording as noted above. *ax*

