

Making a Lasting Career:

Conductor Joseph Rescigno Tells How

by Brian Manternach

Conductor Joseph Rescigno certainly knows about longevity, not only for his own lengthy career with Florentine Opera, but also in watching others' careers last or fade. Rescigno shares his beliefs about the secrets to a long career, his feelings about the new Young Artist Program at the Florentine, and his optimism about the current opera scene in the United States.

It was a typical January morning in Salt Lake City, with 12 fresh inches of “the greatest snow on earth” forcing life to maneuver at a snowplow’s pace. The warm fireplace inside the downtown restaurant Elevations provided welcome contrast to the white blanket covering the city streets.

Between performances of *Tosca* with the Utah Opera, Maestro Joseph Rescigno sat down with *Classical Singer* to reflect on his 26 seasons as principal conductor and artistic advisor of Milwaukee’s Florentine Opera. Dressed in a black mock turtleneck, Rescigno spoke with his

hands, conducting the conversation as if on the podium. He shared his thoughts on the current state of opera, his career, and on how singers can find success.

Congratulations on your 26 seasons with Florentine Opera. What has it been like having a “home base” at the Florentine for so long?

Florentine has been the single most important aspect of my career. I was a young conductor when I started. I’ve grown up—musically, and every other way—with the company, with the city. I was kind of a young kid when I started and

now I’m more like an older veteran. It’s like a marriage that’s worked. It’s always such a great joy for me to return to the company. I think it’s been the center of my musical life.

How many general directors have you seen during your tenure?

Three. Besides my presence there for so long, our general directors have stayed for nice long periods. The combination of the two has given a nice stability to the company that I think is important. I’ve been very fortunate that it’s been a real collaborative effort—it kind of proves the adage that two heads are better than one.

What led to the decision to bring back the Young Artist Program at the Florentine?

We had a very successful program early on which was started by [former General Director] Dennis [Hanthorn]. We dropped it when we got into some financial trouble, but we had quite a high success ratio. One of our singers went on to have a nice career at the Met and another has had a very successful career singing all over the world. We’ve had the Young Artist Program in a limited way over the last couple of seasons, but starting with this upcoming season we’re having special auditions for the relaunch of the program. I think the fact that we’re bringing it back is a very good thing.

Maestro Joseph Rescigno



photo by Richard Brodzeller Photography

left: Maestro Rescigno is challenged to a duel by the witch in Métropolitain du Grand Montréal production of *Hansel and Gretel*, 1998.
right: Hansel and both puppeteers look on as maestro Rescigno charms Gretel.



Why is having a Young Artist Program important to the Florentine?

As soon as the budget came into line, and as soon as it became possible to bring back the Young Artist Program, I very much encouraged [current General Director] William Florescu to do it, because it's important for young singers to have as many outlets as possible. There is no substitute for experience, and it's beneficial for the company both in its image and in its outreach to schools and to other audiences, too. It's a kind of mutually beneficial situation.

I think that Houston, San Francisco through its Merola program, and Chicago have found and developed so many great singers. Their batting average has been fantastic. Certain summer festivals—be it St. Louis, Santa Fe, Glimmerglass, Des Moines—also have a good batting average with finding good singers. That said, there are some companies who seem to put more emphasis and resources almost into their Young Artist Program than into their mainstage productions, which doesn't make a great deal of sense to me.

Will you be one of the artistic mentors for the Young Artists?

Yes. I was in the early '90s and there was a wonderful young singer who was getting her master's at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee that we encouraged and gave a part in *Rosenkavalier*—Mary Elizabeth Williams. She got a job as a young artist with Paris Opera and now she's launching

a very successful career. I coached her and worked with her at the time.

What do you look for in the singers who audition to be Young Artists?

Rather than trying to find a certain Fach, it is our approach just to try to find the best singer, the best all around. It's a total package. So many people think that it's the voice, and the voice certainly may be the principal ingredient, but not the only ingredient. There are so many other elements involved in making a career. We try to find the three or four best all-around people and program to the talent that we find, which I think is especially true in the Young Artist Program. Rather than thinking of the operas and certain roles in the operas and saying, "Let's find these kind of voices," I think it's best to find the young voices and if they happen to work out in roles in the opera, great! If they don't, just encourage the best talent you find.

What about in the professionals you hire? What qualities will get them recast at the Florentine?

First of all, there were a couple of singers who were just sensational [but] that, for a variety of reasons, we were unable to bring back. Not because they weren't wonderful. In fact, we mounted a production for a certain singer who then was called by the Met. We then tried to bring another singer to fill that same slot who had also done very well with us but

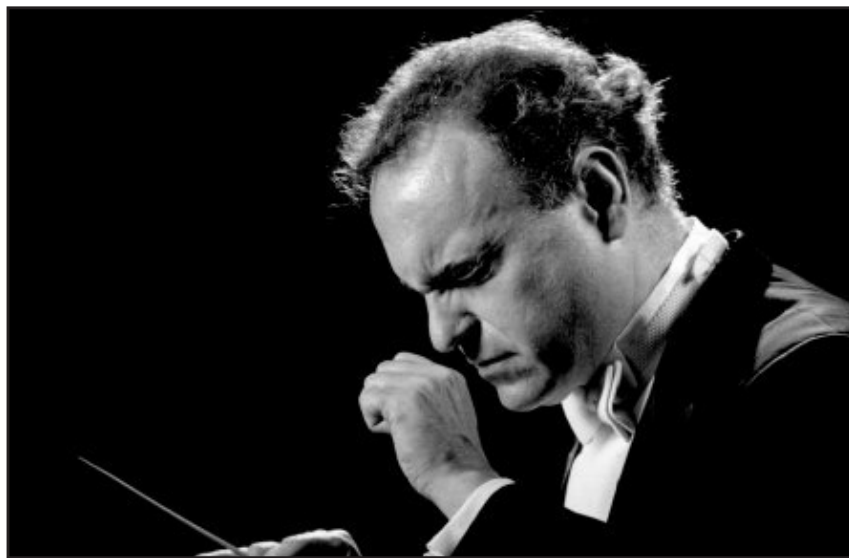
she was engaged at Covent Garden. Then we were lucky to find someone who did the role with Riccardo Muti in Italy, and we've hired her. Unfortunately, the person we originally planned the opera for is now available because the Met dropped the opera that they wanted her for!

In another example, when we heard Erika Sunnegårdh for the first time we gave her what I think might have been her American debut as Leonora in *Fidelio*. She was just wonderful. She was covering at the Met and went on for [Karita] Mattila in the broadcast. But when we saw her, we thought immediately of *Salome* and we're doing *Salome* for her. That I find ideal. It happens so rarely because people think of an opera that they want and then try to find the pieces to fit in it. But if you find an element and a singer that's perfect for a certain piece then it's worth doing the piece just for this person.

Do you believe apprentice programs and graduate programs are doing enough to train singers in all that is necessary to be a professional singer?

I think they're beneficial in raising the level of singing. The only thing I think could be a little dangerous is that because being an opera singer is a combination of many skills, and many programs have an age breakoff, some of [the programs] tend to be confused by the kind of voices that tend to be ideal for certain parts—the larger voices that take a little longer to get under control. So, a lot of apprentice programs

top left: Maestro Joseph Rescigno, top right: The maestro taking one of his very first bows. bottom left: Rescigno with Nicola Rescigno. Far bottom right: pastel created by maestro Rescigno of 'Mr. Bear's Montreal apartment', 1998.



with, for example, an age-30 cutoff tend to focus on the lighter voices. Some companies tend to favor the lighter voices that are more, shall we say, “controlled,” and would tend to overlook a larger voice.

Like a truly great voice, someone with *real* acting skills is rare. I have, on a few occasions, worked with opera singers that I felt were absolutely gifted actresses and actors. In many cases it wasn't because of a great deal of training; it was just a terrifying natural talent. I think it's very important to approach that kind of artist, too. Now, if they don't have the voice or the musicianship or other things that are required to do it, it's not going to happen.

Most people involved in opera are aware of the rare voice that comes along. In addition to that, one should also be aware of the rare dramatic talent that sometimes comes along and coach that as well.

I know at the Florentine—since I've been there, but especially in the last 15 to 18 years—we have been trying to cast not only the best person we could find for a

certain role but surround that person with similar talent that works well together. We try to avoid, for example, putting a heavy dramatic tenor as Rodolfo with a light lyric Mimi, or vice versa. We try not to put someone who is a fantastic actor with someone who has almost no acting abilities. That's not going to work either. So, it's a combination of various things. But as I said, I think these Young Artist Programs are beneficial. It gives people opportunity and the greatest element falls on each performer to find his or her way.

Do you feel your work as a pianist and an orchestral conductor benefits you as an operatic conductor?

Absolutely. I never aspired to be a specialist. That said, there are a few things for which I've been considered a specialist almost by default. I think I have a knowledge of Bel Canto style that has become so rare. In general, whether it's symphonic music, or piano repertory, or chamber music, or accompanying

singers, or doing opera, I've tried to do a wide repertoire from, say, Mozart to the present.

I've also avoided conducting in languages I don't understand. I've not done Russian or Czech. I've done Russian and Czech symphonic repertoire but not the operas. I really feel if it's a language I don't understand I'm not likely to conduct it. Not all of my colleagues agree with that, but that's pretty much been my approach. I really feel a great composer marries text and music and I think that at least a good reading knowledge of the language or a passing knowledge—if someone speaks to you and you can understand it—is important for a conductor.

Should the same be true for singers?

Let me give you an example. Can you imagine an actor who aspires to do movies in Hollywood who can't speak English? Now, I'm not saying you have to be a linguist who speaks five languages, like Nico Castel. Very few singers are equally

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adept at phrasing in four or five languages. But most of the singers I work with tend to be better in one language or another and tend to focus in the literature of one language—gravitate to a literature that suits them.

You must repeat a lot of works over the course of 25-plus years.

Yes, of course, though not so much by my intention. But I’ve tried, as much as possible, to at least every season perform a new opera. There was an opera I avoided for years because I find it so perfect in a childlike way—and because it is childlike it requires a great level of profundity—but I’ll be doing my first *Magic Flute* next season. Because I’m entering my second childhood I may be ready for it [laughs].

How do you take an opera that you’ve done many times and still keep it interesting for yourself, the singers, and the audience?

That is, I think, one of the great challenges, if not the greatest challenge, facing opera today in this country. One of the difficulties is [this]: When presenting a new opera, you don’t have any frame of reference, so you actually have to do a “Butterfly” or a *Rigoletto* better than a world premiere because people know it. I mean, the hardest opera in the world to do—it seems no matter how you do it you’re not going to please somebody—is *Carmen*. Virtually every critic is angry that he has to see *Carmen*, even if he doesn’t see it that often.

Has opera in general changed during your career?

It really hasn’t. I think it works best if it is presented for what it is: a compilation of various arts where maybe different aspects have to be taken into consideration. I don’t think we’re casting a movie—people don’t have to look like they would on a movie screen. But I think it’s important that the singers have the requisite voices, the requisite physical look, and the requisite acting abilities, so that we’re doing the piece and not cutting corners. I think—whether it is a totally abstract, minimal set, or something very realistic—that the productions make sense. If one feels one has to reinvent opera you’re really in the wrong business. Opera has worked for 400 years.

I think that this is a very human art form. As much as I adore the symphonic repertoire and the work I’ve done in abstract music as a pianist and a conductor, I still find that in my life the single most exciting element has been with opera, because it involves so many aspects. It’s maybe the most difficult to bring off because it involves so many aspects, but when it works it’s the most thrilling.

Should we be optimistic about the future of opera?

Certainly, in this country. I’m a little more worried about Europe

right now. Italy, which always had a fantastically strong operatic tradition, seems to be in somewhat of trouble for audiences. Certain theaters that were always selling very well are not selling at all. On the other hand, it’s exploding in Asia. I recently conducted in China, in ’04, and found it just a fabulous experience. I think that East Asia is now at a point, say, where the United States was in 1890 with opera, both in terms of audience and in terms of new talent coming from there. It bodes well for the future. And I think in the United States, what really encourages me is that companies are beginning more and more to do new operas. And some very fine operas have been written in the last 10 to 12 years, operas that work very well both as drama and as music. This, to me, is lifeblood.

What words of advice would you offer to those hoping to have a career as professional singers?

The question is: Is it just a matter of talent? If you want to be a professional singer or a professional musician, especially in classical music, you can’t doubt yourself. The desire must be so strong that no other way of life is possible. And if you’re very fortunate you can actually make a life in music, but the chances of getting to success very soon are not very great. A lot of people just don’t realize the amount of hard work and the amount of courage it takes to do it.

If there’s one thing young conductors underestimate, it’s how well they have to know the piece, and it’s the same with young singers. They underestimate all they have to bring to the first rehearsal and to the career. That is probably the most important single ingredient in making a career and the one that is least talked about. After you have the voice, the acting, the musicianship, the looks, and everything else, dedication and perseverance are maybe the single most important ingredients. You cannot overestimate the importance of hard work, and dedication, and perseverance, even if you have all of the other qualities necessary.

You can read more about Rescigno at www.florentineopera.org and www.concertatore.com.

Tenor Brian Manternach has appeared throughout the country in opera, recitals, and concert work. With degrees in voice from St. John’s University (Minn.) and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Manternach has taught studio voice at the University of Notre Dame and is currently completing his doctor of music degree at the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music. He has recently added opera stage direction to his résumé and is currently the director of Choral/Vocal Activities at Juan Diego Catholic High School near Salt Lake City. E-mail the author at brianmanternach@jdchs.org.