

# An Interview with David Pittman-Jennings

BY JOEL KASOW

On a sunny afternoon, I encountered David Pittman-Jennings in Antwerp where he was rehearsing for a series of performances with the Opera van Vlaanderen (Flemish Opera) of the title role in Tippet's *King Priam*. The baritone had sung and recorded Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*

with Chris Merritt and the Concertgebouw Orchestra under the baton of Pierre Boulez, a recording which should be on the market as you are reading this. The production was given in September 1995 by the Netherlands Opera in Amsterdam and again in August 1996 at the Salzburg Festival.

*Joel Kasow:* Was this the first time you sang Moses?

*David Pittman-Jennings:* No, because I had the pleasure of singing it in a concert performance with the Lyons Opera Orchestra conducted by Kent Nagano, a very different experience, a much quicker experience, but I at least had the opportunity of doing it; the fascinating aspect of that performance was that we also performed the third act—which had not been composed. We just spoke the text. Wolfgang Neumann was Aron. The concept was totally different from the performance with Chris. And I think Chris probably comes much closer to what Schoenberg himself had in mind for the role of Aron than what we hear nowadays when a less lyric approach is taken.

*JK:* How do you go about learning a role like Moses? How do you approach the *sprechgesang*, more from a singing or a speaking angle?

*DP-J:* I've always had a rather unusual approach to *sprechgesang* in all the works of Schoenberg as well as Berg. I've never really felt that the notation was intended to be taken literally, that one should speak precisely on the pitch that was notated. On the other hand, what I should say in preface to that and in support of my theory concerning *sprechgesang*, is that I think that what composers had in mind was purely and simply the style of declamation on the spoken theatrical stage at the period in which this form of musical writing evolved, a very well-supported, unspung spoken sound. I approached the learning process primarily by first learning the text and then, for instance in my first experience with Moses, taking the pitches that were written and finding where my intonation differed from that and seeing why it was different, trying to understand why my intonation—or as Peter Stein (the director of the Amsterdam production) would say, the "speech melody"—was not the same. In working with Stein on preparing this—and we worked for hours and hours and hours—in Paris and Salzburg and Amsterdam and then during the actual rehearsal period, we approached it from a spoken standpoint, a rhythmically spoken standpoint, and took the rhythm first and then analyzed the many different ways in which the speech melody could be intoned. Peter Stein wanted to approach this from the standpoint of speech first and melody second and he constantly referred to it as *sprachmelodie*, which I thought was quite interesting and was a great help to me. We would go over and over one word or one phrase and find the intonation, the speech melody, that worked, and frequently, almost without intending to do so, we ended up perhaps not at the same pitch level but, almost without exception, the same spoken curve that Schoenberg had written.

*JK:* How much input did Boulez have in these rehearsals?

*DP-J:* There was a very good understanding between Boulez and Stein. From the very beginning—and this wasn't their first collaboration as they had already done *Pelléas et Mélisande*—and it is my understanding from Peter Stein himself in the interview I had with him prior to being cast and also at a later point—they had agreed that Stein was responsible for the role of Moses and Boulez for everything else. This really didn't cause any difficulty because the two of them really respect each other so wonderfully, and Stein—even the giant that he is of the German spoken stage—would almost invariably, except on one or two points, during the entire rehearsal period ask, "Pierre, does this suit you?"

*JK:* I didn't see the Amsterdam production, but did attend the production in Paris staged by Herbert Wernicke, which could best be described as cerebral, in contrast to Stein's technicolor approach, almost *Lawrence of Arabia*.

*DP-J:* There was that, but when you look at the score and when you look at the very precise indications that Schoenberg gave, annotations at the side of the score which have now been printed in the score itself, Peter Stein did everything he could to follow as precisely as he could the indications that Schoenberg expressed . . .

*JK:* Which was one of the things I missed in Paris.

*DP-J:* Well, at first or second glance, even at the one-hundredth glance, these things are neither inexpensive to produce nor are they easy to achieve, given the number of people you're working with. The chorus, the people of Israel, is the principal character in *Moses und Aron*. Moses and

Aron as characters are definitely secondary to the chorus. They are co-antagonists, you might say, flip sides to the same coin. First of all, to achieve a production of *Moses und Aron* in which the chorus not only sings the music—my hat off to the chorus master in Amsterdam—very precisely but has the music so under control that they can move on stage and act with never a moment where the concentration sags. It was magnificent, it sort of goes along with one of the comments I heard Pierre Boulez make in an interview that was broadcast on Dutch television when he said that the choral writing of Schoenberg for *Moses und Aron* approaches the greatness and the complexity of the choral writing of Johann Sebastian Bach in his *Matthäus-Passion*. And it's true, the contrapuntal writing is absolutely transparent. You'll hear it on this recording.

*JK:* Was it a live recording or did you have separate sessions?

*DP-J:* We recorded every day in the Concertgebouw. I must say that I admire the way Pierre Boulez runs a recording session. He likes to record big pieces, honestly, rather than taking this note here and that note there. And to watch him working in recording sessions is, I imagine, like watching a human computer. The man is totally in control, he hears everything, he would stop to correct a large error and you would see him go on a sort of instant replay and then he would say, "Harp and piccolo, those two thirty-second notes are indeed to be precisely together, let's do that." And he would rehearse just the harp and piccolo to clarify the fact that they were perhaps not quite together. It has the clarity of orchestral sound you hear only in chamber music.

*JK:* Let's go all the way back. Where and when did you actually start singing?

*DP-J:* Well I started as a child in church, but my studies began at the University of Oklahoma in my freshman year.

*JK:* Are you from Oklahoma?

*DP-J:* I am very heavily from Oklahoma, I was born there, like many artists. It's a good place to be born, to be raised, but if you have any talent it's a very good place to escape from. It's a very good springboard, shall we say. My studies were interrupted by a rather urgent call from the draft board that I would have to finish my studies—I was on a double program of oboe and voice and was told to finish one or the other, so I took the oboe. When I came out of the army I found that my oboe teacher had moved on and the young teacher who had come to replace him knew less about the oboe than I did, so just literally on a whim, a friend who had also just come back to the university from the army suggested that we go to the Metropolitan Opera auditions which were in two weeks. I said, "You're crazy, the deadline is long past." He replied, "I'll call them, tell them we just got out of the army and they'll let us in." So I said, all right, if he could arrange it, never thinking that he'd be able to arrange it. In the meantime, my teacher had moved to California and my friend's teacher at the time was Joseph Benton (born in Oklahoma and changed his name to Giuseppe Bentonelli in order to be able to sing in Mussolini's Italy), who coached us both for the competition. One of the judges was John Crosby and he offered me my first paid position. This is when I seriously began to consider making singing my profession. I had never really considered, up to that point, the possibility or the desirability of a career in singing. After my first apprenticeship in Santa Fe I fell passionately in love with singing and decided that I would go to California and give myself one year. I was rash and unwise at that time and never did I realize that while the passion was already there, it would take many years before it actually would happen. As it turns out, I'm a late bloomer and quite happy about being so.

*JK:* You told me a few weeks ago that you had been in the States working on Carlos in *Ernani* with your teacher. Is this the same teacher?

*DP-J:* Yes, it is. I've only had one teacher, Elizabeth Parham. She eighty years old, studied with Dame Eva Turner, then taught at the University of Oklahoma before moving to California where she taught at California State at Northridge. It was there that I returned to study with her after the army, and she still lives in California. Every year I go back for a control. I always prepare a role because I don't want to go and just sing bits and pieces—you never learn anything that way.

*JK:* Which raises another question. Do you consider yourself a baritone, a bass-baritone, because Priam, which you're now singing, is more the latter.

*DP-J:* And yet Priam is not a particularly low role. It doesn't go high but neither does it go especially low. It's more a question of timbre, although I think that Norman Bailey never really considered himself to be a bass-baritone either.

*JK:* But the first Priams were distinctly basses. Forbes Robinson who created the role . . .

*DP-J:* But Norman was the most successful. I had the pleasure of singing the opera for the first time as Hector to his Priam in Nancy many years ago. To go back to the question, I consider myself a baritone. I think, and this is a very dangerous word to use, I consider myself exceptional—only from the standpoint that it is rare—a baritone who has both good high and low notes. There's really no physical reason why a baritone shouldn't have both good high and low notes. *Au contraire*, there's every reason to believe a good baritone should have both. The fact that my voice extends from high A to low D is primarily because I have a teacher who has taught me how to do that. I've understood that you can't have good high notes unless you've got good low notes because the voice works as though it were a rubber band, and if you pull on one end the other comes up unless you are holding on to the other end as well. Unless you work both extreme ranges, you're going to end up losing. If, for example, you're doing a low role and don't at the same time work the high notes, you're going to lose something else. And who can afford that; given the way engagements happen now, you may wind up singing something extremely low one day and extremely high the next. You don't have the time to put the high notes back in.

*JK:* You sing a good deal of contemporary music. How early does your repertoire start? Bach? Handel? Mozart?

*DP-J:* I'm a great Bach fan, and I personally would like to spend a lot more time singing Bach. And there's no reason why I shouldn't. I call to mind the wonderful recordings of the Bach Aria Group of New York in the early and middle 50s, with Norman Farrow and Eileen Farrell and Jan Peerce—all of these magnificent big voices—and I think if they sang Bach as beautifully as they did, one has to sort of accept the truth in Bach that he was willing to have his music performed on any instrument that would play it.

*JK:* Do you feel that the old music movement has something to say to you?

*DP-J:* I appreciate the "original instruments" theories, and I can appreciate the museum quality of the performances one tries to achieve with less than perfect intonation and, quite often, somewhat limited musicality because of this. I can't possibly understand that this is the *ne plus ultra* in the performance of this music because I cannot, as with contemporary music, understand that any composer would write anything that sounds awful and intend it to be that way. Therefore, I can't accept as the true and really sacred method of performing Baroque music to be with original instruments and, if possible, original voices. As with the Wagnerian repertoire, you can only go so far in one direction before you have to realize that you've gone perhaps too far and have to go back to an acceptable middle road which may not be precisely what the composer heard but takes into consideration modern techniques and modern ears and modern instruments and limitations of the human voice, especially in Wagner.

*JK:* And the distinction must also be made between the way the composers actually heard the music and the way they heard it in their mind. It's all well and good to attempt to re-create the sounds heard by the composer, but is it what he really wanted to hear?

*DP-J:* This is what I ask myself. Do you think that if they had something better that they would have been satisfied with what they had? I can't believe that the early composers would have been happy with something that is clearly inferior to what we have nowadays, had they had what we have today.

*JK:* Do you have any plans to sing music of that period?

*DP-J:* Every chance I get. I have an immense repertoire in Bach, all the major solo cantatas which I pull out and sing on a regular basis just for my own pleasure. Mozart is something I'm particularly well suited for. There again, unfortunately we went off on a side spur to the think where people thought that big voices shouldn't sing Mozart, especially in continental Europe. I think it was Hans Hotter who said that you don't ever really want to sing on the principal of your voice. That's what gives you a range of expression and emotion. I feel that Don Giovanni is certainly a role I would like to add to my repertoire. I was asked to do it but wasn't free, but perhaps I'm just as well

off not having done it given what I heard about the production. I have also reached a point where there are circumstances I won't do again, such as Papageno, or others which I would only do under the right circumstances, such as Guglielmo, and then only with a big-voiced cast in a big house. I must say that Guglielmo is less and less interesting and Alfonso by far a more interesting character. If you have an interesting Despina and Alfonso, the other four only have to sing beautifully and that's all that matters. I'm working my way past Mozart to the early Verdi. I'd like to spend more and more time in the next twenty years of my career singing things that I thoroughly enjoy singing.

*JK:* Do you do much in the bel canto repertoire?

*DP-J:* I have. There are a lot of roles I haven't sung that I'd like to. I sang *Puritani* in the early 80s and would love to sing it again, I'd love to sing *Lucia*, but more and more I'm really interested in Verdi. Not all of the Verdi roles at this point, but there are certain roles I would love to. With *Ernani*, the baritone roles become typical of what he intended to do with baritones from then on. The earlier roles are very interesting but they're not heavyweights by any means. *Simone Boccanegra* I would love to get my teeth into, *Nabucco* less so, but I would love to do *I due Foscari*. There's so much lovely music there. I'm just getting ready now to begin studying Rigoletto. It needs time. Falstaff I'm not ready for. Somebody asked me, but I said, "Give me another five or ten years." These are things where you have to give credence to the maturity of the character himself. I don't want to make a mistake. I'd much rather say, "No, I'll wait," than have someone say, "Oops." I'm itching to sing my first Dutchman, for instance, because that's an Italian opera. There again is one of the reasons I harp so strongly on the fact that we have to get back to what the composer had in mind. *Der Fliegende Holländer* is an Italian opera. It belongs to the second set of remakes, and you begin with *Die Feen*, *Das Liebesverbot*, and *Rienzi* and realize that all three are remakes of Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti with a little bit of Wagner thrown in—and stretched out considerably—and then you go to the next three, you realize that he still is working with the Italian opera form in his mind. When I find a conductor who is willing to approach it from that standpoint, then I'm ready to sing my first Dutchman.

*JK:* Have you heard the recording of *Ernani* from the festival at Martina Franca, in which their aim is to approach the opera from a Donizettian point of view, looking forward, rather than the usual steamroller approach? The only drawback is the tenor who has no idea what it's all about.

*DP-J:* Do you know many tenors who do?

*JK:* Yes, and very few are singing today: Kraus, Gedda, and Bergonzi, to stay within recent memory.

*DP-J:* Do you know the Schippers recording of *Ernani*? I like Sereni very much as well, but I don't understand why RCA at the time allowed the last aria to go out with Sereni singing almost a quarter tone flat throughout. It could not have been that they didn't hear it. It's purely and simply below pitch. Maybe they just ran out of time. But I love that recording, and I love Bergonzi in it, particularly the first-act aria which is a voice lesson for any singer. Never have I heard so clearly in the tenor voice the precise and exact and correct use of *passaggio*, the real understanding of the fact that *passaggio* is a physical law of acoustics and not something in the grocery.

*JK:* To go back to what I was saying, the sooner we rethink our approach to some of the repertoire, the healthier it will be for many singers.

*DP-J:* We'll certainly start seeing singers making longer careers again, with fewer flashpan careers and more that are considered and followed carefully. Speaking of careers, one of the most beautiful and concise statements on the concept of a career that I ever heard was from Pierre Boulez during an interview at the Concertgebouw before a concert at which one of his pieces was played. The interviewer said, "Maestro Boulez, now that you have reached your seventieth birthday, how do you look back over your career, and how would you evaluate your career?" To which Boulez replied, in a more or less these words, "First of all, let me tell you that I do not really understand the concept of a career, I never have and I don't really choose to do so, or find it something I want to do. When I started out, when I was young, I defined for myself a path that I wished to follow. Looking back on that path from there to now, I can tell you that on occasion I had to go around, I had to deviate slightly, but I always managed to get back to that path. If you would allow me to express it this way, I am content with the *traversée* I have made up to this point."

*JK:* And would you say that of yourself as well?

*DP-J:* Absolutely. I have always been, once again, exceptional in the sense that there are not very many people who either brave enough to do it or have an understanding of the necessity of doing it, but I've always had a very clear idea of what I wanted to do and how I wanted to do it. I have gotten much more talented in many aspects of expressing that because it's very difficult, when you're young and a beginning singer and you try to express these very strong feelings, not to come over as being arrogant and difficult. I have since matured in that way and have learned to come closer to what I need in order to stay on my path without being arrogant and difficult. It's very important. When I heard Boulez say that, I thought that's precisely how I view things. Yes, career is something that happens if you follow very carefully and with focused energy what you believe to be correct.

*JK:* He defines it in his way, but he is talking about his career.

*DP-J:* It's just that he—as I—thinks that "career" has taken on a very negative and not necessarily desirable connotation. One talks about "making a career" and unfortunately what we now identify as the duration of a career is rather short. When I think of someone who can come on the operatic scene, full-blown, singing major roles and be nowhere to be seen within ten years, I don't think this is what one should consider making a career.

*JK:* How can we prevent this from happening?

*DP-J:* I couldn't begin to say. I have enough trouble trying to keep myself straight.

*JK:* When you stop singing, do you see yourself teaching and advising young singers, or even before you stop, advising young professionals, being a sort of father confessor?

*DP-J:* Much to my own dismay, I already find myself to some extent in that role. I don't have a great deal of time for teaching, but my teacher sees me very clearly in that role. I think, and she has been rather explicit in her expression of this; of all the people she's taught she thinks that I understand her teaching better than anyone else, and also practice it. I'm often asked my opinions of things, and I don't hesitate to give them because my opinions are not based on what may work or what someone has taught me because it worked for them; my opinions are based, as I said before, on the laws of physical acoustics which my teacher has taught me.

*JK:* Do you think there are many teachers who are working along the same line?

*DP-J:* I think there are probably many more teachers around than one is aware of that would be able, and are able, to convey this to their students. I think the difficulty most likely lies in the fact that students are impatient—you see this all over the place—to get out and "make a career," earn money, and where can they do that now? They can't go to Germany and be an ensemble singer because the ensemble system is falling apart. Consequently they have to sing, and you have a lot of teachers who do what's necessary in order to get their students singing and into jobs. They give him a basic understanding of singing and send them out, or the student leaves and starts singing. That is not necessarily the fault of the teacher. I don't think there are any teachers around who give less than what they understand. That is essentially the calling of a great teacher, to pass on their understanding of the knowledge. I think that circumstances in the current world of opera quite often get in the way so that a lot of teachers find themselves in a situation of providing Band Aid therapy. This is not desirable, but what is the solution: I don't know. We have to go very deeply into that and say that the casting directors are demanding the wrong things of singers, they're offering the wrong singers the wrong roles, and unless you say no to them it becomes a vicious circle.

*JK:* Your career, to use that word again, basically started in Europe rather than in the States, and today is still focused on Europe.

*DP-J:* To this day, it is and will be until I make my United States operatic debut on July 19, 1997, at Santa Fe singing Mandryka in *Arabella*. It's one of my favorite roles and absolutely the greatest of the Strauss baritone roles. Until that date, unless something totally unforeseen happens, my career is totally European. I worried about that for a while. There were times when I became very impatient because I couldn't understand why an American singer shouldn't be invited to sing in the United States and then I realized that probably it was unwise to want to go back and sing in the United States. Things are happening the way they're supposed to happen. I couldn't have asked for a better debut. Mandryka is one of my fetish roles, it's one of the roles I sing with immense

pleasure and passion, and it's a role that I sing very well. Santa Fe really is an ideal place to make a U.S. debut and it closes a circle for me because my very first exposure to singing opera was as an apprentice there.