

Opera Now

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Stately progress

For someone who never intended to be a singer, **David Pittman-Jennings** has ended up with quite a remarkable instrument. The American oboist-turned-bass-baritone is primarily known in Europe where his career was launched in 1976 at the Graz Opera Company in Austria. Rich and elegant, that plummy-toned voice has travelled far and wide, accumulating no less than 46 operatic roles, not to mention a hefty portion of the concert repertoire.

'A lot of people call me a bass-baritone because of the repertoire I sing,' says Pittman-Jennings in an interview conducted in Chicago where he was performing in *Moses und Aron* under Pierre Boulez. 'But I can sing a low D below the staff – those notes are basically relegated to basses – and as high as A flat. I'm like a cello that has a facility in the lower range, and I strive to be one instrument from top to bottom. This is all thanks to a wonderful teacher, the only teacher I ever had, Elizabeth Parham, who once said "the voice is without limits".'

Tall and handsome, Pittman-Jennings strikes a dashing figure. He has been called a



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'noble baritone' by conductor Antonio Pappano. While this seasoned nobility in voice and demeanour makes him a dead ringer for Mandryka in *Arabella* or Germont in *La traviata* – two roles he has performed with great success – it doesn't keep him from leaping into the unknown trenches of contemporary music. 'There's always a great thrill in taking a challenge with a piece that has never been performed before and finding out what that is all about,' says Pittman-Jennings. 'The reason that many singers don't feel comfortable in contemporary music is that they have never learned how you can go past the actual notes. Part of my place on earth is to show people that this music can be sung.'

Pittman-Jennings, therefore, is continuously called upon to tackle modern roles. *Moses und Aron* is one of his signature roles – a convincing and moving portrayal, fully capturing the tragic scope of this complex character. His *speechstimme* is so expressive, so musical that it seems like fully-fledged singing, even though he is following Schoenberg's speech-song notation exactly. (Take a listen to the Deutsche Grammophon recording, as well as the recent release of *Ode to Napoleon*.) He has sung Dr Schön in Berg's

Lulu and the title role of *Wozzeck* to great acclaim, and will sing the title role in Milhaud's *Christophe Colomb* in Peter Greenaway's production at the Staatsoper Berlin. As far as hot-off-the-press items are concerned, he has recently created the role of Vincent Van Gogh in Van Vlijmen's *Un Malheureux vetu de Noir* (recorded on the FNAC label) as well as the title role in Hans Zender's *Don Quichotte*. And in December he makes his Carnegie Hall debut in Luigi Dallapiccola's *Il prigioniero*.

'The Dallapiccola is a dream piece,' says Pittman-Jennings 'It's pure 12-tone writing but conceived and heard through Italian ears. So there are moments when it comes out sounding like Puccini... Just as with *Moses*, I have a production or two behind me, so when I'm out there I'm not just singing notes, I'm performing the role. It adapts itself quite well to the concert because it all takes place in his head anyway. The subtitle is "Torture by Hope" – so it also connects with my life,' he laughs.

In spite of his remarkable facility with novelty, Pittman-Jennings refuses to be pigeon-holed. 'If I had to limit myself to any repertoire I would find myself going crazy very quickly,' he says. 'I refuse to accept the fact that I would be a specialist in anything. I'm just a singer with an aptitude for performing contemporary music. If anything, I have learned a lot about singing traditional repertoire through singing contemporary music because if you really want to *sing*, then you have to accept the fact that the nature of the voice is *bel canto*.' When I spoke with him, he was looking forward to singing Rigoletto in Leipzig, as well as Klingsor in a new production of *Parsifal* with Scottish Opera in 2000. He is also eager to add new roles to his already accomplished list: Hans Sachs, Simone Boccanegra, Iago, Macbeth, Golaud. 'And sometime before I get too old, I'd love to sing Don Giovanni,' he adds.

What makes Pittman-Jennings so effective a presence on stage is the maturity with which he approaches each role, allowing them to 'bake' within himself before unleashing them into the world. He allows himself to grow into roles, studying them from every angle with intelligence and sensitivity, instead of rushing into them like many younger headstrong singers pushed by managers and record companies. A proud 'late beginner', as he calls himself, Pittman-Jennings paces himself in order to get the best out of himself and, above all, the music. 'I'm very happy that I chose to make a long career always guided by what my voice is doing,' he says confidently. 'This has always been my goal: to be able to sing what I want to sing and sing it well, and be comfortable singing it – and not have to do something that I don't want to do.'

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