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ARTS AND LEISURE DESK
MUSIC; A Belated Debut By a Baritone Who's Done It All
By MATTHEW GUREWITSCH

PIECING together the clues, the astrologically challenged reporter gathers that Sagittarians are orderly, methodical, not to be hustled. At 48, the Oklahoma-born, Paris-based baritone David Pittman-Jennings exemplifies the sign.

Since choosing voice over the oboe as his vehicle for artistic expression at the end of the Vietnam War, the young Specialist 5 fresh from the Fourth Army Band in San Antonio has mastered repertory ranging from Bach to the most mandarin of the moderns. Of ample though perhaps not quite heroic cut, the voice connects seamlessly from a free top A flat down to a resonant low D. Sheer sensuous appeal is not its strongest card, but Mr. Pittman-Jennings's imagination and command of style seldom fail to carry the day.

The list of his nearly four dozen roles in opera (alphabetical by composer) starts with Beethoven's Pizarro, oppressor of the just in "Fidelio," and ends with the mad knight of Hans Zender's heavily electronic, thoroughly computer-dependent "Don Quijote." Mr. Pittman-Jennings sang at the premiere of that work, in Stuttgart in 1993, beginning his part with a trio in which all the voices were his own. He recalls the staggering complexities of the work with frank frustration. (So far, it has proved impossible to revive in any but simplified form.)

More familiar items on Mr. Pittman-Jennings's list include Mozart and a heavy sprinkling of Wagner, not to mention such plums as Verdi's vengeful hunchback Rigoletto and Richard Strauss's romantic country squire Mandryka in "Arabella," which he sang to acclaim in his Vienna debut in 1992. His fair lady for the occasion was Kiri Te Kanawa, the unchallenged exponent of the title role in her generation.

With that performance, Mr. Pittman-Jennings, previously active mostly in Western Europe, moved into an international league. His engagements this year alone have taken him from Paris to Buenos Aires to Chicago, with Tokyo still to come. On New Year's Eve and New Year's Day, he sings the archangel Raphael and Adam in Haydn's "Creation" with the Berlin Symphony Orchestra. On Saturday evening, he celebrates a tardy New York debut, in the title role of Luigi Dallapiccola's opera "Il Prigioniero" ("The Prisoner") in concert with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra under Charles Dutoit.

Written in a strict 12-tone idiom, which no longer enjoys the intellectual prestige it did at midcentury, the opera remains one of the few products of that style that have won nonsectarian audiences. Within a dozen years of its premiere with Radio Italiana in 1949, it logged nearly 200 performances. Yet it appears to have gone unplayed in New York since a staging at the New York City Opera in 1960 with Norman Treigle in the cast and Leopold Stowkowski in the pit.

Somehow it seems fitting that Mr. Pittman-Jennings should introduce himself in New York with such an out-of-the-way assignment. The role for which he has gained the widest recognition is, after all, the patriarch of Pierre Boulez's recent accounts of Schoenberg's forbidding "Moses und Aron" on the stages of opera houses in Amsterdam and Salzburg, in the Deutsche Grammophon recording and in concert with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Another of his signature roles is Wozzeck, the tormented, scarcely articulate yet occasionally piercingly eloquent antihero of Alban Berg's masterpiece.

The Prisoner of Dallapiccola's 55-minute work is a latter-day brother to the wrongfully incarcerated Florestan of "Fidelio." Tellingly, both operas are set in the same oppressive Spain, but whereas Beethoven's subject is conjugal love triumphant over oppression, Dallapiccola's is torture. The Prisoner's fears hint at physical abuse. But the ultimate weapon is false hope, and this we witness in action. A door opens, light shines at the end of a tunnel, but the garden into which the Prisoner escapes is one more enclosure within the prison walls. The torturer gives his cruelest twist with a word: "fratello" ("brother"), the acknowledgment of a common humanity it is his goal to crush. Passing through New York recently, Mr. Pittman-Jennings spoke over lunch of his life and his work. Dressed in one of his standard custom-tailored Zegna suits, his straight, salt-and-pepper hair impeccably cut and brushed, selecting a white Burgundy with expert knowledge yet not a fuss, he reflected the relaxed, mature distinction of a man who has found his way, undistracted by worldly notions of conventional success. Those who happened to look his way would not have taken him for a performer. The president of a university or a think tank would have been likelier guesses.

Having sung a famously acrobatic Prisoner in 1992 at the Chatelet in Paris in a triumphant production directed by Bernard Sobel and conducted

by Esa-Pekka Salonen, Mr. Pittman-Jennings speaks of his role with the insight and love one would wish for (perhaps in vain) in a diva undertaking Norma or Isolde. "The Prisoner is every one of us," he says. "The greatest tragedy any human being can experience is when one has given oneself completely and totally to hope only to find that the hope has been futile."

WHAT of the technical challenges of the part? "The range of the role is not as extreme as in 'Wozzeck,'" he said, "basically two octaves, from G to G. The difficulty in this case is getting the music out of the way to the point that it's completely and totally wedded to the text. Personal challenges are some of the dynamic demands: extreme pianissimos in the high part of voice, extreme fortissimos in the high part of the voice. I don't like to use head voice and falsetto. I try to make even the highest part of the voice complete and full, which makes some of 'Il Prigioniero' difficult to reconcile with what I think of as my technique. But I would hope that's something the audience is not aware of. As the French say, 'C'est ma cuisine.' "

Some have wanted to pigeonhole Mr. Pittman-Jennings as a specialist in 20th-century music. A brief thesis shy of a master's degree in vocal performance at California State University, Northridge, he sometimes toys with turning out a few typed pages on Schoenberg's use of the singing voice, the speaking voice and that peculiar intermediate technique called Sprechgesang. This is territory he knows well; even now, he is performing the speaker's part in Schoenberg's "Ode to Napoleon" with Mr. Boulez in Paris and Geneva. Still, he strenuously resists classification as a modernist. "I don't mind at all that people recognize my talent for modern music," he said, "but I feel the need for a constant return to the entire library of great music from other centuries: Bach, Mozart, Verdi, composers who understood the inherently bel canto nature of the voice. In contemporary music, I try to use the instrument as precisely and with the same technique as for other great music. But first you must learn the new musical languages." Like Mr. Boulez, who has professed not to understand the concept of "career," Mr. Pittman-Jennings views the term with mild scorn. "I knew from my earliest age the path I chose to follow, and I have followed it," he recalled Mr. Boulez saying. "That's what I've tried to do," the singer continued. "I've known from the start there were things I could do and certainly I couldn't do. Everything comes in its time. I don't have a five-year plan. But I do have a 35-year plan: always letting the voice dictate to me when it's time to do more."

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