Backstage Secrets

Veteran director Kirk Browning reveals the magic of converting music to pictures for *Live from Lincoln Center*. **By Greg Vitiello**

Dressed in a Mostly Mozart T-shirt, director Kirk Browning looks up from his shooting script and begins humming the first bars of Mozart's Haffner Symphony. "That's how it goes, but twice as fast as this," he tells the production crew in the sound truck adjacent to New York's Avery Fisher Hall. "Fast, fast, fast."

Scanning the row of eight television monitors, each marked with its cameraman's name, Browning elaborates: "This is like chamber music," he says. "I want to see a lot of faces. Nothing abstract. Let's see all the different faces."

As the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra begins its rehearsal, assistant director Alan Skag calls out the shots from Browning's script, alerting each camera to its place in the visual queue. "Ready 4, tight cello…48 ready, dissolve to 3," Skag chants, while music associate Howard Heller follows each prompt with the word "And," bringing up the particular camera shot. Intermittently, Browning joins their dialogue to suggest a change: "On the bass shots, get two or three of them – get more energy. They don't have to all be in the piece."

The camera comes in tight on two bass players, then cuts to an array of string players, before panning and pulling back to a wide shot of artistic director and conductor Louis Langrée and his orchestra. The camera movement is as brisk as the music from the Haffner Symphony that will lead off this opening night concert from the 39th Mostly Mozart Festival.

"I'm using the camera to represent to the eye what the ear is hearing," Browning explains. "I think the psyche is equipped with a visual sense that is in motion. I know that sounds a little kookie because your eye doesn't have a zoom lens, but your interest, your commitment has a zoom lens. And I think that if a camera moves logically, you can keep it in constant motion and represent the way you feel about the material."

Watching the broadcast – in a sound truck or in our homes – we quickly become connected to the musicians and appreciate the interplay between them. It is this blend of intimacy and energy that helps to distinguish the productions of PBS' *Live from Lincoln Center,* the award-winning series currently in its 30th year. As conceived by executive producer John Goberman, the series draws upon Lincoln Center's rich musical and dance repertoire to present live broadcasts with a technical

flair and fluidity designed to engage audiences. This opening-night concert is a case in point: It features the brilliant soprano Renée Fleming in arias by Handel and Mozart, pianist Stephen Hough playing works by Mozart and Rameau, and the orchestra performing symphonies by Mozart and J.C. Bach. The concert also presents two "firsts" – a new stage configuration thrust 30 feet forward from the traditional stage and surrounded by spectators, and a program presented in the style of Mozart's day, with movements of the Haffner Symphony interspersed among the other works.

Clearly, this concert will not be business as usual, but then the *Lincoln Center* production is adept at dealing with the unexpected. In fact, Goberman feels audiences are stimulated by the "aesthetics of risk" involved in a live performance and recognizes the importance of having a production team with musical backgrounds. "It's easier to teach people television than music," he says.

Today's rehearsal provides the production team with the opportunity to ensure that the next evening's live broadcast will be artistically and technically seamless. The team already has access to Browning's shooting script, a multi-page document containing the entire sequence of shots – perhaps as many as 1,000 for a 90-minute broadcast. "It's a formula that I started that's used almost worldwide," says Browning. "In the old days, the BBC director conducted right out of the score. I could do that, but then I'd never look at my pictures; I'd never know what was going on."

Browning prepares the script after listening to a recording of each piece of music with a score at hand. "I go through the music and think what camera can shoot what at what time and what sort of framing I want," Browning explains. "Do I want to be on the conductor when the oboe starts if he has a repeated phrase then go to the oboe, or do I want to go to the oboe first, then when it's repeated, go to the conductor and see him? You make choices. I prescript the entire show, I don't ad lib. I don't invent or extemporize at all."

Louis Langrée conducting the Mostly Mozart Orchestra.

Richard Termine

And yet the script is a working document, subject to change prior to the concert. Where another production team might settle for keeping the camera on Fleming while she is singing, Browning seeks something less static. From his seat in the sound truck, he calls out, "Is there one picture that will show me the cello and Renée?" "No. 4," assistant director Skag replies. Browning responds, "I'll probably start on the cello so we're not just sitting there on her." With this approach, her vocal entrances become more impressive and the cutaways to other performers provide the audience a context for the work's dynamic. Moments later, during the rehearsal of Handel's aria, "Let the Bright Seraphim," the camera is focusing

on Fleming when the trumpet voluntary begins. But where's the trumpeter? Goberman quickly calls out, "Look at camera number 2." By alternating close-ups of the soprano and trumpet, the broadcast team captures the lively musical dialogue between them. As the aria progresses, the camerawork becomes ever more fluid. Sometimes the team will scrap a plan in favor of visual simplification. When Hough is rehearsing the Andante from Mozart's 23rd Piano Concerto, Browning calls out, "Forget all these dissolves, just give me one shot on No. 5." Heller responds, "Pan the face and wipe," as the camera moves from pianist to conductor. A moment earlier, there is a sense of celebration in the sound truck when the camera moves in tight on Hough's hands and catches their reflection in the piano while a cellist is visible in the background. "That's gorgeous," says Goberman. "It'll never happen again," Skag responds.

Throughout the rehearsal, the team will make roughly two dozen such changes, prompting Browning to prepare a revised script for the actual live performance. The changes are consistent with the team's goal of capturing each work's emotional content by zeroing in on the interplay between musicians, the intensity of their expressions, and the demonstrable skill of their playing.

"You have to do something with a certain frisson -- something a little unexpected," says Browning. "I used to work much more in the abstract – close-ups of fingers, things like that. But there's a danger in not humanizing things. It lacks a certain empathy."

The *Live from Lincoln Center* style is more energetic – more cinematic – than the approach taken by many other producers of symphonic music. What we often see during a broadcast of, say, the Berlin Philharmonic, is more static – lingering shots of the conductor,

Kirk Browning: A First Lady's Discovery

Maybe First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt spotted something special in the 17-year-old boy at the piano. Or maybe she just wanted to hear a favorite song. Either way, it was a command performance, for she was the only customer in the Connecticut inn on that day and Kirk Browning was honored to comply with her request that he play "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes." He did so well that she favored him with a $20 tip. "Can you imagine," he says with an infectious laugh, "that was the biggest tip I ever got."

That late 1930s summer job was a mere interlude for Browning, a promising music student in his childhood who later dreamt of composing music for the motion pictures. Later still, he wrote the music for ballads in collaboration with his friend and roommate Patrick Tanner (better known as Patrick Dennis, author of "Auntie Mame" and other comic classics).

With his musical career in limbo, Browning married Barbara Gum and began raising chickens and sheep on their Connecticut farm. It was a long way from Broadway – or from the nascent medium of television. But fortune smiled on him when he developed a friendship with Samuel Chotzinoff, a customer on his egg route who happened to be the head of NBC's Music Division. "Chotzi even sent one of our ballads to Frank Sinatra on the chance that he'd record it," Browning recalls. "Sinatra said it was an average ballad but the lyrics were very good. Chotzi cheered me up by saying, 'Don't worry, Schubert had to start somewhere too.'"

Chotzinoff then gave Browning his critical lead by recommending that he break into television. Browning said, "I don't know anything about television." Chotzinoff rebutted, "That's ok. Nobody knows anything about television.

pulling back finally to an overview of the entire orchestra. "I'm rather bored by the technique some directors use in Europe, which is very tasteful, but I don't get a sense that the director is getting an emotional response," says Browning. "He's just taking pictures."

In his famous broadcasts from the 1950s and 1960s, Leonard Bernstein insisted on a more static approach, keeping the camera on an instrumentalist or conductor. "That kind of didactic approach was what Lenny thought would be useful with certain audiences," Browning says. "There's nothing wrong with it. But I don't think we'd have as interested an audience if we did that."

Broadcast technology has improved a thousand fold since the heyday of Leonard Bernstein's children's concerts...

Fortunately, broadcast technology has improved a thousandfold since the heyday of Bernstein's children's concerts and *Joy of Music* series. "To do what we're accomplishing now, you need big lenses, like those used in broadcasting sporting events," Goberman explains. "Once they came in during the 1970s, it gave us a wider variety of shots."

Talking about a recent *Live from Lincoln Center* broadcast, Browning says, "When you look at some of the close-ups I took of Gil's face (referring to solo violinist Gil Shaham), you couldn't imagine that we were shooting from a camera in the last box in the house, perhaps 80 feet away. It looks like the camera is a foot away from him."

The team also has access to small robotic cameras that sit on small stands on the orchestra floor. Operated by cameramen working offstage, these robotic cameras can swivel around

It's just beginning."

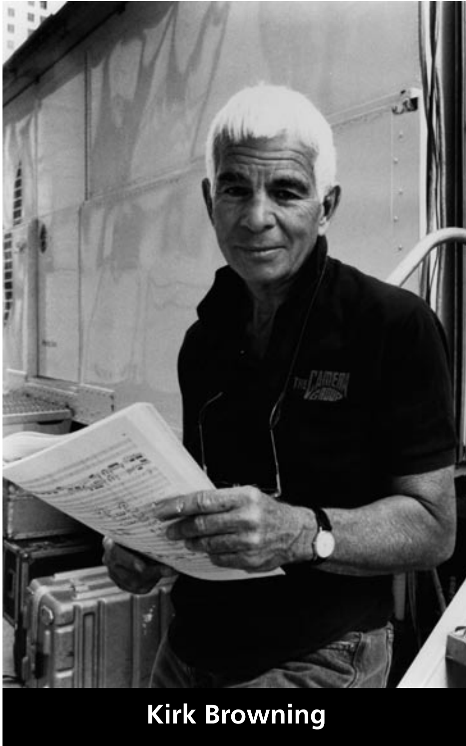
Recognizing Browning's musical aptitude, Chatzinoff helped him get a job with NBC in 1948. Shortly thereafter, he was working as a stage manager on NBC Opera's production of Gian-Carlo Menotti's "The Old Lady and the Thief." Browning recalls, "I was so moved by the music that I went out into the hall and burst into tears. Someone came up to me and asked why I was crying. I explained, then realized that the person I was talking to was Gian-Carlo himself."

By 1952, Browning directed his first opera for NBC, Jacques Offenbach's "RSVP." Less than two months later, on Christmas Eve, he directed the world premiere of Menotti's "Amahl and the Night Visitors," the first opera ever commissioned for television and a work destined for repeated showings during holiday seasons to come.

It was the beginning of a distinguished directing career that has spanned 53 years and hundreds of productions of operas, concerts, plays, ballets and other cultural events. In addition to his 13 years as director of NBC Opera, he was director of NET Opera from 1969 to 1972 and of *Live from Lincoln Center* since 1976. He has received nine national Emmy Awards, a George Foster Peabody Award, and the recognition of his peers as a pioneering and innovative director.

He is also a man who is grateful for his good fortune. Several years ago, he spotted a young man playing the piano in a California cocktail lounge. "I went up to him and said, 'I used to do what you're doing. I once got a tip from Eleanor Roosevelt for playing 'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes.' A little while later, I heard him playing that same song. I went over and gave him $40." Browning laughs nostalgically, then hums the song. The First Lady would have approved.

— G.V.



Kirk Browning

and provide a close-up of an individual musician. "They're basically invisible – they look like half a music stand," Browning says. "Having all these cameras gives me more options."

When Goberman originally proposed the live series in 1975, Browning had reservations about whether the medium was technologically sophisticated enough. Until then, the bulk of cultural performances had been shot in studios with special lighting and other quality controls. "When John said that we were gong to shoot a performance on an opera stage without any control of it, my automatic response was, 'Based on my experience, we'll be settling for something second-rate.'" Browning laughs at the recollection, adding: "John was bright enough not to listen to me and to know that you didn't go on the air without knowing what the problems might be."

Goberman obtained funding for in-house experiments, involving shooting live performances of a ballet, a play, two operas and a New York Philharmonic concert. The experiments varied in quality, depending on complexities of staging and lighting. "The Philharmonic worked best because it was the one where the camera could make the most sense of the material," says Browning. Based on these tests, Goberman recommended going forward. Then fate intervened: the distinguished tenor Richard Tucker died just after appearing in a production of "Pagliacci" that the team had taped. The executives at Lincoln Center decided that the television public must see Tucker's last performance, broadcasting warts and all.

"Fortunately the technology caught up with the programming impulse and the pictures became better and better and we needed to do less lighting," Browning recalls.

Live from Lincoln Center debuted on January 30, 1976 with a concert of the New York Philharmonic with conductor Andre Previn and piano soloist Van Cliburn. The series followed with Douglas Moore's opera "Ballad of Baby Doe," the New York City Ballet production of "Swan Lake," a Metropolitan Opera production of Rossini's "The Barber of Seville," and a second New York Philharmonic broadcast, this time featuring Claudio Arrau performing Beethoven's 3rd Piano Concerto.

Now, almost 30 years later, the production team huddles together in a room inside Avery Fisher Hall to review its coverage of the Mostly Mozart rehearsal. "It's always a collaborative

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effort," Goberman says. "Our crew has been together a long time and we're all pointed toward the same goal."

By the next night, with Browning's revised shooting script in hand and the eight cameramen ready to take the thousand or more cues that go into making the broadcast work crisply and energetically, Skag's voice calls out, "Cue Beverly, cue Beverly." The camera focuses on Beverly Sills, who does her brief introduction before the team cuts to the main stage at Avery Fisher Hall and the entrance of Louis Langrée. Browning's words, "Fast, fast, fast" echo as the camera moves from Langrée to the violins, pans to the oboes, cuts to a tight shot of the bassoon, then continues to move as an attentive viewer's eye might, capturing the flow of the music from instrument to instrument. Near the end of the first movement of the Haffner Symphony, the camera lingers on Langree smiling at the orchestra's lively rendering of the music.

Throughout the concert, there will be many such captured moments. One occurs during Handel's aria, "Endless Pleasure," when the camera juxtaposes Fleming's luminous presence to an intense cellist and a stolid-looking musician playing a 15th-century form of lute called a theorbo.

During her next aria, Handel's "Oh Sleep, Why Dost Thou Leave Me," Fleming's eyes close briefly as she sings the music's poignant refrain. The camera next cuts from Fleming to the paired theorbo and cello, before fading to Fleming smiling, before returning to the two instrumentalists, as the piece ends.

The pièce de résistance is the pairing of soprano and trumpet in Handel's "Let the Bright Seraphim," as Fleming is by turns spirited and regal in her interpretation of the aria. Trumpeter Neil Baum responds impressively, as the camera shots alternate between him and the soprano.

The camera movement varies yet again when Hough performs the Andante from Mozart's 23rd Piano Concerto. Shots of his fingers moving deftly over the keyboard are followed by close-ups of his face, then the camera pulls wide to a two-shot of pianist and conductor before dissolving to the entire orchestra.

Finally, the program returns to the third and fourth movements of the Haffner Symphony. In the final "Presto" movement, the camerawork quickens even more, capturing a quick succession of faces – oboes, bassoons, violins, cellos – before returning to Langrée conducting with energy and command. Seated at home or in the hall, we too are energized, eyes intent on the musicians, ears filled with the music's grace and vitality.

Greg Vitiello is a New York-based writer and editor whose books include *Eisenstaedt: Germany, Spoleto Viva, Twenty Seasons of Masterpiece Theatre* and *Joyce Images.* From 1966 to 1972 he wrote for National Educatonal Television and Children's Television Workshop.