

All the World's an Electronic Stage:

The Metropolitan Opera Ventures
into the Media Future

By Brian Rose

For an august institution, operating at the very highest reaches of high art, it's surprising how responsive the Metropolitan Opera has been to new electronic technologies. The Met's embrace of each new medium has been not only rapid but often futuristic in terms of new directions and applications. In 1910, it sent out its first live broadcast, featuring

Enrico Caruso, fully a decade before radio became a household appliance. By 1931, the company was actively involved in a regular series of one-hour programs, broadcast on NBC's 190 radio stations. The broadcasts were such a success that complete performances began the following season. With television barely past its public launch, the Met produced a special TV program in 1940. This would

Ken Howard / Metropolitan Opera



*Christine Schäfer as Gretel and Alice Coote as Hansel
in Humperdinck's "Hansel and Gretel"*



Alice Coote as Hansel (left) and Philip Langridge as the Witch in "Hansel and Gretel."

Ken Howard / Metropolitan Opera

be followed eight years later with a live opening night telecast of *Otello* in 1948 on the fledgling ABC network. And when it was still in its experimental infancy, the Met utilized closed-circuit television to send out its opening night presentation of *Carmen* to viewers in 27 cities across the U.S. in 1952.

This testing of the frontiers of TV technology would continue once the company found a willing home on PBS. Its 1977 series, *Live from the Met*, provided a powerful demonstration of how the thrill and drama of live stage performances could be captured with a minimum of interference to audiences actually attending the event (experiments with the challenges of low-light cameras had been ongoing since 1973). Additional technical landmarks included a worldwide live broadcast in 1983 of its 14 hour-Centennial Gala, an early HD telecast for Japan in 1991, as well as an experiment in live opera pay-per-view in the same year.

The Met's navigation through the sometimes bumpy waters of new technologies was always seen as part of the company's constant demand for new audiences (and new sources of revenue). Despite its reputation as the favored pastime of plutocrats, opera has its roots in popular theater (before the rich enshrined it in the late 19th century, it was a staple of mass audiences throughout Europe and America), and the Met understood earlier than anyone else how the electronic media could serve its purpose as a tool for mainstream audience appreciation and potential box-office growth.

With the appointment of general manager Peter Gelb in 2006, the Metropolitan Opera entered a new phase in its far-sighted media ventures. Gelb's strong background as a producer of films, radio and TV broadcasts, concerts and recordings (both popular and classical) led him to understand the importance of

showcasing the Met's activities in a way that would potentially intrigue and excite a younger, media-savvy public, wary of opera's embalmed status and stratospheric ticket prices. Thanks to a new contract with the organization's unions, which facilitated media programming, Gelb embarked on a series of innovative initiatives.

Starting with the opening night of its 2006 fall season, the Met launched a city-wide technological showcase, sending out a high-definition feed of *Madama Butterfly* to thousands of New Yorkers watching from seats in the plaza at Lincoln Center and, via satellite, to numerous screens in Times Square. The "plaza-cast" had been tried previously in 2001 for a special fundraiser for the victims of September 11, but this was the first effort in HD, and the results were spectacular. Even on a broad 32-foot-wide screen, hung from the pillars of the Opera House, the image was crystal clear, vividly rendering the dynamic colors and details of Anthony Minghella's celebrated production. Standing off to the side by the New York State Theater, I was so hypnotized by the ravishing quality of the visuals and the surprising richness of the audio, that I found myself oddly preferring this unique outdoor experience to the "in-house" version which I finally saw a year later.

Then, in a "back to the future" movement recalling its 1952 closed-circuit TV experiment with *Carmen*, the Met embarked on a series of six, high definition live satellite transmissions of Saturday matinee performances. The first was an abridged English-language version of Julie Taymor's inventive production of *The Magic Flute*, sent out to some 100

movie theaters throughout the U.S. and Canada, as well as several in England, Japan and Norway. The cinemacast (as they would come to be known), in full Dolby 5.1 surround sound and complete with English subtitles, was a surprising success, with most of the theaters sold-out in advance at ticket prices of \$18.

Producing this groundbreaking event was an enormously complex operation, utilizing 10 high definition cameras, 20 microphones positioned throughout the auditorium and an ingenious remote-controlled tracking camera that was attached underneath the lip of the stage. This complicated apparatus, based on designs by camera operator Hank Geving, required extra cameras to monitor its movements and make sure that it didn't run off the track and onto the musicians in the pit below, but it permitted the program's director Gary Halvorson an extraordinary flexibility in terms of shot composition. To enhance the experience for those watching in the theaters, special material was also provided, including opening remarks by Peter Gelb outside the Met and a montage of pre-recorded views of the goings on behind stage, which was shown during the overture.

Subsequent cinemacasts also utilized a wide variety of live and pre-taped features primarily for the intermissions, offering theater audiences a chance to see behind the curtain and observe stagehands changing the set, costume and make-up personnel feverishly at work, as well as interviews with singers fresh from the stage and profiles of the artists associated with the performance. Attending a transmission of Jack O'Brien's lavish production of *Il Trittico*

at the Walter Reade Theater in Lincoln Center last March, I was intrigued by these well-produced backstage portraits, particularly the sense that those of us watching via satellite worldwide were somehow getting a special view of the Met's interior operations unavailable to the company's regular patrons in their seats just a block away from where I was sitting. What added to this feeling was the sheer power and presence of the HD surround-sound presentation of the three one-act operas, which, through the skill of director Gary Halvorson, provided a perspective that balanced the intimacy of close-up cameras with long shots fully capable (thanks to high definition) of registering every detail on the stage. Though I was under no illusion that this could equal the experience (either orally or visually) of attending the performance in person from a nice orchestra seat, I was also aware that its vividness and impact was far stronger than I usually felt from my more affordable vantage point high up in the rear of the Met's Family Circle.

A total of six operas were transmitted live on Saturday afternoons during the 2006-7 season, with the number of theaters jumping to 200. One of the most interesting cinemacasts was Bartlett Sher's production of *The Barber of Seville*, which posed unique problems due to its use of a passerelle walkway that extended the stage around the top perimeter of the orchestra pit and out into the audience. This presented new challenges for camera placement, especially for those already stationed down below in the pit, but the end result was a fresh sense of intimacy and some comic horseplay when one of the opera's characters interacted directly

with a camera positioned nearby.

The popularity of the cinemacasts prompted many theaters to repeat them, with great success, but there were also additional opportunities to see them thanks to rebroadcasts available on PBS several months later. The televised versions, however, were not quite the same. While still transmitted in high definition, they were gently re-edited with an awareness that what worked in large movie theaters would not necessarily translate effectively to smaller screens (even in the new age of massive home media centers). The primary changes involved camera positions and pacing, with a more frequent use of close-ups and an occasionally speedier editing rhythm to reflect the differences in perceptual scale. Nevertheless, the razor-sharp clarity of the HD image provided a significant improvement over previous PBS Met telecasts, making it possible to appreciate subtle details of lighting, color and set design, even when viewed on a comparatively small 27-inch screen (the broadcast of *Eugene Onegin*, for example, offered a striking demonstration of high definition's ability to capture the evocative atmosphere and moody palette of Robert Casten's minimalist production).

The Met's foray into new technologies continued throughout the season, including satellite radio with the launch of a dedicated channel on Sirius, and onto the internet with the availability of digital downloads of past performances on the Rhapsody online music service and live audio streams on metopera.org. By the start of the 2007-8 season, the Met has essentially redefined the role of a cultural organization in

terms of the new-media landscape. Its HD theater program had grown to 600 theaters worldwide, including new venues throughout Europe and Australia, and an expansion into universities, public schools, and arts organizations. Big-screen opera had proven itself to be such a potent box-office lure that many regional opera companies linked up with local movie theaters to sponsor the cinemacasts, recognizing that the surprisingly large audiences flocking to these events could also enhance their recruitment drives. Perhaps the surest sign of success was that the Met's major competitors, including La Scala, San Francisco Opera and Washington National Opera, announced that they too would begin their own closed-circuit transmissions, with San Francisco Opera bragging that theirs would utilize an even better high-definition technology.

It's difficult to predict what this all means for the future of opera or the Metropolitan itself. General manager Peter Gelb has announced that subscription sales are up 10% for this season and the cinemacasts (which cost \$1 million for each transmission) are now breaking even—impressive figures in an era of declining revenues for most large arts institutions. Clearly the Met's new media initiatives have revealed a far larger appetite for opera throughout the world than anyone had originally anticipated, but it should be noted that this appetite is for opera in a reconceived environment, radically removed from its customary gilt-edged trappings and opulent ticket prices.

From my experiences, and the observations of many music critics,

the cinemacasts largely attract audiences who appreciate the comfort and informality of the movie theater "stage." They applaud the singers, attentively watch the intermission features, all while happily munching on popcorn, brownies and brought-from-home sandwiches. While the HD programs have drawn mostly an older crowd (similar to the Met's standard demographic), the many children who came for the special abridged version of *The Magic Flute* or a 2008 New Year's day transmission of *Hansel and Gretel* seemed equally involved in the dramatic stories and large screen images projected in front of them.

By the same token, the PBS HD rebroadcasts (and eventual DVDs), and the Met's satellite channel and online activities, also point the way to a new electronic version of the opera house, which permits "patrons" to experience opera on their own terms and in a variety of formats and settings. In its willingness to experiment with untraditional approaches to one of the past century's most traditional high arts, the Met may have found a way to return opera to its popular roots and restore its viability to new types of audiences, wherever they decide to listen and view.

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