

Getting Every Detail Right

The complex art and science of rehearsals at Lyric

By Magda Krance

ALL PHOTOS THIS PAGE: TODD ROSENBERG



Pictured in rehearsals for Wozzeck are, upper left, Tomasz Konieczny (title role); upper right, Konieczny and Angela Denoke (Marie); center, Denoke with Lex Bourassa (understudy, Marie's Son); lower left, Bradley Smoak (First Apprentice) with Sir David McVicar (director); and lower right, Sir Andrew Davis (conductor) and McVicar.

On a balmy November night, strange things were happening backstage at Lyric.

In rehearsal room 350, several men strutted in formation while lustily singing, “Who can tell what the hell women are?” in front of a mirrored wall, closely watched by the beaming blonde director/choreographer, Susan Stroman. She occasionally jumped up to put the Pontevedrian and Parisian gents through their paces – especially the new guy, baritone Thomas Hampson, the leading man who’d arrived just that afternoon. Seated around the room, the understudies shuffled their feet and sang along quietly.

Meanwhile, in rehearsal room 200, several bandanna-wearing, gun-toting Peruvian terrorists held terrified international guests hostage, including one very indignant diva, angrily proclaiming demands to the Red Cross representative who’d entered the vice-presidential mansion to negotiate with the captors. Lyric’s music director, Sir Andrew Davis, conducted vigorously. If he felt fatigued from two three-hour *Merry Widow* orchestra rehearsals earlier in the day, and the opening of *Wozzeck* the day before, he didn’t show it.

The Merry Widow’s song-and-dance hijinks went from 12 to 2pm, and again from 4 to 8pm. *Bel Canto*’s hostage crisis ran 3 to 6pm, and again from 7 to 10pm. Meanwhile, stagehands moved *Wozzeck*’s gritty sets into the scenery handling area and shifted *The Merry Widow*’s elegant Pontevedrian embassy for the next day’s first onstage rehearsal.

Just another day and night at Lyric when the season is in full swing.

Those who don’t work in an opera company might think rehearsing is simple enough. The performers learn their music, lyrics, and staging, put on their costumes, and put on a show, right?

Not so fast – literally. It’s mind boggling how many facets there are to the rehearsal process at Lyric, with countless moving parts. Ben Bell Bern, Lyric’s rehearsal scheduler for the past three seasons, likens his job to “a giant game of Jenga,” the vertical block game where players carefully remove lower blocks and stack them on top, creating an increasingly unstable tower. “But it isn’t wooden blocks – it’s hundreds of people’s lives and thousands of

hours and hundreds of thousands of dollars,” he says dryly. What sounds like delusions of grandeur is actually a bluntly accurate description of the daily traffic-control challenges backstage at Lyric. “It’s all about logistics – I need to provide the answers or know how to get them.” Somehow, he keeps that Jenga tower as stable and solid as the Civic Opera House itself.

The weekly schedules and daily updates are dense and ever-changing masterpieces of multitasking, the essential documents that let everyone in the company and in each production know who’s doing what, where, when, and why. For instance, on another typical day and night, the dress rehearsal for *Wozzeck* (1-3pm) overlapped with the *Merry Widow* staging rehearsal in room 200

(2-5pm, 6-9pm) and the *Bel Canto* staging rehearsal in room 550 (11am-2pm, 3-6pm) – not to mention wardrobe and wig fittings, private coachings, student backstage tours, auditions, and other goings on.

To create these essential roadmaps, Bell Bern distills information from several departments, overseen by Cameron Arens, director of rehearsal administration, and abetted by the staff of the rehearsal department. Together they form the command center that directs the multiple simultaneous movements of everyone and everything backstage and onstage.

The operas in Lyric’s season are presented in repertory, which means scenery, props, and people are continually rotating on and off the stage and in and out of rehearsal rooms. (The American musicals presented each spring have rehearsal and performance periods all their own.) Occasionally as many as four opera productions may be in rehearsal and/or performance concurrently; the week of October 26 had *Cinderella* performances plus *Wozzeck*, *The Merry Widow*, and *Bel Canto* rehearsals all going at once.

Wait a minute, you might be thinking – didn’t Lyric’s music director, Sir Andrew Davis, conduct *all four* of those operas?

Yes, he did, and no, we didn’t clone him! Each production has a cover conductor on hand to take the baton when Davis is supposed to be in three places at once. Principal singers are generally engaged for just one opera, though British bass Brindley Sherratt was at Lyric for both *The Marriage of Figaro*’s Doctor



Rehearsing *The Marriage of Figaro* are, left to right, Christiane Karg (*Susanna*), Keith Jameson (*Basilio*), Barbara Gaines (*director*), Rachel Frenkel (*Cherubino*), and John W. Coleman (*stage manager*).



Above: *Lyric chorus members with Bel Canto director Kevin Newbury.*

Left: *The Bel Canto cast in rehearsal.*

Bartolo and *Wozzeck*'s Doctor this season. Several Ryan Opera Center members have roles and are understudies in multiple operas whose schedules overlap; they can be seen literally running from one rehearsal room to another, shifting musical gears as they go.

The rehearsal process starts in July during Lyric's off-season. Each production's scene changes and lighting cues are practiced and notated in the theater, minus singers and orchestra. Everything the audience will see gets rehearsed first. (For more on technical rehearsals, see this season's *Cinderella* program article.)

In August the chorus starts working on music for the full season. Chorus master Michael Black and the 48 regular members of the Lyric Opera Chorus gather in room 550 to learn and memorize their parts. The atmosphere is friendly and focused, with occasional stops to tweak pronunciation or phrasing.

"It's every day, all day, for five to six weeks," says Black, albeit with men only for *Cinderella*, and reduced chorus for *Figaro*, *The Merry Widow*, and *Der Rosenkavalier*. While several chorus members have sung some of this season's operas previously, many haven't, or hadn't in a very long time. And the world premiere of *Bel Canto*, of course, was uncharted terrain for everyone – in multiple languages, no less.

"I spend a third of the time making sure all the notes and languages are spot on, and a third of the time making sure everything is absolutely perfect," Black explains. Then the last third is trying to find interesting ways to repeat and memorize." Remember – that's music and words for *eight* operas, all in very different styles, and rehearsed concurrently. When staging rehearsals begin in September, music rehearsals drop to one or two a week from ten.

The chorus has to incorporate acting and blocking directions for up to four operas at a time while maintaining musical excellence. When rehearsals move to the stage, the distractions of wigs, costumes, and lighting compound the challenges. By opening night, though, all systems are go and virtually perfect.

The orchestra's m.o. is considerably different – understandably, given the sheer volume of music they have to process and polish – every note of every moment of every single opera, overture through finale. According to Laura Deming, a Lyric cellist since 1976, orchestra members begin their preparations "as soon as the next season is announced. We rarely 'read' music for the first time in rehearsal; orchestra musicians get practice parts as soon as they're available, and practice throughout the summer." Many listen to recordings, study the full score to understand how their parts fit with others, and even study the language. Starting in early September, each opera gets at least a three-hour orchestra-reading rehearsal per act, without singers. The longer operas, and the new ones, receive additional orchestra rehearsals.

The early rehearsals are challenging "because it's so incomplete without the singers, Deming says. "Many of us hear the vocal lines in our heads from experience." The orchestra rehearsals entail "a lot of stopping and starting, marking parts for where to expect a singer to breathe, where a particularly tricky spot is to stop or start together, where there will be slowing down or speeding up, what notes might be held and for how long, when to expect audience applause (even in the middle of an aria), what another instrument is doing and what to listen for to be together, what is happening onstage so we know the character and style,

TODD ROSENBERG



TODD ROSENBERG

The Lyric Opera chorus in rehearsal for Anna Bolena last season with, left to right, Bryan Hymel (Percy), Sondra Radvanovsky (title role), and John Rehya (Henry VIII); and the same scene onstage in performance with, left to right, Kellie O'Connor (Smeton), Richard Ollarsaba (Rochford), Radvanovsky, Jamie Barton (Jane Seymour), Rehya, and Hymel.

and how short, long, sustained, quiet, loud, and how important a passage might be in the scheme of things.” Whew.

Playing techniques also vary according to each opera’s era and style – delicate and intricate for Mozart and Rossini, for instance, percussive and forceful for works such as *Wozzeck* and *Bel Canto*. Deming notes that the string sections also have to synchronize their bowing – as in the movement of their bows across their instruments, not the curtain call! Bowings may be provided by conductors in advance and marked into scores by Lyric’s music librarians, or they may be worked out by the concertmaster and string principals. Having the same bowings helps musicians “create the same sounds, and helps avoid accidents because of the close quarters” in the orchestra pit.

The orchestra’s “first date” with the singers is the *Sitzprobe*, or sitting rehearsal, with cast and chorus in chairs at the edge of the stage with their scores on music stands. “It’s pure music-making, and our best chance of hearing the singers without worrying about staging,” Deming notes. “It’s exhilarating, and has the quality of a love-fest.”

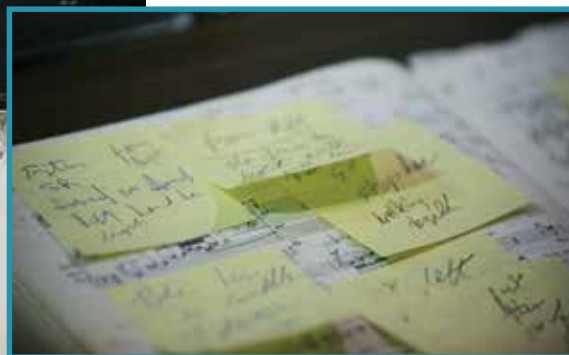
Staging rehearsals start in late August backstage. On the “first day of school” the atmosphere is charged with excitement. Old friends and new colleagues walk through the stage-door entrance chatting happily, check in with the rehearsal department, and head off to the designated rehearsal room. The director greets the assembly, talks through the production’s concept, passes around set-design images, and points out the costume sketches stuck to the wall. Then it’s time get to work – six hours of staging rehearsals daily, six days a week, paced by the conduc-

tor, accompanied by a rehearsal pianist, and aided by a prompter if it’s a new or especially difficult work.

The director talks cast members through a scene, they run it, the director stops the action, they discuss what’s working and what might make it better, run it again, and slowly progress through the opera with countless refinements and tweaks as they go. As *Bel Canto* director Kevin Newbury told the cast when they met, “It’s all about collaboration – the best idea wins.” Chicago Shakespeare Theater’s artistic director, Barbara Gaines, embraced the suggestions of her *Figaro* cast, who had more experience with the opera than she and brainstormed vigorously on the set during the first week of rehearsal. “That’s great! Yes, let’s try that,” was Gaines’s frequent refrain.

At every rehearsal, starting with the summer tech, the stage manager takes notes on every little detail to ensure that once a scene is set, it can be repeated reliably. Every entrance and exit, every prop’s placement, every offstage quick-change – it all gets written down and revised repeatedly. “You make a plan and then you change it,” says John W. Coleman, a Lyric stage manager for 25 years on more than 100 productions, including four world premieres and two *Ring* cycles. “That’s the whole nature of any theatrical venture; you’re creating something that’s inherently messy, time-consuming, and costly. It’s really labor-intensive. It’s not like you say, ‘Oh, we’re going to do *La bohème*’ and it just happens.”

It all works, Coleman says, because “the skill level here is really high. Efficiencies are built in backstage because of the personnel, who are journeymen in their own right, who have years of experience here and years of experience working together.



Wozzeck stage manager John W. Coleman and a page of his score.

We all know how to work together and how to get things done. We know each other personally and professionally. If we had high turnover, we'd have chaos and never get the shows up." He adds that when a director or designer returns to Lyric "80-90 percent of the people will be the same," which fosters a remarkable sense of ongoing collaboration and mutual respect.

After the earlier endless note-taking, the stage manager's role becomes highly proactive and reactive during onstage rehearsals. The stage manager is "in charge of calling the show – places calls, calls to stage, warnings on all the scenery shifts, all light cues, all spot cues, all scenic moves," Coleman explains, standing at the stage-manager's booth just offstage right with an intricately marked score. Often during rehearsals the stage manager steps into sight to stop the action, consult with the director, advise the maestro where to resume the music, and countless other adjustments. If something goes wrong, which happens rarely, "the job is thinking on your feet and finding the best solution for the situation at hand," says Coleman. "You have to keep people safe. You have to not panic or be distracted."

The piano dress rehearsal is the first time all the physical elements of a production come together – costumes, wigs, makeup, scenery, lighting, and staging. The director, designers, and the staff in charge of each element can finally see what works and what doesn't – the shade of that wig, the length of that gown, the movement of that curtain, the timing of that trap opening, the billowing of that fog, the position of that singer. The piano run-through, or PRT, starts and stops frequently as adjustments are made or noted over the course of five working hours. For longer operas, that's not much time. Every minute is essential, and everyone is hyper-alert to getting every detail right.

Three-hour stage-orchestra rehearsals take place over the next two days – the conductor's final opportunity to fine-tune the musical fit between stage and orchestra pit. Soloists are costumed (though often not in makeup and wigs), the better to acclimate to how their outfits affect their movement and sound production.

The final dress rehearsal brings everything and everyone in the production together before an audience of company and board members, sponsors, donors, and invited guests. It's a virtual performance, with the caveats that artists may choose to not sing at full voice and that the dress rehearsal may be stopped at any time.

Then, finally, rehearsals are done for the soloists, who enjoy two days off before the opening performance. For everyone else, not so much: the day after the dress rehearsal the understudies will have full staging and run-through sessions backstage, chorus and orchestra members will likely rehearse and/or perform another production the next day, along with Ryan Opera Center members and Sir Andrew Davis. And stage management, stagehands, and backstage departments will all be there to make it all happen. Days off are few and far between. It's the nature of the process.

As Coleman notes, "We're all there creating something together. It's a group effort. Everybody's important, everybody has individual responsibilities and collective responsibilities. Everybody wants it to be a good show – everybody. Everybody wants to do our jobs in the best way possible."

Simple enough...right?

Magda Krance is Lyric's manager of media relations. Prior to joining the company in 1992, she worked as a fulltime freelance journalist for several national and local magazines and newspapers, and as an editor for Outside magazine.