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The Virtual Orchestra

Technology: here to stay?

by Shirley Fleming

A small opera-training company in Brooklyn stepped on a giant's toe in mid-August and has lived to tell the tale. When the Opera Company of Brooklyn announced that it would present its single performance of *The Magic Flute*, its ninth and final production of the season, using a Virtual Orchestra, Local 802 of the American Federation of Musicians went into action. Two weeks before the date, it raised strong objections to the project on the opening page of its website, and stirred up what might be described as a Virtual Storm. Some 500 e-mails descended upon the company's founder-conductor, 30-year-old Jay D Meetze—"the letters were both good and bad", he says—and two of his most prominent board members, Deborah Voigt and Marilyn Horne, resigned. (Horne issued a statement that while she agreed with the union's position, another reason for her resignation was that Meetze had not informed the board ahead of time of his decision. A goof, he later admitted.) There was, also, a threatening phone call, traced by the police—of which more in a moment.

The Local 802 protest recalled a similar situation of much larger proportions last March when Broadway musicians went on strike and show producers threatened the use of virtual orchestras—in the end a moot point, as other theater workers' unions struck in sympathy and Broadway went dark. Meetze's modest company hardly seems poised to shake the foundations of live-music enterprises, although one of his cast members quit the *Flute* five days before the performance because she feared professional backlash.

The Opera Company of Brooklyn, founded three years ago, offers a showcase for singers who already have some regional opera experience but may or may not have management; in some cases it gives a young artist first shot at adding a role he or she has never sung before. It also runs a resident artist program sponsoring free master classes, coaching, and recitals for about a dozen budding singers (16 were chosen last year from 567 applicants). "That's my big beef about the protest", says Meetze in a moment of exasperation. "We are trying to create opportunities and exposure for young artists, and we have the only paid young-artist program in New York, outside of the Met. Our

young singers get training and a little money in their pockets at the same time."

In its first two years the company employed live orchestras, but this past season was forced to operate on a budget so limited that it resorted to concert performances with pianos. The end-of-season offer of the Virtual Orchestra from its developer, a technology company called Realtime Music Solutions, along with the use of a refurbished Brooklyn theater owned by the New York City College of Technology, was seen as a way out of the bind. The fact that the technical services and the site were free of charge prompted critics to accuse Realtime of using the opera company simply to show off its wares. (Realtime was one of the companies slated to provide virtual orchestras in the Broadway dispute, if matters had reached that point.)

And so to the performance. With notepad in hand, primed to write down statements by enraged musicians possibly picketing the theater, I arrived to find the sidewalk deserted and opera goers peacefully entering to collect their tickets. Inside, a pleasant member of Local 802 told me that although some members had wanted to demonstrate, the union had discouraged it.

The Virtual Orchestra, it must be said, did its job remarkably well. In a basically black-box theater seating 186, three dozen loudspeakers of many shapes and sizes (also black) were distributed inconspicuously around the walls and on the small stage floor. Each speaker is designed to respond to a particular kind of instrument. As Realtime's Dr David Smith, who developed the technology, explains, "The radiation pattern of every instrument is different. If you're standing in front of a trumpet it's much louder than if you are behind it. A violin, on the other hand, gives off sound from the front plate and the back plate—a more widely enveloping sound. You want a speaker that simulates the way an instrument responds to space."

The original sounds themselves were not computer generated but were produced by real instruments, recorded by musicians playing chromatic scales in different timbres; the notes are assembled electronically into a complete orchestral score. Surprisingly, a certain amount of flexibility is possible: while phrasing, pitch, and dynamics are fixed, tempo can shift with the wishes of the singer, and expressive pauses can be accommodated.

Such electronic magic is wielded in the hands of two people: the conductor (in this case, Meetze) and an assistant conductor at a keyboard, who responds to the conductor's

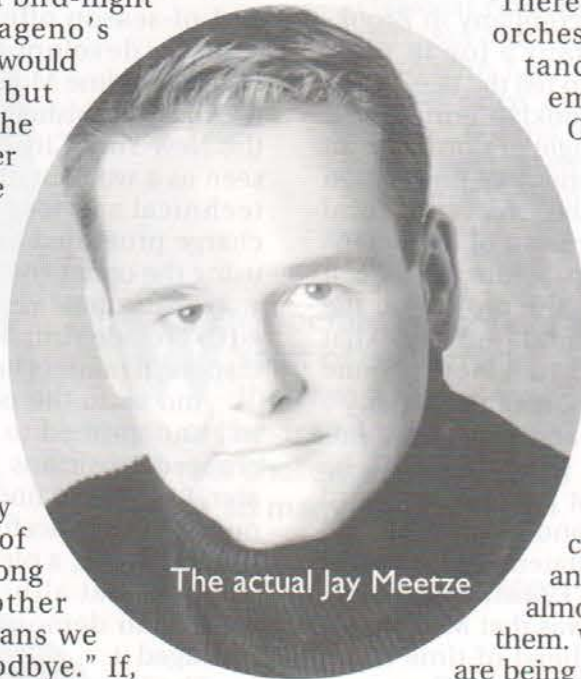
tempo cues and keeps the music running at the chosen pace of the moment. At the well-rehearsed *Flute*, singers, conductor, and keyboard operator meshed smoothly, and there appeared to be little strain in any quarter. The dynamics had been fixed to avoid overwhelming the singers at any point.

Meetze allowed himself to have some fun with the *Flute*, with a futuristic setting suggested by slide projections and a few shenanigans via electronics—a jet-swoosh take-off for outer space at the start, a bird-flight overhead to reflect Papageno's occupation—not stuff you would want as a steady diet but scarcely offensive under the circumstances. One insider joke was explained to me later: the odd sounds coming from Papageno's bag of birds was an electronic manipulation of the threatening phone call Meetze received, which had been caught on tape.

In her resignation statement, Marilyn Horne said: "It has long been my contention that the use of synthesizers, for opera, along with microphones or other sound enhancement, means we can kiss great singing goodbye." If, however, a young singer is faced with the alternative of a concert performance with piano or a stage experience with simulated orchestra, the choice seems clear. "Of course I prefer a live orchestra," said the evening's Papageno, Kenneth Overton, "and in the beginning I thought working with the Virtual Orchestra would be extremely restricting, like singing with a karaoke, but it wasn't. We were able to stretch phrases, take time, make a ritard—things like that. This was a new experience, and I'm glad I had it. I'm almost positive it will crop up in more places, so I may be faced with it again." Hardly a prediction that will please instrumentalists, but probably on target.

Janinah Burnett, fresh from a stint in Baz Luhrmann's *La Bohème on Broadway* and at 23 singing her first Pamina (and doing it with great charm), expressed much the same reaction. "At first I thought it was not going to be easy to manipulate, in terms of tempo, but once Jay and I got together and decided what was best musically for both of us, it worked fine. We had to adhere to what we rehearsed—there's not as much leeway as with an orchestra, but there's a second or two. You can hold a fermata, but flexibility within a phrase is more difficult." Had she encountered resistance to her performing with a virtual orchestra? "I let people know this

was for educational purposes, and because of the budget, and they understood. This was in no way intended to replace an orchestra—that was not the purpose." She went on to explain that while the singers donated their services for this *Flute*, instrumentalists, by union rules, are not allowed to volunteer. (Actually, they may do so on very rare occasions, we were told—possibly an emergency concert free to the public, and only by special permission of the union's executive board.)



The actual Jay Meetze

There's little doubt that virtual orchestras will encounter resistance wherever they may be employed. When Kentucky Opera used one for *Hansel and Gretel* in 1996, the move was "not well received", says general director Deborah Sandler in what sounded like understatement. (She was not with the company at the time.) She has no plans to use one. But she sounds a note of warning: "Orchestra contracts have become so cumbersome and complex and costly that it has become almost impossible to negotiate them. We are being strangled. We are being challenged now to think of new ways to approach the situation. The tail is wagging the dog."

The musicians union, despite its letter writing campaign, doesn't entirely rule out the use of virtual orchestras under certain circumstances. "The technology can't replace live musicians; it's a different experience," says Bill Moriarity, president of the New York's Local 802, "but in cities where instrumentalists aren't available, the virtual orchestra has a practical use, and I think it will ultimately find its place within commercial music. In the past we took a stand against *any* use of it, but we gave that up because it never worked. We're changing too. Technology changes us, and if it doesn't, it runs right over you. You can't just say no to technology—it always wins and you have to learn to live with it."

Meanwhile, Meetze moves ahead to his next season undeterred. He is developing a live-orchestra fund, and plans to present a *Marriage of Figaro* with a combination virtual-real orchestra. The highlight of the season is to be Copland's *Tender Land* with full orchestra. "It's a natural," he says. "Copland was a Brooklynite, and 2004 is the opera's 50th anniversary. I wouldn't dream of using anything but a full orchestra for that."

