

MUSIC ACADEMY OF THE WEST

by Steven Libowitz

Baritone Returns to His Musical Roots

American lyric baritone **Thomas Hampson** has performed worldwide in major opera houses and music halls, played scores of iconic roles, and delivered recitals that captivate for his creatively constructed programs explore connections between eras and approaches. He's an expert both in German Romantic song and tunes from our own country where his "Song of America" collaboration with the Library of Congress has proven extraordinarily popular and important.

The fact that Hampson studied as a teenager here at the Music Academy of the West (MAW) has never been lost on the singer. Hampson makes his latest return to Miraflores early in the new summer festival, where he'll perform in recital in Hahn Hall with pianist **Tamara Sanikidze** on Wednesday night, June 23 (7:30 pm; \$55) and teach the vocal masterclass at the same venue two days later (3:15 pm; \$20).

Excerpts from a much longer interview conducted via phone from Austria and email/digital recording from San Francisco:

Q. How did you come to be an opera singer? You were already late into your teens when the idea came up, right?

A. I was passionate about music, and had been encouraged to develop it, but mine wasn't a musical family. I'd been studying political science in Spokane, Washington, with a very different trajectory to my life. My (music) teacher there had studied at the Music Academy with Lotte Lehmann, who was my idol. It was that first summer there that was a significant, life-changing experience. I'd never been around kids my age with more talent and ambition than I had. I was a total Pygmalion. It was truly unbelievable to me. The work I did that summer and as hard as I did – to get the Lotte Lehmann leader award and the encouragement and invitation to return the next summer – it was huge for me. It opened up a kind of permission to actually find out what this musical classical operatic world was about. From that point on, it became more and more of a passion. So in some ways my voice discovered me. It really did work like that. And honest to God, it started in Santa Barbara.

You were back here a few years ago as a Distinguished Alumnus. How have the changes on campus struck you?



Baritone and former MAW student Thomas Hampson returns to Miraflores

Anytime you walk around an alma mater, things are just different. I remember being petrified in certain rooms. It's hallowed and the memories are still there for me. I remember walking into Lehmann Hall and feeling the presence of this grand lady. The first time I sang on stage there, I was absolutely terrified. Maybe I'm not quite so scared anymore. But it's a very special place.

Do you still get nervous before performances?

I do. Everyone does. It's part of life. You need to respect the public arena. Actual nervousness is usually only if I don't feel I have had enough time to prepare... I think one of the reasons young artists are preoccupied with stage fright is because they go out on stage thinking they are there to prove themselves, or to garner approval from the audience. The assumption is the great public with a capital P knows more about what you're doing than you do. If you go out with that kind of energy of singing at an audience or trying to convince them of something, you probably will be very nervous. (For me), those last 10 minutes before I step on stage are very nerve-wrack-



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ing, but once I'm finally out there, I'm inviting everyone to come into my world. So I feel more in my zone once I'm out on stage.

I was terrified when I was 23 years old at MAW singing for Martial Singher. It was an incredible challenge and made me dig deeper than I've ever dug before. What got me through was that my preparation, my sense of discipline – self-preservation if you will – was on par. That's the first thing any teacher worth their salt wants from a young singer. Whatever I wasn't able to do and what perspective I didn't have, I made up with enormous amounts of passion and enthusiasm and willingness to take instruction.

When I've attended MAW masterclasses, the coaches always seem to tell the singers to imagine what the composer and/or lyric writer was feeling, his intent, the situation of their lives, and the moment. How much do you still do that for yourself?

That's the alpha and omega of singing. It's not about me. It's always about what I'm singing (whether) opera or song. It's one of the reasons why recitals are less popular these days. We've become distracted by celebrity. It's a difficult environment to invite people to concentrate on their own existence, their own landscape of their life. And that's what recital is about.

When I teach, I enjoy getting young colleagues to focus on this triangle of effort between understanding what it is and in minute detail how it's constructed, and the physicality, the athleticism which is underestimated by the public what it takes to actually sing classical music. There are rules you need to pay attention to, and it's directly related to the soul of the piece you sing. The job is to keep those things in play with each other.

I'm struck by this concept of inviting the audience to focus on their own existence. How do you achieve that?

What I'm saying is I'm not trying to present you with something. I'm making a context of music and poetry audible. I'm there to make this world of thought, tone, and word audible. All I can do is that. I want the public to take that journey with me, give them as many inroads as possible, be the door to their experience. If we make the world of poetry in the language called music realizable, people will find

roads into a deeper understanding of themselves. It's inevitable. That's the beauty and wonder of the repertoire.

How do you know you've succeeded in a concert, both for you and the audience?

I can't know that. I can only measure my relationship to what I can do. I can sometimes be very unhappy with myself and yet know that the evening was a success. I want the audience to be enlivened in their own imagination because of what they're hearing – not that I'm singing it. The content as a moment of reflection of who we are as human beings is the overriding worthiness of anything we do in classical music. That's the whole point. If what I've sung has opened up connections and possibilities, if there's a quiet in the hall, a few seconds held in silence after a piece is over because people are moved, those are special moments.

Your recital here is being billed as a tribute to the faculty: Lotte Lehmann, Martial Singher, Marilyn Horne.

It's my personal tribute to three most important singer-pedagogues of the history in my lifetime at the academy. I also wanted to reflect the different centers of gravity of these three major personalities, the German, French, and American, and examine the universality of repertoire in an educational experience. I do know these songs very well and I love them.

In a masterclass, how do you find the balance between teaching the student and entertaining the audience?

I'm not very focused on the audience. I try not to get too direct in communicating with them (because) classes are more interesting when the public feels like observers of a work session. They get to participate in what it is we do as artists working with each other in a learning situation. My concentration is really on the student.

There is the old adage of we teach best what we need to learn most: how does teaching help you in your singing and approach to music?

I always feel that I sing better having been teaching simply because all of us, regardless of our experience, must pay attention to basics. Keeping your thoughts as simple as possible, and having articulated either as student or teacher, how you approach a work, is very healthy. It definitely benefits me.

For more information and tickets, call 969-8787 or visit www.musicacademy.org.

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