

A man with grey hair, wearing a dark blue jacket over a dark sweater and a light-colored collared shirt, stands in an urban setting. He is looking off to the side with a thoughtful expression. The background features a large steel bridge structure and a brick building. The overall mood is contemplative and sophisticated.

LIEDER

OF THE

Thomas Hampson

As he prepares to make his Australian debut, the veteran American baritone talks to **Jo Litson** about Mahler, Bernstein, American art song, and why he finds pandas so adorable

Thomas Hampson remembers the exact moment that he fell in love with the music of Mahler. It was back in the late 1970s and the renowned American baritone, then still in his early 20s, was studying at the University of California in Santa Barbara, where one of his teachers was the French-born American baritone and pedagogue Martial Singher.

"I think it was the summer of '79, and he assigned five of us to sing the *Kindertotenlieder*. I was assigned the second song. I'd heard of Mahler but didn't know much about it, so I thought 'I'd better figure out who this is'. So, I went down to the public library and checked out some cassette tapes, [as you did] back in the day, to listen in the car as I was going to some of my other jobs," recalls Hampson.

"I thought 'well, I'll just start at the beginning', so [I began with] Mahler One with the New York Philharmonic and Leonard Bernstein. I found myself on the freeway driving 35 miles an hour, and I thought 'this isn't going to work', so I pulled over. I was so

transfixed by it that I, of course, was horribly late to the music job I had. They said, 'what's wrong with you?' and I said, 'I've been listening to Mahler One' and a couple of wizened old orchestra players said 'Oh, I'm surprised you made it at all'. My fascination was instantaneous. It was not a world I understood, but it was a world that I knew I wanted to understand," says Hampson. "And as we say, that really started me down the rabbit hole, and I've never come out."

Over the course of a four-decade career, Hampson has built a vast operatic repertoire of more than 80 roles. He has also become a champion of the American art song, and has carved a reputation as an important interpreter of German Romantic Lieder, particularly Mahler. He even has an edition of Mahler's complete songs for voice and piano named after him: the Hilmar-Hampson edition, which was published by Universal Edition in 1995, following more than a decade of important research which he undertook with a small team of musicologists.

Mahler will naturally be on the program when Hampson makes his belated Australian debut this month. "Is Australia ready for me?" he says with a laugh. "I'm really looking forward to it."

He will sing Mahler's *Lieder eines Fahrenden Gesellen* (Songs of a Wayfarer) with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, and perform in recital at Melbourne Recital Centre and the Utzon Room at the Sydney Opera House. His program will include Mahler and Schubert, two of the cornerstones of Lieder, along with some French *chanson* (which he explored recently on an album called *Serenade*, featuring songs by composers

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associated with the Paris Opera), and traditional and folk-inspired songs from his homeland by the likes of Aaron Copland, Paul Bowles, Margaret Bonds and Henry Burleigh, who Hampson describes as “like the dean of African-American composers on Walt Whitman who is the prophet of American democracy”. Polish pianist Maciej Pikulski, who played for him on *Serenade*, will be his accompanist in Australia.

“I had a good conversation with the presenter as to what they would like to have, and what they thought the public would like to hear. I’m quite well known in these particular types of songs. I just wanted to give a representative recital of various languages and styles that I feel strongly about and am experienced in, but I was assured that that’s part of your recital and concert-going public’s desire as well,” he says.

Talking to Hampson by Skype early one Sunday morning, his rich, molten voice resonates through the apartment with such clarity that my husband listens fascinated from another room. Renowned as one of the intellectuals of classical music, he is extremely articulate, speaking with a galvanising passion. His roving, curious mind is allied with a dashing, charismatic stage presence: quite some package. Tall (six foot four) dark (now flecked with grey) and handsome, he burst onto the scene in the 1980s, quickly establishing himself as one of the leading lyric baritones of the day. He was championed by the likes of Bernstein, and in 1995 Dame Elisabeth Schwarzkopf described him as “the best singer in Europe right now”.

Hampson was born in Indiana in 1955 and grew up in Spokane, Washington. His father was a nuclear engineer and his mother was a doctor’s receptionist and played the organ

Above: As the villain in Offenbach’s *The Tales of Hoffmann* at the Royal Opera House

Below: With Renée Fleming in *The Merry Widow* for Lyric Opera of Chicago



at their local Seventh-day Adventist Church. (Hampson has not been part of the Church for the past 25 years). It was a musical household, with one of his sisters going on to become a musician.

Hampson likes to say that his voice discovered him. Though he was always very musical, and enjoyed singing, he didn’t initially consider performing as a career, choosing political science as his major at college. However, a Catholic nun called Sister Marietta Coyle, who had studied with the legendary Lotte Lehmann in California, urged him to study music so he concurrently undertook a degree in Voice Performance from Fort Wright College, then continued his vocal studies in Santa Barbara.

“That was not an easy conversation with my deeply practical father,” he admits, but his father’s concerns were quickly assuaged. In 1981, Hampson won the National Council Auditions at the Met then headed for Germany where he honed his craft as a member of the ensemble of the Deutsche Oper am Rhein in Düsseldorf. Stepping in at short notice to play the Herald in Wagner’s *Lohengrin* for an indisposed baritone, ears pricked up. From there his rise was meteoric.

Shortly after making his debut at the Metropolitan Opera in 1986 as the Count in *The Marriage of Figaro*, he was invited to audition for Leonard Bernstein, which led to legendary performances and recordings of Mahler’s *Kindertotenlieder*, *Rückert-Lieder* and *Lieder eines Fahrenden Gesellen* with the maestro.

“I was a young man. I think the most remarkable thing about that entire experience was that Lenny heard and perceived in me something that I could not have possibly known about myself. And now fast forward 35, 40 years, I feel that responsibility to young colleagues that I also work with,” says Hampson, whose master classes are highly sought after.

“The thing that I learned the most from Lenny was not so much a specific Mahler thing, as this general musical curiosity, knowledge [and need to] analyse – and that is in the preparation and in the belief of what you’re doing,” he adds. “Leave no stone unturned, leave no thought unquestioned, do not trust that your ability has reached its zenith. All those things are important but, in the moment you make music it is only that music that you’re interested in, that is your life.”

As for having his name on a thoroughly researched critical edition of Mahler songs, he says that he is “very proud” and that he “enjoyed the process” of investigating the discrepancies between the piano and orchestral scores.

“I think the most significant thing we did was to firmly and finally forever establish that Mahler was working in legitimate piano versions or in legitimate orchestral song versions. This idea that he worked his stuff out on the piano and printed these curious reductions but was really thinking about the orchestra is simply not true in the *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* repertoire at all,” he says.

“It wasn’t really true in the *Rückert-Lieder* either of 1901, but one could argue that he was at least thinking

parallel orchestrally as well as pianistically as he wrote the *Rückert* songs. It's a never-ending, wonderful conversation. I've been part of many symposia and it's always great fun to go into those details. It's fascinating – and actually the edition needs to be revised; we've got a plan over the next couple of years to revisit it."

When it comes to the American art song, Hampson has driven a complete reappraisal. He has unearthed masterpieces, performed them, and championed and disseminated them. "Even as we speak I'm right now in the throes of building a large 50-state tour called *Songs of America: Beyond Liberty*. We launch in August of this year. It's a one-man show where I will recite and act and tell stories and sing songs," he says. "We have a very small group of musicians: violinists, cellists, clarinetists, and the extraordinary young pianist Lara Downes. She's my total partner in crime, so we are going to do this 50-state tour and also plant repertoire in schools and curricula. The Hampsong Foundation is launching, by next September, an online education platform called *Song of America*," he says.

"The thesis of my whole project with American song is literally American culture seen from the eyes of poets and heard through the ears of composers. I teach non-musical teachers how to teach social studies, history and politics in America through music, and especially through song. So much of American song functions like a diary of our culture and our country, and it's a fascinating, endless exploration of the American psyche. It is a project very near and dear to my heart, and I'm very pleased to be able to bring that to Australia."

As well as a huge operatic repertoire, Hampson has a discography of around 170 albums. Asked about the



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difference between recording and performing live, he says it's a question that "could be answered really dismissively", but nonetheless he takes it seriously.

Recording is, he says, "an arduous process. It's like standing naked in front of a mirror all day long. Most artists I know can't abide what they hear in playback and you become very dependent on your producer to guide you." His approach was to work with producers he could trust. "I was probably, in the bulk of the recordings in the 90s, somewhat complacent about editing, which might have been a mistake. I've actually come across some recordings that I've thought, 'that's not what we planned' but in general I was happy. I made a lot of recordings but that's more a story of the industry than it is my own personal story. I belonged to a group of very quick-learning, interested people who were trusted by record companies to do projects."

"One of the things Lenny told me at the beginning was, 'you have an extremely recordable voice because one instantly hears that it's you and it's your timbre, and that's worth gold.' I don't know if I've ever made gold but it's true, you have to have a recognisable sound."

"In the 90s, the recording industries were small production companies and when I had a contract with EMI it was for five records a year: two solo piano, one orchestral solo and two operas. And that's why I have 150 recordings or something like that," he says.

During the course of our conversation, Hampson mentions that he subscribes to *National Geographic*, which allows me to put my panda question to him. I've read somewhere that he collects panda memorabilia. True?

He gives a hearty laugh. "I'm totally busted! I'm a diehard World Wildlife Fund person, not just for their mandate but because the panda is their icon. I just find them insatiably, incurably adorable. If you could just lead your life sitting on your extremely sweet, fat arse eating 50 pounds of bamboo every day, and every gesture that you make and every fart that you offer is somehow considered adorable by literally looking at you, and even when you're angry you have this round face and the sweetest of little black ears, what is there not to adore? Talk about a blessed existence for crying out loud! And I did collect them



Photo © Jiyang Cheng

“ AS I’VE MATURED – AND I’M CERTAINLY IN THE LAST QUARTER OF MY CAREER – I’M VERY INTERESTED IN NEW WORKS ”

pretty voraciously there for a while, so we have a lot of stuffed pandas around our house,” he says.

Hampson’s huge operatic repertoire ranges from Monteverdi right through to contemporary operas such as Miroslav Smka’s *South Pole*, with a libretto by Australian writer Tom Holloway, in which he played Roald Amundsen when it premiered in Munich in 2015. Best known for Verdi and Mozart roles, his repertoire includes Wagner, Puccini, Tchaikovsky and plenty of lesser known operas such as Ambroise Thomas’s *Hamlet* and Ferruccio Busoni’s *Doktor Faust*.

Asked how he is dealing with the inevitable changes to his voice as he gets older, he is circumspect. “In the baritone repertoire, the decision process is actually pretty easy, because when you’re a young spit-and-vinegar boy, you’re singing all the Guglielmos and Barber of Sevilles and all that sort of thing. Then you go through your Macbeth period, perhaps if you’re lucky enough, certainly Posa and all that. I adore singing Germont, and I still very much like singing Bocca Negra and Scarpia, but certainly it’s not just your age, it’s your appearance, it’s also what you feel your talents are best offered to,” he says.

“The highness and lyricism and gentleness of my voice is something that I have arduously protected through my career and actually always have that as a barometer against the choice of opera rep. My

choice of repertoire has always been whether the character itself interested me, and whether I thought I could inhabit that character both physically, mentally and then with my voice. As I’ve now matured – and I’m certainly in the last quarter of my career – I’m very interested in new works.”

He has two world premieres on the horizon. In October he appears in a new opera for the Canadian Opera Company in Toronto written for him by Rufus Wainwright. Entitled *Hadrian*, Hampson says it is about “Emperor Hadrian and his tortured relationship with [his gay lover] Antinous and his desperate Macbethian wife.” In April 2019, he appears in a new opera called *The Phoenix* about the scandalous life of Lorenzo da Ponte, who famously became Mozart’s librettist. “There’ll be a lot of skirt chasing and opera dramas,” says Hampson who plays the older da Ponte, while his son-in-law, bass-baritone Luca Pisaroni (who is married to his daughter Catherine), plays him as a younger man.

“With that, plus the *Songs of America* tour, I’m not doing so many repertoire evenings in opera houses where I have historically been in. It’s just a natural flow of things. It’s a very rich life,” he says philosophically.

“It doesn’t take a brain surgeon or a record critic to listen to me now and listen to me 35 years ago and say ‘hmm, yeah I can recognise the voice but he sings differently’. Well, duh! I am not going to sound like Leonard Bernstein’s recording, but I will sound like me. It will be a beautiful performance, I promise you, otherwise I wouldn’t sign up for it.”

Thomas Hampson performs in recital at Melbourne Recital Centre on May 31, and in the Utzon Room, Sydney Opera House on June 3. He sings with the MSO in Hamer Hall on June 7 and in Geelong on June 8