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# Opera

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## **INTERVIEWS**

**Susan Graham, Stéphane Degout,  
George Benjamin, Will Crutchfield**

## **FESTIVALS PREVIEW**

**Lyon, St Louis, Holland,  
Aix, Teatro Nuovo**





# THE NATURAL VOICE

Will Crutchfield tells George Loomis about his new festival

Last summer marked the 20th anniversary of Bel Canto at Caramoor, the series founded and directed by the conductor Will Crutchfield to present operas—mainly Italian and mainly from the early 19th century—in stylistically informed editions. You'd think the anniversary would have sparked a major celebration as Bel Canto prepared to enter its next decade but, in fact, last summer's performance of Bellini's *Il pirata* was its finale. Happily, Crutchfield and his forces will press on, as operations are set to continue at a new location and in expanded form. At Caramoor, many summers saw just a single performance of one opera. In its inaugural season Teatro Nuovo, as the new organization is called, will give two works in a total of five semi-staged performances: Rossini's *Tancredi* and Johann Simon Mayr's *Medea in Corinto*.

The performances will take place over nine days (July 28-August 5) in collaboration with the Performing Arts Center at the State University of New York at Purchase, northeast of New York City. Long-time observers of the New York opera scene will remember SUNY Purchase as the site of Pepsico Summerfare, where several of the young Peter Sellars's productions, including those of the three Mozart-Da Ponte operas, were given. In addition to the featured operas, the festival will include daily vocal and instrumental concerts as well as masterclasses, lectures and panel discussions. The hall at Purchase will be an improvement on Caramoor's tent, known as the Venetian Theater, especially when the weather is rainy or sweltering, and makes staged performances a possibility in future.

'Sometimes I ask myself, "Why didn't I do this ten years ago?,"' says Crutchfield. Costs were always an inhibiting factor at Caramoor, because a substantial component of the programme involved the training of young singers. 'New members of the Caramoor board saw the costs and were not convinced about spending so much money training the next generation'; Crutchfield adds that several key opera donors at Caramoor are funding Teatro Nuovo along with new backers. SUNY Purchase contributes by offering discounts on the use of its facilities. The budget for the initial season, Crutchfield says, is 'approximately \$1m, which is considerably above our final Caramoor budget'. Essentially a stand-alone organization,

■ *Will Crutchfield, embarking on a new venture*





Teatro Nuovo will no longer be under the umbrella of a larger organization but on balance Crutchfield thinks it's better off 'because all donors, board members and staff are united on the priority of opera'.

The name Teatro Nuovo was chosen not so much because the organization is new but because it represents a shift in priorities compared to other producers of opera. 'Opera has gone through a long period of focusing on things other than singing—theatrical values, up-to-date editions, rediscovery of forgotten repertory,' says Crutchfield. 'People assumed that singing could take care of itself. What needs to be "new" or "renewed" now is the development of singing actors—building their voices and strengthening their artistic autonomy, authority and creativity.'

This is why the six-week training programme is central, and it will be expanded 'enormously', he says. 'We will have about the same number of singers as before—between 40 and 50—but three times the number of faculty members. We've already given young singers important information that they weren't getting elsewhere, and we intend to step up strongly in helping them put the information to work with their own voices.' The entire Bel Canto at Caramoor staff, including Rachelle Jonck and Lucy Tucker Yates, will be part of Teatro Nuovo, to be joined by the singers Jennifer Larmore, Juliana Gondek and Marguerite Krull, who will give 'bootcamp training in agility'.

A second major advance will be the establishment of Teatro Nuovo's own period-instrument orchestra. 'This is an overdue step for 19th-century opera, and we're better positioned to take it than anyone, as far as I can see.' As concertmaster, Crutchfield has engaged the Berlin violinist Jakob Lehmann, who has served as concertmaster for leading European period ensembles and is also, Crutchfield notes, 'an opera fanatic'. Another important addition to the team is the Florentine conductor Jonathan Brandani, currently with Minnesota Opera, who will also take a teaching role.

Rather than a modern, stand-up conductor, Crutchfield plans to divide the musical leadership between the *primo violino* (concertmaster) and *maestro al cembalo*, though exactly how much actual keyboard playing the latter does will be determined case by case. Crutchfield will serve as *maestro al cembalo* for *Tancredi*, with singers to include Tamara Mumford, Sydney Mancasola and Santiago Ballerini, while Brandani will perform that function for *Medea in Corinto*, with Jennifer Rowley, Derek Stark and Mingjie Lei in leading roles. Teatro Nuovo will focus on the 19th century, in particular the first half, although Crutchfield does not rule out an eventual *Aida*. Other future possibilities include Gomes's *Il Guarany*, Mercadante's *I briganti* and another Mayr opera.

Both operas in the opening season are in the *seria* mode and date from 1813. *Tancredi*, written for Venice, was Rossini's first great success, whereas the German Mayr, who came to Italy as a young man, had a two-decade career behind him when he wrote *Medea in Corinto* for Naples. 'Rossini knocked Mayr from centre stage,' Crutchfield says, 'but he was the biggest role model Rossini had, a master composer awaiting full discovery, and Medea was one of Giuditta Pasta's most important roles.' At its premiere *Tancredi*, like most *opere serie*, had a *lieto fine* ('happy ending'), but for performances a month later in Ferrara Rossini created a tragic ending to conform with the opera's Voltaire source. Which one will Teatro Nuovo perform? 'Both!' Crutchfield says with delight. 'Rossini actually wrote substitute pieces not just for the finale but for about half the opera. He never did them all at once, but that's what we're going to do in one of our performances. It's practically a new opera.' Aleks Romano, Christine Lyons and David Margulis will be the singers.





■ *Heading for the Teatro Nuovo: (l. to r.) Jennifer Rowley, Sydney Mancasola and Tamara Mumford*

Crutchfield envisions instrumentalists and singers working closely together in a stylistically assured manner. ‘Our goal is to create an ensemble of players and singers who listen and react to each other every exciting second, where every musician shares an ownership stake in the opera. We’ll provide an in-depth immersion in the performing style of the period—not just to check off boxes and say “this was allowed, that was not allowed”, but to work with those stylistic features long enough and hard enough to make them belong to each singer and player.’

Much about ornamentation and other points of style, in Crutchfield’s view, can be extrapolated from recordings made by the first generation of singers to produce records, of which he has made an assiduous study. His pool of recordings encompasses singers born between 1843 (the birth of Adelina Patti) and 1873 (the birth of Enrico Caruso) forming an invaluable supplement to vocal treatises such as the indispensable *Traité complet de l’art du chant* by Manuel García. When we met, Crutchfield played contrasting recordings of ‘Je crois entendre encore’ from Bizet’s *Les Pêcheurs de perles*, one by Fernando De Lucia and one by Giuseppe Di Stefano, to illustrate the former’s greater dynamic range and much freer tempo (‘there is hardly a tempo at all’), gorgeous though Di Stefano’s performance was.

Early recordings also illustrate the absence or rarity of certain departures from the score that singers think of as ‘traditional’, such as vocal ‘tacets’ (or ‘drop-outs’) at final cadences and the interpolation of high notes. According to Crutchfield, not one recording from the first generation includes any drop-outs, an indication that the practice is a modern corruption. As for final high notes, Crutchfield reports that of 21 tenors from the first generation who recorded ‘La donna è mobile’, 14 ended the aria as written with a B below middle C, four sing a high B (as is invariably the case today) and



three recorded it both ways. On the other hand, he points out that contemporary reviews of the premiere of the revised version of *Don Carlo* at La Scala (1884) comment on Francesco Tamagno's high C at the end of the 'friendship' duet. 'You can be sure he wouldn't have prefaced it with a drop-out!'

Today both practices, while contrary to musical logic—the final high note adds tension, where closure should normally bring a sense of repose—are deeply entrenched. 'High notes at the end have become obligatory and they were not earlier,' says Crutchfield. But he is not doctrinaire about conforming to period practice. 'It isn't necessary to do everything, everywhere in the style of its time. But you can never learn what you really think about that style—what really works and *how* it works—if you don't make the experiment of ruling out everything else.'

In addition to steeping singers in authentic stylistic practices, Crutchfield encourages them to adopt earlier methods of vocal production. He believes that singers today have been adversely influenced by the microphone, to the extent that it affects performances whether amplified or not. To illustrate this he plays two versions of the pianissimo close of Alfredo's opening statement in 'Parigi, o cara', one by Florencio Constantino and the other by a popular tenor of today. 'That's crooning!' he says of the second example, 'something they never did back then. Constantino's pianissimo is no less a pianissimo, but it is wiry, firm, tensile and athletic.'

The comparison also points up a major difference between vocal production then and now: a significant decline in the speed of vibrato. 'There is almost no overlap—almost without exception, earlier singers had faster vibratos than singers of today.' A slower vibrato makes for singing that is 'less strength-based and more slack', he notes. I mention Joseph Calleja, whose fast vibrato has been widely noted, although it is not to everyone's taste. 'His is almost as fast as the average of the earlier generation,' says Crutchfield. He is not pushing for faster vibratos but is wary of slow vibratos for young singers. 'I think too many young singers are at risk of a future "wobble" without realizing it. They have vibratos that don't sound problematic yet, but are almost certain to get slower and wider over time. There are ways to address this, but only when the voice is still relatively young and fresh. If athletic conditioning were notched up, for instance, vibrato rates would adjust without anybody seeking that as a goal. But focusing attention on the issue is the first step.'

'I want the natural voice, free of qualities traceable to the microphone, to become popular again. Singers need to understand and hear the difference and then be persuaded to like the non-microphone style better.' It's a tall order, but Crutchfield feels it's doable. 'Our singers already love opera and are prepared to be diligent. We can produce examples of singers that will generate other examples. Established singers can learn too—people who have sung in three productions of *Traviata* can learn from the experiences of a 19-year-old. Some of our lead roles will be sung by people participating in the whole six-week programme, even though they are pretty well established and have proved their quality. I'd like to see the kind of singing we're cultivating become trendy again, like organic food and natural fibres. It's like the rediscovery of an old handicraft. Think of it as singing without chemical additives.'

*The inaugural Teatro Nuovo season runs at Purchase College, New York, from July 28 to August 5, with performances including 'Tancredi' (July 28, August 3), 'Medea in Corinto' (July 29, August 4) and 'Tancredi rifratto' (August 5). [www.teatronuovo.org](http://www.teatronuovo.org)*