

EGSM 18: Picking up good vibrato (Opera)

Content Warnings

- Sexual references
- Explicit language
- Discussions of: sexism and classism, physical violence & death
- Mentions of: domestic violence, stereotypes, racism, poison

ANIL

By the end of the first act, the stage is trashed...

[Group laughter]

...it is a complete mess, and the interval is basically someone just sweeping up the stage and cleaning it!

[Show Theme - Intro]

HELEN

Hello friends and fans and welcome to Enthusiasm, the show where we talk about a few of our favourite things. I am your host Helen Gould, one of the best Rusty Quillers, and today we're talking about opera. And I am delighted to be joined by Anil, Katie, and Lowri. Anil, can you give us your pronouns and tell us what you do.

ANIL

Hi, I'm Anil Godigamuwe, he/him, and I am Rusty Quill's chief compliance officer.

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HELEN

Katie, what are your pronouns and what do you do?

KATIE

Hi, I'm she/her, and I was the producer of the podcast that was called Stella Firma. I recently started a new role making content for all our lovely Patreons, which I'm very excited about.

HELEN

Aww. You're very good at it. I'm enjoying all the stuff you're putting out.

(Group laughter)

Lowri, my darling. Please introduce yourself. Give us your pronouns and tell us what you do.

LOWRI

Hello, Lowri, she/her and I produce Enthusigasm.

EVERYONE

Yay! Woo!

LOWRI

I also edit for Rusty Quill Gaming, and I said that with a question at the end because I was like, is it still going on when this comes out? I think it probably is.

HELEN

It will be, it will be yeah.

LOWRI

Mmm. And I'm actually getting very emotional as we get closer to the end.

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HELEN

Oh yes, of course.

LOWRI

I'm editing episode 216 right now, just for context, and it's a lot.

(laughs)

HELEN

Oh...

LOWRI

It's a lot!

HELEN

Well...

LOWRI

Anyway...

HELEN

F for you, Lowri.

(Laughter)

Alright, so, we're going to start with, what is becoming quite a typical question, which is: how did each of you get into opera, because it is kind of famously a reasonably exclusive interest. So, what happened? Someone tell me your journey.

LOWRI

I was into opera from a very young age, because several of my family are opera singers...

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HELEN

What?!

LOWRI

I mean amateur opera singers, but like singing is a...you know, the stereotype of the Welsh singer is there for a reason.

KATIE

Yeah, I can totally verify. My husband is from Wales. It is true.

LOWRI

We love to sing!

KATIE

Any excuse to burst into song!

LOWRI

Yes. You're not wrong.

(Laughter)

I expect I will be singing on this episode, and I am not the opera singer amongst the four of us so...

(Laughter)

Sorry everyone! Yeah, and my gran was an opera singer, lots of my uncles and aunts are opera singers. Always in choirs. My mum sings. So there were loads of opera records and videos around the house that I grew up in. And I just used to listen to them. Like, and sing along and dance to them in the middle room, when I was little. And go to rehearsals, and things like that.

HELEN

That's super cool.

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LOWRI

So yeah...

HELEN

So did you get drawn into any of these rehearsals?

LOWRI

Oh, absolutely.

HELEN

Oh, excellent.

LOWRI

I did years and years of amateur operatics with my mother.

HELEN

Oh...

LOWRI

And it wasn't full opera. We did a lot of operettas, and musicals.

HELEN

Ok.

LOWRI

So I've never gone into opera singer. I would be more of a musical kind of singer, but... yeah! It's... I love it.

HELEN

Aww. Anil, how about you?

ANIL

So, I suspect I'm coming at this from like completely different from Lowri and Katie because I don't come from a musical family. Like music is not a big thing for my immediate family. Like my grandmother apparently was a piano teacher, and taught piano and singing, but because she lived in Sri Lanka, none of that really came around for me and my sister. My sister played the flute a bit but...a bit of a digression, how I got into it was my mother is a nurse. And for a long while, and I don't know if this scheme is still running, a lot of the London theatre houses and opera halls, if they had spare tickets for shows, they would put an allocation of these tickets into a pool, which London's first responders and care professionals could access.

HELEN

Oh...

LOWRI

That's cool.

ANIL

So, if you were available on short notice, you might be able to pick up like stalls or circle seats, at a vastly reduced rate, just so that they would have people filling the seats. My mum was a nurse, she got access to this pool, and I was the only one in the family who had any interest in going to see theatrical performances and things like that. And then one day she said 'oh I have tickets for an opera, or I can have, get access to an opera at the English National Opera at the Coliseum', and I said 'yeah, sure I'll go along', because primarily up to that point it had been like RSC productions at the National and so forth...

HELEN

RSC is Royal Shakespeare Company, right?

ANIL

Royal Shakespeare Company, yeah, I got to see a lot of Shakespeare that way.

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HELEN

Cool.

LOWRI

Amazing.

ANIL

And so yeah, I went along to the English National Opera, I can't exactly remember which show it was, but it was definitely...I enjoyed this enough, that if you get more opera tickets, I will quite happily go along.

HELEN

Mm, wow. So was that like a little tradition that you had?

ANIL

Yeah. So whenever my mum could go along with me, or if, sometimes it was just I would go on my own. And it's really weird because while I have issues like going to the cinema or something on my own, I am very happy to go to the theatre on my own, and go and see a musical production or a musical. Partly because I know that I have very few close friends as well who would be available on short notice to go and see it. So often, it's like, if I wanted to, it would have to be on my own. But I really enjoy like sitting there in the... in the vast hall, enjoying this music that is reverberating around you that is just so grand.

HELEN

Yeah. Yeah I know what you mean. I go to the cinema often on my own, and also to the theatre, when there's something I want to see very much. So yeah. I remember seeing Hamilton, and I was just in bits like for the entire last fifteen minutes!

(Laughter)

Because the fact that it's live, and of course you get this with films as well, but like with theatre particularly you can't pause it, and there's like an immediacy to it...

ANIL

Yeah...

HELEN

... that you don't get with movies, especially when people are singing.

KATIE

Yeah.

HELEN

And I'm also so invested because I'm like "Oh that's so difficult to sing, I really hope that you can keep that up!" And they always do, they always do.

(Laughter)

KATIE

I just, I think there's a physicality about when you're in the same room as the people, because it's, it's actually...people have to use their whole body to make these sounds.

HELEN

Yes...

KATIE

And somehow when you're in the room, you can tell. And that's part of the thrill of it.

HELEN

Yes.

KATIE

You know, obviously the wonderful systems they have for the sound in the cinemas are incredible in a different way, so you get the huge impact. But it's not got that sort of human effort behind it that you can actually feel.

HELEN

Yeah. Well, since you're having a chat, can you tell us how you got into opera then, Katie?

KATIE

Alright. It's quite the journey!

(Laughter)

LOWRI

Ooh, good!

KATIE

So as a kid when I was growing up, my parents were not into that sort of thing at all. Like you said, the perception of it being a bit elite really put them off, and they would say so quite openly to me, and everything. But I would have been about nine or ten, and a couple of things happened. First of all I had a friend at school. Her parents were separated and her dad was a merchant banker, and so he was really well off, and he used to take her for weekends in London where he lived. They used to get complimentary tickets to Covent Garden, and she invited me along one day for the weekend with her dad to go and see this opera. And I remember really clearly, it was Hansel and Gretel, and I remember everything about it. Like the production was trying to bring out...I think they thought I didn't understand, because I was only nine, but it was clearly the director was trying to sort of look at domestic abuse and that sort of thing, because all the way through the witch scene dad was just sitting there, reading the paper in the corner, and all of these little details just vividly remember. But the thing I remember the most about it was just the atmosphere. I mean it was just...the magic of it. You know, because these

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were complimentary business tickets, it was something like fifth row, the stalls in the middle, I mean it was like...

HELEN

Wow...

KATIE

You know, I didn't realise at the time, but it would have cost about 200 quid for this ticket, you know, that I was sitting in, age nine, like clueless! But it was just everything like from the sound of the orchestra tuning up, and how it sounds in that big room, and...just kind of the magic of the lights going off and everything. I mean, it was just amazing, and just the whole thing of being in London and being bought dinner afterwards, really late at night. One day, and I can't remember how it happened, I discovered my upper register. And I'm like quite a stocky build, and I've got like a really fat head, and I've got wide cheekbones. And it turns out that this was a really strong part of my voice. And I remembered that I used to like opera, so I started getting the train into London and going to ENO and watching them, either by myself or with my sister, and by then my mum was starting to sort of relax on the whole thing. And she was getting into it too, so I would go with my mum too. I started to try to sing like that myself, and it felt incredible. And so I went to this masterclass thing, you know where I lived, and sung like a completely inappropriate repertoire for someone my age, it was Pamina's aria from the Magic Flute. But the guy who was running the masterclass was a chorus member in English National Opera...

HELEN

Mm. Oh that's the ENO?

KATIE

ENO, yes.

HELEN

Oh OK.

KATIE

Yep. And he said “you’ve got loads of potential. Would you like to start coming down with me, and just sort of observing rehearsals and meeting singers, and that sort of thing?”

LOWRI

Oh my gosh, amazing!

HELEN

That’s...I never knew that. That’s so cool.

KATIE

Yeah! So I did that like for a few years. He was fantastic. I got to go to dress rehearsals, which was really good, because obviously it’s a free performance, but I also got to go to pre-dress rehearsals, which was even better, because you could see them getting the direction, and talking about it, and all that sort of thing, and it was just incredible. You would go backstage and you would go into the canteen, and you would walk in there and there would be this kind of wall of “ra-ha-ha!” because everyone was talking like an opera singer.

(laughter)

And yeah, then I went up to uni and I studied music. And by then singing was my first instrument. So I started, I was having lessons, and my plan by then... I met a bunch of people who were also into opera, and just that stuff in general, and my plan had been go and do post-grad in singing and actually try to get into singing myself. And I got as far as the auditions, and they said “loads of potential, but you’re a bit rough and ready, you know you haven’t got a good technique, you’ve obviously not been brought up in this. Go have some more lessons and come back next year.” Having about the confidence of a... well, no confidence at all, I heard “you’re rubbish, go away.”

HELEN AND LOWRI

Oh no!

KATIE

And by that time, I'd been on an aeroplane, and I was getting obsessed with that, so I went off and became a pilot instead.

(Laughter)

HELEN

What?

ANIL

Wow - what?

HELEN

You're a pilot? You can fly a plane?

LOWRI

Oh did you not know that?

KATIE

I didn't know you didn't know that, I'm sorry!

HELEN

No, I had no idea Lowri!

ANIL

No, I... wow!

KATIE

Yeah, I remain into it, and I feel like... after I'd had my children, I got into creative music, which is probably where I'm supposed to be. And I was realising as I was thinking ahead of this episode, and I'm sorry that this is my life story by the way...

HELEN

No, this is so fascinating. Thank you so much for sharing this!

ANIL

No, it's fascinating!

LOWRI

Oh, it's a very good one!

(Laughter)

KATIE

I realised that that early exposure to the big grand, colourful, emotional and I love everything that's colourful and emotional and big, and makes you think, and makes you feel, you know. And that has really influenced me a lot. And whatever genre I'm writing in, and because I've always been into all music, I tend to be quite eclectic in what I listen, but whatever genre I'm writing in, I realise that that influence is there, some of the stuff I listened to at an early age. You know, I remember when I went to see Turandot for the first time. And the first act with the chorus just blasting away, you know, and I might be writing electronic music, or whatever, but that... ambition I guess, of kind of what you're trying to do, remains. And I have to say, it tends to be what the clients really love as well. And they don't even know it's that influence from opera that they're loving, but I think it is. Yeah, so, I always say that I've done loads of things, but I've never had a career. So...

(Laughter)

HELEN

That's such an incredible story though, Katie.

LOWRI

Yeah. I realised about, I don't know... maybe five or six years ago, that what my taste in music is, because it's also eclectic, what my taste in music is, is I need it to just be big, sweeping, and romantic and epic.

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ANIL

So that's opera all over pretty much!

KATIE

Pretty much, yeah!

LOWRI

I need... and as you were speaking then, I was like "oh I wonder if that's why" because from a very young age, that's what I was listening to. Like these epic, as you say, like wall of sound sometimes, and all these harmonies and just like sweeping romance and, yeah.

ANIL

I always liked musicals. I mean I'm that kind of stereotypical gay (laughter). It's...

HELEN

Oh Anil...

ANIL

Well, I mean it is a stereotype, and I am quite happy to own that...

(Laughter)

ANIL

But like, you don't often see that transcend to opera, because, as Katie said, there are elitism issues, or at least perceptions, and particularly when you are non-white...

HELEN

Yeah...

ANIL

You will also not really see non-white performers.

EVERYONE

Yeah...

ANIL

I don't think any of the productions I saw as a teen, or in my early 20s, had a non-white lead.

HELEN

Yeah, it's really rare in general and in theatre too.

LOWRI

It hasn't changed very much now. I think the last thing I went to see was the same.

ANIL

Exactly.

KATIE

That said, some of my favourite opera singers are not white, so...

HELEN

Excellent.

KATIE

Yeah.

ANIL

I should get recommendations, or if you have recommendations, I'd really be interested, because I haven't seen opera, or haven't been to the theatre in a very long time. So, I would like to know what... like what's good. And even of like past recordings, what is good?

HELEN

You have very very handily moved me on to the next question.

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KATIE

Ah ha...

HELEN

Which is indeed what makes a good opera? What is the difference between that is an opera, and THAT is an opera? You know what I mean...

LOWRI

I've got a hot take straight off the bat, don't listen to it in your own language...

(Laughter)

LOWRI

Because the lyrics are bloody crap, and it just spoils the whole thing. You just want to let that music wash over you, and just feel the emotion from the sounds, because the lyrics are just... no...

HELEN

Really...

LOWRI

Yeah... they're not the focus, which is valid, in a way, you know, it's not the focus.

ANIL

Which is weird, at least for me, because I really like... like I really like being able to understand and listen to the lyrics, but I fully get that point, because some of the best stuff I have watched has been foreign language. And the same goes for my general taste in like pop music, particularly like Eurovision...

HELEN

Ah yes...

ANIL

Like I am much more fond of some sung in other languages, than I am often in English.

LOWRI

I've seen Traviata a few times. The first time I saw it in Italian, and oh my god I loved it, it moved me so much. But then I saw it in English, or maybe it was just with English subtitles and I was like... are you kidding me...? You've just met, and you're in love... no...

(Laughter)

LOWRI

This is ridiculous...

HELEN

Katie, I think you said you had an exception?

KATIE

Well, yes I agree with you in general. One of the exceptions I would say is when you have an English language opera written... taken from Shakespeare...

LOWRI

Ooh...

KATIE

One of my favourites is Benjamin Britten's Midsummer Night's Dream, for example.

HELEN

Oh, that's very cool.

ANIL

I guess that's where the native language is English...

EVERYONE

Mmm....

ANIL

It works. As opposed to where it has been translated...

HELEN

So the issue is the translation?

KATIE

I mean some of them with this, is some of the plots are absurd, you know...

(Laughter)

ANIL

I mean it's opera, you know... like I would say that's one of the hallmarks, or at least of classical opera...

EVERYONE

Yeah...

ANIL

One of the hallmarks is that the storyline is absurd. They're like... you have got these grand narratives playing out. This is not something that I have in depth, but unless I am mistaken, it's only modern operas, like the late 19th century, 20th century that you start to get a condensing of plots, like they are more focused on like issues of now and like more contemporary matters. Whereas your traditional opera is very grand, it's very soaring, often drawing on mythological folk tale narratives for their story base, or at least fantastical things, like the magic flute, or something like that. So, it's that grand absurdity, which is one of the draws for me, and what makes a really good opera. But the other thing it is, is the theatricality of the production. Because I came to opera, from enjoying theatre, I really like it, when the theatricality matches the music. I've seen operatic productions where the focus is on the music, because you are focusing on like the singers, but they forget some of the theatricality, or the theatricality has come second or third, down the list, and this particularly comes where there's choreographed bits, like where there is dancing. And I often find that if there are dance segments in an opera, they have been given short shrift, because the focus is obviously on the singing. So like for me, all of that needs to gel well, to elevate it from a good opera, to a great opera, even more so than like understanding what it's necessarily about, because a lot of that comes through anyway. So, one of the things for me, that

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really cemented liking opera, was particularly like modern tellings, or like updatings of traditional opera. So, like, as I say I don't exactly remember what the first opera I saw in a theatre was, but probably the second or third was a production of Don Giovanni at the English National Opera.

HELEN

Yeah...

ANIL

And, this one started with a blank stage. The back of the stage a screen elevates, a car drives on to the stage...

KATIE

Oh, I've seen that one, yep!

ANIL

Yeah, I suspected that you might have. The car starts bouncing up and down... because obviously there are people in the back seat, and then a man runs on from the wings, with a baseball bat, and smashes in the front... the windscreen of the car. Glass goes everywhere across the stage, he pulls open the back... the back seat door, drags out Giovanni and Anna... Donna Anna his daughter, because... I mean the story of Don Giovanni is that Giovanni is a womaniser and the play is all about how he gets his just deserts...

HELEN

Oh...

ANIL

Yeah, he's been having it away with Donna Anna, and her father is upset. But while all of this is going on, they've just like broken glass strewn across the stage, and then like a scene later, the stage is done up like a tavern, and there's lots of revelry and streamers and sawdust and everything and like by the end of the first act, the stage is trashed.

(Laughter)

ANIL

It is like a complete mess. And the interval is basically someone just sweeping up the stage and cleaning it before the start of the second half. And it was like that which kind of cemented in me like a real love of this dramatic... like of dramatic opera.

HELEN

That's super cool. Gosh. I think we're going to take a break on all of those musings, and we when we come back, we're going to talk some more about what a good opera is. I want to find out more about Don Giovanni. I always thought it was a romance, but apparently not... OK.

(Laughter)

HELEN

We'll be back in just a second.

-BREAK -

HELEN

And welcome back. Alright, so that was a really comprehensive breakdown of what you think makes a good opera, Anil. Thank you so much for that. We'll come back to Don Giovanni. Katie, what are your thoughts?

KATIE

It's interesting what both Lowri and Anil are saying. I kind of agree, but actually some of my favourite operas are some of the later ones in the late 19th century and the 20th century, which have plots around real life. There's a special word for it like opera realism or something, I don't know. I should have gone and read the Wikipedia article before this, so I looked like I knew what I was talking about...

(Laughter)

HELEN

I didn't, so don't you worry.

KATIE

But I do think the same applies, because although they might be looking at real life, they're trying to bring that sense of epic-ness to it. And maybe that's what I like. Maybe as a very emotional person, a very political kind of person, I feel actually ordinary people's lives deserve that level of, of attention, and deserve to be given an epic stage to be played out on, and for wonderful music to be underlining what they're going through. So, yeah, you mentioned La Traviata, I actually think that once you dig into the ridiculous plot, actually there's some really important stuff there about... at the end of the 19th century, what it is to be a woman and can you have any power and can you have any kind of agency or ownership over your own life, you know...

ANIL

The same goes for Carmen...

KATIE

Yeah... absolutely yeah. And so although it's ridiculous, it allows you another way to look at the human experience. And you know that's not to decry the fantastical ones, which I adore as well, but I think that element is in there. I think actually that became a really important part of what opera is, over the centuries, as it developed and that became a really important thing, that it was trying to do, or at least the composers were trying to do. I don't know if the audiences were that bothered, but the librettists and the composers were trying to do it.

(Laughter)

ANIL

Yeah, I get that because like those are issues that show up in like, La Boheme.

KATIE

Exactly...

ANIL

Which, like modern audiences might know better as Rent... (laughter)

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HELEN

Yeah, that's an interesting one...

ANIL

Yeah, and the transition of operas to musicals has been a longstanding one. But no, I very much get that, like, taking those issues and such and adding that extra layer to them, would have been like some of the best ways to get those messages across at the time.

KATIE

Yeah.

HELEN

I mean, art usually is. It's always a really...it can be a really useful way to communicate about stuff that's happening. And I mean that like in every single kind of art that we have, including comedy. I might even go so far as to say, including podcasts, but we shan't... we shan't toot our own horns.

(Laughter)

LOWRI

Toot toot!

KATIE

Dear listeners, you can be the judges of that...

(Laughter)

HELEN

Digital hashtag content...

(Laughter)

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HELEN

So, in my head, Don Giovanni was like a tragic romance in which Giovanni was like some love-struck kid and like trying to get married or something...

ANIL

(laughing) No...

HELEN

And then dies at the end.

KATIE

Not quite. He does die at the end to be fair.

HELEN

Oh OK.

ANIL

Do you know how he dies?

(Laughter)

HELEN

Err... beheaded...

LOWRI

Do you know, I don't... I don't think I've ever seen it.

ANIL

Really?

HELEN

I don't know anything about the story.

ANIL

So yeah... Don Giovanni is like... he is a love-struck womaniser. He is a young nobleman, who basically wants to cut his way through like sways of Italian noblewomen...

KATIE

And all the rest...

HELEN

Oh dear...

ANIL

And the story is, for this one is that he fixates on Donna Anna, and spends like most of like the production trying to... trying to woo her and such. Obviously, she has feelings for him as well, but a whole bunch of political stuff and things around it. But at the end, he is confronted with a final decision. Give up your womanising ways or pay the price.

HELEN

Oh...

ANIL

He refuses to and is dragged to hell...

HELEN

Oh...

KATIE

It's actually kind of terrifying.

(Laughter)

ANIL

Yeah...

HELEN

That's amazing.

ANIL

Done in the uber-traditional versions... like you would have choruses of demons and such just like wandering around, waiting for him to make this final... because it's... like there's a lot of supernatural elements to this... it gets kind of horrific, like because some of the schemers start to worry about... like are they doing the right thing, and things like that, but yeah... the final decision is that... he is dragged off to hell, because he refuses to repent, or recant his ways.

HELEN

Oh my God.

LOWRI

That's the ending of quite a lot of operas isn't? Or have I just seen that scene from Don Giovanni a lot?

KATIE

Really, it's not the ending, but it should be because there's this interminable final scene where everybody discusses it for a long time...

(laughter)

...which is really, the energy curve just drops off, it's...

ANIL

Yeah... to be fair, in the production I saw, they shortened that a lot. Because it's also got the wedding of Donna Anna to her actual fiancé, like after a year of mourning, or something like that. And the father being like all is well and good, and things like that, but yeah, there is a fair bit of moralising after that but... but as I say the ENO production cut a lot of that out, if I remember correctly. But yeah...

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HELEN

Now I want to ask... I want to ask the big question, which is can we talk about The Phantom of the Opera?

KATIE

No...

(Laughter)

HELEN

Yeah... that and the Marriage of Figaro are my two links to opera. That is all I basically know about it.

LOWRI

Well Phantom of the Opera is not an opera in any way, shape or form.

HELEN

I know it's not, but it's about an opera, and therefore it is valid for this episode

(Laughter)

LOWRI

It is. I actively dislike the Phantom of the Opera.

(Laughter)

HELEN

Oh... really... why?

LOWRI

Really? I just think Christine and Raoul are two of the most selfish people in the world...

(Laughter)

LOWRI

And I... I just hate it... and that's why. I had a friend, who was in it, and I went to see it and I was like "you were brilliant. I hated it!"

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(Laughter)

LOWRI

Though I do love the song Masquerade.

ANIL

Yes.

HELEN

Oh, that's a great song.

ANIL

I don't disagree with you in the slightest. Like as a story, Phantom of the Opera is not... is not a great story. Like it doesn't really help anybody or put anybody in a very good light.

HELEN

Yeah...

ANIL

That said, I do enjoy the music from it. And as you say Masquerade is a great song. And obviously in giving Sarah Brightman like showcasing her range as a young star, and also I have a... I really don't know why, and I probably shouldn't... I have a great deal of affection for the last Phantom of the Opera film...

HELEN

With Gerard Butler?

ANIL

Yes.

HELEN

That was my first exposure to Phantom of the Opera.

LOWRI

Ahh...

HELEN

Yeah... loved it...

ANIL

And it's like... because it is a big, over the top production of it, it has a lot of those hallmarks that I like about opera, and it put them into... it showcased it on the big screen. And yeah, as I say, I probably shouldn't like it... because... there are a lot of problematic elements to the Phantom of the Opera...

HELEN

Oh, a hell of a lot yeah... awful message...

ANIL

... but it is enjoyable...

HELEN

Mmm... I will say I always hated Raoul.

(Laughter)

HELEN

I was like... he is such a boring so and so...

KATIE

Always though...

LOWRI

I just remember there being a moment, where he is like trying to convince Christine to do something really dangerous, when he should be doing the opposite... and she does something as well... and I was like... I hate you both...

(Laughter)

LOWRI

I hate you both... so angry...

HELEN

My fun fact though about that film... the guy who plays Raoul went on to be a massive... well not massive... but he's in several horror franchises now. He's in the Conjuring Universe franchise as Ed Warren, and he was in Insidious as whatever his name was - the dad - in Insidious. So, I actually associate him more with horror now than with...

(Laughter)

But it's so weird to think back and see "oh yeah... he can sing actually". And he does sing in the Conjuring Enfield Poltergeist film. Got a nice little guitar. Sings to the kids. It is very sweet. Anyway... Patrick Wilson, that's his name. Katie...

KATIE

Yes.

HELEN

How accurate do you think Phantom of the Opera is in portraying what opera is like?

KATIE

I don't know a lot about Phantom of the Opera. I'm really sorry.

(Laughter)

HELEN

Oh, have you not seen it?

KATIE

No I haven't. I gather from what you were saying that Raoul is a tenor?

LOWRI

Yes.

KATIE

Why are they all like that?

Rusty Quill - Enthusiasm – Opera

(Laughter)

HELEN

OK. In Phantom of the Opera, Christine is like the understudy.

LOWRI

She's the ingenue.

HELEN

Yes the ingenue and there's a scary man who lives beneath the opera building, who falls in love with her, and starts giving her singing lessons. And then poisons... well not exactly poisons... but he puts something in the main soprano's drink...

LOWRI

Carlotta...

HELEN

Oh right...

KATIE

Give her big break sort of thing.

ANIL

Yeah...

HELEN

Yes. Like Carlotta, so that she can't sing properly, and so Christine has to step up and show off and then gets loads of the major parts.

LOWRI

He threatens to kill everyone if they don't give Christine the main role, right?

Rusty Quill - Enthusiasm – Opera

ANIL

Well yeah...

LOWRI

It's not just... like he's like... you have to make it Christine...

HELEN

I mean, yeah that comes a little bit later.

LOWRI

Oh, OK.

HELEN

First it's just a bit of trickery. Then he threatens to... he threatens to kill everyone unless they put on his special opera that he's written, for him and Christine to star in, which is very sexy. There's a...

(Laughter)

HELEN

Oh yes, Past the Point of no Return...

LOWRI

Ooh, actually that is a great song.

ANIL

And that's the thing, it's like... the film has a very good version of Past the Point of No Return... now...

HELEN

Yes, oh God do I still remember any of the lyrics? No I don't... I just remember "Past the Point of No Return... *ba-dum ba-dum!*" And it's so scary, it's so great. And they're like on top of this like scaffolding...

EVERYONE

Yeah...

Rusty Quill - Enthusiasm – Opera

HELEN

And she's got this like flamenco type dress. Again, one of the formative scenes from my childhood.

(Laughter)

HELEN

Absolutely terrifying and a very sexy scene. Anyway, the Phantom of the Opera, wants Christine to basically run away with him and live underneath the opera house, in a cave.

ANIL

I mean it's Paris, beneath the Opera Relais.

(Laughter)

HELEN

Oh is it a specific opera house? I didn't know...

ANIL

Yes.

HELEN

I thought it was just a fictional one?

ANIL

No, it is the primary Parisian opera house. Like I made this special point of going to see it, when I got to Paris very early on in the year I was living there. Because this is an iconic piece of musical architecture. Yeah, it is just as grand as it is depicted... I suspect that they probably did use the actual opera house in the film, but I don't know for certain.

HELEN

Oh yes, I forgot to say as well... so the Phantom of the Opera, he always wears a mask, because he has a scarred face.

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KATIE

Oh... Does he sing in this mask? Sorry, just to clarify?

ANIL

Yeah...

LOWRI

It's a very conveniently half mask that leaves his nose and mouth...

KATIE

Oh one of those ones... Gotcha.

ANIL

Yes it's kind of like over his eyes, and half of his face, but doesn't obscure the mouth though...

HELEN

Yes.

KATIE

That's creepy.

ANIL

Because it was Michael Crawford who originated the role in the West End.

LOWRI

Yeah...

KATIE

Oh dear, my popular culture knowledge is so bad...

LOWRI

I mean Katie, I don't think this is popular culture knowledge...

ANIL

No...

Rusty Quill - Enthusiasm – Opera

LOWRI

I'm not sure this is popular culture knowledge.

(Laughter)

ANIL

Many of us will probably remember Michael Crawford more as Frank Spencer, in Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em...

KATIE

Oh yeah...

HELEN

Really?

ANIL

Yes, but... he is actually a very big like star of musicals.

HELEN

I had absolutely no idea.

LOWRI

He was in Half a Sixpence as well, right?

ANIL

I believe so. Like he's done a lot.

HELEN

Good for him.

ANIL

Yeah.

HELEN

Anyway, yeah... the Phantom ends up dying because Christine betrays him and decides to go back to Raoul.

KATIE

It's a bit ungrateful really isn't it?

HELEN

We're coming to time, so I'm going to ask you a really difficult question to round us off with. Which is... if you were to recommend an opera to someone, to see for the first time, what would be... like your starters opera to get someone interested in it?

KATIE

Oh my goodness.

LOWRI

I have two answers. One is a bit of a cheat. And the more we've been talking, the more I realise that I know a lot of songs, and pieces from opera, and I haven't watched that many, because I always listen to the compilation CDs. So I think getting a compilation CD, they're probably going to be like the really famous ones, but if you listen to a compilation, you'll realise... oh I actually do know a lot of this, because it's used so much in like advertising, or in TV, in film and in things like that. And that's quite a nice way to find out what you like. In terms of an opera, I think... my favourite could be different at any given time. But one that has stayed with me, for so so long, and I keep coming back to is Carmen. I just... love it... It's so... romantic and passionate and I love it. So, I would highly recommend it... and you will know... if you're going to know any operatic songs, you will know a few from Carmen. There are some real bangers in there, that like... are really popular...

HELEN

Carmen's the one with the red dress right?

LOWRI

Yes.

HELEN

And she has a red flower in her hair?

Rusty Quill - Enthusiasm – Opera

LOWRI

Yes, it's very sexy. Actually Helen, if you haven't listened to Carmen or watched it, I think you'd enjoy. It's a very sexy opera.

(Laughter)

HELEN

Excellent. Thank you.

LOWRI

It's very good. It's probably why I like it, actually.

ANIL

I saw a production of that at the Albert Hall, where it was performed in the round and it ended up with... they'd built like a pillar, where the stage usually is. And it's like Carmen throughout the opera is like dancing around in the round, and then making her way, and slowly edging her way up to... towards that pillar, and at the end of the show, and that...

LOWRI

Can I ask for no spoilers though... for people who...

ANIL

Yep.

LOWRI

OK. Good.

(Laughter)

ANIL

For the final scene, let's say...

HELEN

I can guess...

Rusty Quill - Enthusiasm – Opera

(Laughter)

HELEN

Considering what I know about operas, which is not much.

(Laughter)

HELEN

What about you Katie? What would you recommend?

KATIE

Oh man... it depends what you want.

(Laughter)

ANIL

Yeah...

KATIE

Can I give a number of responses?

(Laughter)

HELEN

Go on then... go on then...

LOWRI

I want to hear what you're going to say.

KATIE

Ok. So the ones which are often recommended, as being quite accessible, with really good tunes and really fun to watch, are the Marriage of Figaro... and then quite a few of the Puccini ones... La Boheme is often mentioned, because that's very colourful and it's got good tunes... and yeah... it's larger than life. But I would say, depending on what you're into, there are some others that you might want to check out. If you want something a bit more up to date, I would look at John Adams again actually. Maybe the one that has made the biggest impression on me in the last 15 years, has been Dr Atomic, which is the one about the Manhattan project and Oppenheimer, really really enjoyed that, even the first time I watched it. Or you could look at... there's a weird one to recommend, but I'm going to say it anyway, because it's one of the off the wall

Rusty Quill - Enthusiasm – Opera

ones. There is one opera in the world which is based on a comic book, or a comic story, a comic strip...

ANIL

Oh...

KATIE

And that is the Cunning Little Vixen by Janacek.

ANIL

Oh, I've heard of that.

LOWRI

My singing teacher was in that. Oh yeah...

KATIE

I really like Janacek's music. It's kind of early 20th century or 20th century, but it's... for me it's got a big strong atmosphere and the themes are all about nature, really and like life cycles, and mortality...

HELEN

Wow.

KATIE

And all that sort of thing. And I really enjoy that.

ANIL

So, as I say, coming into this as like the more casual opera viewer... in terms of like accessibility... we've talked about Gilbert & Sullivan and operettas and they are definitely catchy, and they are definitely some of the easiest ways to get into the format. The one that I would say that hasn't been already mentioned, is The Barber of Seville, because it's very fun... and it's very easy to grasp the plot. I would say at least from my perspective, the comic operas tend to be easier to get into as an entry point, because the plots are more straightforward, and you can more readily grasp nuances that you might not in something that's a bit more dramatic or a bit more tense. The one that I will say that I not... if we're doing... let's not do this one as your first opera,

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Berlioz's The Trojans... So again, this is a production I saw at the ENO. It is usually performed in two parts, over consecutive nights, in repertory. I saw a full production of it...

LOWRI

Oh no...

ANIL

It is... four and a half hours long...

HELEN

Wow.

ANIL

Plus about an hour or so of intervals. And the main reason for that... for it being done this way at the ENO, was that the big break was so that they could build a battleship on stage.

(Laughter)

LOWRI

I mean, that's epic.

ANIL

Because it was effectively trying to tell the whole story of the Trojan War.

HELEN

Oh... that's a rough one to try and...

ANIL

Not so much the Trojan War, the aftermath of the Trojan War, so from the fall of Troy to basically most of what happens in the Aeneid. So it's about Aeneas and Dido.

HELEN

That's still a lot of stuff.

ANIL

It is. It's very dense. It was great visually, but I couldn't tell you really what happened in the plot without... I know the Aeneid and I still wouldn't be able to tell you, but what I would say is, there are a lot of operas which are said to be like... this is the best thing that a given composer has done.

EVERYONE

Mmm...

ANIL

They are not necessarily the best way to get into the genre, or get into... or get an appreciation for what that composer can do. It's a case of building up to it.

HELEN

Fair enough.

LOWRI

I'm going to be really cheeky. I'm sorry and I want to put a shout out for Die Fledermaus, which is actually I think... to be credited... because that's an operetta... and it's such a fun romp.

(Laughter)

HELEN

Cool. Well on those recommendations, we're going to have to finish the episode. Ahh... this is so cool to talk about, because I don't know anything about opera. I've learnt so much. Thank you. Listener, I hope you have also enjoyed this, and maybe you'll also be checking out some operas later on. I hope you do. I will see you in the next episode, but for now, it's goodbye from me, goodbye. And it's goodbye from all of them. Do you want to say goodbye everyone?

EVERYONE

Goodbye!

[Show Theme - Outro]

HELEN

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[Show Theme – Outro Ends]

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