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KURT HERBERT ADLER AND THE SAN FRANCISCO OPERA

Volume III

COMMUNITY AND UNION LEADERS, FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Interviews with:

R. Gwin Follis	Arthur Bloomfield
Betty Folger Miller Cooper	James Schwabacher
Prentis Cobb Hale	Alfred Fromm
Walter Baird	Otto Meyer
Jerry Spain	Nancy Miller Adler
William Diedrich	Kristin Adler Krueger
Eddie Powell	Dr. Walter Strauss
Don Tayer	Martin Magner
James Matheson	

With Introductions by  
Beverly Sills,  
Roger L. Stevens,  
and Lotfi Mansouri

Interviews Conducted by  
Caroline Crawford  
1986-1989

Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the Nation. Oral history is a modern research technique involving an interviewee and an informed interviewer in spontaneous conversation. The taped record is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The resulting manuscript is typed in final form, indexed, bound with photographs and illustrative materials, and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

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Jane and Jess Walker



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## PREFACE

Kurt Herbert Adler has been described as the last of the great operatic impresarios. Known as "the Maestro" at San Francisco Opera during his twenty-eight-year reign as general director (1953-1981), he built the company into one of the world's great houses, respected for its strong repertoire, collective artistry, and quality in all aspects of production.

Adler controlled every detail of every opera performance, from casting to curtain. He was a skillful labor negotiator, a remarkable fund-raiser, and in addition to all his other duties, he managed to conduct more than a hundred performances for the company during his tenure.

All of Adler's energies were devoted to opera production, and he demanded equal dedication from his staff and artists. Leontyne Price, who got her first stage break from him and returned the favor many times over, recalls the Adler temperament: "He was strong, opinionated, devious, affectionate, elegant, caring, vindictive, argumentative, ruthless, determined, egomaniacal, charming, loving, sentimental and extremely successful."

Adler booked the artists, balanced the repertoire, presided over the home season and the road tours, edited practically every word of print that left the opera house, courted divas and wealthy patrons alike, and tallied the box office receipts. Best known for his discoveries, Adler gave U.S. debuts to Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Leontyne Price, Birgit Nilsson, Leonie Rysanek, Anja Silja, Anna Tomowa-Sintow, Stuart Burrows, Sir Geraint Evans and Ingvar Wixell, to name but a few luminaries. Out of loyalty to Adler, Jean-Pierre Ponnelle and Luciano Pavarotti made San Francisco their home company, the place where many of their first designs and first roles would be seen and heard.

Under Adler San Francisco heard Licia Albanese's first Desdemona, Renata Scotto's first Adriana Lecouvreur, and Montserrat Caballe's first Turandot, and if the singers complained that Adler's theater was too big and too far away from the action in London, Milan and Munich and that his fees were too low, they came, they sang, and they returned.

Adler founded an operatic empire in an area with a relatively small funding base, and the pressure of fund-raising was a major factor in his decision to retire in 1981. He pioneered in the development of young American artists with the creation of Spring Opera Theater and Western Opera Theater, all the while offering some of the most adventurous repertoire in the country and winning for himself the title "the Czar of Opera" from the New York Times.

Few would disagree that Adler was a difficult, tyrannical character or that he created crisis after crisis just to keep the operatic juices flowing. Of his legendary temper he said that it made for "artistic tension, which is good for success." He added: "I didn't have the time to be sweet and nice. Maybe not the personality, but certainly not the time." Still, he had an undeniable genius for producing the lyric art, and the great artists of our time traveled to the West Coast for the privilege of working with him. Pavarotti, when asked about Adler, said: "Is he dittoriale? Are we joking? He is the most, but his company is running the best in the world."

Adler is central to the oral history of the San Francisco Opera, but he is not the only character. The story begins with Gaetano Merola, who considered the city "my other Italy" and believed in its ability to support an opera company of its own. Merola launched the company in 1922 in the Stanford University Stadium, where audiences of more than ten thousand came to hear Giovanni Martinelli and Bianca Saroya at five dollars top. Merola ran the company until his death in 1953, and nearly all of the world's best-known singers graced his stage.

In order to broaden the history, therefore, it was decided some time during Adler's sessions to conduct shorter focused interviews with artists, staff, and others who had been important to the development of the company, as well as family and friends.

Those interviews--thirty-five in all--were conducted in various ways and places. One week I talked to Birgit Nilsson in soprano Carol Vaness's New York apartment and the following week interviewed Carol Vaness, who had returned to New York, by telephone from San Francisco. Leontyne Price's brother, General George Price, kindly ran through the list of interview questions with Miss Price and tape-recorded her responses; Sir Geraint sent his taped thoughts from England. I was able to sit down with Jean-Pierre Ponnelle on a short break between rehearsals of Falstaff, the last production he did in San Francisco before his death just months afterward. Tim Pfaff conducted interviews with Leonie Rysanek and staff member Ruth Felt.

We were able to document the profound and long-lasting involvement of Robert Watt Miller with the company through interviews with his widow, Mrs. Sheldon Cooper, and R. Gwin Follis, a close friend and board chairman from 1971 to 1984. Nancy Miller Adler was a bridge from Robert Watt Miller, a first cousin of her father's, to the later Adler years. Colin Harvey, a veteran of forty-six seasons with the company (chorister, comprimario and librarian), covered certain aspects of the Merola years, and others shed significant light on opera production and on San Francisco as a cultural community. Not surprisingly, a treasury of opera anecdote has accumulated on tape: stories of diva's quirks and tenor's idiosyncrasies, classic bailouts and crises, near misses and grand successes.

Work on the oral history was often interrupted when additional funding had to be brought in, a difficult task in the music world, where institution boards and patrons are constantly being asked to contribute to the performances themselves. Nancy Adler was able to direct a portion of a gift from the Richard Tucker Foundation to the project; other funding was received in large and small amounts from opera angels, and long-time opera staff member Evelyn Pantages kindly asked for memorial donations to the project in memory of George Pantages, for several decades the opera's lighting technician.

We would like to thank the following individuals, whose encouragement and support have made the oral history possible. Special thanks are due to Jillian Sandrock and the Skaggs Foundation, who initiated the project with a seed grant, to former University Librarian Joseph Rosenthal, who helped with support from the Library Fund, and to James D. Hart, the late director of The Bancroft Library, who persuaded Maestro Adler to undertake the oral history. Our advisors helped greatly with suggestions and access to research materials. Thanks to community leaders Otto Meyer, Mrs. Sheldon Cooper, Gwin Follis, and Walter Baird for helping raise funds in the first years of the project, and to Ann Flinn and Nancy Adler for the final funding phase in 1994 to bring the transcripts to completion. An offer from Jimmy Schwabacher to celebrate the completion with a gala party spurred the efforts on. Thanks to Arthur Kaplan for his final proofreading of over 1300 pages.

The Regional Oral History Office was established in 1954 to augment through tape-recorded memoirs the Library's materials on the history of California and the West. Copies of all interviews are available for research use in The Bancroft Library and in the UCLA Department of Special Collections. The office is under the direction of Willa K. Baum, and is an administrative division of The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley.

Caroline Crawford  
Interviewer-Editor

October 1994  
Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library  
University of California, Berkeley



Kurt Herbert Adler and the San Francisco Opera

Interviewees

Volume I, The Life and Career of Kurt Herbert Adler: 1905-1985  
Interviews with Kurt Herbert Adler

Volume II, Artists and Staff of the San Francisco Opera  
Interviews with Leontyne Price, Birgit Nilsson, Leonie Rysanek, Sir Geraint Evans, Ingvar Wixell, Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, Jess Thomas, Carol Vaness, Gerald Freedman, Wolfram Skalicki, Dorothy Kirsten, Luciano Pavarotti, Matthew Farruggio, John Priest, Richard Rodzinski, Ruth Felt, Richard Bradshaw, Evelyn Crockett and George Pantages

Volume III, Community and Union Leaders, Family and Friends  
Interviews with R. Gwin Follis, Betty Folger Miller Cooper, Prentis Cobb Hale, Walter Baird, Jerry Spain, William Diedrich, Eddie Powell, Don Tayer, Arthur Bloomfield, James Matheson, James Schwabacher, Alfred Fromm, Otto Meyer, Nancy Miller Adler, Kristin Adler Krueger, Dr. Walter Strauss, and Martin Wagner

Advisors

San Francisco Opera and Music Community

Walter Baird, president, San Francisco Opera Association, 1974-1985  
Arthur Bloomfield, author and music critic  
Robert Commanday, senior music critic, San Francisco Chronicle  
Mrs. Sheldon Cooper, member, Merola Opera Program Board of Directors  
R. Gwin Follis, chairman, San Francisco Opera Associate, 1971-1970  
Prentis Cobb Hale, president, San Francisco Opera Association, 1967-1970  
Otto Meyer, president, Spring Opera Theater; member, San Francisco Opera Board of Directors  
James Schwabacher, artist, president of Merola Opera Program; member, executive committee, San Francisco Opera Board of Directors

University of California

Joseph Rosenthal, University Librarian  
James D. Hart, director, The Bancroft Library  
Bonnie Wade, chairman, Music Department  
Andrew Imbrie, professor of music  
Joseph Kerman, professor of music





INTRODUCTION--by Beverly Sills

Kurt Adler was the best opera impresario I have ever known. Tough, noisy, autocratic and a relentless perfectionist, he brought the San Francisco Opera to a heady era of excitement and success. Every major opera singer, conductor, director--indeed right across the operatic board--wanted to work with him. Yes, we all loved to visit San Francisco which greeted us with warmth and adoration. But so did a lot of other cities. Yes, San Francisco Opera paid us well. But so did a lot of other opera companies.

It was Kurt.

He was tough--but he was fair. He yelled a lot, but if you yelled back he listened. He was autocratic, but he could afford to be; he knew his business. He was a perfectionist, yet he never demanded the impossible. Being perfect was not necessarily impossible to Kurt.

When in the early 1980s I was the new General Director of the New York City Opera it was to him that I turned for advice and after his administration that I modelled my own.

He was above all my friend. They say if you leave this world with friends who will miss you, you leave a rich man. Kurt left a millionaire.

Beverly Sills  
General Director, New York City Opera

June 1988  
New York City, New York





## INTRODUCTION by Roger L. Stevens

Artists and supporters of the arts in this country are fortunate that Kurt Herbert Adler chose to make the United States of America his home after he was forced to flee from his native Austria. We all benefited from the extraordinary talents of this outstanding man.

I first became acquainted with Kurt as a member of the music panel of the National Arts Council. With other distinguished musicians, he gave it the impetus it needed to get organized in a professional and artistic way. When he finally became a member of the Council itself, it seemed to thrill him as much as the first time he received an award and, of course, during his lifetime he received many. While serving on the Arts Council, he never missed a meeting, taking in his stride the frequent long trips from San Francisco. His enthusiasm and vitality impressed all of us and was, no doubt, a major contributing factor in the Council attaining the important status it has in the country today.

Kurt had his inaugural season with the San Francisco Opera in 1954. The immediate impact of his work was reported by the famous critic Alfred Frankenstein as "the most interesting in local operatic history. This new regime promised much and it fulfilled every one of its commitments, often more brilliantly than anyone expected." In spite of the vicissitudes of managing an opera company, and the obstacles that loom up out of thin air, his productions always stood out as among the best in the nation. Needless to say, along the way he discovered many singers and composers who are now superstars of great renown, firmly placing him as a leader in the world of opera.

Kurt was a man of great charm. I was privileged to enjoy many dinners in his company and to have the opportunity to meet the charming Mrs. Adler. Men such as Kurt are few and far between and the music world will feel his loss deeply.

Roger L. Stevens  
John F. Kennedy Center for  
the Performing Arts

January 1989  
Washington, D.C.



## INTRODUCTION--by Lotfi Mansouri

There are few people in the history of opera who have had the long-lasting and far-reaching impact of Kurt Herbert Adler. He was truly the last of the old-style European impresarios and San Francisco Opera blossomed during the nearly thirty years of his powerful guidance. I knew the man very well, having directed thirty-four productions at the War Memorial Opera House during eighteen seasons of his tenure. Now, following in his footsteps as general director of the company, it is clear just how significant his legacy is and how fantastic his vision was. Though Adler possessed many extraordinary gifts, perhaps the greatest was his uncanny nose for talent--his ability to recognize important artists early in their development and introduce them to the opera world. Literally scores of singers, conductors, directors, and designers made their American debuts at San Francisco Opera because of Adler's sixth sense.

The great Leontyne Price not only made her American debut at the War Memorial Opera House under Adler, but was first seen in several of her most famous roles here--including *Aida* and both *Leonoras*. Luciano Pavarotti sang "Nessun dorma" in *Turandot* for the first time on any stage at our opera house, as well as his well known roles in *Aida*, *Un Ballo in Maschera* and many others. Marie Collier, Brigit Nilsson, Leonie Rysanek, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Anja Silja, Ingvar Wixell, Geraint Evans, Giuseppe Taddei, Jess Thomas, and many more legendary singers came here first because of Adler--and then returned many times because of him, too. Director Jean-Pierre Ponnelle not only made his U.S. debut here, but for many years made his North American home at San Francisco Opera creating some of his most exciting work--again, thanks to Kurt Adler.

Because of his concern for nurturing and properly training young singers, in 1954 Adler started creating the educational and artist training programs that, since 1982, have been administered by the San Francisco Opera Center--the Merola Opera Program, Western Opera Theater, Brown Bag Opera, and the San Francisco/Affiliate Artists-Opera Program (later renamed the Adler Fellowship Program). Today, these are recognized internationally for seeking out gifted young singers from around the world and caring for them, providing a coordinated sequence of performance and study opportunities. Such internationally applauded artists as Janis Martin, Ann Panagoulas, Ruth Ann Swenson, Carol Vaness, Deborah Voigt, Dolora Zajick, Brian Asawa, Craig Estep, Thomas Hampson, David Malis, and many others started their careers here--again because of the vision the Adler held for this company.

Adler was tough; an uncompromising perfectionist who very rarely gave a complement. You might never hear a kind word from the man, but when he asked you back, it was his sign of approval--and that was his

way. Much of the strength of San Francisco Opera, and that of many other companies internationally, exists because of the strength and insight of this remarkable man. There will never be another like him.

Lotfi Mansouri, General Director  
San Francisco Opera

October 1994  
San Francisco, California

VOLUME HISTORY--Kurt Herbert Adler and the San Francisco Opera, Volume III,  
Community and Union Leaders, Family and Friends

In this volume of the Kurt Herbert Adler/San Francisco Opera Oral History are conversations with a chairman and two presidents of the opera board of directors, leaders of various labor unions the company dealt with on a routine basis, a music critic, two members of Mr. Adler's family, and two of his friends from the Vienna and Reichenberg days.

R. Gwin Follis is the first interviewee. Chairman of Standard Oil of California from 1949 to 1966 and of the San Francisco Opera Association board of directors from 1971 to 1984, he was a close friend of Kurt Herbert Adler's and influential in San Francisco society. Betty Miller Cooper talks in the history about her late husband Robert Watt Miller, who was president of the board from 1937 to 1942 and again from 1951 to 1966, and who was largely responsible for Adler becoming the company's general director and subsequently holding on to the position when in the late 1950s his leadership was questioned. Two board presidents added their own chapters: Prentis Cobb Hale (1967-70) and Walter Baird (1974-1985), the president with the second longest tenure after Robert Watt Miller's.

Kurt Herbert Adler was respected by San Francisco unions for his skill in labor matters; due to his expertise and manner of working personally with the unions, the company had many fewer stoppages and strikes than most major opera companies in the country. Jerry Spain of the American Federation of Musicians, Local 6, Eddie Powell of the International Association of Theatrical and Stage Employees, and Don Tayer of the American Guild of Musicial Artists speak about their dealings with the company and the development of benefits for their constituents over the years. James Matheson, principal oboe of the opera orchestra and union representative for many years, speaks for the musicians in this volume, and William Diedrich, a partner in the law firm Pillsbury, Madison & Sutro, talks about the company's labor relations from the viewpoint of pro bono house counsel, which he was for many years.

James Schwabacher has worn many hats around the opera house over the years: first as a singer on the company roster, then as board member of the parent company, vice-president of Spring Opera Theater, and president of the Merola Opera Program. Alfred Fromm and Otto Meyer were opera patrons who served on various company boards and were longtime friends of the Adlers. Arthur Bloomfield, formerly music critic for the San Francisco Examiner and author of a history of San Francisco Opera, analyzes the quality of Adler's seasons for nearly three decades.

Representing the Adler family in the history are Nancy Miller Adler, who married the general director in 1965, and Kristin Adler Krueger, the daughter of Adler and his second wife, Diantha Warfel.

Dr. Walter Strauss and Adler were childhood friends in Vienna. A practicing cardiologist, he left Europe as Adler did in the late thirties,

and settled on the East Coast. His interview, and that of Martin Magner, a young director who first worked with Adler in Reichenberg and later in Chicago, shed important light on Adler as a child and young man seeking a career in opera. Adler kept track of a remarkable number of friends and acquaintances throughout his life, among whom Strauss and Magner were two of the closest.

Caroline Crawford  
Interviewer/Editor

September 1990  
Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library  
University of California, Berkeley

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University of California  
Berkeley, California

Kurt Herbert Adler and the San Francisco Opera

R. Gwin Follis

CHAIRMAN OF THE SAN FRANCISCO OPERA BOARD OF DIRECTORS, 1971-1984

An Interview Conducted by  
Caroline Crawford  
in 1986





# R. Gwin Follis, Retired Standard Oil Chairman

## He was active in S.F. art world, schools

R. Gwin Follis, the retired chairman of the giant oil firm that later became Chevron Corp. and a leader in San Francisco's civic and arts worlds, died Monday of cancer at his home in the city. He was 93.

Mr. Follis retired from Standard Oil Co. of California — one of the world's largest oil companies — in 1966 after spending 42 years with the company. Standard Oil was renamed Chevron in 1984.

He came from a family with deep California roots. Mr. Follis' great-grandfather was Senator William M. Gwin, a leader in the movement to have California admitted to the union as a state in 1850.

Mr. Follis was a San Francisco native. He rose through the ranks at Standard Oil of California after going to work at its Richmond refinery in 1924, not long after graduating from Princeton in physics and geology. He became the refining division's general manager by 1940.

He was elected Standard Oil's president and a director in 1945, vice chairman in 1948 and chairman in 1950.

During his years with Chevron, the company grew spectacularly. Originally founded in the city in 1879 to extract and refine oil, the company was acquired in 1900 by John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil. In a landmark 1911 case, the U.S. Supreme Court broke up Standard Oil into 34 independent companies, including what was then called Standard Oil (California).

During Mr. Follis' years with the company, it expanded from its base in the Western United States to become the ninth-largest U.S. corporation by the time of his retirement, with \$3 billion in sales. Earnings more than doubled during his tenure as chairman.

Today, Chevron has \$35.13 billion in sales, almost 46,000 employees and operations in approximately 100 countries.

Mr. Follis had a key position in shaping the giant company's domestic and international business strategies and operations. He was instrumental in helping Chevron acquire Standard Oil of Kentucky, giving the company a market presence in the southeastern United States. As a promoter of the idea of using scientific research to boost the company's growth, he helped establish the Chevron Research Co.

As Chevron's top executive, Mr. Follis was a frequent traveler to the Mideast, where he negotiated contracts with such leaders as the Shah of Iran, Kings Ibn Saud and Faisal of Saudi Arabia and the Sheik of Bahrain. He was a director of Aramco, the Arabian American Oil Co. part-owned by Standard Oil.

In his activities outside of Chevron, Mr. Follis served at various times on the boards of a lengthy and diverse group of local organizations and businesses. He was a trustee of the Asian Art Museum in Golden Gate Park, where he helped acquire the Avery Brundage Oriental art collection. He also served on the boards of the Crocker National Bank, the Palace of Fine Arts League, the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, Grace Cathedral, Children's Hospital, the Asia Foundation and the San Francisco Art Institute, and he was chairman of the San Francisco Opera Association.

He also was active in overseeing San Francisco's public schools and served on a group that helped arrange the transfer of the Port of San Francisco from state to city ownership in 1969.

Outside of San Francisco, he served on the boards of the Stanford Research Institute, First National City Bank (now Citicorp), Princeton University and the American University of Beirut.

Mr. Follis also was a founder and chairman of the National Petroleum Council, a group established in 1946 to advise the federal government on oil industry issues. He had also been a director of the American Petroleum Institute and was chairman of the National Industrial Conference Board, an influential group of executives from the country's biggest corporations, and a regional vice president of the National Association of Manufacturers.

He is survived by his wife, Ann; son, James Gwin Follis, of Philo in Mendocino County; daughter, Mary Ann Voorhees, of Greenbrae, and three grandchildren, Dr. Camilla Van Voorhees, Lesley Van Voorhees and Tracy James Van Voorhees.

Private services will be held at Grace Cathedral.

Donations can be sent to the Asian Art Museum, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco 94118.

— Edward Epstein



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INTERVIEW HISTORY--R. Gwin Follis

Gwin Follis, a nationally known leader in the petroleum industry, was born in San Francisco in 1902. He studied at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, earned a B.A. from Princeton University in 1924 and returned to California that year, where he began working with Standard Oil Company of California. He served as chairman of the board of the corporation from 1949 to 1966, and still maintains an office in the Chevron Building at 555 Market Street.

A lifelong resident and community leader in San Francisco, Mr. Follis has been a director on many corporate and nonprofit boards including the San Francisco Opera Association board, which he joined in 1967. From 1971 to 1984 he served as its chairman, and of Kurt Herbert Adler, with whom he had a singularly close relationship, he says: "He gave very fine leadership. I think he, in some more or less extraordinary way, was able to inspire confidence...and obviously they accepted this dictatorial world that he radiated because of that."

Mr. Follis is a tall, lean, elegant man who speaks in spare, precise sentences. As we began he fitted a small hearing device into his right ear and he told me that because of his hearing loss he had recently given up his opera tickets and his seat on the board of directors.

The interview took place in Mr. Follis's office, a large, oak paneled room on the fifteenth floor of the Chevron Building, with expansive Bay and city views.

In the interview he talks about the transition from Robert Watt Miller's board presidency to the presidencies of Prentis Cobb Hale and William Orrick, how the board was enlarged under the Orrick administration, how and why Robert Watt Miller was able to appoint Kurt Adler to the directorship of the opera company over the objections of his board, and the financial crisis that nearly closed the company in the 1960s. The following interview was lightly edited in this form by Mr. Follis.

Caroline Crawford  
Interviewer/Editor

June 1986  
Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library  
University of California, Berkeley



BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name Ralph Gwin Fallis  
Date of birth 2/1/1902 Birthplace San Francisco, CA  
Father's full name James Henry Fallis  
Occupation Real Estate Promoter Birthplace San Francisco  
Mother's full name Mary Bell Gwin (Kingsbury)  
(maiden name)  
Occupation Housewife Birthplace San Francisco  
Your spouse Opal Ann Young (Fallis)  
(maiden name)  
Occupation Housewife Birthplace La Verne CA  
Your children Mary Van Voorhees, James Gwin Fallis

Where did you grow up? San Francisco

Present community San Francisco

Education Potter School (San Francisco), Andover,  
Princeton

Occupation(s) Corporate Executive: Chairman  
Standard Oil Co. of California (now called Chevron)

Areas of expertise Domestic and international  
petroleum

Other interests or activities Fishing and Hunting

Organizations in which you are active retired from active  
participation, until recently on various public  
& private boards,





Remembering Robert Watt Miller[Date of Interview: May 16, 1986]##<sup>1</sup>

Crawford: Mr. Follis, you joined the San Francisco Opera Association board of directors as vice president in 1967 and served as chairman of the board from 1971 to 1984. How did your association with San Francisco Opera begin?

Follis: It began with Mr. Miller coming over here to ask me if I would come on his board, because the opera had reached the point of very serious financial crisis. He had to have someone on his board that could help him do something about the crisis. And so I told him I'd come on his board and do what I could. Really I was hired to help him raise money at that point. I remember that they made me vice president, and I must say that at that time Mr. Miller ran the opera association almost as a private matter.

I went to my first board meeting, which was held in his office, and the board consisted of five or six people. There was Mr. Miller, Prentis Hale. Mr.--we called him Mickey--Hellman, and I'm not just sure what Mickey stood for officially. [Marco]

But Mickey Hellman, who was the treasurer, and Bob Hornby, who had been president of Mr. Miller's business, and Kurt Adler were there, and that was just about the board of the San Francisco Opera company.

Crawford: Mr. Miller had a very personal approach to the leadership of the board.

Follis: Yes, and it was really what we created later in the form of an executive committee. You can't run a business with a hundred people, and I'm getting ahead of myself maybe, but one of the first things that was apparent when we attempted to reconstitute our financial affairs was that we had to broaden the base and get more people interested in more than just going to the opera. In other words, draw them in, and the way to do that is to put them on the board.

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<sup>1</sup>This symbol (##) indicates that a tape or a segment of tape has begun or ended. For a guide to the tapes, see page following transcript.

So we started a program of enlarging the board to the point at which it is now, which is, as you know, very large. We talked about it when Mr. Hale was president, we wanted to do it then, in principle, but somehow or other it didn't really go until Mr. Orrick and I got the ball, so to speak, and then we made a very concentrated effort to enlarge the board, and we did enlarge it a few hundred percent.

We enlarged from the order of ten to the order of a hundred by interesting everyone we could think of who preferably had the combination of interest in opera and the financial resources to help us.

Crawford: What was Mr. Miller's involvement with the opera and in the community vis-a-vis the opera?

Follis: Well, he was chairman and president of the opera association, and the association is the identity that owns the opera company. So he hired Mr. Adler, for example, and he had the final responsibility for the opera.

Crawford: And was he involved artistically?

Follis: Yes. He was an unusual case in that regard. He not only had the responsibility--legal and financial--for the institution, but he also became artistically involved very deeply. I think he talked to Adler almost on the level of a fellow professional, rather than a backer. He was unusual.

Mr. Miller went on our board at Standard Oil, and I took him on a few business trips--Standard Oil business trips--to familiarize him with our business, and when we would go to Europe, the first thing Bob wanted to do was to head for the opera house. He knew the directors and the artists and the whole business almost equivalent of Adler himself in terms of his close and informed relationships with the profession.

#### Kurt Herbert Adler Becomes General Director: 1957

Crawford: What was his relationship like with Maestro Merola?

Follis: I don't know, except that somewhere along that time he became president of the opera association, and when Merola died, of course, it was incumbent on Miller to get a new director. And instead of going out and doing what you might call the easy

thing, hunt around for an experienced, proven director from some other opera company here or in Europe, he appointed Adler.

It took a certain amount of courage to appoint Adler general director of the opera, because he had little prestige and experience at that time, other than having worked on the opera staff in various jobs. Kurt has told me that in the last year Merola apparently was in very bad health, and he was calling on his staff to carry the job for him.

Adler apparently got pretty close to being his assistant, and running things, and that gave him an opportunity to demonstrate his ability to cover the whole field.

Crawford: So Mr. Miller had confidence in him?

Follis: Yes. I'm just guessing how Mr. Miller would have the confidence to do it, and I think that was the basis on which he estimated that Adler could take over the job. And he did, of course, take over the job and do a magnificent job of it. But I think that may have had something to do with Miller's peculiar relationship with the opera end as well as the business end.

Adler, being equally inexperienced, in my sight, it encouraged a working together that wouldn't have happened, maybe, had Adler come in as a former, finished general director of the Chicago opera company or something like that. He would have resented Miller, or anyone else, telling him what he ought to do in relation to his art.

But this relationship arose, I think, to a degree, from the opportunity of having a comparatively unformed man in terms of the general directorship.

Crawford: Mr. Miller retired as president and became chairman of the board in 1967. Why?

Follis: Well, he had been there a long time, and he was getting old, and he had health problems, from which he finally died. I think we all reach a point where we realize that we ought to be willing to turn the job over to a younger person.

Crawford: I gather, from what I've been told, that he had been able to raise the money for the budget fairly single-handedly in the early years.

Follis: Well, I've never quite understood this. Two or three years before he came and asked me if I would come on his board, he came over one day, and said, "You know, I'm really embarrassed."

He said, "We are having financial difficulty in the opera, and I want to ask you to give us your guarantee."

They had, at that time, and they still have, a system wherein the box-holders, in order to hold their seats, guarantee a certain amount of money which is to be called on in need. That had been in for some time, and, it's unbelievable to us now, but Bob had never required money to the degree to which he had ever asked a guarantor for his guarantee. This was the first year he had ever had to do that, and it bothered him very much.

He took the trouble to come all the way across town to tell one seat-holder and explain this thing. And, of course, I said, "Well, my gosh, Bob, I can't understand this, because, when I signed that guarantee, I expected you were going to call on me." And he said he never had, "and I never thought I'd have to." But he did have to.

That was the beginning of the change. Somehow they ran the opera with a very narrow base of support and they paid all their expenses. Well, now we can barely run our opera with the very broadest support: about 50 percent of the expenses now have to be raised from outside sources. The box office only brings in about 60 percent.

#### Financial Crisis in the 1960s: A Turning Point

Crawford: Would you describe the financial picture during the late sixties, when the company was in trouble, and how that particular situation was resolved?

Follis: Well, I mentioned that this turning point came sometime around in the late sixties, when the opera began to progressively, increasingly exceed its income. And all during Mr. Hale's regime, we were trying to reduce the expenses, and not very successfully to increase our income. So that every year, the deficit increased. And, by the time Mr. Hale retired and Mr. Orrick and I inherited the job [1971], this thing had reached the point where the bank had just told us that they just couldn't go any further.

It was a very difficult position for the bank, really, because we needed \$100,000 and they had no collateral that would be appropriate for a proper loan, even though banks do stretch to do those things, you know, for civic purposes. And so the

bank was very, very exercised and very concerned about this thing, and they said, "We're sorry, but on this basis we just can't loan you more money now." And that meant shutting down the opera.

I was obviously very disturbed about that, because I think the opera is, as Alioto said, "the crowning jewel" of our cultural world here, being, really, the only local cultural institution recognized as one of the top half dozen in the world.

And so Orrick and I went to talk to the chairman and president of the bank, and persuaded them to go one more year with us. That if they loaned us the money for one more year, [we promised] that we would move heaven and earth and get these things squared around.

That set us off, as you can imagine, on a fairly intense drive where he and I spent our days for a good many days calling on people and presenting our case to them, saying that this is the point here of no return. We're either going to shut the San Francisco Opera down, or we're going to raise its money. And we had a remarkable response. Over the next three or four years, we reduced our debt and finally wiped it out.

#### New Sources of Support: Corporate Donors

Crawford: The 1971 annual report shows a deficit of nearly \$334,000, and 1972 shows a \$500,000 surplus. That is some amount of fund-raising! Were those primarily individual donors, or did you seek foundation and corporate support?

Follis: Well, individuals have been the chief source, but we searched for other sources. And the funny part of it is that the Met was having the same problem. The man who took over the chairmanship of the board of the Met was head of a bank that I had been a director of for years in New York, so that he and I compared notes back and forth all the time about what they were thinking up and what we were thinking up to raise money. And things that the opera had never tried to do, like approaching corporations, raising money from corporations, and things of that kind were brought into the picture.

For example, we asked corporations to pay for new operas. And new operas in those days didn't cost as much as they do now. But even in those days they cost \$50,000 to \$250,000 dollars.



We did get two corporations: the Crocker Bank underwrote one opera, and the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company underwrote an opera, and that took a big load off.

You see, in order to maintain this position of being one of the five or six world operas, we have to continually be producing new productions; we can't just be redoing the same old productions. We have to be creative, artistically creative, and every new production is an artistic creation, of course.

#### Mr. Adler and New Productions

Crawford: So that, even in dire financial circumstances, the board never felt that new productions should be curtailed?

Follis: That was one of the most painful issues we ever had at executive committee meetings between Mr. Adler and our board, because the board--when we were losing \$300,000 and so on--would like to quit spending \$300,000 on new operas. And Mr. Adler was telling us that we would lose our position in the opera world, that the people from Europe wouldn't come over here to sing in it--the very finest stars in the world come over here from Europe and all over to sing in this opera house, and it isn't because they can't find a job somewhere closer or that we paid exorbitant fees, but because they're very sensitive to the prestige of the opera company they're singing in.

We recognized the validity of that; the only question I kept in my mind was that you can always have a hiatus in anything, and how long could you go with the virtual stopping of creativeness and new operas before you lost that prestige?

Certainly if you just had a lower number of operas for one year, and then picked it up the next year, it wouldn't undermine fifty years of the building up of prestige and confidence in our art. So how long could you go?

Well, as I remember, we got ourselves down at one point to where we only had about one or two new operas. I don't think we ever had the nerve to go through a year with no new operas.

Crawford: Was there friction between the board and Mr. Adler, who would have been pressing for new productions?

Follis: I'll say this: these were the meetings when the hair was really torn out, you know. However, he finally went along each time. And I think it did something: it stimulated him to [make] an immense effort to find sponsors himself. And he did.

In our later years, it was astonishing the number of sponsors, individuals, that Adler had contact with that would come up with large sums of money--\$50,000 and sometimes much more--for new operas. And you, in your research, probably know how many private sponsors we have.

Crawford: Yes. I know that Mr. and Mrs. McGowan, through the Merrill Trust, were the first donors to give a substantial amount to one production. And Mr. Adler fostered that, as you say.

Follis: Well, that's right. Of course Mr. McGowan and his wife were going to the opera regularly; he was more in the family. And then we had a man named Robertson, James Robertson, who was a golden man; he gave us two of three operas, maybe four.

Then we had a Miss Cynthia Wood down in south Santa Barbara, and, of course, the Gettys, now, are giving operas.

Crawford: Yes. Incidentally, wasn't it Mr. McGowan who said to Mr. Adler, "You can't say 'no' to Mr. Follis"? According to Mr. Adler, you were quite a fund-raiser yourself.

Follis: I don't remember that, particularly, but I knew McGowan very well, and he may have said that facetiously, too, you know.

### The Los Angeles Season

Crawford: Let's talk about the Los Angeles seasons, which expanded the revenue base of the company.

Follis: Well, we had a long and interesting negotiation with Los Angeles. It goes back to Bob Miller's time, when this thing began to become a problem, the financial problem.

Somehow or other, Bob contacted Los Angeles; they wanted to have an opera, and they said, "Well, why don't we just join and form a single opera company? We won't call it the Los Angeles Opera Company but we'll call it the Pacific Coast Opera Company, or some name like that. And then your opera can play part of the year here, and part of the year up there." Which would be

parallel, you might say, to what happened with the stock, exchange: the San Francisco Stock Exchange and the Los Angeles Stock Exchanges combined and it's now known as the Pacific Stock exchange.

Bob was very intrigued with that, but I wasn't quite as intrigued, because I knew that with the immense media exposure they have down there and all, it would only be a matter of time before it became thought of as the Los Angeles Opera Company. And I thought, as I say, we have this crowning cultural jewel, and we ought to keep it for San Francisco, as a sort of a civic phenomenon.

So we never did anything with that first round. And then Orrick and I got into the thing and John McCone, who had been a member of our board and who was head of the Los Angeles Music Center Association, which is responsible for their opera house in Los Angeles.

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John came to me, and said, "Let's work out a way to have the San Francisco Opera company in Los Angeles. We have a Music Center hall, the Dorothy Chandler Hall, and we have no opera, and we would like to sort of take over your opera for its L.A. season.

I told him, John, I don't really want you to take over the San Francisco Opera. It's a private corporation; in that sense we could go to Los Angeles, or go any place; San Francisco has no hold on it, but that's not the way we think up there. We have to work out a way of doing it that will maintain the integrity of the San Francisco Opera. And, of course, we'd be glad to come down there and play in your opera house.

But, oh no, they couldn't have the San Francisco Opera playing in their opera house. There's an awful lot of that, you know, in the world.

Crawford. Especially between the two California coastal cities.

Follis: So this thing went on for years. I won't bore you with all the schemes that were thought up and worked through. And finally the last gasp of it was that they would form their own opera company, and we would teach them how to run an opera company.

They realized that an opera company, you know, is an assembly of a very large number of people with a very large number of talents. And it's the pounding together of that group



of talented people into an effective, working unit that makes a great opera company.

They were starting from base zero; they realized that. They had been getting what you could call, relatively, a second string company, called the New York Opera company.

Crawford: That's New York City Opera; Beverly Sills's company?

Follis: Yes. And that is recognized, in the opera world, as a second-tier opera, not comparable with the Met or this opera.

The New York City Opera had come out every year and had put on a season there. But they were very uncomfortable with it, because they don't feel Los Angeles is a second-class city at all, and they wanted first-class opera. So, that kept this thing going, and, as I say, it finally came down to where we talked about, in effect, building a Los Angeles Opera Company and helping them, which would mean giving them a lot of our talent and having our various specialists in different fields go down there and help them build these units of a hundred-person staff.

Crawford: Would Mr. Adler have administered the company?

Follis: Well, he would have done the same thing: he would have coached somebody to run it. We went quite a way with that, but this was going to cost us money. It also seemed to me that we had some professional know-how, if you will, that was worth something too. That's what all kinds of organizations like McKinsey live off of. Hopefully, what they'd be doing would be about what you'd expect to get from Arthur D. Little or McKinsey or somebody coming into your plant and showing you how to run it and organize it, start it up.

We had quite a few discussions along there, and we never could come to an agreement on the terms, and then, finally, that one died. And, as a matter of fact, the people who were most active in the pushing in those days have pretty much died out, too: McCone is out of it, Mrs. Chandler's out of it...

Crawford: Los Angeles now has an opera company of its own.

Follis: Well, then they started. They may have gotten someone else to do this with them. Of course, you can put on a simple opera, you know. They have one in San Diego now, and they have one in Seattle, and almost every town wants to have an opera and a symphony now.

Los Angeles didn't want that; they could have the New York Opera Company any time they wanted it. They wanted something in a class above that.

Crawford: And they no longer invited San Francisco Opera to perform in their music center?

Follis: Well, we never would, and they have invited us, but we never would, because the music center is so small that it takes a tremendous subsidy. You see, their opera house, I think, is 2700 or 2800 seats, and ours is 3250. But, in addition to the difference in the number of seats, the cost of moving everything down there is high, and you can't schedule everybody to just get on the plane and play the same Bohème with the same people tomorrow in Los Angeles, something like that. You can't work that out when you get down to it. So what you finally wind up doing is putting on another Bohème in Los Angeles with all the preliminary rehearsals and everything with new people.

Crawford: So that even performing at the Shrine was not profitable for the company?

Follis: Well, the Shrine, you see, has 4500 seats, and it came pretty close. I think it was profitable a few times. But the last time we were down there, there had been a murder, a mugging murder, committed right in that neighborhood, practically on the steps of the Shrine. The people down there--here, too--go to everything in their own automobile, and they park all over the place in those dark streets. And they were very much excited, in Los Angeles, about this murder and so on, and people were afraid to go down there and walk around in those streets at midnight to get their car after the opera.

Crawford: So it damaged the season?

Follis: Yes, it damaged the season very much. I think that was why. Otherwise, Adler always thought, at least, that we were going to make a little money, and, if we'd had the attendance that we'd had in previous visits, we would have. Attendance was extraordinarily low, and other people who had other kinds of performances down at the Shrine Auditorium had the same experience then. It seems it finally was forgotten, but this was right at the hot point in 1969.

The Adler Administration

Crawford: Let me move on to focus on Mr. Adler now, and ask you your impressions of Mr. Adler. You knew him, and know him, as a close friend and an associate. How would you describe him as an administrator?

Follis: Well, he was one of those remarkable administrators. He was a fellow without any great willingness to delegate. But Adler had the energy and great willingness to work sixteen hours a day and see that everything was done right himself. I told him that he wouldn't even delegate painting the wainscoating; he would be out there to see that the painter did it right. He ran a very fine, tight, efficient show, no question. He always met his budgets; he was very cost-conscious. He had remarkable ability to handle labor. And he does have an extraordinary combination of virtues in terms of his ability to produce the job, to do the job.

But it was a one-man job, and when he left, I worried long before he retired, because I knew that those people, those very strong leaders in an organization, always leave a vacuum. And he had to leave a vacuum.

He tried to overcome that, we all realized that, by this very long overlap he had with McEwen. You know, McEwen was here for a long time before he resigned, and we hoped to, and I think we did, get over the hump. But, if you're asking me what kind of a manager Adler was, I'd say he was an excellent manager of the pure, autocratic type.

I don't know Mr. McEwen's performance quite well enough to be sure, but I assume he's not that kind of a manager. That is, he isn't like Adler; I know he isn't down there 'til midnight every night.

Crawford: So you, as a chairman of Standard Oil, give Mr. Adler very high ratings as a manager?

Follis: Oh, yes. He did a grand job. You know, the San Francisco labor is not the easiest in the country. I think we're probably the most highly unionized town, maybe even in the country, certainly one of the more highly unionized towns.

The musicians union, for a while, was very difficult to deal with, so much so that the symphony had had all kinds of strikes. Adler somehow or other managed to get through that whole period, and the Bay Area never had an opera shutdown for

labor reasons. I don't know how he did it, because he negotiated deals, particularly with the artistic unions, that they would probably strike the symphony for.

Crawford: Was his being a musician helpful in your opinion?

Follis: I suppose; I don't know.

Crawford: The labor people I've talked to said they trust him completely.

Follis: I guess they did. That certainly doesn't mean they didn't bargain with him, or that he didn't just march out on their meetings and things like that; he had a great temperament. But, somehow or other, he always managed to handle the labor problems--and there were problems--much more skillfully than anybody else around here.

Crawford: Let me ask you about Mr. Adler as a man of the community. How did he operate within the community at large?

Follis: Well, of course, during his stay in the opera management, he didn't have much time for the community, other than those tasks in the opera house. That was his world, and he went to Europe so much, you know, so he was in and out of the city, as well as "pegged" for the opera house.

Of course, he's very articulate on his feet, and he has a fine sense of humor, and, at a place like the Bohemian Club, or the Bohemian Grove, why, he was known by everybody, and he was well regarded by everybody. And, when he retired, if you check the press he got, I don't know of anybody who ever retired from anything in San Francisco who got the press he did.

Crawford: So he did visit the Bohemian Grove, which would have taken a certain amount of time?

Follis: Well, it's the weekends, you know. There are only three weekends a year of their season. And he would go up there once or twice every year, that's all.

Crawford: Was he involved in some music there?

Follis: I don't really know--I never heard Kurt play an instrument, professionally, of any kind. I don't think he ever did that. He might have conducted the orchestra up there, taken part in that sort of way. But, to the best of my knowledge, he's never been the sort of fellow who has a violin of his own, who will get up and play a solo for you. I think he plays instruments.

Crawford: Yes, he started out as a keyboard player early in his career.

Let's talk about the Adler personality.

Follis: He's a very high-strung, very sensitive man, to start with. He's the easiest man you could think of to hurt. I can't tell you how many times I've been present when somebody has made a remark, either a slurring remark or a sharp remark or something that people make sometimes at the height of disputes about matters, and he'd come to me three days later, just absolutely down about it.

He'd recite exactly the words that this man used, and he was so hurt. He's very, very sensitive that way. It takes him a long time to get over some inadvertent things, as most of the things that I saw were, and I'd try to explain that to him and convince him that they were inadvertent, and not intended at all to hurt. But he has that great sensitivity; he's very emotionally high-strung. I never heard of an argument at an opera board meeting. But there were all sorts of arguments at the executive committee meetings.

#### The San Francisco Opera Association Executive Committee

Crawford: Talk about the executive committee, if you would.

Follis: The executive committee met, varying, depending on circumstances, anywhere from once a month to once a week. There's a lot of off-season in the opera, and your normal schedule is once a month, or it was when I was there. But we had lots of extra meetings; sometimes we would meet once a week, because that is where all the problems come up.

The board meetings consist mostly of reporting to the larger group about what you're doing, where you are, and so on, and of course some can stand up and ask a question. And they do. But, usually, when their question is answered, why, they sit down. It doesn't become a two-way matter.

Crawford: In general, how did Mr. Adler interact with the board and the committee?

Follis: Well, as I say, in those board meetings Mr. Adler always made a report, and I think the board was more interested in his report than mine or any of the others, probably, because he was the one that reported on what we were going to put on, and who the



artists were going to be, and what the thrust was, and what we were trying to do, and all that. Which is really, I think, what most directors come to hear.

He did that very well, and very seldom had a question. Oh, occasionally somebody would ask a question, and very often the questions were of the kind that they would say, "Well, why don't we put on Aida?" And then Adler would respond to that, and he would say, "Well, we put on Aida last year," or this or that, or, "Well, I have it scheduled." Those things don't create any tension. So I think he always made a very fine impression at the board meetings, and there, there was never any tension of any kind at all.

It was in the executive committee meeting where we would say, "Well, we just can't afford five new productions this year," and cut out four of them. That's when he'd go through the ceiling.

Crawford: Was there a question of having an artistic committee, such as the symphony had?

Follis: Yes; we had one, once, and it didn't work out very well. It didn't work out very well because, well, put it this way: it might have worked out better with a different temperament of director. But we really didn't have any directors who were able to argue with Mr. Adler on a point of artistic judgment.

So we did have an artistic committee for a while, and it really was just a sort of an irritant. It was very difficult for them to crack the thing, get into the thing, without getting into Adler's business too much.

Crawford: And he wouldn't have welcomed that interference.

Follis: As I say, as a manager, he didn't miss. He covered the whole field very efficiently. But he was very jealous of being the only person that talked to any of his staff. He didn't like any director, or even the president, to talk to a department head privately.

#### The Issue of an Expanded Pit

Crawford: What about questions such as the pit? I know that he wanted very much to have a larger pit, and this happened for the first time in 1976.

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Follis: Yes, that is correct. We didn't really have any strong dispute, but the executive committee questioned taking out two or three rows of seats at a time when the opera was in financial difficulty, and when seats were at such a premium that we were even able to debate whether or not we should show 100 or 102 percent average attendance for the year, the difference being the way we handled seats that would be returned and resold and standees and so on. But it meant every seat that we gave up was a net loss, and I mention that because very often it isn't, because if your occupancy is 80 or 90 percent, it doesn't make much difference. But it did make a big financial difference, and we, however, agreed to do it, and it was done.

### The 1972 Ring

Crawford: What was at stake in 1972, when the Ring cycle was done and the board felt that there should only be three cycles, and so there were only three? Mr. Adler had wanted to offer more.

Follis: Well, that's a very strange thing. I never understood, and I've asked this present regime how they sold out the Ring this time the way they did, this past Ring, because of the history of the opera had been that the Ring performances, particularly if they're four or five hours, were not very good box-office things.

There are a lot of people who like opera but don't want to sit in an opera house for five hours, you know. The history had been that that wasn't the way you fill your opera house, and we didn't feel we could afford this. Well, it turned out we were wrong, I guess, because, I tell you, this last Ring we could have sold a lot more performances.

In 1972, we were sure that it just wasn't going to sell like the very popular operas, because people like to have their dinner and go at 8:30 at night, and so on. Those are the operas that are easiest to sell usually.

Adler and the Development of San Francisco Opera

Crawford: Speaking of Mr. Adler and his building of the company, do you think he takes most credit for building the company into a world-class house?

Follis: Yes, I think he's entitled to it. I don't know who else did it. It wasn't a world-stature company when he took over, and it is now.

I don't know just when we moved up into what you might call the first tier, but it was during Adler's regime. There was no question except for the participation that Bob Miller had with him, and as we've already discussed, going further into the artistic decisions for a moment, it was a one-man job.

Crawford: Do you think Mr. Adler was ever tempted to leave San Francisco? For instance, Herbert von Karajan asked him to come to Vienna in 1962-63.

Follis: Well, I just found that out yesterday. He mentioned that yesterday. I hadn't known that. I think that was the acid test right there. The only job in the United States that would have tempted him would be the Met, because he doesn't think that there is any other opera company, and I don't think there is, comparable to this. There's even a question of the Met's quality. I noticed that the New Yorker magazine had an article about that, saying that the San Francisco Opera was the best in the country.

Well, if I'm sensitive to that, Adler's five times as sensitive. I don't think you could pay him to take a job that he considered artistically inferior to the one he had. So that means that in the United States it would have to be the Met, or in Europe, it would have to be one of the other several there that he would consider comparable.

Crawford: He would not have been artistic director in Vienna. He would have been administrative director under von Karajan in that instance.

Follis: Yes, but I think that there were some circumstances making it likely that he would have been scheduled to be the top man in about a year or something.

Crawford: In Vienna?

Follis: Yes.



Crawford: I see.

Follis: But he turned it down.

### The Adler Retirement

Crawford: Did his announcement that he was going to retire surprise you?

Follis: Oh, yes and no. He had been talking about it for years, so in that sense it was no surprise. For three or four years he had been saying that he would retire, and he was anxious to get someone to take his place before he left. Well, we couldn't argue with that at all, because we felt very unconfident to pick a new director.

It is true that we had been somewhat concerned because, of course, a man Adler's age or of any age, for that matter, can drop dead, and we wondered how we would work that out. So we were glad to have Adler collaborate and help us pick somebody that his background and artistic judgment would validate. We talked about and looked at two or three people during those years, but there never was one that seemed to stand out.

Then he got on to McEwen, and he had almost burned his bridges behind him in the sense that he had long before assured us that as soon as he found a suitable replacement, he was going to retire.

So here was the suitable replacement. The question was, though, that McEwen had had no experience running an opera house, and I must say I don't think the board ever would have picked him, because we never would have had the nerve to pick a man that had never run an opera house.

Adler assured us that if we would let him have a year or two here under him, this man with his business experience with London Records and his artistic capacity and all would fill the bill. So we were open. There were really no surprises.

Crawford: So he was Mr. Adler's clear choice?

Follis: Yes.

The San Francisco Opera and Broadcasting

Crawford: We haven't talked about broadcasting yet, and I think we should. You were very instrumental in getting the funding for the West Coast broadcasts, which started on a regular basis in 1971.

Follis: Well, I don't know how instrumental I was. It happened to be that my company became a participant in underwriting the broadcasts.

We had wanted to see opera broadcasts for a long time, and Adler, of course, even more so. I did talk a little bit to our company, and it seemed to me it was something that a company like this could appropriately do, and they thought so, too. And then the Skaggs Foundation got involved. I don't know how, who got them into it. I didn't. Do you know who got them into it?

Crawford: Philip Jelley, very likely.

Follis: So between the two, why, they got them going. We did have one successful television program, but we apparently haven't been able to do that again. Although we would love to do that.

Crawford: Is it a question of priorities, or is it simply that the sponsorship is difficult to come by?

Follis: The cost is fantastic. The cost of a national broadcast is enormous. You see, you're not talking about a three-minute spot, you're talking about three-hour prime time on a national network. I've forgotten who it is just now, but the Met has been able to get sponsors. I think Texaco has sponsored the Met, Exxon has sponsored them. But we just haven't been able to do it. I suppose we're still trying.

Crawford: What were the ramifications of coast-to-coast broadcasts? Was fund-raising made easier, for example?

Follis: You mean, why did we do it? You know, when you're in a thing like this, you do a lot of things that are just because of your pride. Well, you know, like the director of a museum, you don't make any more money if you get more art, but you're trying all the time. We are very proud of the opera, and we want everybody to hear it and know about it. I doubt if it brings in any appreciable amount of funding--it may cause somebody in Ukiah to, if he comes down here, buy a ticket for the opera because he has heard it on the television or on the radio. But I don't think it has much financial value.

Fund-raising for the Opera: Broadening the Base

Crawford: I would like to look a bit at fund-raising, the development of fund-raising, and ask you what you think the outlook for the future is in terms of the various sectors that have given?

Follis: Well, my opinion isn't worth anything, because I have not had any contact with it now for several years, and these things change.

The problem we always had was that this small, very small base that Mr. Miller was able to operate the opera on, a very few generous and wealthy families around here, was expanded as much as we could. But we never really have been able to expand it nearly as much as you would think we should be able to, and there is still a relatively small number of people in proportion to the wealth of the Bay Area that are supporting the opera.

There are some areas where great wealth has been accumulated, like the Silicon Valley, that we get almost nothing from. We had Mr. Packard and Hewlett, who are exceptions. They are generous to the nth degree in everything. But most of those people, if they're generous, they're not generous with us.

We have an awful lot of new people here. All these buildings that are full, the second highest rents in the United States, are full of people that we don't know. And there must be an awful lot of money, but we're not getting it. That has been the real question right from the start: how to broaden this base. Eventually these people may start participating in civic things of this kind, and if they do, the potential is enormous, because I suspect that the base we have represents a fairly small percent of the potential wealth that might be tapped.

Crawford: Was the board actively seeking all the time to expand the base?

Follis: Well, we were working on it constantly, but not very successfully. I know they're working on it now, and they may be getting into things much more successfully than we were, and that's what I don't know. That's why I say, I don't have any basis for really answering you.

Crawford: In what ways would you say the board has changed since the sixties and seventies? That is to say, under the new administration?

Follis: Well, I don't know that there has been any great change other than the normal change that takes place with attrition, you know. I haven't looked down the list of board members for some time, but still, I'm pretty sure last time I looked, most of the names were names I knew. And most of the names I knew are the kind of people that do participate, you know.

These people that I don't know the names of are the ones I'm talking about, and I suspect they're two-thirds of the potential. We don't get any money at all from the East Bay. Edgar Kaiser, when he was alive, gave us money and took a box and gave us money. But he's the only one I can think of, and since he died, I don't know if they even have kept that.

Crawford: Do you think that the focus should be now on corporate giving, as opposed to individual giving?

Follis; Well, corporate giving has been very disappointing, and I don't know if there has been any ground-swell change in that. But by and large, it has been disappointing. The corporations give to education and pure charity, but they don't give an awful lot to these kinds of things. I think the opera gets perhaps its share, but it's not a great deal.

Crawford: I have read that corporate giving increased 250 percent from 1967 to 1970; that was its full thrust under Mr. Hale's presidency and, of course, your chairmanship.

Follis: Well, that was during the time when we were breaking our necks, and we got funding from the Ford Foundation. That's only one. There are a number of foundations that through the years have contributed, and I'm sure they'll continue, because their staff gets into these things, and they see us as a national opera. We get money from people who see it, who respond to the fact we're a national opera, not because they particularly want to give money to San Francisco.

#### The Orrick and Baird Presidencies

Crawford: Let me just move on here to the other presidents with whom you have served following Mr. Miller's death: Mr. Hale, Mr. Orrick, and Mr. Baird. Could you just comment a bit on the board under their administrations, and also your reflections on Mr. Adler's relationships with those presidents?

Follis: Well, it's just a little bit difficult for me to say. They all did their jobs, and the job varied so much during their periods in relation to the circumstances of the opera.

Mr. Orrick was, of course, put right into the bottom of the crisis [in 1971], the financial crisis we were talking about earlier. And he worked very hard and very effectively in getting us out of that financial hole. We were pretty well out of it by the time Mr. Baird got there [1974]. And Mr. Baird, I thought, ran the job very well. He wasn't confronted with any real major crises.

The big crisis we had was when we built the music center, and we got our rehearsal hall and our larger extension of the opera house, according to its real original design, you know. We didn't add anything to the opera house; it was the original design of the opera house, which had been cut off to save money. And it was very inadequate for the magnitude of the operations that were going on.

So we got all that, but we also got a competitor, because up to that time, the symphony had never been able to play simultaneously with the opera, because we both used the same hall. That meant that we could use the same orchestra or the bulk of the musicians of the same orchestra, the symphony orchestra for the opera orchestra.

#### A New Opera Orchestra: 1980

Follis: When the symphony got their new hall, and they said, "Now we're going to put on the symphony simultaneously with the opera," we discovered we had an opera but no orchestra. That was, I would say, the major crisis that hit us during Mr. Baird's time, you see. And Mr. Adler created an opera orchestra overnight.

In order to do that, we had to provide work for these people. You see, before, the musician had continuous work. He worked right through the opera season, and then he went to work for the symphony and he went through their season. Now this fellow, when the opera season was over, he would be out of work. And were you going to wait nine months, or seven months, maybe, would be more like it, for the opera season to come around again? What was he going to do?

Well, obviously, people couldn't live in San Francisco just to work here for part of the year like that, and we had to work



that out with the musicians union and the musicians. We felt at the time that the best we could do was we would give them a hundred performances. We had been putting on about sixty-five, and we jumped from sixty-five to a hundred, which you never do, you know, in building your audience. You don't build your audience that way; you build them a little at a time.

A Summer Season: 1981

Follis: So we put on the summer season, and between the fall season and summer season, we increased our performances sold from roughly sixty-five to roughly a hundred. That created a lot of problems and a financial crisis, because the cost went up accordingly, but the audience didn't go up accordingly.

Mr. Baird went through all that and handled it, I thought, very well. They're still suffering from it. They're still in financial difficulty, trying to close the gap every year, although the attendance has come up. The first year we dropped in our mutual discussion of whether to show 100 or 102 percent occupancy to something down in the 70s.

Crawford: This was because of the summer season only?

Follis: Yes. Well, it has hit both sides.

It affected summer. The summer was lower than the fall, but it reduced fall attendance, too. And then the symphony playing next door! We had it both ways; we had the symphony playing next door simultaneously with increasing the number of seats (to be sold) by a third. As it turned out, the gross attendance was greater, but it was spread out through a hundred performances instead of sixty-five.

##

Follis: I believe they can build to a hundred performances a year, which is enormous on a national scale. The only opera that exceeds that is the Met. I don't know how many they have, but we're getting up towards them. I remember when we were talking with Los Angeles. They told me that they had calculated that Los Angeles could support fifteen performances a year.

Crawford: Remarkable.

Follis: I've said it a lot of times, "We have sixty-five, and you will eventually, with your population, build up to much more than that. They said, "Oh, yes. But how long did it take you?" And that, of course, is so; it takes a long time to build an audience like we have here now. I think that will fill out, and maybe some day they'll be able to further extend the season.

But I suspect we will stay somewhere in this range in the foreseeable future, in the next twenty-five years or something. I doubt if it changes much.

### The Adler Contribution

Crawford: What impact has Adler had on opera production?

Follis: I don't know. From the standpoint of artistic talent, I don't know that he has contributed anything that they don't have at La Scala or some other opera already, if you see what I mean. I don't think he has enlarged the scope of the art on a world basis that I know of.

I think he has done two things: he has increased the concept that opera is for a broad portion of the population, not just the people who can sit in box seats there. He has also created this Western Opera Theater that plays all over, from Juneau, Alaska, to Palm Springs and Arizona. His Brown Bag Opera that he has performing over here in Zellerbach Square or some place.

He did a number of things of that kind that have taken opera out of the opera house, more or less, to the people. As far as I know, that has been of great interest to people in the top of the opera business in other parts of the country who come here and visit and discover that.

That's an idea that hasn't penetrated to New York, let's say, or at least hadn't at the time. So I think he created something new. Whether that is spread across the world, I don't know.

Crawford: Has he created audiences here for opera?

Follis: Oh, yes.

And then we have the Spring Opera. That was kind of faltering for a while. We had it out at the Palace of Fine Arts

for a while, and that is about the time I left. We were having some doubts about it, but I don't know what they've done.

Crawford: Spring Opera Theater has been discontinued.

Follis: Well, as I say, we were having doubts. At that time we were wondering what to do. Kurt didn't want to quit. But that was all part of a broad concept of getting opera out to the people.

You know, the public has a feeling that the opera is a place where people go in their Rolls Royces and so on and so forth, but I think it's more democratic in San Francisco than in most places, and I think that Kurt had a lot to do with that. I'm sure they've told you about the people who, in the days when we had our sixty-five performances 100 percent sold out, would line up there on the opera steps hours and hours before the ticket office opened.

Crawford: Yes.

Follis: And some of those crowds, if you drove by there sometimes at eight o'clock in the morning, there they would be!

Crawford: They were there overnight many times. Especially opening nights, and Mr. Adler would often go out with donuts for them and say hello.

Follis: A lot of them looked like the same kind of people you would see lined up in front of St. Anthony's Dining Hall! But they were there. And you won't see that, certainly, in many American cities.

Crawford: Is there anything you would like to add? Personal recollections of your friendship with Mr. Adler over the years?

Follis: No, I don't think so. I was fortunate in that I got along very well with him and therefore I had a lot of communication. He used to invite me to lunch, and I would say, "Well, I'll come to lunch if you'll just have a sandwich." He always had a sandwich at his desk while he was talking to Europe most of the time, and I said, "If you'll just put an extra sandwich there for me, why, I'll come and have lunch with you."

I did that many, many times, and quite often our time was interrupted by calls. He would be talking Italian, and then he would be talking German, and then he would be talking French. [Chuckles] I guess those three. But I also did discuss his problems with him in a way that never happened in a board meeting or an executive committee meeting.



I was very fortunate in that. I learned something about opera that, as I say, I could have been a member of the executive committee all my life that I wouldn't have learned.

Crawford: So the two of you had an exceptionally close relationship.

Follis: Well, in that sense, yes. I think I came as near to having a similar relationship to him as Miller did as many of these people who eventually would sit there. For some reason, I don't think that sort of thing went on between either Orrick or Hale or Baird. So I would say I was fortunate in that. And it was very interesting. I really got an interesting education.

Crawford: You learned a great deal about opera, but you came in to the board already knowing and loving opera?

Follis: Well, yes, although without any appreciation of what it's really all about, putting on opera.

Crawford: Please tell me this. Do you think Mr. Adler is unique in the kind of leadership he gave the company during the years?

Follis: Well, I've said I think he gave very fine leadership. I think he, in some more or less extraordinary way, was able to inspire the confidence of other guys, from the labor union man painting or putting in the plumbing to the top echelons. They all had a lot of respect for him, I think. And, of course, obviously they accepted this dictatorial world that he radiated because of that. That's really the most a leader can do in an organization.

Crawford: That's a fine interview, Mr. Follis, and I thank you for helping tell the story. Thank you very much.

Transcribers: Elizabeth Eshleman and Kristi Foell  
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University of California  
Berkeley, California

Kurt Herbert Adler and the San Francisco Opera

Betty Folger Miller Cooper

THE SAN FRANCISCO OPERA FAMILY

An Interview Conducted by  
Caroline Crawford  
in 1986





Kurt Herbert Adler speaks at a luncheon honoring his twenty-five years with San Francisco Opera. Left to right: Mrs. Robert Watt Miller, Mayor Joseph Alioto, Nancy Adler, Robert Watt Miller, chairman of the Opera Association board of directors, Mrs. Kenneth Monteagle, and opera manager Howard Skinner.

*Courtesy of Nancy Adler*



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## INTERVIEW HISTORY--Mrs. Sheldon Cooper

Mrs. Cooper was born Elizabeth Folger in 1899, the granddaughter of James Athearn Folger, who founded Folger and Company Coffee, Tea and Spices in 1850. She was raised in Oakland, and in 1921 she married Robert Watt Miller, president of the Pacific Lighting Corporation and community leader. His tenure as president of the opera association board (1937-1942, 1951-1966) was by far the longest in the company's history.

According to everyone who knew Robert Watt Miller, he ran the board almost singlehandedly, personally raising funds among his many friends and professional contacts. Extremely knowledgeable about music, he attended opera performances all over the world, and knew the artists and impresarios personally. When Toscanini engaged Jarmila Novotna to sing at the New York World's Fair in 1939 and the performance was cancelled, he called Miller and asked him to get her a San Francisco date. Mr. Miller's dedication to the company was complete (Mrs. Cooper estimates he spent 50 percent of his time at the opera house during his presidency). His relationship with Kurt Adler, whom he persuaded a somewhat reluctant board to appoint as director following Gaetano Merola's death in 1953, was extremely close.

In this interview, Mrs. Cooper, now married to San Francisco attorney Sheldon Cooper, talks about San Francisco as an opera town, the very unique relationship that was shared by Mr. Miller and Mr. Adler, fund-raising in the early days, and the involvement of the family in the opera (the Miller's son, Richard, was on the board of directors for nineteen years and served as chairman from 1982 until his death in 1984; Mr. Adler married Nancy Miller, in 1968, whose father was a cousin of Robert Watt Miller's).

Mrs. Cooper, who still serves on the Merola Opera Program board of directors and maintains a busy social and travel schedule, was interviewed in her Nob Hill townhouse on two occasions for the oral history. She made no changes in the transcripts of the history.

Caroline Crawford  
Interviewer/Editor

March 1990  
Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library  
University of California, Berkeley



## **Elizabeth Folger Cooper**

Elizabeth Folger Cooper, a philanthropist and benefactor of the San Francisco Opera who was described as "San Francisco's grande dame," died yesterday. She was 96.

Mrs. Cooper was born in Oakland and attended private schools, finishing at the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Menlo Park.

In 1921, she married Robert Watt Miller, who served as president of the San Francisco Opera Association for many years before his death in 1970.

At the end of 1982, she married Sheldon G. Cooper, a member of the founding family of the law firm Cooper, White and Cooper and a general counsel and board member of The Chronicle Publishing Co. Mr. Cooper died in 1990.

She is survived by her sons, Robert Miller of Hillsborough and Paul Miller of Los Angeles, and daughter Marian M. Miller, of New York.

A service will be held Monday at 10 a.m. at Old St. Mary's Church in San Francisco.

Memorial contributions are recommended to the San Francisco Performing Arts Library and Museum, 399 Grove Street, San Francisco 94102.



Robert Watt Miller and Kurt Herbert Adler: A Unique Relationship

[Interview 1: January 7, 1986]##

Crawford: I would first like to talk about Mr. Adler's relationship with Robert Watt Miller, your first husband and president of the opera board from 1937 to 1942 and 1951 to 1966.

Cooper: I would call it a very close relationship which grew to be a great friendship and also a great business relationship.

As you know, Mr. Adler was a chorus director who came from Chicago, and it was some time after Maestro Merola was the general director and my husband was the president of the opera that he conceived the idea that there should be somebody on standby to follow up in case of emergency if the director wouldn't be here.

He thought it was best for Merola to appoint somebody congenial with him and that he would know best the kind of a person to have stand by. So Maestro Merola chose Maestro Adler to be his assistant, and it was at that time that my husband began working with Mr. Adler.

When Merola [died while] conducting the opera at Stern Grove and there had to be a successor found, my husband, in following Mr. Adler's career and working with him, conceived the idea that Maestro Adler would be ideal as the general manager, and of course there was some difference of opinion.

Some members of the board felt that somebody should be brought in from the outside, from Europe, not just a local person. But my husband was very convinced that Maestro Adler was the right choice, and finally the board decided that he had made a right decision and stood in back of him and they appointed Maestro Adler as the new general director.

As we all know he served for about twenty-seven years and proved to be an outstanding man in the field and created one of the finest opera companies in the world.

Crawford: How did the two get along?

Cooper: Well, they used to argue and talk, generally about casting and the prices of productions and the various things my husband felt he was responsible for to his associates and to the public here in San Francisco which supported the opera. And of course Maestro Adler, being the artistic person involved, was much more concerned on the artistic side, although he grew to be very conscious of the budget. Shall I tell a story now? Would you like to hear it?

Crawford: Very much.

Cooper: I remember, when Mr. Hale was president later on of the opera association, there was a bust made of Maestro Adler. It was unveiled one day, and everyone admired it very much, and my husband was called on to say a few words, make a small speech.

He said: "I've been looking at this plaque and Maestro Adler has a very serious expression on his face. I hope that is because he was studying the budget at that time." So it was rather a joke between them.

I remember sometimes they would talk on the phone for fifteen or twenty minutes about some detail that had to do with the presentation of opera, either the presentation itself or the budget, but they always seemed to be able to come to a happy solution to the problem.

Crawford: Was Mr. Miller involved in every aspect of opera production?

Cooper: Yes, he spent about 50 percent of his time at the opera house and was very critical of how it was produced and the music and he was interested in the entire picture.

Crawford: I understand he studied scores at rehearsals, and went over cuts very carefully with Mr. Adler.

Cooper: Yes, he studied music at Stanford and then very often they would take his musical suggestions. He was a very musical person, naturally.

Crawford: How do you think his relationship with Mr. Adler was different than with Mr. Merola?

Cooper: Oh, it was, yes. My husband came in as a very young man, and Mr. Merola was very well established in the business as general director. He started the opera here.

When Adler came in, he hadn't the same experience, and so he was able to seek help and counsel on certain phases of being the general manager.

Crawford: After Mr. Merola's death, Mr. Adler was given the title of artistic director; he was not given the title of general director for four years. What were the conditions, if any, of his assuming that title?

Cooper: Well, I don't know. I wasn't involved. I've never been on the opera board. I don't know what the conditions were at all, but I can imagine that the ordinary restrictions placed upon the director of any organization would have been the same in this case. There would be certain fields for which he would be responsible and others he would not.

Crawford: Yes, it is often said that Mr. Miller was reluctant to have Mr. Adler conduct.

Cooper: Well, he was not engaged to be a conductor. My husband always felt that being a conductor was a career in itself, and it would interfere with his position as manager, and also take time that could be devoted to the organizational problems he had.

#### Fund-Raising During the Miller Presidency: The Guarantor System

Crawford: Let us look at fund-raising. How would you describe Mr. Miller's approach to fund-raising in the early days?

Cooper: To fund-raising?

Crawford: Yes, to fund-raising as an aspect of his directorship.

Cooper; Well, he thought it was extremely important. Opera is never a plus. It is something that hardly ever comes out even, and therefore there is always the problem of raising funds for the season.

Very happily, my husband decided that a guarantor system would be helpful and not very painful for the supporters of the opera, because in the early days they would buy a season ticket, and attached to that was a guarantee that if there was a loss,



the buyer of the season ticket would guarantee up to a hundred dollars.

They never taxed them more. If they gave more, it was very welcome, of course, but that way the people who could afford to buy season tickets could afford to make a small donation, and not be overtaxed. The guarantor system worked perfectly; in fact it is still in effect today.

Crawford: Very much expanded from what it was in 1936 when it was established?

Cooper: That's right. It was only up to one hundred dollars they could be asked for for support then.

Crawford: In 1955, they had a large deficit, and your husband felt it was necessary to have the first public fund-raising campaign. Was that difficult for him?

Cooper: No, he knew that the public of San Francisco was very supportive of musical things, and he didn't hesitate to form a committee and have an intensive drive. And it was very successful. They more than met their goal of \$100,000.

Crawford: When did Mr. Adler become active in fund-raising?

Cooper: I can't answer that at all, because I wasn't in on those discussions. Mr. [Milton] Esberg, head of public relations, probably entered into that phase of it early in his career. He became conscious himself that it had to be supported from the outside.

Crawford: There was one period--beginning in 1968--when the opera company was in danger of closing down, and your husband brought in Mr. Hale to appeal to the bank to give them another year. Did he believe that the operation could be suspended?

Cooper: I don't think he ever felt that the operation would be, although as a businessman he was very conscious that you had to be solvent after a certain point; that you couldn't float along in debt. In fact, he never discussed it at home. He was always very optimistic and positive, so the details of that I really don't know.

Crawford: What about the Los Angeles season, which went on for so many years and was finally discontinued?

Cooper: Well, we used to go down every year for the season, which they held at the Shrine Auditorium. It was very successful.

I think they did it the first year in conjunction with the symphony. Then it became separate. I don't know how exactly, but I do know that it was very welcome down there and it gave the same program that they gave up here. The public had the same operas, the same productions, the same singers.

They were very careful in those days that the singers knew they were to sing in Los Angeles, so that the performances there were just as strong musically speaking as they were in San Francisco.

### The Callas Cancellation and Union Confrontations

Crawford: What about the difficult times? After Mr. Adler took over, there was a season of major cancellations in 1957, when Maria Callas cancelled, among others.

Cooper: Well, I remember that there was great distress that she didn't come. She was supposed to open the season, and so my husband consulted AGMA [American Guild of Musical Artists] and New York was very interested because she was coming to sing that year with them, and they felt that there were three ways that AGMA could punish singers who cancelled, who broke their contract.

They could forbid them from singing in America for a year, which was particularly hard on foreign artists. Or they could fine them monetarily, or they could just chastise them. And I think my husband felt it was such a very bad thing to do that he recommended that she get the full penalty from AGMA. He felt very strongly about that. [AGMA reprimanded her]

Crawford: The company came through very well, I remember, because they got Leonie Rysanek and Leyla Gencer for Lady Macbeth and Lucia.

Cooper: Yes, that's right. The opera in a sense didn't suffer.

Crawford: That brings up the question of covers, which Mr. Adler never really had. He felt covers to be a real extravagance. Was that an idea your husband shared?

Cooper: Well, I think they worked together on that. They didn't commit any extravagance they could avoid. [laughter]

Crawford: Back to the union problems, which occurred through the years. In 1961, when the two parties couldn't agree, and Mayor

Christopher came into the fray between AGMA and the opera, they apparently came close to suspending the season. The season was actually cancelled by board vote.

Cooper: It was cancelled, but only for about one or two days. They sent someone out from Washington, and they had meetings all night, and they were able to reconcile the differences and I believe that season we only lost one singer. All the rest of them re-signed immediately.

Crawford: When there was a crisis like this one with the unions, did Mr. Adler and your husband work together?

Cooper: Yes, they did. They always worked together. In fact, we made several trips to Europe when they were planning some of the Wagnerian performances. We spent ten days in Munich with conferences together, and I realized at that time how closely they did work together on both the artistic and the business end of it.

The Selection of Artists and Repertoire: Thoughts About Contemporary Opera

Crawford: Mr. Adler in his conversations has often said, "Mr. Miller and I hired so-and-so." Did they always collaborate in this way?

Cooper: No. He never imposed himself in the hiring of a singer because he thought Mr. Adler was the better judge, but in some of the other aspects--contracts, and other problems--well, then my husband would express himself.

Crawford: Mr. Adler called your husband "Mr. Miller," always, even though they were very intimate working associates and friends. Why was that?

Cooper: I don't know. That was a personal choice he made, I guess. My husband wasn't a very formal man, really, but he had the manner of appearing formal, and maybe Mr. Adler thought that he preferred that. And maybe my husband felt it made a better relationship from the point of view of the public.

Crawford: Staff people at the opera still remember your husband dashing backstage from his box to correct something that he saw during a performance.

- Cooper: Well, he would go back and if he noticed something awry or something that should be corrected he would mention it to the stage manager or Mr. Adler, or whoever was there. Often he would go back, and if he thought it was proper to suggest something, he would.
- Crawford: In the 1961 season the opera did its first world premiere, which was Blood Moon, and it wasn't very well received. How did your husband and Mr. Adler work through that process of commissioning a new work?
- Cooper: It must have come out of a great deal of discussion. The public wasn't used to more contemporary music. There were failures, or works that were not too strong or the public didn't accept them so well, and you just have to accept them as a mistake or mistaken judgement. That happens even today.
- Crawford: Mr. Miller was interested in contemporary opera and thought it should be performed?
- Cooper: Both he and Mr. Adler were very anxious that contemporary music be promoted, and it was always controversial with the audience, as you know, but they managed to produce every year something that was contemporary, and it pleased the audience--some of the audience--and the critics also.
- Crawford: During the times of deficit, particularly 1968 to 1970, did the board and particularly Mr. Miller try to discourage new productions, which were naturally more costly?
- Cooper: Well, he didn't discourage them. He wanted to have them, but they had to watch the budget more carefully. Naturally, a new production is more expensive, so they would cut the cloth according to the pattern and they would have to agree that some of the new productions would have to wait.

#### Corporate Giving in the 1960s

- Crawford: The opera didn't receive their first large corporate gift until 1970 for the sponsorship of Così fan tutte. Why do you suppose this was so?
- Cooper: I think because business wasn't attuned to giving in that direction at that time, that education of the corporations has now taken place in San Francisco, and that the corporations are now very generous in supporting all forms of art. In those days

it just wasn't done, or wasn't thought of. My husband was associated with Standard Oil (he was on the board of Standard of California), and I think they were one of the first who came in to support the arts here in San Francisco. So it's probably through his influence there that the very generous contributions they made started in those early days.

Crawford: What are some of the special things that you remember about the days when Mr. Miller and Mr. Adler worked together? What do you recall?

Cooper: There were several instances when an artist would faint or become ill and the opera would call my husband and he would rush out there.

I remember one evening--my husband always went early to the opera. He was just preparing to go out there, when the conductor himself came to the house and declared that he wouldn't conduct because of a difference he had with one of the singers. The singer was going to sing a high note that Mr. Adler and my husband felt was not artistic, and she insisted on singing it.

Finally they compromised. They had the conductor there, and he was allowed to put his baton down while she sang the high note. So he didn't have to take part.

There were also several instances when at the last moment a singer would become temperamental and think she couldn't sing, and my husband would have to persuade the singer to go on and sometimes there would be a mechanical thing that would go wrong, and he would have to rush out there so that he and Mr. Adler could work it out in some way. [laughter]

There were always very, very dramatic moments.

### Mr. Adler and the Subsidiary Companies

Crawford: In your work with the Merola Program, which was very important to Mr. Adler, what have your impressions been of his involvement?

Cooper: Oh, he was always been very helpful. His interest is great in young singers. Just as Mr. McEwen's is. The Merola training program was just his love because it was formed to help them and



train them, and I think he had a very great interest in the program and furthered it very much.

Crawford: With Richard Miller [board chairman 1982-1984], was the relationship anything like it had been with your husband?

Cooper: Not at all, because Maestro Adler knew Richard Miller when he was about four or five years old. The children used to go for one act of the performance at that time sometimes, and Mr. Adler would put them in the prompter's box, so he regarded my son as sort of a little boy relationship.

It continued a long time, but it was never the same. Dick was so much younger than Maestro Adler, but he had great respect for Dick because of his love of opera and he was very musical and they worked well together.

Crawford: We haven't talked about Spring Opera Theater, but of course your husband was at the helm when the company was founded. That had long been a dream of Mr. Adler's; what was Mr. Miller's involvement?

Cooper: Well, he wasn't as keen about Spring Opera as Mr. Adler, and so he wasn't very much involved with it, or interested as he was with the mainstream, but he encouraged Mr. Adler in those phases, because it was experimental and my husband didn't know how it would turn out. I don't think he discouraged him at all from those new ideas he had. And it grew to be of great worth.

There had been a spring opera that didn't belong to the San Francisco Opera, and I believe my husband was involved when it became part of our own company.

Crawford: Are you referring to the Cosmopolitan Opera?

Cooper: Yes, they joined forces, you know, and in a sense that became the Spring Opera as part of the San Francisco Opera Association.

Crawford: As I remember, your husband did not want to ask the San Francisco Opera patrons to support the new spring season.

Cooper: Yes, he felt that if there were demands made upon those supporters already active, it might not be very popular; that it might spoil the efforts.

Crawford: But they eventually resolved that.

Cooper: Yes.

Mr. Adler as Administrator

Crawford: Why do you think Mr. Adler retired?

Cooper: I really don't know. That is a very private matter. You know, he had been general director for more than twenty-five years, and most men when they have been that long in a business, and it is a business, really, would like some leisure and would like to develop their talents.

As one of the outstanding directors of opera anywhere, in Europe, and in the United States, he has discovered more talent for opera than anybody I can think of. He had a very great sense of what a good singer has to be, and as you know he brought many singers from Europe to sing here before making very successful debuts at the Metropolitan. Sandor Konya was one. Leontyne Price made her debut in San Francisco, and many many others that he has discovered and brought over. He had a great ear and a great sense of discovery.

Crawford: Do you think he took risks?

Cooper: Naturally he did. But not consciously. He really believed that his artists, when he brought them, would be successful. But some that he brought weren't, I suppose.

Crawford: What were his great strengths as an administrator?

Cooper: Well, he understood discipline--he understood that very well. He had a good sense of organization, which was very fortunate, because there can be confusing moments in the production of opera, and he had the respect of the artists; where he maybe didn't have the great affection and the warmth that some general directors had, he certainly had all the respect of the artists.

Crawford: Do you think his personal temperament was counterproductive in any way?

Cooper: No. Not really. I think that every general director has a certain personality, and when he is successful in producing opera it is accepted by the singers and by the people in the organization and I don't think it creates any real problems.

Crawford: Anything you would like to say about the transfer of power to Terry McEwen?

Cooper: Well, I'm not on the board, and I don't involve myself on the personal end of it. Of course there is a certain amount of



difficulty in any transition period that has to be overcome, both personal and organizational, but everything seems to point to a good transition.

Crawford: Anything you would wish to elaborate on?

Cooper: No, only to say that we have very happy memories in our association with the Maestro, and I think he felt the same way. As you know, he married a cousin of my husband's in the course of the events, and it has made a very close relationship closer. We've grown to be very close friends and I am very fortunate to have him as a great friend.

San Francisco Society and Support of the Arts##

[Interview 2: August 5, 1986]

Crawford: Mrs. Cooper, in our last interview we concentrated on the relationship between Mr. Robert Watt Miller and Kurt Adler and their respective roles. Today I would like to focus on the community and your own family and its relationship with the San Francisco Opera Company. My first question: Why has San Francisco supported so much operatic activity?

Cooper: Well, first of all it has a history as a musical city from the early, early days. I think when the pioneers came out here, they were so far away from everything that they had to create their own entertainment and their own--I don't like to put it on the amusement basis--but their own things to boost their spirits, because they were alone.

Music always seemed to be one of the first and most important things that they fostered here, and I think as the educational quality improved, their interest in the more serious music came.

There was a lot of talent here, too; natural talent, voices, and the schools fostered it. So that's why I think that it grew up. There was also a variety of nationalities. There were a great many Italian settlers and they were naturally very musical, and the Jewish population was very supportive of music. They encouraged education among their children, in their families, to pursue the career of music.

Crawford: The opera also became the foremost social attraction in the community.

Cooper: They built an opera house in San Francisco in the very early days, and they were very anxious to have the very best singers. In fact, as you remember, there was the story about Caruso coming here and singing in 1906 the night before the earthquake in the opera. Also people made it an event to go to musical things, and opera was one of them, foremost among them.

The public was very kind to the singers, and very attentive, and I guess it's the knowledge they have of music and the interest they have in it that keeps them so alert and keeps them so appreciative of this kind of music.

Crawford: How would you define the personalities or profiles of the various subscription audiences?

Cooper: Well, there has always been in San Francisco what they call the Saturday night audiences. They're more relaxed, I think; they go with more enthusiasm to hear music, and they make greater sacrifices, generally, to hear it. I think that maybe that's why there's a differences, although the other audiences are very appreciative too, but not in the same relaxed manner.

Crawford: What is the Wednesday night audience, for instance?

Cooper: Well, from my point of view, there's not much difference in the other audiences, because the subscribers to the opera subscribe for different nights--some go Sunday afternoons. There are very appreciative people that go on Tuesday night, which is supposed to be the social night. But I think that is just something that's built up in the minds of people.

Crawford: It's not a very clear-cut distinction?

Cooper: It's not a very clear-cut distinction at all. People take the Tuesday night series, I think, because they want to go to the opening. That includes, generally, the opening, and the other series do not, although some of the operas open for the first time on the other nights rather than on Tuesday nights.

So there's really no essential difference, except that, for example, the people that first took part in going to the opera didn't have so many nights and so many days to choose from. They added those over a period of time, so the people that take what they call the opening night series or the Tuesday night series are generally the people that first supported the opera by taking box seats or season tickets.

- Crawford: The Tuesday night boxholders were the first guarantors, I believe, under the system instituted by your husband. Is the funding appeal much different now in San Francisco with the proliferation of arts companies and funding needs?
- Cooper: Well, I think it is changing, yes, because every year new supporters come in, and it has grown so that it's just a question of including them in different series. If they can't go Tuesday nights, they'll take Wednesday nights, Friday nights, or Saturday. But Saturday night is generally when most people don't have to be early at the office in the morning, so they look at it more as a weekend entertainment, you know. But essentially, they're all music lovers, so I don't see that there's much difference.
- Crawford: Now that there is so much more artistic activity in San Francisco, do you think that the donor necessarily divides up the large gift, whereas in the past people could concentrate on one company such as the symphony or the opera?
- Cooper: I didn't understand the first part of your question.
- Crawford: What I'm asking you is if the situation with the major donors has changed a great deal in terms of support for the opera and for the other major companies because of the proliferation of arts organizations.
- Cooper: I don't think the major donor has changed at all. I think that the major donors have always been interested in different types of music, and whatever they're interested in most, they give to, whatever is in their field. Some people enjoy the opera more than the symphony, or the symphony more than the opera. So whatever is most pleasurable to them, they generally support more liberally.

#### The Folger and Miller Families and their Interest in Music

- Crawford: I'd like to talk a little bit now about the family involvement in the company of the Millers and the Folgers, and the children.
- Cooper: I think it came with the interest of the parents and the grandparents in the field of music. My mother-in-law [Mrs. C.O.G. Miller], for example, was very musical. She played the piano and was very musical, and therefore her son was exposed to it.

In my family all the children took lessons in various instruments; some of them in piano, some of them in other instruments. Also they would listen to records, and we did too as children. We had an old phonograph, and we could hear Caruso and some of the early singers. And my mother and father fostered it.

Also I went to a convent, and in the convent music is mandatory. You have to study music as one of the main sciences.

Crawford: I like to think of it that way, too.

Cooper: Yes, and so it was instilled in me, and it was instilled in my family. It was just a matter of course that you would like symphonic music and opera music. So for my husband's and my family, it was just a matter of course that we would be interested in music.

Crawford: What was your own instrument?

Cooper: Piano. I played piano. I wasn't very good. My sister sang; she took singing lessons. She was very talented in singing. But I could never sing. However, in Oakland, where I was born and raised, in my early days they had in the amusement park a small opera house. We used to go every Saturday afternoon and we would hear operas like Butterfly and Aida and some of the serious operas. Just as a matter of course.

I think that we weren't so distracted by so many different forms of music like jazz that they have now. And we didn't have television. Therefore the legitimate theater and the musical events were more sought after, I think, in a way, than they are now. They were taken more seriously because they didn't have so many forms of entertainment for young people.

So music and opera became much more a treat for them, you know, an event. I think that's why the young people--they're more exposed to the music of opera and so forth.

Crawford: Did your children study instruments as well?

Cooper: Oh yes, they all did.

Crawford: How many children were there?

Cooper: I had four children, and they used to hear records a great deal, and we used to take them to the opera when they were very small. But we wouldn't let them stay very long, just a short time, so

they wouldn't be surfeited with it. I would let them stay for one act, say, and of course they wanted to stay longer, so that made it a more sought-after event for them.

Crawford: I'm going to remember that. Nancy Adler has told me that Mr. Miller was a very good organist.

Cooper: Well, yes. He played the piano by ear. Then he became interested in organ music. And then he later studied with a professor down at Stanford. He studied the organ, and there was an organ in our house.

Crawford: A pipe organ?

Cooper: A pipe organ, and he used to play the organ at that time. Then he learned to read music at quite an advanced age. I guess he was about twenty-five or twenty-six before he could read music, and he became so interested in it, especially when they used to have to cut the scores, you know. People couldn't listen to all of a Wagnerian opera; they used to cut it. They don't do it so much anymore, but they used to, and he used to work at cutting the scores. He was very interested in that.

We used to go to the rehearsals, and the children went to some of the rehearsals too, and listened to the orchestra rehearsals. So in that way they became very interested in the music; not only the singing, but the music too.

Crawford: Who was the professor at Stanford? I'm interested to know.

Cooper: His name was Allen. I can't remember his first name now, but his name was Allen, and he was very fine. He was a professor of music, of piano, there.

Crawford: On the faculty?

Cooper: Yes.

#### The Creation of the San Francisco Opera Guild

Crawford: In the 1920s the board list shows that Mrs. C.O.G. Miller was chairman of the woman's committee then.

Cooper: In 1920?

Crawford: 1928.



Cooper: Yes, that would be my mother-in-law.

Crawford: What are your memories of the early women's activities? Those preceding the San Francisco Opera Guild.

Cooper: Well, there was first a committee of women, and in those days there was no educational program, because the guild brought in the educational program in the schools later, and the various developments of the musical program.

So the women were under the direction of Maestro Merola, who started the opera here, and they used to perform different duties for him, whatever he wanted. They even collected props for the stage.

Then, of course, later on it became a professional job, and they didn't do that anymore. That's why we brought in the guild, because it was time to make a change in the activities for the women.

Crawford: Would you talk a little bit about the guild and how it developed?

Cooper: Well, in New York Mrs. Belmont started the New York Opera Guild. Mrs. August Belmont was very active, and she mentioned to me one time when I was in New York that we should start a guild in California.

So Mrs. Stanley Powell, who was the daughter of the president of the opera, Mr. Bentley, joined me in [the late 1930s] in trying to interest the then-existent committee in an educational program.

Mrs. Belmont was very helpful. She sent out a Mrs. Witherspoon, who was a professional woman who had helped form the opera guild in New York, and together with her help we started the San Francisco Opera Guild. We started a branch in Sacramento at the same time, and in Oakland, in San Jose, in Palo Alto on the Peninsula, and in San Francisco.

The purpose was to assist the opera in the educational field and also in the financial field. So it gradually grew from the original twelve members to, I think, five or six thousand members.

Crawford: Are you still active with the guild?

- Cooper: No. I'm an associate member right now. I have retired from the active membership, but I was very active in the guild for about forty years.
- Crawford: Yes, I know. When I asked the present president whom to talk to about the guild, she said, "Only one person, Mrs. Cooper."
- Cooper: Well, naturally, since Mrs. Powell isn't here anymore. She took just as active a part as I did.
- Crawford: Mrs. Stanley Powell?
- Cooper: Yes. So it's, as you know, growing in its activities and its membership tremendously. And it is a great help to the opera.

More about the Millers

- Crawford: I know Donna Casey, your granddaughter, has been very active. How about your own children? What role did they take?
- Cooper: Well, I had three sons and one daughter, and my daughter was more interested in the activities of the opera than she was with the guild, so later on she assisted with the chorus and assisted Matt Farruggio, the producer, in various ways.
- Crawford: In a professional capacity, then?
- Cooper: Well, not really; in a volunteer way. She would ask him how she could be of help and he would tell her, and so she would come. And with different events they put on, she assisted him. Of course, the boys were not so active in the guild as they were in the opera. My youngest son became the chairman of the board.
- Crawford: That was Richard Miller?
- Cooper: Richard. And my second son was very active and is very active in the opera down in Los Angeles. He lives in Los Angeles. My oldest son is not associated with the committee, not very active. But he loves the opera just the same.
- Crawford: What about the grandchildren?
- Cooper? Well, there's quite a difference in age, you know, with the younger people. They're very interested in so many forms of music. One of Dick's sons is very interested in the opera. I don't think all of them will follow exactly in the footsteps of



their father. They have their own preferences in the music world.

Crawford: Are they tending away from the classical music?

Cooper: No, I don't think so. I think they like all forms; I find that young people like all forms of music today. They don't shut out one or the other. They accept all the musical forms. I think they're very varied in their interests in music.

Crawford: The Miller family made a very substantial contribution to the opera family in Nancy Miller Adler.

Cooper: Well, yes. We have several members of the family that have taken official positions, and several members of the family who are just good at being an audience!

Nancy, of course, studied music, so she's very proficient and she's very helpful, I think. She has been very helpful to Maestro Adler in the field of opera, because she made it her great interest. And before she was married, she took official part in the opera association. She was a member.

Crawford: She was working in set design, among other things.

Cooper: Yes. I think she took interest in almost all phases of the opera.

Crawford: Do you think that marriage has mellowed Mr. Adler, if I could put it that way?

Cooper: Well, I think he had something to do with the process himself. You know, age takes care of a lot of things. I always felt that his disciplinarian side was very good for the opera. I think the singers respected it. Maybe they didn't like it all the time, but it made order, and it also made him not only a great maestro from the point of view of the artistic, but it made him very useful to the opera association in a practical way, in a business way.

He became a well-rounded director with a marvelous interest in the artistic side, but he was also interested in the whole picture, the business side as well. That is unique, in a way.

Crawford: That seems to be the consensus. Nancy Adler has also said how very supportive you and Mr. Miller were of her marriage to Mr. Adler, which in 1965 was a bit shocking to the community.

Cooper: Well, it was only on account of the difference in age. Naturally, we felt that it was more or less their business, their choice, and it certainly worked out very well, the marriage. We felt that they should have their own choice, and in fact, her family very quickly became convinced that it was a very good marriage.

Have you got this on?

Crawford: Yes, it's on.

Cooper: I want to turn it off--[brief interruption in tape]

Crawford: Would you relate the story about Nancy Adler's father?

Cooper: Yes. Well, he had wondered about the difference in their ages, and therefore he was skeptical about the marriage.

And as I had had several marriages in my family that I had been skeptical about and changed my mind, I went down to see him in the bank. And I told him how I felt. I felt that my experience would be helpful for him to swallow the doubts that he had and attend the marriage and make the best of it. So he did.

About a year later I came out of my box and there, standing in white tie and tails, was her father. He said, "Have you noticed where I'm sitting?" and I said, "No, I haven't." I hadn't looked around that far.

He said, "Well, I'm sitting in the Adler box right next to the stage and I'm enjoying it very much. And I'm very fond of my son-in-law."

Crawford: That's a very happy ending.

Cooper: That's a true story!

Crawford: So you were a pre-marriage counselor. You saved the day!

Cooper: I don't think I saved the day, but at least I influenced him to be more open-minded.

Robert Watt Miller and Kurt Herbert Adler Compared

- Crawford: I asked Nancy if she thought your husband and Mr. Adler were similar in certain ways, and her answer surprised me. I wonder if you would answer that question.
- Cooper: Well, they were similar. Not in character exactly, but in their interest in the opera. They just loved the opera, and they worked very hard for it.

Although sometimes they wouldn't in the beginning agree on a subject, they would generally come around and have a mutual agreement on whatever subject had arisen, whatever doubts had arisen in regard to an opera or to a singer. They were very congenial and very friendly.

- Crawford: In our first interview you used the word "create." You said that Mr. Adler "created" the opera company and brought it along and built it. To what extent was that a joint creation with Mr. Miller?
- Cooper: Well, my husband didn't pretend to be an opera impresario. He didn't know all the fundamentals. He learned them, but he didn't know them in the beginning, so he had to depend on Mr. Adler's judgment in certain fields in which he was restricted.

I would say that they worked side-by-side in creating the San Francisco Opera. It had been started very well by Mr. Merola, you know, by Maestro Merola. He was the first one that started the opera company, but different phases of it developed.

My husband introduced certain things with Mr. Adler's sanction. My husband believed in it, too, and he didn't work alone. He had a committee, you know, that was very interested then in San Francisco, and Mr. Bentley had already contributed a great deal as president, the first president of the opera.

The company seems to be progressing very well, and I imagine there will be some changes as time goes on. Different people have different ideas, and different ways of making success, but it's well established, and I find that when I go to Europe, they know all about the San Francisco Opera. And the singers are very aware of the company, and like to come here, sing here.

I don't know what will happen with the entire difference of support, you know. In Europe they have government support, and

we don't have it here, and I don't know whether that will ever come into being.

Crawford: Would it be a good thing, do you think?

Cooper: I really don't know, because America's best things are different than the European traditions. The traditions that exist in Europe don't exist here. And I think the freedom that we have that spreads over the artistic world is good. I wouldn't like to see it changed.

Crawford: Because government subsidies would mean government interference?

Cooper: That's right; yes.

Ranking of San Francisco Opera and Other Reflections about Opera

Crawford: How is San Francisco Opera ranked as you travel around? Is it among the first ten, for instance?

Cooper: Oh yes, it is. Of course, the Metropolitan is the mother of them all, and is regarded as such. It has been established in that way. But I think the artistic quality of the opera is very well regarded.

##

Crawford: Did you attend the Metropolitan Opera over the years?

Cooper: We always went there two or three times a year. As a matter of fact, I relied very much on Mrs. Belmont and her associates in the founding of the guild in 1938, because they had that idea first. We were related, the guild and the magazine, as you know, and we used to go the opening of the opera at the Metropolitan.

Crawford: You went every year?

Cooper: Yes, for many years. When we could go, we always went, and we always went during the season. So I would say that there was a close association. They used to call up here when they couldn't find a date for a singer that had been brought over.

For example, when [Jarmila] Novotná came here, came to America first, she was brought by Toscanini. He had engaged her for several performances at the New York [World's] Fair, and the

musical program in the New York Fair was cancelled right at the last minute, and so he had no dates for Novotná.

As we opened earlier (we opened in September, before the Metropolitan) she made her debut in America here, and it was Toscanini who called up my husband and asked him if he could find a date for her. So you can see that we worked closely with the Metropolitan.

Crawford: You certainly did. The network was even closer then.

Cooper: Oh yes, in that time.

Crawford: Has the opera business changed in that respect?

Cooper: Well, it's become larger, and as things grow larger, you know, the contacts are less close. But I think there's still a close association.

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Kurt Herbert Adler and the San Francisco Opera

Prentis Cobb Hale

PRESIDENT OF THE SAN FRANCISCO OPERA BOARD, 1967-1970

An Interview Conducted by  
Caroline Crawford  
in 1986







Chairman of the board of directors Robert Watt Miller, Kurt Herbert Adler, and Prentis Cobb Hale, board of directors president, on opening night, 1968, Adler's twenty-fifth season with the company.

*Courtesy of Nancy Adler*



## INTERVIEW HISTORY--Prentis Cobb Hale

Prentis Cobb Hale, born in 1910 in San Francisco, has been a member of the San Francisco Opera Association board of directors since 1955. In 1967 he succeeded Robert Watt Miller as president of the board and served as president from 1967 to 1970. He became a member of the California Bar in 1936, and has served as chairman of the board and the executive committee of Carter Hawley Hale Stores, of which he is still a director. Among other boards on which he has been a member are Santa Fe Industries, Bank of America, Union Oil Company and the San Francisco Symphony; he is currently director of the DiGiorgio Corporation, Syntex Corporation, and Datron Systems.

The following interview was held in Hale's offices in the Neiman Marcus building. It is a dark, uncluttered environment, and Mr. Hale had told me that he had only an hour for the interview, during which we were uninterrupted.

Having served on so many other boards, Mr. Hale is in prime position to analyze the development of the opera board over three decades. His was the difficult task of following Robert Watt Miller, whom he claims wanted Hale to be a "hatchet man" in an era of financial trouble. Hale attempted to bring the board into a new era in which its members had to become active in fund-raising, since by all accounts during Robert Watt Miller's tenure he had taken care of that aspect nearly single-handedly.

Mr. Hale's presidency, by his own and Mr. Adler's reckoning, was a stormy period for both men, and this is reflected in his interview. "We fought a lot," he said, "but we loved each other, and we always worked it out."

Mr. Hale answered the questions put to him briefly and without hesitation, and edited the transcript very little.

Caroline Crawford  
Interviewer/Editor

June 1986  
Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library  
University of California, Berkeley



BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Your full name Prentis Cobb Hale

Date of birth July 30, 1910 Birthplace San Francisco, California

Father's full name Prentis Cobb Hale Birthplace Michigan

Occupation Retailer

Mother's full name Linda Hoag Hale Birthplace California

Occupation Housewife

Family

Spouse Denise Hale

Children Prentis Cobb Hale III, Hilary Hale Spencer, Linda Hale Bucklin,

Hamilton Bryan Hale

Where did you grow up? San Francisco, California

Education Stanford University, A.B. 1933

Stanford University, LL.B. 1936

Areas of expertise \_\_\_\_\_

Special interests or activities \_\_\_\_\_



Early Associations with San Francisco Opera and Kurt Adler  
[Date of Interview: June 18, 1986]##

Crawford: Mr. Hale, how did your association with San Francisco Opera begin, and when did you first meet Mr. Adler?

Hale: Well, my association with the San Francisco Opera really began with Howard Skinner, whom I knew very well and thought was probably one of the greatest forces for good that the San Francisco Opera had in its early days. I think it was largely due to Howard that Kurt Adler was received so well in the very beginning.

In the early days after Merola died, there was great antipathy to making Kurt Adler the general director. I give Bob Miller complete credit for overcoming this criticism and insisting that he become the general director.

I also give Howard Skinner full credit for being the catalyst in this operation. Howard over the years was paid a very meager salary. On his own he would go out and entertain the artists, and pay for their entertainment--and this he could ill afford. He had no independent income of his own, but he loved the opera and he loved San Francisco, so he did all he could to further its development.

Crawford: And he was involved at the symphony as well.

Hale: At that time he was also the co-manager of the symphony.

Crawford: Why did Mr. Miller select Mr. Adler? And did he cast about for an internationally known administrator who might have been more glamorous, let's say?

Hale? No, he didn't. He was sold on Kurt, and his judgment was absolutely correct as it turned out.

Crawford: What do you remember of Mr. Adler when you first met him?





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Crawford: What do you remember of Mr. Adler when you first met him?

Hale: Well, that's a difficult question. I remember Kurt as a very self-assured individual, very glib in his discussions, very knowledgeable about all things pertaining to the arts, and he also had an innate ability to negotiate with anybody on anything.

Crawford: Upon what was this antipathy to his directorship based?

Hale: Well, he was the chorus director, as I remember. He was untried as the general director. I believe a lot of people would have liked to have had a famous person come and take Merola's job. I believe that they didn't want to give Adler a chance, because they didn't know whether or not he could do it. I'm not sure the reservations were based on any facts that were really valid.

Crawford: So it was Mr. Miller's insistence that brought him into the directorship?

Hale: Unquestionably.

Crawford: And he had been made assistant some years before, to Mr. Merola.

Hale: Yes. Yes, but he was really the chorus director.

#### Robert Watt Miller and the Board of Directors

Crawford: Let's talk for a moment about the board of directors under Mr. Miller, whom you succeeded as president. How would you describe the board then? Was it a strong board?

Hale: Well, it was a strong board in the sense that it had a lot of strong people on it. But the board did practically nothing.

Crawford: Fund-raising?

Hale: In those days, fund-raising was a very simple thing. We had, as you know, a guarantee in the boxes, and in those years, they didn't use the whole guarantee to fund the opera. So the fund-raising in the very beginning was very modest, and could be done out of your left hand, so to speak.

Crawford: And did Mr. Miller do most of that?

Hale: He did a part of it. Milton Esberg did a lot of it, and was the professional who was hired to do it. Milt did most of the fund-

raising at that time. Bob Miller did some, but not a great deal.

Crawford: And Mr. Adler--did he do any initially?

Hale: Oh, he always raised money. He was a very good money-raiser.

Crawford: Why?

Hale: Why was he good?

Crawford: Yes.

Hale: Well, he just happened to know a lot of people who were very interested in the arts, and he had a way with going after them and getting them. But you must remember, this kind of fund-raising was a minor part of the budget in the San Francisco Opera.

Crawford: This budget was rather easily met?

Hale: It was easily met. As a matter of fact, as I said, insofar as the guarantee of the boxes was concerned--and all the boxes didn't guarantee--it was more than adequate and they almost never had to call for the whole amount.

Crawford: Only in a crisis.

Hale: Yes.

Crawford: Was the board well informed? What was the general relationship of the general director to the board of directors?

Hale: The board was not well informed as to what was going on. I can't remember how many meetings they had a year, but at one or two of them, Kurt would come and give a long dissertation as to what was going to happen in the fall season. And that was about it insofar as what was going on with the opera. Bob Miller had an executive committee later on that was better informed than the board.

Crawford: There was no artistic involvement, then, as there was at the symphony?

Hale: Practically none.

Crawford: Was it ever suggested that there should perhaps be an artistic committee?

Hale: No.

Crawford: What sort of relationship did the board have with Mr. Adler?

Hale: Well, I think you've got to go in periods of time. Under Mr. Miller, the board was through the executive committee, and to them primarily through Bob Miller. The board was just a board that went along with everything. And there was no problem about it.

#### The Hale Presidency: 1967-1970

Crawford: Because Mr. Adler produced a great deal of contemporary opera, you might have suspected that the board would have been somewhat concerned for the box office.

Hale: Well, he did a lot with contemporary opera, and that's one of the things that was very good for Kurt Adler and I guess for the San Francisco Opera, but it wasn't very good for the box office. I think you've got to get this in perspective. At the time I became president, we had no retirement program for anybody in the opera. The board had no relationship with the people who ran the opera; for example, with John Priest and Pierre Cayard.

Crawford: The staff.

Hale: The staff. And that was one of the very, very serious things that I faced when I first took over. In this day and age, I don't see how you can run any company and not provide for some kind of retirement, particularly when some of these people devoted their whole lives to it. So that one of the first things that I did was to establish a retirement program.

Another thing at that time was that there was hardly any involvement of the board with the goings-on of the everyday happenings at the opera. And I tried to get a lot of people involved and appointed a lot of committee heads. I may have gone too fast or something, but it didn't work very well.

Kurt would share very little with anybody. He was a one-man show, and he always did what he wanted to do. He would come up and say, "This is it," and you would have to beat him over the head to get him to retreat a little. But he didn't want any interference, and he did a good job himself.

Bob didn't interfere with him very much, and I think probably that's the best thing that Bob ever did; I don't know. I tried to change a lot of that, and it was very difficult. I tried to make the board aware of the relationship of money to the finished product: cost, and all the rest of it.

At one point, I appointed a person to try to run herd on it, and Kurt immediately got mad at me. And we had a hell of a time. It was Hugh Southern...in any case, Kurt would come up to me and say he resigned, and I would say, "All right, Kurt, if you want to resign, fine. Please have your resignation on my desk in the morning." I never received a resignation in writing.

### Collaboration with the Symphony

- Hale: At the time when I was president of the opera and Phil Boone was president of the symphony, we got along famously. We always planned everything together, and we had no problems. But Kurt was always trying to get more time in the opera house, and we always had a conflict in December, would have a terrible time with it. But we worked all those things out with no problem. After I left and Phil left the symphony, however, they each went their way. And now that there's Davies Hall, everything is wonderful, but it's costing a hell of a lot.
- Crawford: Mr. Boone said that when he became president of the symphony, Mr. Miller told him, "Keep your board small, because otherwise they'll hamstring you."
- Hale: I know.
- Crawford: Is that typical of his approach?
- Hale: Yes. Bob never worried too much about the feelings of the board. He didn't have to until they got in trouble; until they got in financial trouble.
- Crawford: Is this what promoted his retirement? Of course, he didn't retire altogether; he became chairman of the board.
- Hale: Yes, I'm sure of that. One thing that precipitated his decision to leave the presidency was the Trilogy, which was a disaster. It was the first year I became president. Hardly anybody came to see it, and that put us in a financial bind that year. That



was a little much for Bob, I think, and I think he wanted to get out from under and have a fall guy.

We also have a couple of real problems with warehouses. The city used them, or somebody took them over, and that bothered him. And so he decided to stay in and hold on to the glamor, but he wanted a hatchet man to do his dirty work.

Crawford: And that was you.

Hale: He got me. But I had worked with him before on everything.

Crawford: As chairman, what did he do?

Hale: Nothing. Not much. However, when I say nothing, I mean to say that he was a man of great stature, and he had great knowledge of the arts and a presence that was very important to the San Francisco Opera. There's no question about it. But getting down in the trenches--he didn't want to get down in the trenches. And why should he? He had done it for years. He had Kurt there, and he had great confidence in Kurt. But Bob had a big impact on that opera company; he always did.

Crawford: There were some problems in 1958, which was five years into Mr. Adler's directorship. Do you remember those problems?

Hale: That is when they really wanted to do something about Kurt, and I remember a meeting with Mrs. Powell, Ken Monteagle, and Charlie Blyth in Charlie's office, about what should be done. I was among those who said we ought to go along with Adler and with Bob and see what would happen. But at that time, there was a lot of furor against Kurt.

Crawford: You said that during your presidency there were changes you wanted to make, one of which was the implementation of a retirement system. What were the other changes?

Hale: Well, I wanted to get the board involved with the opera, and I wanted to have some controls over Adler, which I found was a more difficult job than I could do. And I also felt that it was important to have a fund-raising presence that we really never had, in the sense of having a real fund drive every year to make everybody conscious of our needs.

I think by this time we had a guaranteed system for all the boxes and part of downstairs, which was in furtherance of that. As a matter of fact, I think that happened in Bob's time if I'm not mistaken, through necessity and by needling from a few people, including myself. I wanted to get much more board



involvement. I wanted to have an open relationship with the press, and to that end, for the first time, I had a luncheon and invited all the press--this is a cute story--and Kurt.

He didn't want to do it, and he said, "Oh, no, they'll just kill me!" I said, "Come on, Kurt, we want to tell them all of our problems." So we told them our problems with the ballet and told them our problems with the symphony and some others--totally off the record. It was quite successful, and we got, I think, a better press by reason of it. So the next year came along, and I called Kurt about the same time, and I said, "Don't you think we might have another lunch with the press?" "Oh," he said, "I've already done that!"

### San Francisco Opera in Los Angeles

Hale: At that time also, one of the things Kurt wanted to do was to have Los Angeles Opera as part of our opera company. So it was put upon me to try and see what I could do, because I had a lot of relationships with people in the south. I went down there and saw John McCone, who was then president of L.A. Opera. And John and I had a deal whereby we would join forces and they would stand for their share of the deficit that occurred insofar as their performances were concerned.

It was announced in the paper as an accomplished fact only to have John renege on the deal at a later date. This was embarrassing, and we never could resurrect it. Kurt and I had spent a lot of time negotiating, but they insisted that we would have to give a cost estimate per performance, and that if our cost went over our estimate, that was too bad and we had to pay it. So we never did it. It was probably in the best interests of San Francisco, but at the time we were talking about it we were positive about it. That was when we put Mrs. Chandler and Ed Carter on the board.

Crawford: Was it going to be a jointly run company?

Hale: It was going to be San Francisco Opera performing in Los Angeles, and we were going to perform there after our season. We had done that for many years before at the Shrine Auditorium, but this was going to be under their auspices at the Chandler Pavilion. We had arranged to go down and try it on a temporary basis. And they said, "All right, we'll do everything we can to help you down here."

So the first thing they did in November was to invite the New York City Opera to perform. They had a big fund-raising for the company the night before they were opening. They didn't do a damn thing for us in the end.

Crawford: And it didn't do well, did it?

Hale: Well, it didn't do well but it didn't do that badly either. But it could have been all right if they had just gotten behind it, but they were terrible about the whole venture.

Crawford: Was Mrs. Chandler behind it?

Hale: No, of course not. She didn't want it, because it wasn't Los Angeles. If we had changed the name to Los Angeles Opera, sure, and based it there, sure. It was a fiasco, and I had worked on it for a long time to no avail.

#### Expansion of the Board of Directors

Crawford: In 1966 there were eighteen directors and thirty-nine governors, and in 1967 there were fifty-three directors. That was the time of expansion. Did the expansion of the board work out satisfactorily?

Hale: Well, certainly it did, and today they've expanded the board even more. I don't think you can have too big a board, if it's an active board and they'll participate. One of the bad things about the opera under Bob's time was that he never got real participation from the board. He didn't believe in the board. He believed in running it, and he could run it in those days. But as things have developed, you can't do that today. You have to have broad city-wide participation. You have to have people who have an entree into all of the corporations, you have to have the people who have entree into the foundations, you have to have people who have entree to a lot of moneyed people who are interested in the opera. You have to keep developing that.

Crawford: It can't be a personal directorship in this day and age.

Hale: It can't be a personal directorship. You see, Bob and Kurt had a marvelous time together, because Bob provided the social overtone to the whole thing and gave it a real social flair. And he also knew music, and between the two of them they had a great performance.

But those days were over. You couldn't just run the opera on a small amount of money, or without raising money. And that's where the whole thing changed, and Kurt was marvelous with the change. He's like a chameleon; he can change his spots in a few days if he wants to. And so with the new approach to it, he fit right in and did a job raising money.

Crawford: Did that begin with your tenure?

Hale: Yes.

### Kurt Adler as Impresario

Crawford: How would you describe Mr. Adler in his various capacities as director, as administrator, as businessman, as negotiator, and so on?

Hale: I think Kurt Adler, to start with, has a monumental ego that stands him in very good stead when he pursues all the various fields in which he is very proficient. He's probably as good a labor negotiator as I've seen. I think he's also a very good negotiator insofar as salaries are concerned, with artists, and all the rest of it. He obviously has a fine talent insofar as repertoire is concerned.

He's a very difficult man to work with in the sense that he's really opinionated and not open to suggestion very readily. He has enormous energy, and I would say that, for his age, I don't know of anybody that has more energy or ability. He certainly doesn't seem to have slowed down in any way.

Crawford: You have said of your relationship with him, "We fought a great deal, but we loved each other, and we always worked it out." Is that your perception?

Hale: Sure. I told you about how he would resign, maybe three or four or five times; I can't remember how many times. But I was the first one that really tried to corral him. And it was difficult to corral him, because I didn't have the artistic background to argue about some things, so he could always hide behind that.

I couldn't argue that Rysanek ought to be here, or somebody ought to be there, or we ought to be able to go with Jenny Jones whom we would get for \$10,000 instead of 12. I didn't have that kind of expertise. However, I could argue with him about figures and objectives, and we did. We fought a lot, up to the

point where he would get so mad he would say, "All right, I resign!"

Crawford: And you accepted.

Hale: I said, "Fine, Adler, have it on my desk in the morning." And that was that. But we got along very well, by the way, and went through a lot. Another thing about Kurt that would drive you crazy was all the details he made you deal with. He would call you for anything under the sun at any time of the night or morning about some little minor thing that he should take care of, or somebody else should take care of.

Crawford: Was that when you were president, or at other times as well?

Hale: It was when I was president. After I was no longer president, he didn't call, although I talked to him many times, because we were friends.

#### The Presidency of William Orrick

Crawford: How would you describe the Orrick presidency that followed your own in 1971?

Hale: I think Bill Orrick was a good president. I think he made some mistakes. For example, I don't believe the general manager of the opera house should be a conductor at the same time. Under Bob's regime and my regime Adler never conducted.

Crawford: He did conduct a few times during Mr. Miller's regime: in 1958, 1960, and 1961.

Hale: In any case, it was few and far between. Bill did a fine job, as did Mr. Follis, then chairman of the board. They did a wonderful job of raising money. Bill, particularly, got the Ford Foundation grant, he got a lot of people to come on board, and that is when the board continued to expand insofar as money-raising was concerned.

Crawford: You really gave the thrust to corporate giving, didn't you?

Hale: I gave the thrust to all giving. But you know, when you give a thrust to something, it takes a little time for it to take hold. And it didn't take hold that quickly.

##

Crawford: Who was responsible for getting the 1970 gift from the Crocker Bank for the funding of Cosi fan Tutte? It was the first corporate gift for an entire production--I think it was in the amount of \$41,000.

Hale: Mr. Follis.

Crawford: Has corporate giving stood up to your expectations?

Hale: They are raising a lot more money now than they did before. I believe Bill (Godward) is doing a splendid job in this regard. I still think that they could do better, but, you know, you have people on the board for a while, and they have to participate. When Gwin Follis was chairman, and Bill president, they seemed to stop board participation. We had just started board participation and hadn't gotten very far, so it needed another pushing which they didn't give.

Gwin was the one who said, "Well, Bob Miller said they shouldn't participate, so why should they?" And that's fine; it represents one philosophy. But it's not a good philosophy in this day and age.

Crawford: It's outdated, isn't it?

Hale: Yes.

#### Public and Private Support of the Opera

Crawford: So what you are saying is that giving has not really picked up to the extent it might have?

Hale: Well, it has picked up over what it was, but I don't think it is near what it should be.

Crawford: San Francisco doesn't rank right at the top in terms of business support of the arts. What do you believe is the outlook for giving, in terms of individuals and the government?

Hale: Well, you tell me what the new tax bill is going to be. If there is going to be a 27 percent top bracket for individuals, I think funding is going to be tougher to get.

Crawford: How about the political climate--do you expect that to change? I'm talking now about government support, the NEA and so forth.



Hale: I'm not familiar with that at this point, although I think that is so. As a matter of fact, I'm the one that got them started with the California Arts Council. Jesse Unruh and George Miller at my behest sponsored this and pushed it. Even the then Governor Ronald Reagan was originally against it. That funding has gone up a lot, I think, since we started. The National Endowment for the Arts will probably expand but I don't know what the final result will be. There is a lot of pressure on government spending.

Crawford: In your 1970 president's letter in the opera program you said, and I quote: "We are like the character in Alice in Wonderland, who had to run faster and faster to stay in the same place."

Hale: [Chuckles] Well, it's another way of saying it!

Crawford: It's a very good way of putting it. And you also said in that letter that the stock market affected the company very much: "The recent decline in the stock market hit the family foundations and trusts, from which we have in the past received considerable support."

Hale: Well, that's true. But that has gone up now. That's no longer a problem.

Crawford: Is that a fairly clear indication of what the market is doing?

Hale: Well, it's a good indication. If people have a lot of stock that they bought for a dollar and it's now \$100, they can get a tax deduction. It's a pretty good deal.

Crawford: Is the company financially as secure as you would like to see it?

Hale: Well, that's a very difficult question. How can you answer that? No, it's not. But that doesn't mean it's not viable. I think it's a very viable, vibrant company.

I would like to see them with a \$100 million endowment, or a \$50 million endowment. I would feel a lot more comfortable about it. They're trying to start an endowment fund. They have a small one, but they don't have nearly enough. The symphony has an endowment fund, and so have the Fine Arts Museums.

Crawford: Yes. The San Francisco Opera started the endowment fund in 1973, rather late.

- Hale: Well, it's not really late, but they haven't gotten anything of a commitment to speak of.
- Crawford: Is that a question of priorities?
- Hale: That they have very little in the fund? It's a question of lack of effort.
- Crawford: Lack of effort--in terms of going out and specifically asking for money for an endowment fund?
- Hale: Well, mounting a really good campaign with people who know what they're doing. You have to put a lot of effort in it. I think the symphony does the best job here in San Francisco.
- Crawford: How do they manage?
- Hale: Well, they've got a lot of very dedicated people, and they have been more attuned to that than the opera has for a long time, for the simple reason that the opera board has not participated much and the opera has lacked good development personnel.
- Crawford: So the symphony board does, and has?
- Hale: Oh my, yes.

#### The Adler Era and a Changing Company

- Crawford: All right, good. That covers that well. How do you perceive that the company changed under Mr. Adler?
- Hale: Oh, I couldn't answer that question, because I was not privy to it enough to really know how it was under Merola. But certainly from what you hear and what you observe, the company's stature has grown considerably by reason of the calibre of the operas which have been given, and by reason of all the new operas that were performed--the more modern operas, and by reason of their excellence.
- Crawford: Did the board have to do with trimming the number of productions per season that had been fourteen and was reduced to ten over the years? In 1953, there were twenty-two performances of fourteen operas in a four-week period; in 1976 there were sixty-one performances of ten operas in ten weeks. That represents a major shift in numbers.



Hale: That's a question of who came first, the chicken or the egg. It was discussed at great length, and the question of the number of productions we should have was analyzed. We found that doing more performances of each opera was less costly in the long run, so we changed or modus operandi; it was a joint effort to try and have a more balanced budget at this time. Obviously Adler was a prime mover.

Crawford: Let me ask you about the executive committee. That was the part of the board that met often, as opposed to the whole board. How did Adler report to the executive committee? What was that dynamic?

Hale: At the executive committee everything was discussed in the minutest detail. Whatever it may have been; whether a warehouse, a performance, a lawsuit, or any other problem, it was discussed in great detail at the executive committee meetings, and Kurt Adler was always there.

Crawford: What new directions do you see the company taking now under the administration of Mr. McEwen?

Hale: I think Terry has started out well. He certainly had a great success with the Ring last summer--it was world-acclaimed. His last fall season was quite good, and I think that this fall is probably even better. He's got an expanded board, a new management, all very smart people. Whether or not they have sufficient understanding of the artistic elements of opera, I'm not sure, but they certainly have the intellectual ability to do a good job if they will spend sufficient time, and I think they will. They have certainly done a good job of getting a lot of other people involved, and Wally Baird has done a good job in this respect and also getting more money raised.

#### The Presidency of Walter Baird

Crawford: How would you characterize Mr. Baird's eleven-year tenure as board president?

Hale: I think Wally did a very good job under very difficult conditions, because he had the crossover between Kurt and Terry. And as you well know, that was swords' points for a long time. Terry is a most unusual and effective man, and I believe that he had a tough time with the turnover.

I think Wally played a very interesting role, and with good results that a lot of people don't give him credit for. It was a terribly difficult time. Kurt was trying to get a better retirement, and he wanted to conduct. Terry wouldn't let him conduct in the beginning--it was very tough on everyone.

Crawford: Do you want to comment on that situation of the transition, and how it was effected?

Hale: No, I don't think so.

#### The McEwen Administration

Crawford: How does Mr. McEwen's approach to the board differ from Mr. Adler's; how does he relate to the board?

Hale: I think he is, in a way, quite similar.

Crawford: He is there as often; he is with the board as often and so on?

Hale: Oh, yes.

Crawford: Do you perceive that his involvement with the company operation is as profound?

Hale: That is a tough question. I think that the result is the same, but Terry works through other people more, and lets other people do jobs, whereas Kurt used to do almost everything.

Crawford: Was there no particular staff member that he relied on?

Hale: John Priest, for technical things. Kurt relied on whomever was on the scene, but still he did it all himself. He still knew about it, whatever it was.

If he had an attorney who was going to have a labor negotiation, fine, he had the attorney do it, but Kurt knew it as well as his lawyer did, if not better.

Crawford: You said that he was such a skilled negotiator. Did you sit in with him on labor negotiations?

Hale: No, I never did, but he negotiated with me all the time!

Crawford: So well you know.

Hale: Well I know.

The Adler Impact

Crawford: The final question: what do you think will be Mr. Adler's impact on the history of opera production?

Hale: Oh boy, that's a tough one. I can't answer that in an intelligent way. All I know is a gut feeling, and I think that he's going to go down in history as having taken a regional opera company and having made it into a world-renowned opera company. This alone should give Kurt plenty of credit, plenty of kudos. I can't be any more erudite than that.

Crawford: Maybe I can ask you what, in your opinion, formed Kurt Adler? What made him the unique kind of a personality and driving force that he was and is?

Hale: Well, of course, you need a psychiatrist to tell what happened to Kurt in his childhood, the main story.

Crawford: [Chuckles] Was his childhood very important?

Hale: I don't know. I can't answer that. I mean, he just is an unusual person with great energy. I think he loses a lot by being so meticulous and failing to delegate. For example, if the San Francisco Opera Company was five times as big as it is, I don't think Kurt could do the job as well.

Crawford: In other words, this company would be harder for him to manage as it is now.

Hale: Oh, I'm not sure as it is now. But if it were all year round, for example, and were much bigger, like the Met, I think it would be tougher for him to do it, because he gets into too much detail all the time, and he doesn't trust anybody else to do something. And you can't run something very big that way. But he did a hell of a job on the San Francisco Opera, because it was more contained.

Crawford: So in a way he served in the time when his kind of directorship was appropriate.

Hale: You know, it's a funny thing. You get into all these start-up companies, and you get a guy who is a genius and he gets the company from zero to \$20 million, and then they usually change

and get another CEO. It's a different place when you have to rely on a lot of other people to do things for you, than when you have complete faith that you are going to do all of whatever it may be.

He was always at every rehearsal, and he was always sticking his nose in everything. I used to go just to see what he was doing, for the fun of it. But he was always into everything! And Nancy would bring his lunch down, his dinner down, and he would eat it while he was having rehearsals. Well, you know all that as well as I do, maybe better. But he is meticulous. He does everything. Well, you can't do everything after a certain point. There are only twenty-four hours in a day, and now he's working twenty-two. Well, you can't do twenty-four.

Crawford: Is there genius there?

Hale: Oh, sure. Very much so. Of course, there has to be.

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University of California  
Berkeley, California

Kurt Herbert Adler and the San Francisco Opera

Walter Baird

PRESIDENT OF THE SAN FRANCISCO OPERA BOARD, 1974-1985

An Interview Conducted by  
Caroline Crawford  
in 1986





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## INTERVIEW HISTORY--Walter Baird

Walter Baird worked with Price Waterhouse from 1936 to 1976, beginning as a junior accountant and rising to the position of partner in charge of the San Francisco office. In 1954 he was assigned by the firm to serve as auditor for the San Francisco Opera Association, and in 1974 was made a member of the opera board of directors. That year he was elected president of the board and he continued as president until 1985, a tenure second only to that of Robert Watt Miller in length.

Mr. Baird's presidency coincided with an era of opera in San Francisco that saw unequalled popularity for the company: fall performances selling at more than 100 percent, the creation of a summer opera season, the building of the Davies Hall, and extensive additions to the opera house, as well as the creation of an opera orchestra whose players worked primarily for the company, rather than for both the opera and the symphony. He also presided over the transition from the Adler to the McEwen administration.

Baird considers himself a surprising choice for president. He had the difficult task of following three presidents who were personally close to Kurt Herbert Adler, which by his own admission he was not, and this fact colors his perspective when evaluating the Adler years.

Mr. Baird was born in Portland, Oregon, in 1915, the son of a surgeon, grew up in Oregon and attended Stanford. He has been active in the community, listing among his special interests the United Crusade, Chamber of Commerce, and the Bohemian Club (of which he was president from 1969 to 1971) and describes himself as a "reasonably accomplished jazz pianist." The interview took place in his office on the thirty-sixth floor of the Bank of America building and he edited the transcript little, preferring to leave it as it was, "warts and all."

Caroline Crawford  
Interviewer/Editor

July 1988  
Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library  
University of California, Berkeley



BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please print or write clearly)

Your full name Nutter M. Baird

Date of birth 7/5/15 Place of birth Portland, Oregon

Father's full name Alvin W. Baird

Birthplace Redwood City, CA.

Occupation Physician + Surgeon

Mother's full name Mary Elizabeth Monell

Birthplace New York

Occupation Nurse (before marriage)

Where did you grow up? Portland, Ore.

Present community San Francisco (residence - Sausalito)

Education BA Stanford U. 1936

Occupation(s) with Price Waterhouse 1936-1976 - started as junior accountant - finished as partner in charge of San Francisco office (member of firm's executive committee)

Special interests or activities Music, reasonably good jazz pianist, various assorted community activities over the years - United Crusade, Chamber of Commerce, professional accounting societies officer + director, President Bohemian Club 1964-71, President S.F. Opera 1974-1975.



## Walter M. Baird

A private funeral will be held tomorrow in San Rafael for Walter M. Baird, 78, a longtime San Francisco accountant, civic leader and former president of the San Francisco Opera Association.

He died Wednesday of lung cancer at his Sausalito home.

Mr. Baird was a native of Portland, Ore., and a 1936 graduate of Stanford University. He spent his 40-year career with the San Francisco office of Price Waterhouse, joining the firm in 1936 as an accountant and rising to become

partner-in-charge of the San Francisco office and a member of the executive committee. He retired in 1976.

From 1974 to 1985, Mr. Baird was the president of the San Francisco Opera Association, the chief fund-raising arm of the opera. He remained a member of the board of directors until his death.

"The opera fared very, very well under his firm direction," said Reid Dennis, current chairman of the association. "He loved opera and, with his background in accounting, it was hard to pull the wool over his eyes. Not even the costume department could do it."

In the early 1970s, he served as president of the Bohemian Club and was given the delicate task of informing the White House that President Richard Nixon would not be allowed to speak at the group's annual gathering.

Mr. Baird was also a former president of the Pacific Union Club and the California State Chamber of Commerce, and a trustee of Dominican College. In 1967, he directed the local fund-raising drive for the American Cancer Society.

A lover of music and wine, Mr. Baird was an accomplished Dixieland jazz pianist and the former proprietor of a small chardonnay vineyard near Kenwood.

He is survived by his wife of 55 years, Jane; four daughters, Mary Jane Baird-Hetzner and Judy Leedy, both of San Anselmo, Nora Turner of Greenbrae and Kathleen Leones of Kentfield, and seven grandchildren.

Contributions in his memory may be made to the San Francisco Opera Association or the Hospice of Marin.





First Associations with San Francisco Opera  
[Date of Interview: April 17, 1986]###

Crawford: Mr. Baird, when did your association with the San Francisco Opera begin and what were your responsibilities?

Baird: I believe it was probably in 1953 or 54 that I first became associated with San Francisco Opera other than as an attendant or participant in their performances. We had been the auditors of the association I guess since it began, and I had recently become a partner, and this was one of my assignments. Basically I simply saw to it that the staff carried out the work and reviewed the financial statements of the association, discussing them with the president of the board and the general director.

Crawford: So you were intimately acquainted with the financial picture of the opera?

Baird: That may be a little strong. I certainly was as intimate as any outside auditor would be with the financial data. I understood their financial position and the results of their operations, but an auditor doesn't actually get in and look at every transaction. He just sees to it that the financial statements fairly present the results of their operations and the financial position. So, that was basically my contact with the opera until I became president in 1974.

Crawford: What was the financial situation or picture during your presidency?

The Financial Picture in the 1960s

Baird: During my presidency it was very good. Prior to my presidency, in the late sixties, it had seriously deteriorated. But during the regimes of Prentis Hale and Bill Orrick, particularly in the

last years of Bill Orrick's tenure, it improved materially. So, it was in good shape when I took over.

Crawford: What was responsible for the improvement? Talk a bit if you will about that period in the late sixties.

Baird: Well, I think that A, we were putting on too many operas and too few performances. We put on as many as twelve, thirteen, and fourteen operas a year in some of those years, and some of them only two or three performances. As inflation goes on and costs go up, that's no way that you can run an opera company and succeed financially. And, not enough money was being raised in the early sixties. It was fairly easy for them to balance the budget with a modest amount of outside giving.

That situation simply changed with the times. As a result, the fund-raising activities didn't conform with what was needed, and, as costs increased far more than ticket prices could be raised, deficits started appearing, and along around the latter part of the 1960s, the company was in bad shape financially. It had a huge deficit. Whatever assets they had were far offset by what they owed the bank. Under Prentis Hale's and Bill Orrick's tenures as president and under the chairmanship of Gwin Follis, that was corrected. At that time also the Ford Foundation helped a great deal, giving us, as I recall, a grant of a million dollars, which was paid over a five-year period if we conformed with getting our financial house in order. We did. And the Ford Foundation paid us the million dollars and that helped greatly to eliminate the deficit, but one of their requirements was that we raise the fund-raising capabilities and just plain get more money in in the way of fund-raising, which we did.

Crawford: And how was it done?

Baird: Well, actually, most of it was done before I was there, so Bill Orrick, Prentis Hale and Gwin Follis could tell you how that came about. But I believe they just simply got the board more interested in going to work and raising money from foundations, corporations, and individuals, and pointing out the difficult situation, financially, that was facing the company.

Then with the Ford Foundation's grant as a stimulus, they raised a lot more money and erased the deficit, and got it into reasonably decent financial shape. By the time I took over, it was in pretty good shape, for an opera company.

Crawford: Was it ever thought that the company would have to suspend its operations, there in the late sixties?

Baird: I think it was a great risk. I told them at one stage--it must have been about 1968 or 69--that if in the following year they hadn't improved their financial situation, Price Waterhouse wouldn't give them an opinion on their financial statements. That kind of shook them up a bit.

Crawford: Does the situation in which they found themselves reflect the end of Robert Watt Miller's presidency?

Baird: Well, that's right. He was the fund-raiser, basically. And, for years it worked very satisfactorily. As I understand it, when he faced a deficit at the end of the year, he found a few people of means to make reasonably decent contributions, and wipe out the deficit. That became impossible as the costs kept going up, and the ticket prices couldn't match it.

#### The Baird Presidency: 1974-1985

Crawford: Let's talk about your term of office. What was your approach to the presidency?

Baird: At the time that I became president, I had not even been on the board, and also I think I probably ceased to be the partner in charge of the audit for several years, because usually nonprofit organizations are given to the junior partner in the office, and by that time I was running the office.

In any event, I was asked to be the president in the summer of 1974, when Bill Orrick was appointed as a federal judge and had to resign, and for one reason or another there didn't seem to be anybody else on the board who they thought ought to be president or had the time and availability.

At that time, as I mentioned before, we were in pretty good shape. We had reduced the number of operas to ten or eleven a year and we were putting on five or six or even seven performances of each opera, and this makes for an easier way to balance the books.

The nature of opera is such that you have a lot of start-up costs to get the opera ready for production: new sets, or even rehabilitation of old sets, fixing up costumes, rehearsal time, and that sort of thing. So there is a huge amount of start-up costs for each opera. Now, if you can amortise that over five or six performances, you can appreciate how much the average

cost per performance will be reduced as compared with putting on two or three performances.

So that change in reducing the number of operas, with the Ford Foundation's million dollars, helped reduce or eliminate the deficit and give us some working capital, and when I took over, the financial position was good. Certainly good by the standard of any other opera company in this country.

That went on for several years, and we were in great financial shape until we decided to put on the summer festival. Here we were taking on, putting on, in the summertime, four operas, four or five performances of each, and at the usual cost of putting on operas, with nothing but ticket revenues to offset those costs.

It was obviously impossible to get our fund-raising increased proportionately in such a quick time to offset the costs taken on there. Remember that we were putting on roughly seventy performances a year in the fall, and here we were adding another twenty-five, so that's an increase of 40 percent. We couldn't increase the fund-raising 40 percent in one year. We knew that we were going to incur deficits for the first few years, but they turned out to be larger than we hoped for, for sundry reasons. As a result we wiped out the surplus that we had accumulated up to the end of 1979 and up until 1983 the deficit got to be an intolerable sum.

Fortunately, through the generosity of Phyllis Wattis, we wiped out the loss for 1983, and 1984 was a relatively inexpensive season. The nature of opera again is such that opera A may cost let us say, an average of 125,000 dollars a performance, whereas opera B, because of large orchestra, large cast, expensive singers, expensive costumes and the like, may cost 175 or 180,000 dollars or even more, so that by the end of 1983 we had a two and a half million dollar deficit.

At the end of '84, we had wiped out that deficit through the Phyllis Wattis challenge grant, so we were in reasonably solvent shape by the end of 1984. So, the financial picture over the many years in which I've had some association, which I suppose if you start with 1952 or 1953 is thirty years, has been up and down.

Crawford: You became president of the board at the time of the company's greatest popularity and renown. What particular strengths of yours was the board looking to in electing you to the presidency at that time?



Baird: A, I can only conclude that there was no one on the board who could do the job and had the time and B, I was familiar with the financial aspects of opera. C, I knew a lot of the board, particularly the business people; I had been president of the Bohemian Club from 1969 to 1971 and these were a couple of successful years for the club. I really never found out why me.

Crawford: Let's talk about your presidency per se, your approach to it, the kind of time you invested in it, what you attempted to strengthen, what weaknesses you saw.

Baird: Well, I remember I made a short speech to the board the day that I was elected president, and I thought that I ought to say something about what I was going to do. Basically, what I said was that I was just going to continue the good work that Bill Orrick and Gwin Follis had done in the recent years. I had no reason to try to shake the branches or shake the trees or have a revolution; it was going well. So all I wanted to do was do as well as Bill had done and carry on. I had hoped that we would improve the financial situation.

I mention at this time that during Bill Orrick's administration the endowment fund was started. We had an investment fund which Mr. Miller had raised over the years that had amounted to several hundred dollars--I think around eight hundred thousand dollars--and we called that an investment fund. Orrick decided we ought to have a real endowment fund, and he set a goal and got the board to approve a goal of five million including the investment fund, which at that time had a market value of around a million.

We received an anonymous gift of a million dollars from a person in the San Francisco area, and then the board was to raise an additional three million dollars, having a goal of a five million dollar endowment. This was raised on a five-year basis, and by the time I took over most of the pledges for that three million dollars to be raised from the board and from the public had been secured. The job wasn't quite finished, but the committee chairpeople were all appointed and were still working on it and Emmett Solomon was chairman of that endowment fundraising committee.

So that job was pretty well done by the time I appeared on the scene, and when I took over, the general fund was in pretty good shape, having erased its deficit. The endowment fund was well under way. We have, of course, the affiliated companies, Spring Opera, and Western Opera, which weren't in very good financial shape, and fortunately the Opera Association was doing well up to the late seventies and we were able to bail them out

and keep them going, and basically during my twelve years we went through the first few years getting on very well.

One other aspect in the late seventies that caused our costs to significantly increase was that we had to get our own orchestra. With the opening of the symphony hall, we could no longer share the symphony's players when our seasons were completely separate. About half, or more, of our players were also players in the San Francisco Symphony.

When our programs, which commenced in 1980, overlapped, we had to get our own orchestra. Some of the players with the symphony opted to come with us rather than to play with the symphony, which was their right under the union rules, but most of them stayed with the symphony. So we had to secure a lot of new musicians.

This had its costs, because we had to, in effect, have a lot of rehearsals solely so that the musicians would at least have met each other. That was a big expense.

Crawford: Let me have you expand on that a bit. What were the ramifications of the opera having its own orchestra?

Baird: Well, I think it was good. First of all, at the same time, we had decided to have a summer season, so we were going to give the orchestra more work than we had when we only had the fall season. But it did mean searching the country for new, competent musicians. Fortunately, San Francisco is a desirable place to live, and we were able to do that.

We also had to be very careful. It is simple enough just to get an orchestra, but it would be an orchestra of low quality. We wanted to have an orchestra of at least the quality of the orchestra we'd had when we had shared these musicians with the symphony, and Adler was able to do that. He searched the country, as I understand it, and found people, and attracted them to come to San Francisco to join our orchestra.

But you don't get a good orchestra by simply calling up eighty musicians and telling them to show up at 10:00 some morning for a rehearsal and have a good orchestra. They have to learn to know how the other, fellow players play and how they work together, and it takes a long time to put together an orchestra. I think we did, and I think we have an excellent orchestra now. But it ain't easy.

Crawford: That's right. What kind of investment of time is it to be a board president for a major opera company?



Baird: Oh, I spent a lot of time. I retired in 1976, so I was president two years when I was still working, and in addition to that I had an assignment where I was spending 40 to 50 percent of my time in Europe, so obviously my responsibilities at the San Francisco office of Price-Waterhouse had to be reduced. It just wasn't practical for me to really run this office when I was away for so much of the time.

So when I was in town I had a fair amount of time I could devote to the opera's activities. When I was out of town, I was often on the telephone. Once I retired in 1976, and had very little to do, other than my eleemosynary activities and my personal affairs, I could devote a lot of time to it. And so I did. It isn't absolutely necessary to devote as much time to it as I did. I suppose most of those years I was spending what may be considered, oh, 30 to 40 percent of normal working days on the opera.

Crawford: I remember seeing you at the opera house quite a bit.

Baird: I was there a great deal. However, you don't have to spend that much time, and also I was doing a lot of things I could have got other people on the board to do. I simply had the time, so I did it. But I don't suppose you could satisfactorily do the job unless you're prepared to spend at least 10 to 15 percent of the normal working day at it. I would say that that's about the minimum.

Of course, the time requirements bob up and down during the year because opera is a very seasonal type of thing. In fact, here we are in April; there isn't very much doing in April. The staff, of course, is getting ready for the summer season, but it's not the time for big fund-raising, it's not the time for preparing the budget; the current year's budget has long been prepared and adopted. It's a little bit early to expect to fine-tune next year's budget, so at this state of the game, the president could easily just disappear for a month or so and nobody would notice. Just relax.

It's seasonal just as the opera is seasonal, but overall I would say that the president ought to be able to spend certainly a minimum of 10 percent of his time. I would say that he need not spend more than 20 percent of his time, unless he just likes to do it and has the time.

Crawford: As Robert Watt Miller must have also.

Baird: Yes.

Crawford: What do you recall of his presidency and chairmanship?

Baird: Well, very little. As the auditor I hadn't really very much to do with Mr. Miller, except once a year to go in and talk over the financial statements with him. Most of the work was done with the staff, with the general director and the controller, and the accounting department; that sort of thing.

I knew him personally, and I know that he spent a great deal of time. I never was at the opera that I didn't see him walking around, inspecting the premises or watching a performance from different locations. Although he had a box at the opera, I often saw him in different areas, listening to how the singers sounded from the Grand Tier, or downstairs in the Orchestra. And I know that he spent a great deal of time, and, of course, he spent a great deal of time in the artistic end of the thing, because he loved it.

Crawford: That was rather unique, wasn't it?

Baird: Absolutely unique. He knew every important singer that was hired and entertained them and got to know them personally, visited them in their dressing rooms. Opera was--I guess it was his life. I once heard his assistant saying he spent more time at the opera house than he did running Pacific Lighting Corporation.

Crawford: You have talked a bit about Mr. Hale and Mr. Orrick as presidents. Any other recollections you want to make?

Baird: Bill Orrick completely severed his relations with the board, when he became a federal judge. He's still an important contributor, and still an opera lover. And Hale has been a tower of strength over the years, particularly in the executive committee.

#### The Structure of the Board of Directors

Crawford: Well, that leads us to the next question, which is the structure and function of the board of directors. It has changed very radically since Mr. Miller's time in terms of numbers and committees and responsibilities.

Baird: We now, under our bylaws, are permitted to have up to a hundred directors. We never have, but I believe it's in the range of seventy-five to eighty now. And that's a large increase since

prior to 1967. I've forgotten exactly when they decided that they ought to expand the board of directors. But it was a much smaller board (eighteen in 1966). I suspect there was not an executive committee prior to that time.

There were a few officers when Bob Miller was president. He had Mickey Hellman as treasurer, and I suppose he had a corporate secretary--every organization has to have a secretary. But it was run by a very few people, i.e., the board aspects of the thing. And that was one of the problems, I think, in fund-raising: that nobody was interested to raise funds if he wasn't on a board.

So the board was expanded until it had its now large number, and, it now has, as a part of the board, an executive committee. The executive committee is a group of members of the board who have real interest in opera and have some time to devote to it, and it includes the officers. I think when I first became president, it included the officers, which I think at that time were four or five, and three non-officer directors. And for the first few years I was president it was that small a group, which normally met on a monthly basis. Later, I determined that that was somewhat too small, and it was increased to, I believe, ten. And now, under Tully Friedman and Reid Dennis's administration, it increased substantially to about twenty or twenty-two.

Crawford: With ten committees, including a committee for political affairs.

Baird: Yes. The committee structure has been substantially expanded. When I first became president, I think we had two committees. We had a fund-raising committee, and we had a financial committee or something like that. It never met. The latter committee, the financial committee, never met.

Crawford: Why was that?

Baird: There wasn't any need for them. They didn't have anything to think about very much. The day-to-day finances were going along all right. We didn't have enough money in the endowment fund, so they didn't have to worry about investments yet. That changed as we got more money in the endowment fund, particularly.

Then the development committee was established and a vice-president in charge of the development activities. I might just mention in terms of the fund-raising activities the company didn't have a development department when I became president.

There was a nice lady who was the secretary and she typed all the minutes and she sent out all the notices of board meetings, etc., and she typed all the thank-you letters to the contributors, but she didn't raise any money; it was all done voluntarily. And there wasn't a development committee at all. That harks back to the days when we didn't need one.

Crawford: Is it a very large development department now?

Baird: Now it is. Starting about 1976 or '77 we did hire a new person to start a development department, and that had grown. It's still relatively small by the standards of other major performing arts organizations, but I think there are eight, ten, or twelve people in there and headed at the top with professional people.

Our fund-raising activities have been significantly expanded, too, with a vice-president, Bill Godward, who has done it for several years, and we have it broken down into several subdivisions: corporate development, individual development, foundation development, special-events development--that kind of thing. So it's a major activity.

We had a lot of other committees, too. I think this is a move forward and probably I should have done a lot more in expanding the committees, because it seems that nonprofit organizations are successful financially because they get a lot of people involved. They get a feeling of closeness with a large number of people.

Crawford: What about the idea of an artistic committee? Did it come up?

Baird: At some stage of the game, before I was president, they decided to have an artistic committee, and two or three people were appointed to the artistic committee.

After I'd been appointed president--elected president, I guess--Adler told me that he'd resign if I appointed an artistic committee, or an artistic policy committee, or something like that. So I didn't. I might say that the committee that was appointed, I don't think it ever really met. To the extent that I think that an artistic committee really can function, our executive committee took that responsibility over. I don't think that an artistic committee--I could be wrong in this area--but I have often wondered what the artistic committee of the symphony really did. I don't think they can tell the musical director that they want to hear the Brahms First next year, or Beethoven's Ninth the following year.

Crawford: No, but according to Mr. Boone, in his oral history, Agnes Albert did work very closely with certain conductors. And then Mr. Ozawa did not take kindly to an artistic committee.

Baird: Well, I know Agnes Albert and I can understand that first of all she is knowledgeable, and secondly, if you have a person they respect in this area they'll probably listen to him or her. I don't think there was anybody on our board Adler would have respected--certainly not I--in that kind of an area.

There does need to be some kind of artistic control from the board level, I think, because the general director can go off on his own and do things the public may not like or the public isn't going to pay for and he's going to have to be brought back in that regard. Now, Adler's pretty good at that. He knew that the public liked Tosca, and probably wouldn't like Lear. And that's right; the public loves Tosca.

Crawford: Well, he has talked about that. He wanted to do Lear; did he bring that to the board?

Baird: He mentioned that he was going to do it, and he mentioned it early enough so we could have said, "Nonsense, you're not going to do it." But I think he would have quit. I think that if the board, other than in a general way, tries to tell the artistic folks what they're going to do, you'll soon have to find replacements for them--if they're any good.

Crawford: So there was no question of shared artistic control.

Baird: No. There really wasn't any question of artistic control with Adler. Now I think that maybe Bob Miller had artistic control of Adler, because Bob Miller gave him the job.

Crawford: Do you know anything about that?

Baird: Well, I know that Bob Miller was president when Merola died, in August, 1953, all of a sudden out there in Stern Grove. I suppose that's in your records already, and it is my understanding that Miller, with the fall season upon us, made Adler the temporary director, and didn't appoint him general director until a year or two later. I know that Adler had a great admiration for Bob Miller, so I think Bob Miller could tell Adler what to do. And Adler would willingly accept it, I think.

Crawford: Did that extend to repertoire, casting?

##



Baird: I think he could have. Well, it's impossible for the president to do much about casting. He can say, "Why don't you get Pavarotti," and the general director can say, "I can't fit him in for the next two years, between his calendar and the operas he sings and what I am tentatively proposing to do, I can't get him. There's no room." I'm sure that if Bob Miller listened to a singer Adler had brought out and didn't like that person, that person would have never appeared again while Miller was president. Now if I told Adler I didn't like a singer, he'd say, "what do you know about that?"

Crawford: In other words, you didn't have that same relationship.

Baird: No, no, I know I never did. I'm sure Prentis Hale didn't; I'm sure Bill Orrick didn't. It was just a sign of the times. Now, I think, for example, my relationships with Terry McEwen are quite different.

Crawford: How so?

Baird: Well, I hired Terry McEwen. Now, everybody says that Adler hired him. Well, it is a fact, and I didn't do it singlehandedly, that we decided that we had to have a unanimous opinion of the executive committee on anybody that we were going to offer the job to. We got the unanimous opinion of the executive committee that Terry looked good, so we offered him the job.

Crawford: But Adler presented him as a candidate.

Baird: He brought him to us, yes.

Crawford: Were there other candidates? That was something I wanted to get to eventually.

Baird: There never really was another candidate. I discussed candidates with Adler over a period of three or four years. I would hear names here and there, and I would discuss them with Adler. Adler would always have a reason why they would not be good for San Francisco Opera, and I had to believe him. He knew them; he knew their artistic capabilities; he knew how they'd done wherever they were. I didn't, and nobody else on our board did, and the role of the general director, at least as we have had it, required a person who had the artistic capabilities, at least the knowledge of opera, that Adler did, pretty much.

He also had to be a pretty good business man in a way. That's the way we run. And if we could find anybody that would fit the role, that was dandy. I discussed with Adler and with

other people, too, what kind of a general director should we get. Would we ever find another Adler, who I guess has to be classified as very good in the artistic area, and not bad in the business end of the thing?

Crawford: Jerry Spain said in a recent interview that Adler would have made a successful career as a leader in industry. Do you agree?

Baird: Highly unlikely in my judgment.

### Mr. Adler and the Board of Directors

Crawford: Let's focus on Mr. Adler and his interaction with the board.

Baird: Well, of course, the board only met two or three times a year; it's meeting more now. I suppose some years only a couple of times; perhaps at the annual meeting, and once or twice more.

The executive committee basically met monthly. At the board level, Adler always made a report. It was pretty general; what he was doing. With the executive committee it was quite a detailed report, on a month-to-month basis: whom he'd hired, how he was getting along in a union negotiation, what his problems were, what his triumphs looked to be.

His report would often take the better part of an hour at each monthly executive committee meeting, and discussions of-- not "shall I put on Tosca?" or "shall I put on Lear?"--so much as how we should react to some problem that had arisen. Not artistically, perhaps, but how far could we go in a union negotiation, what are we going to do about the War Memorial Board raising our rent, general administrative problems that occur in any organization, and he would be very detailed with us there.

Sometimes he would raise the problem after he'd solved it, but generally he would give us detailed reports, and at those meetings his chief assistants were usually there. The chief financial person was there, the chief fund-raising person was always there.

Sometimes we would have more private meetings, solely with Adler, and I suppose I used to, because I was hanging around the opera house every once in a while, just pop in, and if he was there, sit down and say, "What's doing?"



He kept a great deal of these things to himself until the last minute, because that was his nature. He did always meet with the executive committee, if he were in town, and we could ask him any question; he would never fail to answer a question.

Crawford: Who did most of the fund-raising? He often complained about the fact that he had to do so much fund-raising.

Baird: Well, I know he complained about that--that he was the only fund-raiser in the place. And it isn't true. The fund-raising he did, and he did very well at it, was for new productions, or some "special" thing.

Crawford: Would he go to an individual with a specific request?

Baird: Yes. Now, he's the only one that can do that; that is, he's the only one that can "close the deal," you might say. This has happened, that somebody knows somebody well and can get them slightly interested, saying, "Why don't you give a production; you've got a little money?" I could do that to somebody I know who had the capabilities and a love for opera, but then they would say, "Well, tell me more." That's the time you've got to get the general director in there, and say, "I need a new Tosca set."

Crawford: I see; he would close the deal.

Baird: Yes. Or, "Here's an opera that nobody's done, and by God it ought to be done in San Francisco." Terry McEwen's doing it today; he complains about it, too. But he's the only one that can do it.

Crawford: So what you're saying is the fund-raising was generated within the board.

Baird: Well, general fund-raising. Adler never came to me to ask for any money; he knows I don't have enough money. He wouldn't bother me; he knows I can't give a production, and he's not going to go out and ask somebody for five thousand dollars, or a thousand dollars, or even ten thousand dollars; that's the board's job.

For instance, just a hypothetical thing, a little problem we have now. We're not doing the radio broadcasts now, because our sponsors have decided they don't want to sponsor it anymore, and we're having difficulty finding a sponsor for radio programs. The general director can do a better job of selling a potential sponsor for the radio broadcasts than anyone on the

board. He knows what's going on; he knows which radio stations he's going to get--

Crawford: Did he get the sponsorship for the broadcasts?

Baird: I suppose he did, originally; I wasn't there when they were going on at that time. We finally had to have a second sponsor, because the costs kept increasing, and when they finally doubled, that sponsor decided it was not worth their while to sponsor any more, and they did it for a couple of years, but not wholly, and so we found another sponsor to pick up half the tab.

I don't remember whether Adler was really responsible for that or not; it could be. That person has been a very generous giver for many, many years, and wanted to do something different. And now that person again wanted to do something different; they keep giving us money, they're always available. And naturally, they don't want to talk to some minor flunky in our board structure about what they want to do with their money, because it's a substantial amount of money, hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Crawford: So they talk to Mr. McEwen.

Baird: So they talk to Mr. McEwen, and they used to talk to Adler; that's the kind of person that you have to have to get the big gifts. You've got to get a little romance in the game, you know.

For instance, the Medallion Society we now have, which is proving to be very successful, started just two or three years ago for people who give fifteen hundred annually or more, and we give them a lot of benefits--that was thought up by the development director. Or the Guild: their fund-raising activities vis-à-vis ours has been done, really, at the board level and the development department level.

Adler did a very good job of finding money for productions, particularly new productions, and he always had to have two or three new productions each year to stay in business.

Crawford: Did he come to the board and press for new productions, and say, "I need this amount raised"?

Baird: Constantly!

Crawford: That's what he pressed for.

Baird: Constantly. He always wanted more productions, and he couldn't get all he wanted. No opera company can. And so we started sharing operas, sharing productions. Before, if we decided to put on a different opera, one never produced west of Chicago and Chicago hadn't done it for twenty years and the Met hadn't done it for fifteen, an opera that isn't done very much, we'd find somebody to build us the set. And it would lay in our warehouse taking up space for maybe another fifteen years! Or maybe forever; maybe people didn't like it. We've used our Lear set now twice; will anybody else ever use that set?

Crawford: They should.

Baird: They should; it's a wonderful opera, but nobody else seems to want to put it on, and there's our set. Now, actually, there are probably only three or four stages in the country that can handle it, and I'm sure that we'd be delighted to rent it to them at a modest sum: pack it up, put it in a truck, and send it to them, and get a little of our money back.

Crawford: That's to be encouraged, I suppose.

Baird: Sure it is!

#### Co-Production in the Opera World

Crawford: What about the Gramma Fisher Foundation?

Baird: Well, Gramma Fisher required production-sharing in some of their grants, and they would make a deal and say, "We'll produce"--not a Tosca; everybody's got to have a Tosca, and a Bohème, and a Carmen; pick some opera that is not done a lot. They would get three companies and say, "Why don't you put on Berg's opera," and if we all agreed to put it on, one would put it on one year, and one the next, and one the third. They would pay for it, and each company owned a third of it. That's a fine thing. Last year we got together with Houston for revivals of two productions: Turandot and Falstaff.

Crawford: It really makes economic sense; I don't know if it makes artistic sense.

Baird: Sure, it makes artistic sense, as long as the managers of the different opera companies agree that the designer has done a good job.

Crawford: The concept, that's important.

Baird: Yes, and if you all agree on the concept and you find a designer that you all agree to work with, that's fine. He designs it to fit all the stages, and then somebody builds it. We're the best set-builder in the country, so we might as well build it, but, you know, it costs a third, let's say, if you can find two other companies willing to pick up a third each. And take our new Orlando; how often are we going to put on Orlando? I don't know, but not every year.

### The Problem of Enlarging the Orchestra Pit

Crawford: We were talking here about what Mr. Adler pressed the board for, and I know he wanted to enlarge the pit for years. Was it a board decision not to enlarge the pit by removing those two front rows of seats?

Baird: Well, no. We would do that when he had an opera that required it, usually Wagner operas or Strauss operas, when you have to have another twenty musicians, and we'd take out the first two rows of seats. To change the opera house, of course, you have to have the approval of the War Memorial board of trustees. But it also eliminated sixty seats, and that eliminates a couple of thousand dollars a performance, seventy performances, a hundred and forty thousand dollars! We never had the luxury to just....

Crawford: But you do now, though.

Baird: Yes, it's a larger pit. And goodness knows that it needed a larger pit; it wasn't built big enough in the first place.

Crawford: Certain conductors wouldn't conduct here with such a small pit; that was my understanding.

Baird: Well, that's what I'm told.

Crawford: So that was an artistic limitation. Was Mr. Adler willing to sacrifice the extra revenue?

Baird: He never forced the issue. He got along with it; he took them [the first two rows] out when he just had to have it. I don't recall his ever saying, "I've got to have that larger pit on a permanent basis." He may think he'd said it, but it didn't impress me that he had.

Expansion and the Summer Season of 1981

Crawford: Did the board often look at the budget and say, "No, you can't do an extra Ring cycle, you can't have an extra series of performances," this sort of thing?

Baird: I'm told that that's the way Orrick got the thing shaped up: by saying, "You are putting on too few performances of too many operas." And I think Adler admits that he cut him back; he'd still like to put on thirteen operas, and Orrick said, "We just plain can't afford it." And the arithmetic is obvious, and Adler knew that. So, no, I don't think Orrick said, "You've got Carmen here; no Carmen." I think he said, "You've got thirteen operas here; no thirteen operas. Cut out one, or cut out two; we've got to get back to eleven operas, or ten operas.

Crawford: That didn't occur during your time?

Baird: No, because we were down to the ten, and that's all we did, were ten operas a year. And, of course, we managed to get the attendance up so we could put on the seventy-odd performances. We couldn't put on any more with the time available to us, since you really couldn't start until after Labor Day--nobody would buy a ticket before Labor Day--and we had to get out of there the Sunday after Thanksgiving, because the symphony opened up. There wasn't any time, there wasn't any space.

When the symphony hall was built and the opera house was going to be more available, then we had an opportunity to expand, and we did expand a little bit, by performances, not the number of operas, because we were selling 100 percent of our tickets at that time, so we put on a few more performances.

But we still had to get out of there in time for The Nutcracker, and then we discussed having this summer program, or a second series, or we could have used the opera house, I think, in January. We had to negotiate with the ballet when they were going to put on their bit, because now the symphony was out of there, and the ballet could finally have some room. They were stuck under the old regime; they had to fit their performances in with the symphony, and the symphony had prior rights, so they just kind of had to squeeze in there in odd moments. Now that the symphony was going to be gone in the wintertime, the opera house was now open. We gave some thought that maybe we should have an expanded season and take a vacation.

Crawford: Rather than summer?



Baird: Rather than summer. That was given some thought in the early game, when the symphony hall was going to be built. "What are we going to do? Nothing? Or expand, or what?" The summer festival idea came, I think, as a result of Adler talking to people at City Hall: The summer festival in San Francisco for the performing arts--and maybe other kinds of arts, I don't know--is just a wonderful thing for San Francisco, like some of the European festivals.

Well, we were ready, willing and able, so the final result was, we decided that we would put on our summer festival, and the idea at that time, as I understood it, was that it had the blessing of City Hall, that eventually we would have a real summer festival: the symphony, the ballet, the opera, maybe have some chamber music, and have a real summer festival under some kind of common umbrella.

Well, that all fell apart; we put on the season all by ourselves. The symphony, of course, started putting on their thing, Beethoven thing, or Mozart, whatever, I've forgotten now. [Mostly Mozart] The ballet at that time really wasn't very interested; I don't think they have the facilities really to join in. I might mention that, in the meantime, Proposition 13 came into being.

Crawford: 1978.

Baird: Yes. So the effect was that City Hall said, "You ain't gonna get much more money from us; if there's anything in the hotel tax, we'll try to help, but you can't expect any mammoth monies from the city itself, from the general fund, because we aren't going to have it; you'll be lucky if the opera house is even open."

At that time they were starting to double our rent, raising all kinds of difficulties; the poor old War Memorial Board didn't know how they were going to balance their budget, and Feinstein was saying, "You've got to balance your budget; you've got to double the rents, maybe close everything up." She was threatening that: "You're not gonna get a dime from me, because it's got to go to libraries and policemen and firemen."

That never came to pass, of course, and I spent two or three afternoons with Madame Feinstein--along with Brayton Wilbur and [Richard] LeBlond--arguing with the mayor that we couldn't afford any more rent. She said, "I don't believe you."

Well, anyhow, we got a hundred thousand dollars out of the city to promote the summer festival for 1981. A committee was

formed that represented the symphony, the ballet, the opera, and actually put out brochures of what all three organizations were going to do, and so each did what they wanted to do. So really there wasn't any umbrella organization; it was working with a leaky umbrella if anything.

The next year they hired a consultant to talk to people about this summer festival concept. They talked to people at City Hall, they talked to people from all the arts organizations, they talked to a lot of people around town. (They never came to me for some reason--I don't know why they didn't.) They wrote quite a big report; the answer was, nobody cares. They didn't want one.

Crawford: Did they think that it wouldn't be well-attended? Mr. Adler used to say that in summer people wouldn't go to performances.

Baird: Well, nobody in the city would say, "I want it; I think it would be great and I'd go to some performances." I don't think that sales of tickets were so much the problem as the financing of it.

Crawford: Did you think the opera, being so well endowed or so stable, could take on the burden of another season?

Baird: It wasn't put that way. It's just that there were going to be huge deficits and we were incurring huge deficits, and obviously something had to happen. We couldn't have continued the summer festival ad infinitum the way we were doing it in '81, '82, and '83. We couldn't afford it, even though our fund-raising has improved greatly.

Crawford: Even with the Ring? The summer Ring certainly was successful.

Baird: Oh, highly, it sold all the tickets. We could have probably charged double. We didn't want to. We thought the people that had been our supporters in the past ought to get the tickets to that. The Ring is so expensive to put on, I don't think the ticket prices covered probably more than 45 percent, leaving out the new sets.

Crawford: Was the summer season the creation of Mr. Adler?

Baird: Well, I think he got the idea first and was talking with the mayor. I've forgotten. He might even have discussed it with Alioto. I know that he'd discussed it with Moscone, and, of course, before Proposition 13, "wouldn't it be wonderful for everybody--yes, it would be wonderful--wonderful for San Francisco! It's a tourist place anyhow, and think of all the



people who would love to come to San Francisco and have a wonderful vacation, and have all these artistic things going on!"

Then when it got down to, ultimately, who was going to pay for it, nobody wanted to pay for it. They went to all the festivals around the world, and asked how they pay for it. Well, all of those in Europe the government subsidizes to the tune of at least 75 percent of their costs. Ticket prices brought in 10, 15, 20, 25 percent maybe.

Baird: A different political climate altogether.

Crawford: Oh, sure! So they concluded: A, nobody really wants it that much in town, the important people in town, anyway. I think somebody who lives out on Thirteenth Avenue may think or say, "It's wonderful," but they're not going to pay for it. They're just going to buy tickets, but nobody at City Hall, none of the organizations, figure they could really support it.

The symphony was doing what they wanted to do, anyhow. They didn't need some umbrella to promote what the symphony was doing. I'm not even sure that--by this time McEwen's in the seat--I don't think he cared very much about the grand-festival aspect. He wants to do his thing, and he'll do it. "Don't bother me with anybody else telling me how to do it, or what we're going to do. We'll do what we want to do." And I don't think that you could get anybody very excited on our board or on our executive committee. I cooled on the whole concept, when I saw what difficulties there were in the thing.

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Baird: One of the mistakes in the first summer, I believe, was putting on Lear. It wasn't the time to put on Lear. We should have put on Lear in the fall, when tickets are easily sold. Nobody understood the summer festival anyhow. Despite all the publicity and all the advertising we did, I think the general public thought this was Spring Opera at the opera house.

Crawford: It's easily confused.

Baird: It's easily confused. "It isn't the same as the fall season. They're going to have inexperienced singers. And with this thing Lear, maybe it's experimental." I didn't realize that. Really, all we were doing was putting on the same kind of opera and the same quality of opera as we put on in the fall, which it was.

As a result, we sold less than 50 percent of the tickets the first year. And God, I don't know how few--I've forgotten now--how few Lear tickets were sold. People don't buy tickets to operas they don't understand. If they know the story of Lear, they say, "Gee, that can't be much fun."

Crawford: So they would have to be convinced, wouldn't they?

Baird: That's right. You've got to be a new music freak. For instance, it's not the sort of thing you want to listen to on the radio. I would think it would sound dreadful on the radio. It's cacophonous, with loud noises and dissonance and that sort of stuff. It's a great opera and I love it. I loved it better the second time than I did the first time. I think it's great, but it isn't everybody's cup of tea.

This year's summer festival offers all well-known operas: Traviata, Cav/Pag, Lucia. I think that if the summer season is to continue, it's got to be stuff that the public likes, or they're not going to buy the tickets. There are other things to do on a sunny afternoon or evening. If he's a tourist, he doesn't want to go to something that's dismal. He'll go to something that's fun, perhaps. So I think we have to have popular operas, ones that we're sure we can sell tickets to.

I think we ought to pay some attention to the costs of one opera versus another opera. For instance, Lear is a very expensive opera to put on. Huge cast, huge orchestra, massive sets. And whenever you get things like that, it costs a lot of money. If you need sixty stagehands instead of forty, there goes a lot of money. Every time you put it on, twenty more stagehands, and they don't come cheap. You may have a chorus of eighty as against a chorus of ten or twenty--all those people. If you've got an orchestra of a hundred, it's a lot different than an orchestra of sixty-five or seventy.

Mozart operas are cheap to put on. Usually you don't have many in the orchestra, two or three good singers, a few people in the chorus, and a tiny orchestra. You may pay the singers a lot; you may pay the conductor a great deal. But still the cost is pretty cheap.

#### Costing Productions

Crawford: Does the board now work out those artistic deals with Mr. McEwen to a greater extent than it did with Mr. Adler?

Baird: Well, I think they work more closely with him, and I think we are more conscious of these things. I think we get better information; McEwen gets better information, but I think there's a long way to go.

In this area opera companies haven't paid as much attention to basic cost accounting as they ought. This isn't just criticism of San Francisco. I've read how the Met believes they're so much more efficient now than they used to be, and I've talked with Ardis Krainik in Chicago, and she thinks that they have better information.

You can price an opera, once you know how much you're going to pay the tenor, and how much you're going to pay the soprano, and you know how much the orchestra costs. You've given so much a rehearsal, and all of these things are very important in determining how much it's finally going to cost to get that opera on the stage for that night.

You can come close enough so that you know that opera A is a relatively inexpensive opera. Let's say you grade them A, B, C, and D, with A being the lowest cost and D being the highest. I don't think it would be much trouble to take any opera in the country and give it to a sophisticated cost accountant who has been around the opera house for a little while, to grade each of those.

Crawford: And you tend to do that now more than you did.

Baird: Yes, I think so; yes.

Crawford: Mr. Adler used to say, "I gave the season to the board on a gold plate."

Baird: Well, he did.

Crawford: Was that the way it was?

Baird: Pretty much, yes. Yes, that's the way it was. And I think McEwen pretty much does it. He'll tell us earlier what he's proposing to do, and I have had many discussions with Terry, who I think was a little bit inexperienced in this area. Well, hell, he had never put on an opera; he had made records. You can see that this was very important in some of the years where we had financial losses, where you put on ten operas, four of them in my Class D, very expensive, two were in Class C, and only one was an A opera. This doesn't have anything to do with the quality of the opera.

Crawford: You're just talking about the money.

Baird: Just talking money. That's why I think in '84, we were so successful. That was probably an A- average, whereas in bad years, you get a C- average in terms of aggregate costs.

Adler did have a sixth sense up here. He knew that Tosca was a relatively inexpensive opera to produce, and he knew that Carmen was a lot more expensive. He couldn't tell you down to the nickel, but he just knew it was. He's adding up a chorus of fifty, and he's adding up an orchestra of seventy-five, and he knows that the sets are heavy and there are five changes of scenes, whereas in some other opera, the sets are light, a lot of scrims and velvet, and that sort of thing. It takes ten stagehands instead of thirty.

He used to tell me, and I'm sure he was telling me the truth in this, that he used to look over the payroll, and he would call in whoever was in charge and say, "You don't need fifteen electricians on La Bohème. You can get along with twelve."

Crawford: He knew the production details.

Baird: He knew the nuts and bolts of the game, yes.

#### Adler as Administrator

Crawford: Let me ask you about that, your impressions of him in his various capacities as an administrator.

Baird: Well, I think he was extremely good in the areas I'm talking about. He could look over a payroll and say, "You don't need this. I've put on La Bohème fifty times since I've been general director. I know we can do it with twelve electricians. There has got to be somebody around who looks over that sort of thing. You had fifteen. That's three electricians, and I suppose they cost, I don't know, \$150 each. Not huge, but that's the way you save money in things like that.

Crawford: Was he scrupulous about the details?

Baird: Yes. He was very good at that. Of course, he had loads of experience; certainly by the time I had arrived on the scene, he had had loads of experience. I think he was very good in that

area, and I think he had this fifth or sixth sense; maybe seventh, I don't know. So that he could know that when he produced this thing on the golden platter, it was a balanced season in costs as well as artistically.

Now I think we can do a much better job in the cost area. I've told him, if I wanted to take the time, there's a book that's published for the professionals that shows for each opera--two books that thick--that tells you what kind of soprano you have to have, whether you need a really first-class one; gives you the ranges, and whether she's got to be singing up here on the top B flat all night long.

And then the principals, the four or five principals who are in most operas. The range, the general quality of the voices that you have to have, the type of voice, and then it tells you how big a chorus you need; it tells you how big an orchestra you need, how many fiddles, how many flutes, how many piccolos, how many this and that; how many scene changes. So I think that a knowledgeable person could just take that little book and almost price it out for his own company.

First of all, there are a lot of operas a smaller opera company can't do: "There isn't a soprano in the world that can do it who will come for our price." But if it's going to take a \$10,000-a-performance soprano, okay; you're going to hire her for six performances, and you know what that's going to cost. Or you can do it per performance: we've got a \$10,000 soprano, we've got a \$9,000 tenor, and here's a father figure that takes a pretty good bass, but you can get a good enough one for \$2,500.

You can price that. You can price the orchestra pretty closely, once you've decided how many rehearsals it's going to take. If you've got the sets, you know how heavy they are, how many stagehands it takes. If you're going to build new sets, the fellow who's in charge of that--in our case, John Priest--he can tell you how many stagehands it's going to take. Chorus, the same way. You know what the theater costs.

Crawford: Did Mr. Adler do this for the board?

Baird: No. They would sometimes do it after the fact, but they didn't do it in the planning. And the accounting department wasn't capable of doing it.

Crawford: They do now?



Baird: They do now, I think. I think they've got people out there that can do it, and they should do more and more. Now the Met claims they've got this whole thing on a computer. If the artistic director says, "Gee, how much do you suppose Carmen is going to cost?" they poke a button and say, "Here's what it cost in 1983. We'll add 6 percent for inflation, and here's what it's going to cost in 1988."

Crawford: Is the company here anywhere close to being that high tech?

Baird: No, I doubt it. It sounds awfully good, and I doubt that the Met is quite that fancy. I think we could do it. I've told them, I think that's what they ought to do. Look up how you did it the last time, and then extrapolate as best you can. At least you can get it close enough so you know whether you've got a very fat season or a very lean season.

Crawford: Surely they would have those figures, those cost figures from past seasons.

Baird: Oh yes. Well, I don't need them on a computer screen. I think you can do this sort of thing with a pencil and paper.

Anyhow, Adler was very good in that area.

Crawford: What were his weaknesses as an administrator?

Baird: Well, of course, I knew he was a terrible person to work for. I'm glad I'm going to be able to edit this darn thing. I wouldn't have worked for him for fifteen minutes.

Crawford: The well-known Adler temper. Did that affect you, and did it affect the board?

Baird: Oh, we used to have fights all the time. But you know, he was very good with the board, and he didn't have fights with the executive committee either. But I had knock-down, drag-out scraps with him in his office.

Crawford: About what?

Baird: Oh, he would be complaining about some aspect of the thing. Not about a particular tenor or some such thing. It would be mainly administrative things, that I ought to do this or I shouldn't be in fussing around.

Let me give you an example: I hadn't been around there very long. I had gotten to know a few of the staff, and I called a staff member up one day and said, "How do you do this?"

or "How much does this cost?" or, I can't remember what it was. The next time I was in his office, he said, [mimics German accent] "Walt, when you have a question, you call me." I said, "What are you talking about." He said, "You called Miss So-and-so and asked her," and he recited the question. I said, "Well, what's the matter with that?" He said, "If you want the answer to a question like that, you call me." I said, "You and I don't have the same way of working. If I want a question answered, I'm going to call the person I think is the quickest to get the answer, the one who knows the most about it. The question you're talking about was a financial, accounting-oriented question. So I called the person that I thought could answer it. I didn't even call the controller. I bypassed you, I bypassed the controller. That's the way I work and that's the way I'm going to continue to work." "Then I'll quit," he said. I said, "Go ahead and quit if you want. But I ain't going to work your way. First of all, you ought to be ashamed that I should take up your time with puny little questions like that. I wouldn't insult you with asking a question like that."

Crawford: Did he have all the answers?

Baird: No, he didn't.

Crawford: You don't think so?

Baird: No, he wouldn't have been able to answer that question. Not at all. So I'll get to the answer.

Crawford: That's interesting. But he wanted you to think he could, or hoped you thought he could.

Baird: Well, that--plus, he didn't want me poking around. He did not want me poking around.

Crawford: Do you think that temper was counterproductive?

Baird: Of course it was!

Crawford: You think so?

Baird: Over the long haul, it has to be. He lost all kinds of competent people there, I'm sure.

Crawford: People remain loyal.

Baird: Those that have stayed are very loyal to him, I agree. Some of them, I don't understand why, because I wouldn't have worked for him after the first scrap, unless I was starving to death.



Adler as Labor Negotiator

Crawford: What about his skill as a labor negotiator?

Baird: Well, he claims he was great. I don't know; I have no reason to suspect he wasn't pretty good. And I think I would have known if he was not pretty good, because we have a legal counsel on labor relations. For years it was a fellow named Bill Diedrich, over at Pillsbury, Madison & Sutro, and I am sure that Bill would have seen to it, that if Adler wasn't doing a pretty good job, the board would have known it. He would have found some way of telling us. He wasn't any flunkie of Adler's. I know Bill Diedrich, and I know him well. And I think if he thought Adler was doing a bum job, he would have come and told me.

Crawford: But you have no first-hand experience in negotiations?

Baird: No, I never sat in on the union negotiations, and I don't think I should have. I think that was not my bag in the first place. Adler used to tell us how he was doing, but he was always patting himself on the back. On the other hand, other than how much we were going to pay them, and some certain working conditions, that's all I had to talk about regarding the unions. Unlike the Auto Workers Union that has a lot more problems involved. And there are only three unions involved.

I gather that, in general, the union people have liked our people, particularly the stagehands union, and, Adler always got along very well. In fact, the stagehands always put on a big feast at Christmastime, a crab feast, and they pick up the tab, and there's a big party onstage, and everybody has a great time, and they're always kidding Adler. I guess Eddie Powell has been running that union for years, and he and Adler get along very well. Whether he ever struck a good deal with Eddie Powell, who knows? I don't have anything to compare it with, and I don't think anybody else has anything to compare it with.

As for the musicians, their working conditions aren't too different than what the symphony and the ballet have. Our rates are always a little bit lower than the symphony's, but our musicians aren't as experienced as the symphony's. And we negotiated with them--well, we've had one orchestra settlement since Adler last settled it. And I think we got a pretty good deal there, as good a deal as Adler was ever able to shape.

I remember one horrible opening night. [Mr. Baird added the story later] It may have been 1980. I thought the union and the opera had settled matters during the summer, for a three

or four year contract, after considerable negotiation. Anyhow, about 7:45 p.m. before an 8:00 o'clock curtain, Adler appeared in the box where I had seats to say that the orchestra would not play until the parking issue was settled. What, said Adler, should he do! Apparently, the parking issue had not been settled. Also, I discovered from Adler that, even though negotiations were concluded a month or two before, the written contract had not been completed and nothing was in writing. There wasn't a lot of money involved, but the orchestra was adamant. No parking, no play. What could we do? Three thousand people were taking their seats. Naturally, we knuckled under and the show went on.

Talking about labor negotiations. I remember the first year I was president, and I suppose perhaps you can level some criticism at me. But in any event, for the first time in my life I went on a three-day vacation trip in which I was incommunicado, riding in one of those silly rubber boats down a river. When I got back, I was told that the union negotiations with the orchestra had come to an impasse, and it had to be settled within forty-eight hours. And this was late in the summer, and shortly before the season. So they called a meeting of the executive committee in a hurry, because this was going to cost us another \$50,000--or some very significant sum in those days--a year. Adler didn't want to pay any more, so he came and he said, "I won't give in anymore. I've got to get the approval of my board." And indeed, he used to say that and never get the approval! But this time he didn't want to do it, so the meeting was called and I wasn't there. We agreed to pay the union what they wanted.

So you talk about how good was he, I just don't know. Here was a case where he wasn't able to persuade the union to take what he thought was adequate. They wanted more than what he felt was adequate, and finally he wouldn't do it until he got the approval of the board to go ahead.

Crawford: What matters had to be cleared up by the board?

Baird: I don't think you can find anything in writing, except the by-laws, which are fuzzy. Theoretically, the president and the chief executive officer and the board have the responsibility for running the business. Nothing else is really on paper.

Crawford: So it was very broad.

Baird: Very broad, very broad.

Adler made his policy as he saw fit. And particularly over the years, it worked very well. There's no question that overall, we were the best-run major opera company in the country. We didn't have the problems, for instance, that the Met has had over the years from time to time, particularly financial problems and replacement problems.

Chicago nearly went under in 1979 or '80, and they cut back. You know, they used to be about as big as we were, and put on about the same number of performances. They go so in the hole that they cut way back after that. They were putting on about ten operas and they cut back to six for a couple of years. Then the board really had to go into a fund-raising campaign. They have bailed it out and done a wonderful job since. But they were in a much worse financial position than San Francisco has ever been in. Only once, but they almost sunk. So overall I think you have to say that Adler and the board have done a better job than any other large opera company in this country.

#### Retirement and Transition

Crawford: Can one person be artistic director, administrator, impresario, and so on today?

Baird: You can't be all things to all people. That's why I got so concerned and talked many times with Adler about what kind of a person his replacement should be. There just isn't anybody in the world that good. It isn't a question of being only good, but of who has experience, of their talents, or their interests.

I suppose Toscanini would have made a good accountant if he had decided he liked accounting. But he didn't; he wanted to be a musician. And so you put Toscanini in there, and he did a wonderful job with the orchestra and maybe completely artistically, but he couldn't be less interested in who kept the books or who found the money to pay for it or how much it was going to cost him. That just wasn't his bag. It's not only a question of talent; it's a question of interest. You can't have an interest in all of those areas. Nobody is built that way.

So--what kind of a person should be the general director? The Met has had problems deciding that, and I don't think yet has solved it. Chicago was started by two people; one artistic, and Carol Fox, administrative. And they apparently did very well, but they've always had a business-oriented administrator, and called that person the general director.

We've only had three general directors: Merola, who I guess was solely a musician, Adler, and McEwen. And McEwen now, you will note, has decided that he needs a musical director, and he has taken on Sir John Pritchard, who is the first musical director we've ever had.

Crawford: Does that mean to you that Mr. Adler was unique in being able to do everything? Or are the times changing?

Baird: Oh, I'm sure the times are changing. First of all, when he became general director, or when he first came on, we weren't a very big opera company. We put on two or three operas and three or four performances each. It wasn't a big deal. Turn that thing off for a minute, I just want to show you something.

[Interruption in tape]

Baird: When I first became president, I started discussing how long Mr. Adler wanted to or intended to stay on. And he had some discussions along that line with Orrick. And at that time I believe, if memory serves me correctly, he thought he really didn't want to stay on more than three or four more years. And I said, "We should start discussing who's going to replace you; we can't have you coming in on December 31 one year and saying, 'I've quit.' and saying, 'What do we do now?'" and he said, "I don't know, that's your problem."

So we discussed that for, oh, probably several times a year over the years. He finally said that he did want to retire at the end of--well, he and I disagree on this one. I'm sure, and I've got memos in my file that said he wanted to quit at the end of '80 [not '81], and that he had a person he thought could be his replacement. That was Terry McEwen, and Terry came out and visited with me and visited with other members of the executive committee.

I had told Adler that whatever date he was going to retire--and he certainly was entitled to retire and probably ought to very soon--that his replacement ought to be there a cycle before he left. By a cycle, I didn't mean necessarily a number of months, but I had in mind basically a year so he could see what happens around here during the course of the year. At that time there was no summer festival, so if he wasn't there in January or February it didn't matter much, because not much was happening.

I wanted him to see how a season was developed, how a year's planning took place--whatever year it was, you start



planning ahead--how the singers were hired, how the sets were developed, how rehearsals went, and how the season went. And then the aftermath. I didn't think just coming out here and seeing how a season worked, or coming out here opening night, just three or four months in advance, was enough.

When we finally negotiated with McEwen, McEwen came out here in the summer of '80, a little earlier than I had intended. I thought that if he got out here towards the end of '80 and had the full year of 1981 to work, that would be enough. Well, he wanted to leave his job, and so I said that was okay. These were my negotiations with McEwen, not Adler's. I said, okay, you can come out in '80. Adler insisted later that he really meant he didn't want to retire until after '81. That was never the deal, and finally he did leave at the end of 1981.

The transition, frankly, was not as happy as it should have been. Although Adler and McEwen apparently were good friends before he got the job, once he got out here, they didn't get along very well. I've never known who as entirely to blame. I think partly one, and partly the other. I think mainly Adler was to blame. Adler wouldn't tell him how he was doing things, and then, of course, Adler would complain to me, "He never comes in and asks me how I'm doing or what I'm doing."

Crawford: It had to be a difficult time.

Baird: It was a very difficult time. You didn't walk into Adler's office, no matter who you were. Well, I guess Bob Miller did. And I could never train one of his secretaries that I had the right to open his door as long as the room was occupied by Adler alone. I wouldn't pound in if he had a visitor. But every secretary that he had--and he went through a lot of them before the last one, who is still there--the minute I walked in, they would stand up and say, "Just a minute, I'll see if Mr. Adler's available." He could be sitting in there, staring at the ceiling.

Around my office, if the person didn't have visitors, I could walk into my boss's or my peer's offices and just open the door. That's the way we work around here, but a lot of places don't work that way, and the opera house doesn't work that way as far as the general director is concerned. Everybody else's door is open, but not his, and nobody goes in there without being announced. He can say, "I'm busy," and you just don't get in, no matter who you are. The secretary won't let you in! I suppose I could push them aside, but that didn't work, and one didn't.

But that was the way it was working, so it was not a satisfactory transition. Then, of course, Adler's attitude towards the Association after he did retire was an unhappy experience, too.

Crawford: Could you comment on that?

Baird: Well, he sued us, you know.

Crawford: That was for alleged breach of contract.

Baird: Yes. I would have liked to have seen it go on to court, because I think a judge would have laughed Mr. Adler right out of court.

Crawford: Because the contract was based on a verbal agreement?

Baird: I think I was there at the time this so-called contract was made. It was the night that we introduced McEwen, and everybody was going out with hands around shoulders, and what a wonderful situation, Adler's replacement and Adler is going off to happy years of retirement. McEwen apparently made some comment, and I may have heard it: "Kurt, I hope you'll always be available to conduct at least one opera a year for me." And I think that's as far as that contract ever was made. He claims that was a contract.

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Crawford: What happened?

Baird: Well, he did do one in 1982, then not in '83.

Crawford: Was that because of the bad feelings?

Baird: Not only that, but--well, first of all, the opera he conducted in '82--I've forgotten what it was now. But it got terrible reviews. And at that time, I am told--I wasn't there, obviously--but the orchestra leaders told McEwen they would never play for Adler anymore. He was too miserable. Rude, unconscionably rude. Well, I think that isn't the case anymore. They solved that one. But if the stories that I have by hearsay about Adler's acts during the rehearsals are true, I wouldn't have played for him either. [Mr. Adler conducted Un Ballo in Maschera in 1982].

And then McEwen didn't think he was a good conductor, and he was just happy that he didn't have to hire him anymore. Adler said, "Yes, you do, and I hereby sue you."



Crawford: And that was settled out of court?

Baird: It was settled out of court.

Crawford: To everyone's satisfaction?

Baird: No, not to everyone's satisfaction; to no one's satisfaction, I suspect.

Crawford: What was the outcome?

Baird: Oh, I think he was going to conduct, maybe this year, and maybe one more next year. It comes to an end. But he didn't conduct last year, and then McEwen said, when the settlement came, that he had already hired all his conductors for last year. I've forgotten the details, but anyhow, he is going to conduct a couple more times.

The opera, in my judgment, treated Adler very well. I don't think Adler treated the opera very well.

#### The High Cost of Opera: Artist's Fees and Opera Theater

Crawford: You have said that the budget was five million dollars in 1974, when you became president, and in 1986 it's twenty million. What does that reflect?

Baird: It reflects basically two things. It reflects inflation and the summer season. The summer season approximates probably a 30 percent increase. I don't have the exact details in my mind.

And then the question of singers' salaries. I don't remember exactly what singers were getting in 1974, when I first came around, but I think that probably the top singers in the world would come to San Francisco for \$3,000 or \$4,000 a performance. Normally, they're paid on a performance basis. They're hired to sing six performances. This requires them to come out some time in advance for rehearsals. They normally pay their own hotel and restaurant bills.

Now the top ones are paid--and we have a top that we will pay, and I'll talk about that in a moment--but I think that our top now is about \$10,000 a performance. I think sometimes we break it a little bit, and I'm sure they are going to be higher shortly. Maybe up to \$12,000. They'll come to San Francisco for that because generally the singers like to come to San

Francisco. They like San Francisco and they like San Francisco Opera. It's one of the world's great operas, and they like that, when they list who they are and who they've sung for, that San Francisco is among them.

That's quite different from some small opera company. They only go to a small opera company for substantially more, and many of these smaller opera companies will only be putting on, you know, three or four operas a year, maybe only two or three performances of each. They'll hire one top singer in order to sell the tickets. For the rest, they fill in, and the singer doesn't care whether he goes to that opera company or not. So he charges more, and gets it.

Also, it's my understanding that Europe generally pays more than we do. And I think that is a fact. So many of them are European and they say, "Well, why should I come clear to San Francisco for \$10,000 when I can make \$14,000 at La Scala?" It's a very good question, and it is a problem that we have. It's a problem all American opera companies have.

Crawford: Yes. Especially out west.

Baird: Yes. Now, I know that some singers say, "Look, you want me to come to San Francisco and sing six performances. I'm out there for four weeks, and that's all I do." If they go to, well, let's say Chicago, for instance, they can run down to another metropolis in an hour by airplane, and put on a recital. And they can perhaps fit that in. If they're in Chicago for a month, they can fit in two or three recitals within 500 miles of Chicago.

Here, and it has been done often, they'll run down to Los Angeles and put on a recital, and fly back the next day.

Crawford: Or Johnny Carson.

Baird: Yes, or do something like that. But that's a handicap we have out here, because nobody else is going to put on a recital, other than Los Angeles, where they can make a bundle. For a recital they can usually make even more money, if they're top singers and the house is going to get sold out. The top singers can call up an impresario in Los Angeles, or their manager will arrange to put on a recital at the Music Center and sell the tickets at top prices and get a big piece of change for it.

But generally that's what the top singer gets these days in San Francisco, around \$10,000 a performance, which I would guess

is two and a half times what it was when I started. However, inflation is not far from that.

Crawford: So that when we're talking about a production costing--and I'm talking about a revival of a production costing around \$150,000--that includes the principals' fees.

Baird: Yes. Here is an opera we put on in 1984, a well-known opera. We put on seven performances. The artists--and I don't have the number of them, but you know, you would know this--it's Carmen. The artists' costs were, if I can divide correctly here [pauses to think], \$29,000 a performance for Carmen. Well, there are, what--four major roles, and--half a dozen relatively minor-major roles that would be included among the artists.

Elektra: seven performances, \$224,000. That's an average of \$32,000 for the artists. You have to have some powerful singers for Elektra.

But I think that the summer festival, which commenced in 1981, has added about 30 percent all by itself to our total costs, and inflation accounts for the rest.

### Spring Opera Theater

Crawford: We haven't talked about Spring Opera, but that, of course, was one of Mr. Adler's fondest creations.

Baird: Yes, and it worked very well for many years. And then it just didn't seem to have the attraction for the public the last couple of years. The ticket sales were very poor; I think at 50 or 60 percent, and while it raised, I thought, a handsome amount of money for the circumstances it was in, it still lost a lot of money. We felt that we just couldn't support it any longer, particularly once the summer [season] was on. It would have been right before the summer, and because the tickets weren't selling there, I think everybody agreed, and particularly McEwen. I made up my mind we had to stop it once we started the summer season. And McEwen, when he came aboard, wanted at least to have it be delayed for a year or two while he could study the whole situation.

Now we've got these other things. We have the Showcase, which puts on a couple of operas for the young singers in our training program, and I think that it probably will not be renewed, at least for a long, long time.

Crawford: But the summer season will continue?

Baird: Oh, I think the summer season will continue. Perhaps not in the same format, because it's still a financial drag. It's still hard to sell the tickets. I think that school is out on whether it will continue in the same format. Lots of different kinds of ideas are being presented, such as musical comedy. More serious musical comedy than Jesus Christ Superstar or Showboat.

Crawford: You mean the opera would present musical theater?

Baird: The opera presenting it, yes, and being the producer of it. The thing is, it costs a lot to put on, but you can put on a lot of performances and come out very well.

Several years ago, I guess it was Adler's last year, 1981, we put on The Merry Widow. Now, some people say that The Merry Widow is not an opera, it's an operetta. Take your choice whether it is or whether it isn't, but we had Joan Sutherland, who sang twelve performances, I think, and we made money on that. To have twelve performances sold out--and except for Joan Sutherland it wasn't terribly expensive to put on--is something, and we actually collected more ticket sales than it cost us to put it on!

Crawford: Unheard of!

Baird: Unheard of, yes. Even with Butterfly, which is a relatively inexpensive opera to produce! The sets are all light and there aren't too many of them. You only need a couple of very expensive singers, and not too many other principals. Four or five principals--you've got Sharpless and you've got Butterfly and Pinkerton, and you've got Pinkerton's wife who appears for a moment or two, and you've got the Japanese principal. But not many of them, and they don't have to be top-flight singers. Not expensive--they can be young, good, coming-up singers, and if you can put on six performances, usually the tickets sell out. Butterfly is a popular one, so you can sell most of your tickets. And after six or seven performances, you haven't lost very much money.

Crawford: So that's very much in opera's thinking now.

Baird: Well, of course, you can always put on a Butterfly every few years anyhow, whether it's cheap or whether it's not cheap, simply because it's a popular one. Same with Carmen--you always put on Carmen every few years; you always put on Tosca, Bohème.

You've got to have all these potboilers, because the public demands it.

Crawford: I remember at one point Mr Adler said that people are tired of Bohème; they won't come. It may have had to do with the singers that were available.

Baird: Well, and it may have been one of those years. I used to have a schedule: We would put on a Tosca two or three years running in the old days, and Butterfly maybe two or three years running. Well, sure--you're going to say, "Gee, I saw Bohème last year and the year before. I'm a little sick of it." But watch, in a couple of more years, they would say, "I want to go see Bohème again." So that's just the nature of the game.

#### Two Administrations Compared

Crawford: Let me ask you--if you were to compare Mr. McEwen's and Mr. Adler's approaches to the job--how does Terry McEwen's approach differ?

Baird: Well, McEwen is entirely more of a democratic operator. His door is more open, he's friendlier with the staff. The staff aren't slaves, they're associates. I think that he's just a very more open person.

His talents are quite different. He can't play an instrument, he can't conduct, he can't sing. He says he was going to be a singer once, but he realized that wasn't his bag. But he knows an awful lot about artistic excellence. He knows good singers. After all, he used to hire singers to make records for him. He has a good ear.

So I think he's probably--although Adler was very good at recognizing good, young talent--I think McEwen is also.

Crawford: Does he rely on the board more?

Baird: Well, he's more open with the board. I don't think he relies on it any more. He's more open with the board, and I think will discuss problems more openly with the board and in advance. When Adler had a problem that he would think he would probably have to go to the board about, it would be at the last minute. Such as the union negotiation that fell apart the first year I was president. It came right, you know, within twenty-four hours, and the board didn't even know there was a problem.



And I think McEwen would permit his--it doesn't bother McEwen that I would discuss opera matters with many of his associates. I would start discussing how a union negotiation was going with McEwen and his associates who handled the matter from almost day one that the negotiations started. And, you know, I would know that they were going to have a meeting all day on Tuesday, and I would call them up on Wednesday and say, "How did it go?" And they would tell me how it went.

Crawford: But this was not the case with those under Adler?

Baird: They wouldn't have dared. If I, knowing that a union negotiation occurred on Tuesday, called up the negotiator on Wednesday and asked how it went, they wouldn't tell me, because they knew Adler would find out and be very annoyed with them. Maybe even go so far as to fire them, saying, "I don't know what you're supposed to be here for, to talk to Baird. I'll talk to Baird." That's quite different.

I think the opera house is a much happier place; the staff is much happier than it was under Adler. I get that sense, and I was told that after a year or so when McEwen was there and Adler was not there that the climate was quite different.

Crawford: Yes. Mr. McEwen has enlarged the staff greatly?

Baird: Oh no.

Crawford: Was it as large under Adler?

Baird: There are a few more, but not many. Particularly if you take the development department out, I don't think there are more than a few--well, there are two things: There are a couple of people who work in the store, and the store didn't start until Adler's last years. Then the development department has doubled, but that really hasn't anything to do with producing an opera. I don't think there are more than two or three or four in number on the staff there, the administrative staff, than there were in Adler's last year.

There had to be some more, although Adler told me--and I told him I thought he was dead wrong, and it turned out he was--that he could run the summer festival with the same administrative staff that he had when he only had the fall season. I said, "We can't do that." Either you have to add some, or else they're sitting around here half the year with nothing to do. "Oh, no, they're working hard." "Well, how are they going to add 30 percent more work?"



He was reluctant to add staff, and they found out when finally the chips were down that you had to have some more. You can't put on a hundred performances of fourteen operas a year with the same administrative staff who can put on seventy performances of ten operas a year. It doesn't make any sense.

Crawford: It certainly doesn't.

Baird: Most of the principals are the same people who were there, senior people. The same business manager, the company administrator, the same technical director, and there's still Matt Ferruggio, who has been there for thirty years or something. John Priest was there when I arrived, Pat Mitchell, whom Adler hired, and Bob Walker, whom Adler hired. There had been a change in the controller. The old controller retired, and a new one was hired. But the administrative staff was not increased by very many. I would say three or four, leaving out the development department, which has doubled, I guess; but that's something else.

#### Corporate Giving in San Francisco

Crawford: That brings me to something we didn't cover before, and that's corporate giving. Could you say something about corporate giving and the direction it's taking?

Baird: Well, we're trying to improve it. Most of the major corporations are contributors. Some of them give what I consider is an adequate amount, based on the size of the company. Some, I think, are inadequate, and we're trying to improve that. But I'm awfully sympathetic. While I just ran a small accounting office here--and the other accounting firms have the same problem--you're bombarded by every organization, and you can't discriminate. You've got to, in effect, give to all of them.

XYZ Company can't say, "We love opera in our company, so we're going to give to opera." Nor could they say, "We love symphony; we're going to give to the symphony and forget opera." They've all got to give something to the ballet. They've all got to give something to opera, and they've all got to give something to the symphony. And the Museum of Modern Art, and the De Young Museum, ad infinitum.

Most of the major corporations have somebody whose sole job is to give away the company's money. They're sophisticated people and they look at your budget, they study your operation, they try to figure out as best they can whether you're doing a good job or not, and then try to decide how much--and then the president of the company or the board of directors say, "You can give away X dollars. Now, staff, you sort it out. It's your job to say how much goes to the symphony."

However, I think that, overall, there are some cities--perhaps Chicago, New York, and Minneapolis--where the headquarter companies give more, proportionately, than they do in San Francisco.

Crawford: Why? What explains that?

Baird: I don't know why. I can't explain it. Maybe because of the time. Maybe their development work has been carried out over a longer period of years than ours. For instance, we really didn't do much until recently. You know, I don't have hard rules, but when I read about gifts that somebody gives the Met, for instance, I say, "Well, okay, they've got three times our budget." And maybe it's closer to--well, it's at least three times our budget.

But if a New York headquarters bank is giving the Met five times more than we're getting from a similar sized bank, I say, "Why aren't we getting an amount from the XYZ Bank that's proportionate to the ABC Bank in New York and is proportionate to our budget?" I think we can do a better job, and I think we will do a better job. We've got, now, a committee of a lot of senior executives around who are going to help us do a better job, but I think there's a limit to how much you can expect out of the corporate community.

I have a particular feeling about it, and I'm sure that a lot of corporate executives have the same feeling. They're not giving away their own money, they're giving away their stockholders' money. Should they? I know a lot of people think they shouldn't. And maybe it's a mistake it ever got started. On the other hand, you can make the case that San Francisco's a wonderful place for your employees, and you ought to think of it in those terms.

Crawford: The enrichment that they get back.

Baird: Yes. We get people who will work in San Francisco and be happy in San Francisco where they wouldn't take a job in Kansas City, for instance.

Crawford: I appreciate that!

Baird: So there are two sides to that question. I don't think they do a bad job, and I don't think the opera fares any worse than the other major arts organizations in town. Maybe a little. I think that everybody got excited when Davies Hall opened, so the symphony has done a wonderful job, and a lot of power to them. But they did it in part because they had a new symphony hall. Everybody got excited about it. The opera has been the same old opera.

Everybody got pretty excited about the ballet when it nearly once sunk here a few years ago and they had the girls dancing in store windows.

Crawford: That's right. That was theater.

Baird: Yes. And they've done a wonderful job since. How they found that \$10 million to build that building, I don't know. They had nine of it before I even heard they were thinking about it. You know, it wasn't a big public campaign; they went out and got most of it very quietly. A marvelous job, I thought. Those things can happen to you. I think we got some added gifts when we put on the summer festival. We had something to sell. We were increasing our production 30 percent.

Crawford: So you're very positive about the direction fund-raising is going?

Baird: Yes, I am. I think it's up to us, and I think we're working hard on it.

Crawford: And the resources are there for it?

Baird: I think so. Now, it's going to be tough, because everybody in town is running after the same dollars.

Crawford: And more and more of them.

Baird: I know it. I just counted up last week how many fund-raisers I was invited to that cost money. And there were ten of them, and it would cost my wife and I \$7,000 if we went to all of them.

Crawford: In a month?

Baird: In a week! Now that was an extraordinary week, and it included one \$2,000 political party at Gordon Getty's house. Cocktails at Gordon Getty's house, and meet George Bush.

Crawford: You went, of course.

Baird: Well, it hasn't occurred yet, but I'm not going to go. I've met George Bush; I've had cocktails at the Gettys'. But a lot of people might pay \$2,000 just to go to look at the Gettys' house; it's had so much publicity. Or to meet George Bush. Well, I've done both--besides, my wife's a Democrat! [laughter]

### An Evaluation of the Adler Era

Crawford: I think we've come to our final question, which is, what do you believe will be Mr. Adler's impact on the history of opera?

Baird: Great! There's no question that when he took over in 1953, we were a tiny opera company, doing good work, I guess. He certainly built the company up from, I would guess, a regional opera company, to one of the great opera companies of the world. He had great talent in persuading good singers to come here, and he knew how to put on good opera, no question about that. He did have a sophisticated city to work in. We had been putting on operas in this city since 1860 or something like that. Have you ever talked to Bob Commanday and his studies on that? I heard him make a speech on it. It's very fascinating.

So he had to have a good place to do it. I don't think it would have worked in Spokane. And he claims, and we keep claiming, that it's really one of the six great opera companies in the world. He invented that phrase. But he may be right.

I think there's no question that there are only three major opera companies in this country, really, still. Houston is trying to climb up; maybe they will someday. But there's the Met, Chicago, and San Francisco. Now, we're basically hiring the same singers, hiring the same conductors, hiring the same designers, and all three do a good job. I think we do as well as any of them.

I don't know what's happening at the Met, but all I know is what I read in the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal, and I can't find a good review on what they're doing. It can't be as bad as some of these reviewers say, I think. But one of the six is the Met, and Chicago is not included among the six. I'm not really sure who the other four are. La Scala, I guess, and--... Well, I don't know. It's in the beholder's eyes who are the best anyhow.

But there's no question he's made a great impact. Maybe no one else in the world could have built it from what he inherited in '54 to what he left in '81; I don't know. Certainly I've got to give him a lot of credit for that, despite the fights I had with him. So I think he's done a fine job.

Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library

University of California  
Berkeley, California

Kurt Herbert Adler and the San Francisco Opera

Jerry Spain

PRESIDENT, AMERICAN FEDERATION OF MUSICIANS, LOCAL 6, 1978-1984

An Interview Conducted by  
Caroline Crawford  
in 1987





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## INTERVIEW HISTORY--Jerry Spain

Kurt Herbert Adler said of Jerry Spain that he was the toughest of all the union negotiators. Jerry Spain would rather reserve that description for Adler himself, whom he also describes as possessed of "unbelievable charm when he wanted to cut me in half." Of Adler he says further, "I don't care about the alleged tyranny. He was not tyrannical in the sense of being unreasonable. He was certain where he was going and he knew what he was doing. If you tried to con him you never got anywhere."

Spain joined the American Federation of Musicians, Local 6, in 1954. Trained as a professional musician he played string bass in local pickup orchestras. When he was offered a permanent chair with the San Francisco Symphony, he turned it down because he felt wages were too low. Eventually he became a union official and gave up performing because the union required it.

Spain served as president of the AFM from 1978 to 1984, when he became deputy city attorney, the position he holds today. He earned his law degree in 1972.

Jerry is a handsome man with a ready smile and a considerable gift for storytelling, and he agreed to meet me for the interview in his office at city hall, a workplace filled with files, legal books, and the sound of telephones. We talked for over two hours, although he had warned me he might have only one hour, and he was reluctant to stop then for an appointment.

The text of this interview was left unedited as recorded.

Caroline Crawford  
Interviewer/Editor

February 1988  
Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library  
University of California, Berkeley



Union Membership and the Presidency

[Date of Interview: March 31, 1987]##

Crawford: How did you become associated with the American Federation of Musicians?

Spain: Well, basically I came here in 1954 and worked all the music engagements in town. In 1964 I was elected to the board of directors of the union. There were seven directors, and very shortly thereafter I was put on committees, which was the common thing. Various board members were placed on various negotiating committees, and I happened to select the fine arts, opera, and symphony committee, because I had played the symphony, among other things.

I played string bass, and at that time was in playing the Curran Theatre, because you could make a good living at it, which you couldn't at the symphony and opera in those days. Their musicians weren't making a living, and that was one of our major problems.

Crawford: Was that because seasons were short?

Spain: Oh, yes, and money was low. They had about ten weeks in the opera [after 1966] and twenty-two weeks in the symphony. Most people played both and then picked up whatever else they could in the meantime. But salaries were like \$132 a week in the symphony, with a twenty-two-week season; no vacation, no benefits, no nothing.

The opera musicians made a little more money per week, because there is a great deal of overtime in opera, but per service they weren't making any more and many of the people in the opera orchestra were on part-time contracts. All the second winds and brass, tuba, and harp only had an as-needed contract, whereas the others had a guaranteed six-service-per-week contract.



A New Militancy Within the Musician's Union: 1964

Spain: Shortly after I was placed on the committee (the president was Pop Kennedy, and the vice president was Al Arnold), the orchestra really started to demand more money, better working conditions. They were working, it seemed like to them, seven nights and eight days a week.

It is necessary with opera companies, and I think it still goes on, to do a different performance every night, which means you perform an opera Tuesday night, Wednesday you rehearse, Wednesday night you play another opera, on Thursday night you're going to play a third opera, and rehearsing in the daytime not necessarily the same opera you're going to play that night, although hopefully that's the dress rehearsal.

As you get into the second or third week you're now performing Turandot Tuesday night, but you're rehearsing an opera that's scheduled to open two weeks from now, and Wednesday morning you're doing another opera and this goes on and on and on and on and on.

In those days it was seven days a week. We had a hell of a fight to get a day off! It was a terrible grind, and it was a common joke in the orchestra that you got something called the "opera fog" after the third or fourth week.

The season was only about eight weeks long, as I recall. It was quite a battle. It was the first time the orchestra truly took a strike vote and insisted they would not open.

Now you have to understand that the company is a huge company with a very big payroll of which the orchestra is a very small part--maybe 15 percent at the most. This was 1964, and they took a strong stand. They wanted a day off, they wanted more money, a better working schedule, and those who were on what was called half contracts, all the second winds and brass, they wanted a full contract.

At that time the orchestra was about sixty-three to four in number, and then as needed, depending on the score. One of the problems of course is that the Maestro Adler insisted on running the company his way, and he had the full support of Robert Watt Miller, who was the major financial contributor and backer, and at that time president of the board. So we wound up in the mayor's office here.

Crawford: Mayor Shelley.

Spain: Yes, and he brought in a large group from the labor council, because of course the labor council in this city represents about eighty unions, and you have to remember that the big payroll was the stagehands, and a strike would hurt them as much as anybody else. The chorus wasn't much in those days, and the ballet had little [involvement].

The stagehands were and still are the big part of the budget, because they work outside the season; they build sets and scenery in January, February, and March and they will go full time in July with a full crew because they begin their technical rehearsals and moving scenery, and in those days, scenery used to be stacked in the parking lot behind the opera house. You would have one set onstage, one set backstage, and two sets in the parking lot.

Every night at 11 or 11:30 when the performance finished, it would appear that hundreds of stagehands would descend and work all night long. They'd have to strike the entire set and then put the new set in place and when the third show came, you'd have it out in the parking lot covered with canvas or God knows what else. It was unbelievable, but, as I say, it's a big payroll, so they were affected, and we spent three or four days in negotiations here at City Hall.

The quote that will always live in that particular dispute was Robert Watt Miller saying: "I don't need this. I can go out to the ballgame and enjoy myself." Was it a maneuver? Yes, probably so, because the man dearly loved opera and totally supported it and backed Maestro Adler.

What was important in this case was that the orchestra really stood up, took a strike vote, and were willing, were willing, to stay out.

I remember going to the opera house about the second or third day of this dispute and seeing people crying--in tears! I'm talking about stage managers, dressers, costumers, all the backstage people....

Crawford: They had actually wired all of the artists that the season had been cancelled as of August 26, hadn't they?

Spain: Oh, yes, they actually did it. At the time we all wondered how they could do that, because even then, though I was not a lawyer and you'll recall we did not then use lawyers (we didn't call our lawyers into negotiations in those days), I was aware that

you don't do that in opera. There was no protection for a strike clause in the contracts in those days and I knew that.

That means you may cancel the contracts, but you pay them. Not only that, if you cancel them, that is the last time you do business with those artists, in most instances. You just don't do that in opera and we were aware of that.

Crawford: The Metropolitan Opera has had to cancel a season or parts of a season.

Spain: Yes. About eight or ten years ago. That was a terrible battle. The Met had to cut back their season dramatically or go broke. We're talking about a \$40 million budget. Ours was a couple million.

At the Met there is long-term booking of stars. Here, with an eight-week season, we had probably forty-five performances, and all we had at that time was the opera house, with the symphony, opera, and ballet all fighting a constant battle over time and the use of the house. It was a terrible problem.

My opera orchestra--forgive me, the opera orchestra--was in fact mostly symphony, and so they were in a little bit better position, because they would not have been totally out of work.

I was a young man then, and I thought we really had to fight. I was convinced the orchestra really meant it, but it finally settled out. The heavy heads from the San Francisco Labor Council were brought in, and we had tough times. They leaned on us harder than they did management, because there were a lot of jobs involved. A lot of jobs.

They said, "This is madness, you people...don't you know you're holding up the whole opera? If we miss it we can never recapture it. If it goes, it's gone. At least for the season."

What happens so often with this type of thing is that performances are irreplaceable. The opera only had the house until December 7 or 8, and they had to get out. And so a lot of pressure was put on both sides. Anyhow it was finally worked out comfortably.

Crawford: Did that represent a new profile for the union?

Spain: I would say a new militancy for the fine arts musicians all over the country. It had started just a few years before in the New York Philharmonic, not Boston so much, but Philadelphia and Chicago particularly. The major symphony orchestras of that

time were really becoming militant and demanding that they be treated as other musicians.

You have to understand that all the musicians in this town who made real money in those days didn't work for the symphony or the opera. Nobody would take those jobs. I was offered a job with the symphony and I wouldn't take it! Anybody going to make a living on a hundred and thirty dollars a week? No, no--please!

The Curran Theatre, Bimbo's, the night clubs...all did very well, thank you. Twice what those people made. They were the bottom of the pole.

Crawford: Was there no union minimum wage?

Spain: Sure there was, but it's bargained, you understand, by individual contract: The opera contract, the symphony contract, the Curran Theatre contract. The leverage for years had been the other musicians. The hotel musicians made more than the symphony and opera musicians. Symphony, opera, and ballet musicians were the lowest paid musicians in the country, everywhere.

The militancy started about 1960-61 in the East and in Chicago. The major orchestras started to push and it just filtered out here. Some of our very fine musicians got tired of being suffering artists and said, "To hell with it, I want to get paid! I want real money...I'm worth it. Look at the price of tickets!" (God knows, the price of tickets compared with today was low, but that's pure inflation). Anyway, the opera was the gemstone of our entire fine arts, and to get paid peanuts and work like slaves seven days a week with such a short season wasn't worth it.

So it was the beginning of the militancy and very shortly thereafter I'll tell you what it triggered, it triggered the big strike in 1967 with the San Francisco Symphony, the same people. That was a seven-week strike, and I led that one. It didn't involve Kurt Adler.

#### The San Francisco Symphony Strike: 1967

Crawford: What was the outcome of that strike?

Spain: The greatest contract we ever had, that is to say, in terms of the future. It built in tenure and gave a vacation for the first time; it added six weeks to the season for the first time. It got a commitment from the management to go full-time as soon as they could practicably do it...I'm talking about fifty-two weeks. At that time they had twenty-two weeks, and they were starving to death! Not only that, we got back the seven weeks because that was something you could add on to the season, so we didn't lose a week on that strike.

But that was really a strike. As you may be aware in the labor movement, once in a while a strike, if carefully handled and well run (it is harmful to all the people, don't mistake me; there is nothing good about a strike), but sometimes the things that are important in it are in the future, not the present, and you forfeit the present loss of wages, provided the gains are worth it. And as I say, we got tenure--and screened auditions.

We had a maestro, who shall remain nameless, who got off the plane and said, "What are women doing in my orchestra? They belong in the kitchen!" [imitating heavy German/Slavic accent] We therefore put up screened auditions, which meant you performed behind a screen. They had to pick you by the way you sounded, not the way you looked.

We had all kinds of problems because the first screens they put up didn't go all the way to the floor, so you saw first thing the four-inch heels and heard the click-click-click. "Oops, excuse me, would you go back...!" Oh, we had all kinds of those things. However it did produce the desired result, and women were hired.

I must say that Maestro Adler never had that kind of problem. He didn't care if you were black, green, or red. He wanted the best player, and he hired many women, you know. He already had women in there before there was a civil rights action.

#### Kurt Adler and the Union

Crawford: Talk about Mr. Adler in terms of his style in negotiations, if you would, and his grasp of labor issues.

Spain: In those days it was common, I think, to have a two- or three-year contract, so by 1966, when Pop Kennedy died suddenly in



August at a convention in San Diego, Al Arnold became the president, which is a natural succession in our union.

The board has to choose a vice-president and they conned me into it, to be honest about it. All my good friends conned me into taking a tremendous monetary cut, because in those days if you became an officer you could no longer work. That was the rule. It's illegal now, and it's been changed, but in those days you could not play.

So I had to give up my job, and I've often thought an awful lot of bass players voted for that...anyhow, it's a joke! Because I had been on that performing arts committee, I became chief negotiator for the symphony and opera committees and handled all the negotiations, and of course what happened next was the 1967 strike. That occurred from about December 10, 1966, through somewhere in February, 1967.

We were then due very shortly to come back and negotiate with the opera. We always tried to keep the contracts not on the same year, obviously. And that militant display, if you will, carries over--it carries over into the entire community, of course. Local 6 musicians--Oh, boy! But specifically, it carried over to the opera, because here comes forty-five players right out of the same orchestra back over here.

Now we'd already had the beef in 1964, so we began to make progress. Maestro Adler was nobody's fool. He was fully aware of it and I'm quite sure fully prepared as he always was in these negotiations.

Crawford: Was it your impression that he needed or relied upon an attorney?

Spain: No. He used over the years William Diedrich, one of the people I admire most in the business, and one of the reasons I became a lawyer.

Crawford: The feeling is mutual. He has talked a great deal about you in his interview.

Spain: Well, he was something else. He was a senior partner at Pillsbury, Madison & Sutro, and their labor department really is world-renowned. They handled Standard Oil's tough labor problems and there they are helping the opera in these things. It has got to look like child's play to him, and he used to marvel at this. He's a great big guy, as you know.



Well, once in a while Kurt...Maestro would call him on the phone and say, "Jerry and I are here and we've got a terrible problem." He would put him on the speaker phone.

Now Bill was like a judge. He listened real patiently and then he'd say, "You know, that's not a legal problem. You guys work it out" (click). Most of the stuff was the kind of thing for which there was no other answer.

Maestro Adler's expertise, and the thing I will always admire (I wish to God every performing arts company in the world had a man like Kurt Adler) is the absolute grasp of every function in his company. The man understood not only what everyone does and what everyone is supposed to do, what the standard of performance is not only as a musician or a singer or a chorister or a dancer, but as a stagehand, and what you could get out of them all, because he got the most out of anybody!

In addition to that, he understood the contractual impact of each provision on other unions, and he never got caught. To my knowledge, from 1964 to 1984 we never had a situation where one union's contract was at such odds with another union's contract that you had one group of people on a rest wasting time while another group of people were on triple time or some silly thing like that. Everything meshed.

Every time around we talked to him about an artistic matter. About length of performance, we tried to shorten it to less than four hours (no musician plays for four hours, except in a dance club). But there are operas that run five hours; how do I play them? We came up with suggestions to rotate the orchestra; we'd bring in extras and then we'd get the eye from him. "Never! Not in my opera company!" Because the standards would have fallen.

We had gotten the symphony contract down to two-and-a-quarter hours of performance, you see. We felt, first of all, for a musician that's enough, because you play at full 100 percent level at all times. But in opera you have to live with that.

Those were artistic problems, and from his point of view, everything was an artistic value. I don't care what it was. You talk about getting more breaks for the musicians. I cannot tell you how difficult it was to get the intermission break for the orchestra at rehearsal increased from ten to twelve minutes! It took six years of negotiations, three go-arounds.

Crawford: Did he consider that was in the realm of artistic decisions?

Spain: Absolutely! You'd say that's nonsense, but everything is timed. How long does it take to change a scene; how long does it take to get the dancers on and off stage? If that orchestra is out of the pit, and we're talking now about dress rehearsals or rehearsals with cast, not just plain orchestra rehearsals where the maestro is going over the music, but when it comes to getting that cast up on the stage even without costumes, just the run-throughs, the tech rehearsals, everything has to mesh.

When you take the breaks is equally important. We'd say, "We want the breaks every fifty minutes," but that's nonsense, the music doesn't go in fifty-minute segments, therefore, everything had to be timed to when do I break the scene; oh, I tell you....

On the other hand, the man never stinted himself. He made every rehearsal. He would be out there all night and at the next performance the next night and at the rehearsal the next morning. He was there. He put in more hours than anyone else except his assistants.

Crawford: How about Mr. Miller?

Spain: I worked with Mr. Miller very little directly. Mr. Miller, I wouldn't say was standoffish, but the man worked very closely with Kurt and his board; I had not a lot of dealings with him, except that one go-around.

Crawford: He had a reputation for being more inflexible even than Mr. Adler.

Spain: Oh, yes, but I think, if you will excuse me, that that was the game. Nobody was tougher than Kurt Herbert Adler. Mr. Miller did the backup play, in my opinion. Kurt made the decisions. I don't know, because I was never privy, but I just read it that way.

For example, I don't think the board was thrilled, jumping into the 1980s now, to extend the season here into the summer, which they have now decided to cancel. Kurt Herbert Adler decided that was where this opera company was supposed to go, and you know the money involved.

Crawford: Adler made decisions more or less on his own?

Spain: Yes.

Crawford: Well, originally that was to be an all-city summer festival, with the other major companies participating, wasn't it?

Spain: That's what the board thought. I know what he thought: he was willing to compromise to get the opera extended, and the compromise maybe included his saying he would include anyone else who wanted to get into it, but he was also shrewd enough to know it takes a lot of work to extend and get into it.

The others might say, "Oh, sure we want to be part of it." He figured, "Let's see who does it." He did it, and he got his board to do it. He said, "Sure, we'll work with everybody, it's just that I didn't see anybody else show up or put the money out." That is exactly what happened. I think he read that well in advance. He knew this town, and he knew how it worked.

His plan was to extend opera, and he did. We went from eight to twelve weeks in the fall, plus two weeks of rehearsal, so a fourteen-week season for the orchestra. We went to a sixty-nine-piece orchestra, all under full contracts now, that means a six-service guaranteed contract, and the last time I recall, about 1983, the base pay was about \$750 or \$800 a week, plus the overtime doubles it sometimes.

Specific Issues: Expansion of the Pit: 1976

Crawford: I'd like to bring up some of the specific issues that concerned Mr. Adler and have you elaborate on them.

Spain: Sure, you refresh my memory. I had eighty-five contracts, and his was but one. From his point of view, his was the one! There was no other question; that's why I admired the man.

In this town, in the music field, number one was opera. He didn't start it, Mr. Merola did, but he was capable of taking it over, directing it, and building it and making it into one of the world's best opera companies.

It wasn't that way in 1964, I'll tell you. From my point of view, the orchestra grew from about forty working as slave labor (laughs) to a full orchestra of sixty-nine-plus, because you know some of the Wagnerian stuff calls for an orchestra of ninety. How we ever got them into the pit, God knows!

One of our arguments was, for God's sake, will you take the two rows of seats out? But you know how much two rows of seats costs in terms of revenue?

Crawford: Especially after 1972 when the season sold at more than 100 percent. You didn't want to lose all that revenue.

Spain: I didn't mind losing all that revenue, but he did. You looked down in the pit, and you had musicians trying to bow vertically, with the fiddle turned on its side and all of them sticking each other. It's a pit designed for fifty-five people according to the way it was built in 1932. You put ninety in and where do you put them?

You had the infamous Torpedo Room, back under the stage at the rear edge of the pit; a room where you could hardly stand. He'd shove the percussionists in there, the timps and the two percussionists, and give them a little television screen and a camera aimed at the conductor so maybe they could see what was going on. They're looking at little figures about six inches high on the screen, and they are playing in this little room.

Crawford: Did you press for enlarging the pit?

Spain: Of course, and then we got figures on what it would cost! A couple of million dollars--he'd have to dynamite the concrete out.

But there was the solution of the first two rows of seats, which are removable, and that enlarges the pit at the front, but those are the front row seats and God knows, who wants a front row seat, but apparently a lot of people do and will pay a lot of money for them. I couldn't stand sitting in the front row, but he sold them and sold them well. But in 1976 and later on he took them out; sometimes he had to!

#### Time Off for the Musicians

Crawford: Let's look at some of the issues he thought were important. First of all the issue of free time.

Spain: We tried for years and years and years, and one of his favorite people, James Matheson, who is still one of the leaders of the orchestra in terms of being on the committee, and whom he admired and made principal oboe, worked out every negotiation

from 1972 or 1974 up to 1984 when I was last there, and he had a plan by which we could achieve two days off for everybody.

We actually got one day off, and we enlarged it to thirty and then thirty-six hours, which worked out from about six o'clock on a Sunday night to Tuesday morning. That's the only way we could do it. He finally gave up Sunday night performances; we did a Sunday matinee and got Monday off. But when he started we were performing Sunday night and had a Tuesday nine o'clock a.m. rehearsal, so your day off started Sunday at midnight.

Anyway, we stretched and stretched it and that was a compromise. Our goal was two days off, which everyone in the world had always had off, except musicians.

I was chairman of the negotiating committee that struck the hotels to get the five-day work week in about 1969 or 1970, and we got a five-day week for all the musicians in this town except opera and the theater.

Crawford: The symphony has it too?

Spain: Oh, they've had it for years and years. Fact is, they have about a 4 1/2-day week. 1932 is when it came to six days instead of 7 for musicians, but the theater still went seven days in those days; musicians would work six weeks and then take a week off. So by the world's standards, in the 1960s and '70s, a five-day week seemed a reasonable proposal. We never achieved it in the theaters and we never achieved it at the opera.

This opera company, I agree with Maestro Adler, could not survive if it went to 5 days. There is no way you could do it and still satisfy this public and sell tickets the way they had. That would kill it.

Crawford: I understand the musicians now have a forty-three-hour break.

Spain: That's right. It's been stretched (laughs). Each negotiation we'd add two hours. Some day it might stretch to 48 hours. But that fight went on for ten years, and it started out with one day. One day off, but it really wasn't a whole day. Then you got a hunk of this and a piece of that and you'd just keep stretching and stretching, but you understand that artistically, from his point of view, "I have to have the orchestra for the Sunday performance, and for the Tuesday rehearsal." Every time we talked about the substitution of players you might as well just talk to the wall.



Crawford: That is understandable, I think.

Spain: Not from my point of view (laughs).

Crawford: You think another oboe player would fit right in?

Spain: No, but in fact, we do have some substitutions, but only when acceptable to Maestro Adler (laughs).

Crawford: Has McEwen relaxed on any of these sticky issues at all?

Spain: I really don't know. My dealings with Mr. McEwen were very short, just the last couple of years, and even then, we didn't do a lot of the contract in 1982. Pat Mitchell was the ramrod by then, and she had been well trained under Maestro Adler, and she knew right where we were going. We went for quite a bit of money--we had the summer season and the pressures had changed. We were then, you see, a separate orchestra with a new makeup. A big change occurred in the transition year when Davies Hall opened.

The Opening of Davies Hall and the Building of an Orchestra:  
1980

Crawford: Let's talk about that time.

Spain: It was a very difficult time.

##

The symphony had changed general manager, and brought in Peter Pastereich from St. Louis. He had of course an entirely different personality, and at first he didn't get along with very many people, especially Maestro Adler. I suppose he rightly felt the symphony was as important as the opera, and that isn't necessarily the way it was looked at.

So once the hall was established on paper and the money was here and it started to build and the transition of the lot had been worked out (the city had to work out a deal to get that piece of property from the school district) we began to negotiate with the symphony toward that goal.

The symphony insisted that it go full-time starting in September. Prior to that time, about forty people in the symphony were guaranteed the fall weeks if they did not play the



opera, but they did what you might call makeshift work. They went to the schools, they did little concerts, they had a forty-five-piece orchestra, but they were paid full salary. That was our deal.

So the symphony very wisely said, "Heck, we've only got about half the orchestra under contract, and we've always wanted to start in September like all the other symphonies around the country instead of December when we lose part of the season." Their survey showed, surprising to me, that the overlapping audience was only about 10 percent. There were two audiences, one for opera and one for symphony, and Maestro Adler concurred.

So in our negotiations with the symphony we projected ahead three years. There would be a full-time orchestra and you understand that at that time there were at least forty-five to fifty persons who had tenure in both orchestras, and therefore voted on both contracts. They had to decide, and they agreed to make the choice between the two. The symphony made it easier for them and the contract was worked out. Maestro Adler knew that, and he had to make a decision too, because what really happened for the first time in this city was that there was bidding for some of the top musicians.

The symphony wanted to keep certain ones, and Maestro Adler wanted to keep certain ones, and in fact, I believe Maestro Adler hired five on personal contracts, over and above the opera contract. They have year-round contracts: the concertmaster, principal bass, oboe, etc.

Then the symphony made a gesture, and there were quite a few people getting older--and remember this was before the federal changes in the retirement age; sixty-five was the age. They said, "You can go over to the opera, and take your pension, if you will resign from us (many had plenty of years in) and we will guarantee the difference. So that made it easier.

So, in fact, the musicians had their choice, and the Maestro did not; neither Maestro did, and that made it difficult. I am sure that there were some players, without names involved, that neither Maestro Adler or Maestro De Waart actually wanted. But the musicians had the choice.

Fortunately, at the same time the opera could see the summer season coming and so the transition was easier for these musicians, and quite a few of them did move over to the opera. The result was that both orchestras needed some new players. Maestro Adler had to get, I think, fourteen players within a couple of months, and it required diplomatically a hiatus, if

you will, in the application of the normal audition procedure here, and we worked out a very special audition system, so that Maestro Adler could send out a team to audition around the country and find some players.

He was successful, and the result was about twenty-five new players in the opera orchestra and something like that in the symphony orchestra. It was a great opportunity for a lot of people all over the country to come out here and now the jobs were looking up. The opera was talking about eighteen weeks, at pretty good money, and you can enjoy yourself the rest of the time, and that was great for a lot of the older players.

The symphony also offered at that time a fifty-two-week contract with nine paid weeks of vacation and it started at about \$40,000 in those days, so it was a pretty good contract and we had two hundred people lined up for every vacancy here! However, Maestro Adler didn't have that time [for auditions] so the first year we had to work out this special system for auditions.

Now he also spent money, you understand, on an extra week of rehearsal before that opening season, and he had never done that before. And I must say that orchestra came together just amazingly.

First of all, you had Maestro Adler, who had always been careful in selecting his players, picking good players, and secondly, you had enough of the solid old ones with years of opera experience, which you have to have in opera, because you have to follow the conductor and hope he knows where he is going, which isn't always the case.

The orchestra was spectacular that year...you have to give him credit and he does get the credit, as well as his new music assistant.

Crawford: David Agler?

Spain: Yes, that's right, and he did a hell of a job. He took with him Jimmy Matheson and Zaven Melikian, the concertmaster; they went with him around the country to do the auditions on the spot, because they really tried to get experienced players, and they did. Both orchestras came out very, very well.

Crawford: Now, without the summer season, the number of weeks for the opera is reduced from eighteen to twelve weeks. What are the ramifications of that decrease?

Spain: Well, I don't know what is going to happen. This is an interesting year, without Maestro Adler or Pat Mitchell, and the contract expires this year. Mr. McEwen has announced he will pay the orchestra for the summer, but what he will pay them is the six weeks they are guaranteed, without overtime and none of the week or two of rehearsal they normally have, so in fact they will get about half what they normally would for that summer season. But it's due up, you see, and when they're negotiating the opening shot will be, "We're going to cut your season 30 or 40 percent." And whatever the reason is, I'd hate to be part of this negotiation, I'll tell you!

I don't know where it's going, but I do know it's going to be a very difficult year. I've already heard from some of my friends who say they understand what is happening, but that they have to make the same living they were making before.

#### Adler and the Negotiating Cycle

Crawford: Is McEwen involved to the same extent Adler was in labor affairs?

Spain: Never was. Pat Mitchell did it all. I assume she went over everything with him first and he made major policy decisions, but until the very last year, Maestro Adler was across that table.

Crawford: Did William Diedrich assume more of a role over the table as time went on?

Spain: No. Bill was brought in once in about April. We used to start negotiations sometime in the spring. Our rehearsals began around August 20, because labor day was usually the opening, as you know. So we'd start in March, April, May, June, and pretty soon we'd get pretty serious.

One year, poor Bill, who was fairly new then, was called in. And Maestro Adler, as he was wont, had lunch in the conference room.

Here's our whole committee on one side of the table, and I thought, "What's going on here?" Bill gets the privilege of announcing that unless we agreed to their last offer by Friday afternoon at 3 o'clock, and this was like Wednesday, they would announce cancellation of the season. I don't know who made the decision--it was in the middle '70s--but poor Bill got the

privilege. And of course by Friday afternoon in mid-April, we had done nothing! But those things occur, and people try things, you know.

The most embarrassing thing that happened was that I put a contract together in 1980, and I don't know if I messed up or what, but the orchestra committee approved it, and then recalled that I had missed the parking issue. We hadn't settled that, and parking was a terrible problem over there.

We had tried every trick in the book, and at one time we could get every car in that parking lot--43 cars in that lot--which had 21 spaces marked on it! Sometimes we got the meters bagged--every trick in the book. But for some reason I messed up. I can't recall exactly why, but I went back to Maestro Adler, and we were at the dress rehearsal for opening night. I went in and said, "Our agreement is not finished yet." That was the only time I saw him really get angry with me. He felt I was being unfair, that I hadn't kept my word.

Crawford: Wasn't that actually about 5 p.m. on opening night when that occurred? And the contract hadn't for some reason been signed?

Spain: Yes, but a deal's a deal. He said, "You didn't bring this up, and as far as I was concerned, it was done," and we were arguing this at about 6 o'clock on opening night. But he, more than I, knew--and I cannot speak for today's orchestra--that I could not talk that orchestra out of going into the pit that night. He knew it, and I didn't know that he knew it.

He calls Eddie Powell in, and the three of us are upstairs in the conference room going at it (growls).

"I'm not budging."

"Well, I'm not either!"

He knew that I could not talk that orchestra into not going into the pit. And I went downstairs.

Crawford: Did you believe they wouldn't perform?

Spain: Well, the committee had told me they wouldn't budge without that provision. So I go downstairs about 7 o'clock, and the orchestra is there all warming up and they're in tails.

That, incidentally, is another thing. I never got around tails in ten years. Every two years our proposal was to get rid of the tails. "You can see the orchestra in the pit, and they

should look like professionals," Adler said, and to this day they wear tails.

Anyhow, I went down there about 7, before an 8:15 curtain, and I'm saying, "Well, I guess we have to announce we're not going into the pit," and I thought they were going to take me apart!

He knew that--he knew damn well no one in that orchestra would refuse to go on. Oh, perhaps one or two, but professionally you can't do that. So they went in the pit, and I ate it, that's what happened.

Crawford: You got something, I think, graduated parking privileges, or something.

Spain: Oh, sure. But nothing more than what was already in the contract. No improvement over what was in the contract at the time, which the committee felt we had guaranteed to do.

He was marvelous, because he would not budge. When he gets firm like that..."Impossible!"...he will not budge. He also knew he was right and he knew that politically it was an awkward spot for me and that I had not leverage and so he brings in Eddie who also leans on me. He is good at the job--not unfair!--some of the players felt he was unfair.

You are familiar with the Elayne Jones episode? You realize that he hired her; he gave her tenure when the symphony said she couldn't cut it. That took guts.

Crawford: He stood behind her, and she's still there.

Spain: Oh, absolutely.

##

Crawford: What happened with the Spring Opera Theater at the time of their final orchestra contract in 1980?

Spain: Oh, the opera wanted light opera scale, and we gave it to them. The orchestra didn't like it. See, we had a contract with what was called the Civic Light Opera, which is now Nederlander-Shorenstein-etc. And they got a rate that was considerably less than the opera, but as Pat said, "Look, we are doing light opera...."

We had the same problem with Porgy and Bess when it came here. That was scale, and their point was that it was done with



Mrs. Albert and the whole gang; a million dollars and all that. Anyway, [Mayor] Shelley couldn't do that.

Crawford: But [Mayor] Alioto had the moxie to get it all together?

Spain: Yes. He got \$500,000 from the city and \$500,000 from Mrs. Albert and her supporters. But I was really pleased over all the years that we didn't have strikes. We threatened a couple of time, but only once did we get really close.

Issue: Tenure

Crawford: Let's talk about tenure.

Spain: Well, it took a long time coming. We got it first with the symphony in the 1967 strike. It was a gradual thing--you see, it's always a difficult problem to put tenure into an existing employment situation because you are imposing it on everything there. The natural reaction is, "I can live with tenure, but we'll start it with a probation period for a couple of years." We said, "no, you superimpose it immediately on every person in the orchestra" (whistles). It took a while.

But Maestro had fired fifteen or twenty people annually for a while. I mean, he gave dismissal notices, saying he could reconsider next season. He would then hire most of them back, but he always said, "Look, I'm always looking for better players, and these are weaker players." He wasn't picking on anyone, he just wasn't satisfied. Over the years he had culled out a lot of players and, understand, when he took over, there was an orchestra of players who had been playing there, and that was what he was given, so he culled.

So he knew full well what tenure meant. And then his toughest job afterwards was to demote people--not necessarily fire them, but to put them in a lower position. Even though artistically he felt he was right, he nevertheless knew some of these people for a long long while as a piano coach with the chorus.

He had to demote the principal bass, for example, and he did it with great, great pain, it was obvious to me. He didn't want to do it, but he had to do it.



Adler and the Musicians

Crawford: Let's talk about Adler's rapport with the musicians.

Spain: Oh, it was good most of the time. I always felt that Kurt could have done anything he wanted to do. If he had wanted to be full-time conductor he could have been; he just had too many jobs over there. That was always the criticism. The poor man was always so busy running the whole thing and directing it at the same time. He was happy as a kid in a toy store when he was conducting. I never played under him. Played under Furtwängler in Vienna, but I never played under Kurt.

Crawford: What do you think formed Mr. Adler?

Spain: Oh, the man's training, obviously. He was trained in a conservatory as a musician in the days when conductors were in fact gods, and opera directors were super-gods. There wasn't ever any question who was running the company. You can talk about democratizing things, but in fact even the most democratic symphony is run by a dictator the minute he steps on a podium, because it is the only way you can play. No musician ever kidded himself otherwise. He can fight like hell offstage or at rehearsals but once the program starts, the only least professional would ever, ever do anything but follow the conductor or in this case the director.

That is one of the difficult problems with symphony musicians; it's not so much in opera orchestras, because opera players learn from the beginning that they are an accompaniment orchestra. That's their function, and so they accept that.

You sublimate your desire to be a soloist. There is only one first violin solo; everybody else is the first violin section. Even in the symphony with twenty-two first violins, there is only one concertmaster. Everybody else is a player and you are going to have to subordinate yourself, otherwise it doesn't make music.

Opera orchestras are less of a problem, although if you measure it by the Met, you wouldn't think so. It seems to me they've had a strike every year they go, but they have an awful problem there. I think there is a strike every year there.

Adler and the Opera: The Jewel in the Crown

Crawford: Do the unions network; did the New York unions work with you?

Spain: Oh, sure, always. We tried, but of course, each situation is entirely unique. We were so fortunate in this rather small town of 700,000 people to be able to afford a major opera company and a symphony, and a ballet.

Crawford: Why do you think this is true?

Spain: You've always had the tremendous support here of the community. Not just San Francisco, obviously.

Crawford: It is a small base.

Spain: I'll say it is, when you figure the budgets of those three. The last figures I recall, the opera's was 17 million in 1984, the symphony's about 13 1/2, 14 million, I don't know what the ballet was, but I would guess about 5 million. You're drawing from a relatively small community, and it's a lot of money!

Maestro Adler used to get awards for ticket revenues compared to what everybody else did. He'd get 60 percent, and that's unheard of in our business, especially at those ticket prices! They used to ask him, "How do you do this, not in general, but how can you possibly do it in a town this size?"

I'm not just talking about gifts and contributions, but ticket sales. I first saw an opera in this town when I was in the house band in Reno in 1951 through 1954, and I came down to see Albanese and I paid two dollars or something to stand in the back. I don't know what he charged for standing room, but if the fire marshall ever caught on!

He always had more than was allowed in that theater, but who is going to say no to somebody who wants to buy an opera ticket? It was the most amazing thing, and you have to give him credit for not only the opera but for leading the opera from where it was when he took it over but for bringing with him the entire arts community. It is the "jewel in the crown," if you will.

Crawford: Do you mean that he generated more artistic activity in general?

Spain: Sure, he said it could be done. We do it! I don't know how he did it. I was involved with him on another plane. Sure, I've been a guest in his box a few times, and he offered it every

season, but I would rather play. I don't like to sit and watch anything, particularly. I don't know, but as far as I'm concerned he led the entire cultural thing there.

There are a lot of people who worked with him who have ended up on boards in other places, doing it. You can get money, you can get the productions, and you can get the stars here--he didn't accept "cannot."

Crawford: Is it still being carried on?

Spain: I don't know...I guess so.

Issue: Overtime

Crawford: Let me ask you about one heated issue, and that was the question of the players remaining in the pit for the curtain calls.

Spain: (whistles)...yes, that was a hot one.

Crawford: He demanded that and he was successful?

Spain: Yes. It was a question of professionalism, and he knew it. The orchestra by its own vote outvoted those who were screaming and hollering. You know, a few people take the job just as a job. That's normal with any group of a hundred people. Some players who were near exits would sneak out, but nothing ever escaped his eye. I don't know how he saw it, because you know he was never in his box. He would start in his box, and we wouldn't get twenty minutes into the performance before he'd have to go backstage. Down he goes to check it.

So I don't know how the hell he saw it, but he saw it, and he brought it to our attention. It wasn't so bad on the short operas, but on the long ones it really became a problem. People were dying in that pit, and sometimes, if you will recall, when we get an indian summer we have recorded temperatures of 95 degrees in that pit.

I called OSHA, and they laughed at me. "Do you think this is tough? We have a place without toilets!"

Oh, that reminds me about the toilet paper. Did I ever tell you about that one? A major issue in negotiations...there has got to be more toilet paper! (laughs). "I don't put toilet paper around," he says, "that's a job for the house!"

Crawford: They'd have to go to the War Memorial about that one?

Spain: Sure. But the issue of the pit, sure, it finally became an issue. When can they leave? We finally resolved it--not until the concertmaster gets up to leave, and he wouldn't let the concertmaster leave until the last bow.

Crawford: Is it true that Joan Sutherland's call went on so long that Adler dismissed the orchestra?

Spain: You bet, and that is when the rule started to break, when it suddenly became a question of money. The orchestra said, "Now wait a minute, if we have to stay in here and take the bows, we are going to stay here and take the bows. You aren't going to change all of a sudden, because it starts to run overtime. We had a hell of a big fight on that one, but of course you will understand that a part of that was our own rules.

Quite often union rules are self-defeating, in my opinion. My dream of a union, and believe me I am still a strong card-carrying member of the union, is that a union is self-erasing. Over a period of time it does such a good job that it works itself out of a job--it is no longer needed. The fact is, that is what has happened with a lot of unions. We have so much state and federal legislation that people who aren't in a union are covered.

Crawford: Is that true of the AFM?

Spain: No, no, no (laughs). but the symphony contract is now so well developed that the players are protected in every way you can think of. They don't need a union behind them. They are the union in a sense, and under that contract you've accomplished just about everything you need to accomplish.

But on this issue our own rule was the problem, because the opera had to pay a full half hour of overtime if you ran over. Now a half hour overtime for a sixty-nine or seventy-piece orchestra at that rate is a lot of money. If you have an opera where you are over the four hours you have an expensive opera anyway, because we had reduced it to a base pay of 3 1/2 hours, you understand.

So the other half hour was already overtime. That is the trade you make quite often. Where you can't get more and more money you have to start squeezing down on the time, and he was wise enough to know that in most cases a 3 1/2-hour call would

suffice. He had the advantage of being able to look ahead, project, and say, "How many of these work out that way?"

We usually knew what was coming in the season for which we were actually in negotiation, but the next year and the year after that only he knew, and sometimes no one but he knew, because it wasn't down on paper!

Crawford: So he worked from a very strong position.

Spain: Ho-Ho. He could predict, and sometimes in the second year of a contract we couldn't imagine what had happened. The guys didn't make the money we thought they would make because of overtime and all of that.

Crawford: With regard to overtime, he finally got a fifteen minute block of time rather than a thirty minute block, is that right?

Spain: Exactly. It was a compromise, but it solved the problem. To see anyone walking out of the pit would be like seeing someone leave the stage. The musicians begin to feel that nobody sees them in the pit, and it's not true. Maestro Adler says, "This whole performance is a show, from the opening to the closing. you give the public an entire performance. You don't cheat them. You know what a pain in the neck it is to see the orchestra wander in and start tuning up? But it's part of the show. So you finish the show properly, with the curtain and the final bows, everything. They paid their money, and they paid for the whole thing.

Same thing with the tails; we tried that one for years! "Couldn't we just get rid of them sometimes, when it's hot?" we said. I will give him credit for not trying what the symphony tried. Somewhere in the middle '70s the symphony got the idea that we should really have long gowns for the ladies, because they would dress in different things. Did you ever see a contract that spelled out earrings, and purses? God help me, it did!

The symphony decided that the ladies would wear one gown and they brought in a designer and they spent a fortune. But, you see, ladies come in different sizes: we have teeny ladies and tall ladies and other kinds...(laughs). Anyway it worked for about a year. One gown for all.

But Maestro Adler didn't do that. All he ever said was, "Please wear black."

He never got into the gown issue.



Crawford: What do you remember about other board presidents?

Spain: Well, I know Wally Baird. He's a very nice gentleman, and has carried the load for quite a while. He was never at a negotiation; I know him a little bit socially, that's all. I didn't deal with that level. I was quite satisfied with Kurt, because he knew where we were going and he never had to be backed up; he never called anybody that I know of, and I knew we could put it together.

I'm sure he did what he had to do behind the scenes, unlike my other negotiating teams, who would say, "We can only go so far, and now I have to go back and call my financial committee." He never did that. Or at least he never revealed it.

#### The Adler Staff and Labor Negotiations

Crawford: How about his staff. Who did he rely upon? I'm thinking about Max Azinoff and others.

Spain: Oh, Max! He was always with him in the early days before he died. Max had been in labor negotiations in the private sector for management, so he knew full well what to do, and Kurt relied on him a great deal. Several times he helped us work out the contracts because Maestro Adler trusted his word. I miss him.

Crawford: Adler had said that of all the union people, you were the toughest.

Spain: He was the toughest. We did have more problems than the others. The stagehands just wanted to get their money and not be horsed around.

Eddie Powell has a small group to represent. They do one thing, and they are all professionals. They are a small union and he keeps it closed. No he doesn't!

Crawford: You never said that.

Spain: I had 5,000 members and 85 contracts comparing each other all the time. In the beginning we had general meetings, believe it or not. So we'd be voting on the symphony contract and we'd have people wander in who had never played for the symphony in their life. But they could vote on it, back in the beginning!



We got rid of that in a hurry, and then only people on the job could vote on it.

Powell's crew works part time, and the main crew makes more than my people do, although it's not broadcast. They easily make \$50,000 a year and they work January, February, and March building sets, come back in July and close down around December 15, and what with overtime and double time, and all night...! They earn it, but a guy can take that job and work just for the opera and he's set for the year.

My people could work just for the opera and they'd make a third of that. They aren't used to that much, because we don't do anything in January, February, and March. So many in the opera orchestra do pickup jobs or they'll sub over at the symphony, some of the older ones.

Adler: Man and Impresario

Crawford: What are some of the other issues that we haven't touched upon?

Spain: The guy's unbelievable charm when he wanted to cut me in half. The AFM has some special rules: if a union insists that an employer engage a musician that the employer does not want to engage, does not feel is competent to do the job, that employer may appeal directly to the international president of the union and the president will rule on the matter.

He did that to me about the concertmaster's job. We thought the local people were quite sufficient. He didn't. AFM President Herman Cannon said he would send somebody up from Los Angeles to check. So he sent up Piastro from Los Angeles. He agreed with Maestro Adler and so he brought in someone from Chicago. He did that, and he smiled all the way.

Maestro Adler would come down and appear before my board of directors, whom I had told, "this is the toughest man I have ever negotiated with." He would turn on his Viennese charm and my board would turn to me and say, "What kind of a jerk are you? That has got to be the nicest man," and they would give him everything he asked for!

Crawford: How did your personal relationship hold up?

Spain: Always did. I just wish every performing arts group had a director like him. I don't care about the alleged tyranny. He

was not tyrannical in the sense of being unreasonable. He was certain where he was going and he knew what he was doing. If you tried to con him you never got anywhere. The only time we had an unhappy relationship was that night when I went on this parking thing, because he thought I had broken my word, I'm sure. He was personally angry with me.

Crawford: How did you resolve the dispute, apart from the issue itself?

Spain: I apologized. Oh, sure, I owed him an apology, as I realized afterward. The only other confrontations we had that were upsetting to him occurred when he attempted to fire some of the players over a period of some years. I never lost one of those, and my job required me to attack his veracity, in a sense, because he had decided that player was no longer capable of playing at that level and I had to challenge that.

But I can honestly say that never did I attack him or challenge his judgment. I would overcome it with factual presentations and testimony from the players.

The contract said that you couldn't do this without cause. He would then allege the cause, we would discuss it, and if we couldn't settle it, we'd hire an arbitrator, and we'd go down there and Bill Diedrich would handle it for their side and I'd handle it for our side and the arbitrator would move on it, and each time he would say, "You don't have sufficient cause."

The funniest one, I must tell you about. One year he complained that the woodwinds were terrible, out of tune. When I saw this coming I spoke to the principal woodwind. We had already issued a notice, and I said, "I think you are going to need some help here--why don't you get a letter from a major conductor you played with this year?" So she did, but unbeknownst to me, she picked the conductor who had complained about the woodwinds in a letter to Maestro Adler. "Terrible--out of tune!"

So I handed him another letter about this particular player from the same conductor saying the player was excellent and could play in any orchestra. The arbitrator looked at the letters and said, "This goddamn town! I never had one like this before--"

Crawford: How can this be?

Spain: The conductor caught him off guard, I guess (laughs).

- Crawford: So it worked in favor of the player, obviously. Did you never lose one of these cases?
- Spain: No, partly because I wrote the contract in such a way that Adler had an awful burden of proof.
- Crawford: Would it have been easier if he had conducted a performance and then stated that a player performed badly?
- Spain: Even then, the presumption is in favor of the players. But I'll tell you what he did accomplish: several demotions and several players voluntarily resigned. Demotions...that's an artistic judgment we asked every director to make.
- When we started to build these contracts we didn't try to plan long range. The first thing I'd do is get the Chicago Symphony contract in the '60s, when that was the contract and our was a piece of garbage alongside it. When you're dealing with a ten-year clause you try to use the strongest language you can find. I asked the orchestra what they wanted to emphasize; was it protection against discharge; could they live with demotions? So the weight was on discharge. Then a lot of people wouldn't accept demotion, and they said they would rather resign. So that he accomplished.
- Crawford: What other matters were heard by an arbitrator, apart from terminations?
- Spain: None, that I can remember. We always managed to work everything else out in the contract.
- Crawford: What do you think was unique about Adler in his field?
- Spain: Oh, his background and training. That you don't have any more. Sure, you have people with personalities like his, but he had the 1920s European musical background, with the whole attitude of total professionalism. The only place you still see it today, oddly enough, is in the ballet companies. They are still slaves, and the balletmaster is God. They get away with it because you still have 10,000 people who want to be dancers. They'd sell their souls to be ballet dancers, and you don't have that with musicians. The players got wise about this a long time ago: "Hell, no, we want to get paid!"
- Crawford: Will that attitude change the product?
- Spain: Unfortunately, I think so. What is happening is that we are hiring more and more technically perfect musicians--I'm talking about the symphony in particular. Maybe this won't happen so

much with opera, where you have to be musical all the time. All the conductors that I've ever seen in opera start from that point of view.

Crawford: So the conductors aren't reflecting this new attitude?

Spain: No. The best in the world, that's [James] Levine. You watch him out there. That is no technocrat. I see it happening with the symphony, this urge for actual perfection all the time. It leaves a very dry, stereotyped production where it's the same all the time and never gives any life. I'm sorry to hear that.

Crawford: There's no play between stage and pit?

Spain: That's right. Opera will always be to me the top of all the performing arts. But I've said that Kurt Adler was unique, and I believe that. I've never met anyone like him, and I don't see anyone else coming along like him. The ingredients just aren't there anymore.

First of all, there is Kurt as a person, with his own intelligence, skill, and training, but there is also the molding of him in those early years in the artistic arena. Today isn't yesterday and I don't think we can recapture it. Most of the people with Kurt Herbert's skills end up in industry making millions of dollars. He never cared about that. His linguistic skills alone; who else do you know who has that?



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Kurt Herbert Adler and the San Francisco Opera

William Diedrich, Jr.

OPERA COUNSEL PRO BONO

An Interview Conducted by  
Caroline Crawford  
in 1987





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INTERVIEW HISTORY--William Diedrich, Jr.

William Diedrich, Jr., was legal counsel on a pro bono basis for San Francisco Opera from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s. A senior partner in the San Francisco law firm of Pillsbury, Madison & Sutro, he was born in 1923 in rural DeKalb, Illinois, attended Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas, and got his law degree at Georgetown University Law School.

As a young attorney at Pillsbury, Madison & Sutro, Diedrich agreed to succeed Charles Prael as counsel for the opera company because he thought he might learn to like opera, which he did.

According to Kurt Herbert Adler, Diedrich was an aggressive labor lawyer, tough and intelligent, and Adler relied upon him as principal company spokesman in negotiations with the Musicians Union, Local 6. Referred to as Adler's "hired gun," Diedrich liked to say that collective bargaining was something like an ancient Tahitian war dance. "The ritual doesn't necessarily serve any purpose at all, but the parties feel that if you don't go through it, you can't get a contract." He concluded they would be more effective if he did the negotiating on a daily basis and asked Adler to come in at the last to present the final company position to the union committee. Of Mr. Adler's expertise in labor matters Diedrich said: "He was not a labor lawyer, but he had learned a significant amount in the college of hard knocks. He was, however, an expert in bargaining with opera unions."

The interview took place in the comfortable Diedrich home in St. Francis Woods, where the interviewee relaxed his large frame into an easy chair and recounted, with natural storytelling flair, his days of union battles and of being called to the opera house at all hours to help settle arguments (often extra-legal) and to resolve issues. Now semi-retired from his firm, Diedrich lists among his special interests several Catholic charities; he is on several boards of directors, including Girl Scouts of America, and has served as an advisor on the oral history of Pillsbury, Madison & Sutro. He edited his transcripts considerably, and in a secondary interview session amplified some of his original answers.

Caroline Crawford  
Interviewer/Editor

July 1988  
Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library  
University of California, Berkeley



BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please print or write clearly)

Your full name WILLIAM L. DIEDRICH JR.

Date of birth 4/17/23 Place of birth DE KALB, ILL

Father's full name WILLIAM L. DIEDRICH

Birthplace DE KALB, ILL.

Occupation U.S. RURAL MAIL CARRIER

Mother's full name MARIE LAWNER DIEDRICH

Birthplace CHICAGO, ILL.

Occupation MOTHER

Where did you grow up? DE KALB, ILL.

Present community SAN FRANCISCO, CA

Education B.A. ST BENEDICT'S (NEW BENEDICTINE) COLLEGE  
ATCHISON, KS.; L.R. BEDFORD TOWN HALL CENTER

Occupation(s) ATTORNEY - MEMBER OF FIRM OF PILLSBURY,  
MADISON + SUTRO - S.F.

Special interests or activities CHARITABLE WORK - (CATHOLIC  
CHARITIES, KARIBBA JUNTAS, LIONS CLUBS, ST. ANTHONY  
FOUNDATION, HOSPITALITY CENTER, LIAISON W/YOUR ORG on  
HISTORY OF PILLSBURY, MADISON & SUTRO

FOR FATHER DATA SEE WHO'S WHO in THE U.S. (1985 et seq)





May 14, 1992

## William L. Diedrich Jr.

A funeral Mass will be celebrated today for William L. Diedrich Jr., a respected labor attorney with the San Francisco law firm of Pillsbury, Madison and Sutro for 33 years, who died of kidney failure Friday in Aurora, Ill., where he was visiting relatives. He was 68.

Mr. Diedrich retired from active law practice in 1984, but he remained available to the firm for consultation on labor-management issues.

Born in DeKalb, Ill., Mr. Diedrich was a 1949 graduate of St. Benedict's College (now Benedictine College) in Atchison, Kan. He earned his law degree at Georgetown University Law School in 1951, the same year he joined Pillsbury, Madison and Sutro's Washington office.

Mr. Diedrich moved to San Francisco in 1954, and headed the firm's labor and equal opportunities department, representing management and employers before the National Labor Relations Board and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

During his retirement, Mr. Diedrich was an active board member of Benedictine College, Catholic Social Services, Arriba Juntos, San Francisco Bay Area Girl Scouts, the St. Anthony Foundation and the Serra Club of the Golden Gate.

He is survived by his wife, Margaret, of San Francisco; two daughters, Anne Diedrich of San Francisco and Louise Diedrich of Val Verde in Riverside County, and a son, Peter Diedrich of Los Angeles. Other survivors include two sisters, Lucille Riordan of Hinsdale, Ill., and Patricia Lynch, of Elmhurst, Ill., and four brothers, Charles of Salt Lake City, Thomas of Arlington, Va., Joseph of Hinckley, Ill., Edward of DeKalb, Ill. and two grandchildren.

The Mass will be at 11 a.m. today at St. Cecilia's Church, 17th Avenue and Vicente Street, San Francisco.



The Role of Counsel for Labor Relations: The Company's "Hired Gun"

[Date of Interview: February 24, 1987]###

Crawford: Mr. Diedrich, would you begin by describing your role with the company over the years?

Diedrich: Maybe "Jack of all trades, and master of none."

When I first started representing the opera, which was back in the early '60s, I started because Mr. Charles F. Prael, who was the head of our group at Pillsbury, Madison & Sutro and my mentor and good friend, had been representing the opera but he had gotten very busy on other legal matters.

Secondly, he was not terribly interested in the opera, and thirdly, those were the days when you dressed in formal evening wear on Tuesday evenings to be Mr. Adler's guest in the Box.

So, he being the boss, and I being the subordinate, he said, "Why don't you represent the opera, Bill?" Since we were doing it for free and he was my boss, I had the opera rather thrust on me.

Crawford: Was it always the case that the firm gave their services for free?

Diedrich: It's always been the case up until now. We never received a fee. The opera paid expenses, like for arbitration and whatever incidental expenses there were to the representation: transcripts, that kind of thing. But there was never a professional fee charged.

Crawford: You had a seat in Box A.

Diedrich: Yes, upon invitation to be Mr. Adler's guest. It is the worst seat in the house! It's a great seat if you like to see what's going on in the wings. [laughter]

In any case, I went out not knowing what my role was, and I met with Mr. Adler, who at that time I had obviously heard of, but I had never attended a grand opera in my life. He received me very graciously and asked me if I knew anything about opera, and I was perfectly honest. I told him I didn't know anything about opera, but I could name the starting offensive and defensive lineups for the 49ers, but I'm not sure I could name more than two or three famous opera stars. He said, "I vill teach you," in his best Viennese accent, and he did!

My role was to be the advisor, not only to Mr. Adler, but also to members of his staff who had personnel responsibilities for the entire opera company, not only the artists, but the orchestra, the stagehands, the wigmakers, the box office, and whenever they had a personnel problem they needed some advice on, they would call me.

Very often the discussions weren't legal in nature at all, because very often they were calling upon the knowledge I had from representing private employers for years for some sort of personnel advice. Should they grant so-and-so a leave of absence for a year to go to Monte Carlo to play roulette? That kind of a thing.

In collective bargaining for probably fifteen years, I was the principal spokesman and negotiator for the San Francisco Opera Association in its collective bargaining with Local 6 of the Musicians Union. Mr. Adler was saved for occasions of dire emergency and to make sure the orchestra negotiators understood that when I said there wasn't any more, he could come in and tell them he meant it because those were his instructions.

It was long, and very interesting, and it developed over the years between Kurt and me into a very strong personal relationship as well as a professional one.

#### A Working and Personal Relationship with Kurt Adler

Crawford: Did you deal with the other unions--AGMA and IATSE--as well?

Diedrich: Yes, in the sense that I advised the staff people who actually did the bargaining. The only other union that did significant bargaining with the opera was AGMA, representing the chorus, and they were represented by Don Tayer and Harry Polland, but I did not act as spokesman or chief negotiator. The bargaining was

generally done by one of the staff. In later years it was Pat Mitchell.

They would come to me when they needed advice. Should we do this or are we obligated to do this or are we not obligated to do this?

But the most taxing bargaining was Local 6 of the Musicians Union, because they evidently felt most strongly about their position vis-à-vis the opera.

Crawford: They were also the most powerful union.

Diedrich: Well, they were the most powerful union unless you wanted to go to tapes to produce an opera. [laughter]

The chorus could have been as powerful, but bear in mind that in those days it was a part-time chorus, so the opera was a nice supplementary income and in some cases the people's primary income to be supplemented by some other outside work, but the opera was not the main source of the way they made their living, as it is now.

It took years and years, and we now have a professional chorus which is the nucleus of the larger chorus, and that has taken ever since San Francisco Opera began to about six years ago to develop a professional chorus.

So there's no doubt that the opera orchestra brought the tradition of unionization going back to James C. Petrillo, the economic power to bargain and the know-how, and therefore musicians' bargaining was a kind of bellwether about what was going to happen throughout the opera organization. Eddie Powell and the stagehands always bargained for themselves, and I don't ever remember having a problem involving the stagehands.

Crawford: They apparently never came close to a strike of any kind.

I was told that in the 1940s they made \$2.25 per hour, which was higher than what their counterparts in the theater made; today they average around \$17 per hour, so they've come a long way. Have all the unions come as far?

Diedrich: Oh, no. The other unions have not come as far, but bear in mind that the stagehands union basically brings crafts people, whose highest craft is working as a stagehand, but if they didn't work as a stagehand they could be out working as a journeyman carpenter in general construction without missing a beat.



So they again had an alternative career to the opera. They were much more closely allied to the construction trade pattern of unionism and tradition than they were to the musicians pattern of unionism. Nobody, of course, has a pattern like the opera star--that's a world unto itself! [laughs]

Local 6: The American Federation of Musicians

Crawford: Yes, we'll get to that. I wanted to talk first about the development of the musicians' benefits. They worked under fairly difficult conditions in the early days, say in 1950, as you mentioned to me.

Diedrich: I can't tell you dollars and cents as compared to where they are right now, but let us look at the opera orchestra, which is by and large the crème de la crème of classical musicians on any particular instrument, e.g., classical--the concertmaster is an amazing musician. I would say that the musicians occupying the first or second chairs are probably among the top fifty on that particular instrument for concert playing in the United States.

They used to maintain, and I'm satisfied it's true, that playing in an opera orchestra is much more difficult than being a symphonic musician, because you have to make instant adjustments. If the soprano comes onstage and she has a cold, you may have to transpose everything down a notch, and you may have to do it right now! You didn't rehearse it that way.

You have to be adaptable as far as you don't want the music to end fifteen seconds before the scene ends, leaving everybody on the stage with their faces hanging out. So I have a great respect for the artistic abilities of these people and I thought they were paid appallingly poorly.

Crawford: Yes. The figure I have for the early 1950s is \$150 per week. They are now paid \$950 for a six-service week, which means they are now making slightly more for a performance than they were making for a week.

Diedrich: I don't decry that in the overall picture of the fine arts. I do not subscribe to the theory that artists should live in a garret on crusts of bread; I think they are entitled to at least a moderate standard of living.

A Season Cancelled: 1964

Crawford: Were any of their demands consistently unreasonable?

Diedrich: Oh, sure! Whenever you bargain with the opera orchestra, and this goes back to the unpleasantness when we called off the opera in 1964. You are bargaining with sixty-eight individuals, and there is an overlay of bargaining demands made by the negotiating team, but within those are pet subjects, of people within the orchestra who think they should be better compensated for some particular role they play.

Lloyd [Gowan] had a perennial demand that he should get paid an additional differential over the one he was paid for tripling. He received a differential because he tripled on three instruments akin to the flute, and I'm not enough of a musician to even name them, but they always presented this demand and I'd say, "Oh, that's the Gowan demand."

They would get on a kick and some of the kicks were not unfounded, but for two or three rounds we were on the soap-dispenser kick. They insisted that we ought to have more and better soap dispensers in the orchestra quarters so that they could wash their hands more easily, better, and more cleanly, I don't know.

We always had a fight about the chairs in the pit, and that still goes on. No matter what chair you got, you could take a vote, and half the orchestra didn't like the chairs they were sitting on. It wasn't an easy choice to make, because the pit at the San Francisco Opera is rather small, and occasionally they would say they needed a bigger pit.

Crawford: Which they got, after 1976.

Diedrich: Yes. They started to get operas that demanded bigger orchestras, so it wasn't just because of union demands.

Other Crises

Crawford: What about other crises that might have brought strikes or closure--1980, when the orchestra, on the afternoon of opening night, came with demands?

Diedrich: Well, I just consider those as ordinary glitches. That was serious, because you might not have had an opening night, but it wasn't anything that was going to lead to a strike cancelling the season.

But to me, a serious matter was a disagreement so broad or so fundamental that as you approached the pre-rehearsal week, you did not have a contract. The parties were either hung up on a variety of subjects, or on a few subjects on which neither would move and insisted they never would, and you were faced with the choice of whether to spend the money to rehearse and prepare to actually stage the operas, or just cancel the season.

In 1964 we did cancel the season for twenty-four hours. We sent cablegrams all over the world and told artists that due to the failure of obtaining a collective bargaining agreement we were cancelling the season and we would work out any arrangements under their contracts as a result of the cancellation.

If you are going to run an opera company, so I learned, once you get into the preparation of the season and you start having artists arrive, and you start paying for rehearsal time, the orchestra, and all the attendant support facilities for the artists, you start spending what could be called discretionary funds. If you chop it off and you don't incur that expense it doesn't occur, and so you cut your losses.

Often we had threats of strikes--Lord, we had them occur during the season.

One year I was at a Halloween party, an annual Halloween party for my children, which became a massive, popular neighborhood affair because of the imagination of my kids (plus the star was always me, I always opened it with a ghost story in a dark basement with a jack o' lantern for a light).

I was in the midst of this when the phone rang, and Margaret called from the upstairs down into the basement--it was the basement of one of those west-of-Twin Peaks houses where the first floor is the garage--and she said that Kurt Adler was on the phone.

I went up and he said, "Bill, the orchestra will not go into the pit." I said, "Why not?" And he said, "They say I must apologize for remarks I made, and I'm not going to apologize." I said, "Is Jerry Spain in the house?" And he said, "I think so." I said, "Why don't you get Jerry and you and Jerry sit down and find out what all this is all about, and

if you can't work something out, call me up and maybe I can help you."

So they got together, and the curtain was about twenty minutes late, but that is the temperament of the classical musician. You have to understand Adler had a monumental ego, particularly where artistic excellence was concerned. If he didn't like an individual's playing, he felt obliged to make comments in front of the entire orchestra.

Crawford: Did those kinds of things happen frequently?

Diedrich: Well, they weren't unusual. I didn't automatically declare a state of war because of them, but they happened once in a while, and the ultimate threat of the orchestra is, "We won't play."

That was their age-old tactic, to bargain and present their must-have demands, and then hold on to them right up until rehearsal week.

Crawford: In the 1980 situation, where the orchestra insisted on parking space at the eleventh hour, had they saved that up to increase the pressures?

Diedrich: Oh, no, that was on the table all the time, but that, I think, got hung up not because there was no agreement but because it hadn't been reduced to writing.

Crawford: They had a tacit agreement but no signed contract, and they thought it was a good time to get their parking places?

Diedrich: Sure!

Crawford: Highway robbery, one staff member called it.

Diedrich: No, it's not highway robbery. It's knowing when you have the muscle and when you don't. All the time I represented the San Francisco Opera Association the closer you get to opening night the less muscle the opera felt like demonstrating. I have encouraged them on several occasions: "Look, if you fold now, you are never going to have any credibility in future bargaining when you decide to be tough," and that has proven to be the case.

The union has always believed, and experience has always proved it to be the case except for the 1964 one, that if they waited long enough the choice would be would the opera cancel or would they give us what we insist upon? And history has shown the opera has generally compromised its position. So has the

union but the union has always gotten closer to what they wanted than what the opera wanted to give them.

I don't consider it unsportsmanlike or anything else. The union agents are being paid to get the most they can for their people, and the essence of the game is that if you have the economic power, use it, as long as you don't kill the generator of the money. [laughs]

### Adler and the Issues

Crawford: What were the issues which Adler held fast on?

Diedrich: Well, any infringement on his artistic judgment. He held fast on instituting an audition program, he held fast on anything in a contract that looked as if he would have to be responsible to the orchestra or practically anybody else for his artistic judgments. Quite properly so--how do you run a democratic opera company? Darned if I know.

Crawford: No, he has made it clear that he doesn't believe too much in democracy in the theater.

Diedrich: Right.

Crawford: In 1972, AGMA pressed on the issue of auditions, or reauditions, as it happened. The senior choristers didn't want to reaudition, and Adler made a dramatic entrance suddenly from his vacation in Moscow to settle it.

Diedrich: I don't remember--I wasn't that close to AGMA.

### Adler the Negotiator

Crawford: Let's talk then about Mr. Adler and labor negotiations--what was he like as a negotiator?

Diedrich: As a negotiator, Mr. Adler was specific and definite. When I was doing the negotiating, his role was to appear and to make sure that the union committee understood that the final position of the opera association as I stated it was in fact the final position. That they were aware of it and approved of it.



I never saw Mr. Adler in negotiations treat anyone other than with respect and an appreciation for the union spokesmen whose obligation it was to represent the opera orchestra.

He was a fine negotiator. The reason I finally successfully suggested to him that he didn't want to be in the negotiations on a daily basis is, one: you have a lot of other things to do, and this was very time consuming. As I have stated to both unions, collective bargaining is like an ancient Tahitian war dance. There is a certain ritual that has to be fulfilled before you get a contract. Now the ritual doesn't necessarily serve any purpose at all, but the parties feel that if you don't go through it, you can't get a contract. Kurt didn't have time to engage in this ancient Tahitian war dance! [laughs]

#### The Collective Bargaining Cycle

Crawford: How time consuming were the negotiations with the musicians?

Diedrich: Very time consuming from when they commenced seriously in May to when they got a contract in late August. I came and went, but when I was negotiating, it occupied my time for several months, and that's why I stopped doing it. I said, "Look--I've got other clients who pay me! Here, I'm not working for a paying client."

I talked to Bill Orrick about that when he was board president, and he was a lawyer too, and the senior partner of a major law firm, and he was very understanding.

He said, "Well, Bill, it certainly would be asking too much to have you present in all the collective bargaining," and that's when I assumed the role I've had ever since. When somebody like Pat Mitchell or Bob Walker would do the bargaining, they would have frequent consultations with me, but I wasn't locked up during a week in a room talking to the union.

Crawford: AGMA and AFM both brought teams of negotiators to the sessions, unlike IATSE.

Diedrich: Yes, but bear in mind that Local 6 to a much greater degree than AGMA, I think, had tremendous local political pressures within the union. There was no way that Jerry Spain or Pop Kennedy were not going to let the musicians select their own negotiating team and make the collective bargaining policy for the



orchestra, so long as it didn't fly in the face of some firmly imbedded international policy. They had to be there. If they weren't and they had reached agreements without orchestra representation, they never would have gotten them ratified by the opera orchestra players.

That was the fundamental problem in 1964. We reached at least four different agreements with the union negotiating committee, and they couldn't get it ratified by the membership, and we had to go back, and finally Mr. Miller, bless him, said, "We're not going any further. We've bailed these guys out four times, and they are either going to accept the fourth time, or forget it!"

And that's when we met in City Hall across the hall from Jack Shelley's office, and he brought in the labor establishment and pounded the opera people into reasonableness.

Crawford: It is said that Mayor Shelly criticized Mr. Miller at times for being too tough--too inflexible where the unions were concerned.

##

Diedrich: Not in my presence. The Mayor may have had said something different in our absence to the union representation.

But in 1964, if Kurt Adler had had his way, he never would have sent those telegrams all over the world cancelling the season. He pleaded and cajoled with Mr. Miller to find a way out, short of telling the musicians that there was not going to be a season--every way known to man. Kurt Adler was the general director of an opera company; his job was to be midwife to the birth of another opera season, and he felt that if the season was killed, the baby was killed. He felt he would pay almost any price to avoid cancelling an opera season. I don't begrudge him that, but I disagreed with him violently on a number of occasions, including this one, as did Mr. Miller.

Crawford: Why did Mr. Miller feel so strongly?

Diedrich: How often do you reach four different agreements with somebody and then have them fall apart on you?

Mr. Miller was an experienced businessman and said, "We've gone the last mile--we are at our wit's end. Outside of giving away the store, what can we do to satisfy them?"

Robert Watt Miller and His Relationship with Kurt Adler

Crawford: Talk about Mr. Miller; you knew him well?

Diedrich: I'm not sure I knew him well. I knew Mr. Miller as well as somebody in my position could know him.

Mr. Miller was a very patrician, but gracious man. He knew, of course, a great deal about opera--substantively; I'm not talking about mechanics--but the man had started listening to opera when he was a little boy, and he was then president of the board of directors for over twenty years.

There was hardly ever a rehearsal that he missed. He didn't come to be officious or anything else, he just came because he liked it. In the terms of 1980, if you can say it about somebody as dignified and well recognized as Mr. Miller, he was an opera groupie! [laughs] He had a tremendous amount of knowledge about the economics of the opera association, but to me he was always the most gracious man.

Well, you saw the letter in the scrapbook--he was nice enough to write a letter of praise to a senior partner of our firm.

##

This is perhaps beyond the purview of the biography of Mr. Adler, but one of the most moving and emotional experiences I've ever had was the funeral of Robert Watt Miller. He had gone into the hospital for open heart surgery knowing full well that he might never come out, but he said he would rather take the risk than be an invalid for the rest of his life.

He did not come out, and Mr. Adler called me very shortly after Mr. Miller's death, and I paid attention and went to the funeral services at St. Dominic's Church. Mr. Miller's wife was Roman Catholic, he was not, but the funeral service was basically a version of a Roman Catholic service, and there was music by opera personnel, who played selections that had been particular favorites of his.

The pièce de résistance was Leontyne Price, in this best of Gothic architecture we have in San Francisco, singing the Ave Maria. It made chills up and down the spine, unless you were tone deaf or something. It just had a real wallop, not a great sense of sorrow, because he had led a full life.

Crawford: Everybody knows what a loss that was for the company. I remember the stagehands talking about "ten-thousand-Watt Miller," as they called him.

Diedrich: There are so many stories I could tell.

Crawford: Well, as soon as you get the transcript, you can add them all, and I hope you will.

Diedrich: Okay. [laughs]

Crawford: What was Mr. Adler's relationship to Mr. Miller like?

Diedrich: It was, I would say, a very affectionate relationship, with Mr. Miller making sure Mr. Adler was constantly aware who the ultimate authority was, to wit, Mr. Miller. He was the ultimate chief executive officer, as far as the opera was concerned.

Crawford: So he would have made the decision whether or not a season was cancelled.

Diedrich: That is correct.

#### Successive Board Presidencies and a Changing Board

Crawford: Would any of his successors have done that?

Diedrich: Well, they never would have done it as unilaterally as Mr. Miller would have done it. Later on, we had clearance from the board on a couple of occasions, particularly with one of his sons, God rest his soul, Dick Miller.

He was chairman for two rounds of bargaining. As a result of meetings with the executive committee of the board which we kept fully informed, they said were not unwilling, if they deemed the circumstances necessary, to call off the opera.

It never came to that, and later on, Wally Baird, quite properly, was not about to make that decision all by himself, and it wasn't my place to make the decision, I was just the lawyer. And we met with the executive committee.

Robert Watt Miller was a one-man show. I don't think that I knew anyone else on the board when he was president. At that period of time in the United States with many not-for-profit organizations, you got on the boards according to how much money

you might be willing to give and not how hard you wanted to work or what peculiar talent you might bring to the board that might be of value to the overall enterprise.

I don't know if Robert Watt Miller appointed the board or not, but I never attended a board meeting in the time I knew Robert Watt Miller. I saw him, and when Mr. Miller said it was okay, I said it was okay with me.

Mr. Adler was in the picture as much as he always had been: he ran the opera company, but when the big decisions came about whether or not we were going to put on the Ring and spend um-diddy-um million dollars, Mr. Adler didn't do that until Mr. Miller said it was okay.

Crawford: How would that have differed in the Hale presidency [1967-1976]?

Diedrich: By then the board had become much more a working board, and Prentis wasn't president long enough really to be faced with the whole panoply of problems that arise over a ten-year period the way Robert Watt Miller was.

Bill Orrick was a very active president [1971-1973], he was a lawyer also, but Bill Orrick was not a one-man show. But all of these men had admiration and utmost respect for Kurt Adler's judgment, particularly artistically. I don't know how; he may have had heated discussions about what the repertoire should be three years from now--I wasn't involved in those kinds of things.

Crawford: You were involved, though, in executive committee meetings and attended board meetings.

Diedrich: Yes, and generally only when a labor problem was involved. I never knew of any board president who didn't have the utmost respect for Mr. Adler as general director of the opera company.

As the economics of the San Francisco Opera Association changed with the passage of time, Adler's artistic judgment may have been questioned because of its economic impact. This is seen particularly in Wally Baird's presidency, when the company needed the best financial management available, which Baird was most qualified to see it had. Wally Baird was different than the others. He was a dollar and cents man. So the importance shifted.

Crawford: Upon whom did Mr. Adler rely regarding labor matters?

Diedrich: Well, me. Really it developed down to that.

Crawford: What was your relationship like?

Diedrich: Number one, I never waited to see Kurt Adler. If he knew I was coming, he made sure I had immediate access to him in his office. The meetings were always very informal, with sometimes Pat Mitchell or Marian Lever taking notes for the purpose of memorializing what the discussion was. That would lead to such weighty things as whether or not I should have a diet Pepsi today or iced tea.

Mr. Adler generally had a demitasse of coffee, but all in all it was very efficient, with well-defined issues, not general bull sessions. They generally resulted in a conclusion as to what the opera would do in a particular situation.

If we had a really thorny problem, I might be out there at the opera house two or three times a week for an hour at a time.

Crawford: Were these sessions always during the working week?

Diedrich: Yes, except during collective bargaining. Generally, I stopped on my way home--four-thirty or five o'clock. I had to take the streetcar down Market Street anyhow, and getting to the opera house and expecting anybody to be functioning before ten o'clock in the morning is an exercise in futility. [laughter]

Crawford: Those late night curtains...

Diedrich: That's right.

But he called me up and talked to me or I'd go up. I'd put my feet up on his desk and discuss whatever the problem was that he thought he wanted to discuss and come to some conclusion.

Sometimes I'd say, "Look, I can't give you advice about that. I don't know about that, or it's none of my business--that's your decision to make as general director."

On other occasions, I quite frankly told him, "You're crazy as hell! I can't tell you you're doing something unlawful but my gut reaction tells me within the history of this opera company, this isn't the move you ought to make."

And we reached a situation where he listened to me, and I listened to him. I had utmost respect for Kurt Adler in this area.

Crawford: Did he know a lot about labor law?



Diedrich: Mr. Adler was not a labor lawyer, but he had learned a significant amount in the "college of hard knocks." He was, however, an expert in bargaining with opera unions.

He knew a lot about labor law, but he knew a lot more about the opera, and there was not a thing about the opera and about where the money went that he personally did not know. The only other person I know out there that could talk to Kurt openly-- just say, "I disagree with you Kurt; you're wrong, and if you go ahead and do it, it's your responsibility, not mine,"--was [chief accountant/comptroller] Max Azinoff.

I didn't work for Kurt Adler, I worked for Pillsbury, Madison & Sutro, and I was their lawyer and I grew up in a school where it was said that if you let a client make you give them advice that they want and not what they ought to get, then you ought to stop being their lawyer.

The Adler Staff: Max Azinoff

Diedrich: Max came out of the private sector, he had worked for Fuller Paints, and he was not used to yes-men either. So we gave Adler a hard time, but not too often, because most of the time we agreed.

Crawford: So Max Azinoff had a very good grasp of the financial picture at the opera.

Diedrich: Oh, sure. In my memory, Max came out there after he retired--he may have been there when I arrived.

Crawford: Max came to the company in 1963.

Diedrich: So about the same time. I think he found the financial records of the opera in complete disarray. Max came in and got them all straightened out. He was a very direct guy, and he could tell you you were wrong and be as critical as all get-out, but he had this manner, this mad-Russian manner that nobody took offense at. I don't know of anybody that ever got angry at Max. But when Max spoke seriously, I listened. And so did Kurt Adler, because usually he had something to say and usually had a reason for saying it.



Howard Skinner: Manager of the Company

Crawford: How about Howard Skinner?

Diedrich: Well, Howard Skinner had been there from time immemorial, and Howard didn't have too much to do with the labor picture. He was the most gracious gentleman and he had a tremendous value not only in the community because he was widely known in San Francisco and one of the finest artistic administrators in the community. He was one of the nicest people you'd ever want to meet.

I'll tell you a little story about Howard that illustrates the whole thing. When our children were growing up, and there are three of them, we bought a motor home. It was back in 1969 when motor homes were rather unusual. It slept five people and had a freezer and a bathroom, and we bought it because we liked to travel and we owned some land in the country and we could go up and park it up there on weekends and tramp around for a few days, and so forth.

So we had just gotten this and we had planned its maiden voyage back to Illinois where both Margaret's family and mine is. We had made an agreement--Jerry Spain and Kurt and I--saying that this business of waiting until late in August to get an agreement is nonsense; there is no reason why we can't get it by the middle of July, and then everyone can devote their energies to whatever else might be more productive in getting ready for the opera season.

Well, everybody on the staff who knew this thought we were crazy--it had never been done before.

Crawford: It was always August before that?

Diedrich: Oh, sure. It was always very near the rehearsal weeks. But we pulled it off. It was sort of a peaceful year, I think, and there wasn't really any great credit for it. We pulled it off, and I let it be known that we were scheduled to be off on Thursday, perhaps, to start our drive back in our motor home for Illinois.

Wednesday afternoon, we had gotten it all signed, and it had been ratified by the union and the bargaining was behind us. I came home that Wednesday night, not very far from here, and on the front steps was a package. I was the first one home, no one else had arrived yet, and I opened the package. Here are two

bottles of the finest champagne that money could buy, and all it said was, "Thanks. Howard."

And so we drank the first bottle of champagne, getting it cold in the Truckee river! [laughs]

But he was that kind of a man.

#### More About 1964

Crawford: In the letter Robert Watt Miller wrote to your law firm, he said that you were the point man in the 1964 negotiations. Was that the case?

Diedrich: I was the arbitrator between Mr. Miller and Mr. Adler. If the truth were known, I didn't want Kurt to get hurt by telling Mr. Miller he would do whatever drastic thing he would do if they cancelled the season. On the other hand I thought Mr. Miller was taking the correct position.

Also in the meeting with the Mayor I was sort of the spokesman because I was the spokesman in negotiations. Now Jack Shelley, bear in mind, was a union guy! He had been a business agent in the bakery drivers union of the Teamsters before he went into politics, and he understood labor-management relations and I knew he did and I talked to him like that. I could say, "Mr. Mayor, how many times do we have to go to the well to try and reach an agreement with these people? We have been there four times. We still don't have one, and we're not going back to that well, it's dry. Forget it!"

Now when organized labor wants an agreement, they can have one. It's sitting right out there on the table. Shelley knew I meant it.

Crawford: Did Mr. Adler hint he might resign ever if a season was cancelled?

Diedrich: Oh, no. [laughs] Most of the time we were closeted in an empty office right across from the Mayor's office and I was just there waiting to be summoned to do something, and Kurt and Mr. Miller were there hours on end.

They would reminisce about people they had known in the opera, and what was the matter with certain opera companies in Europe, and what were the bad halls and what were the good

halls. I got a liberal education in worldwide opera! But I just didn't want either one of them to get at loggerheads with each other. They were looking through two different sets of glasses.

Issue: Outside Hiring of Musicians

Crawford: Let's talk about issues: One of the issues that seemed to give a lot of trouble over the years was the importation of musicians from elsewhere into the opera orchestra. How was that resolved?

Diedrich: Oh, I don't know that it ever got formally resolved. It was just finally resolved on the grounds that we convinced them they didn't have musicians here as qualified as the people we wanted to import, and they ought to stop beating a dead horse.

Bear in mind that every leader of Local 6 is elected by the membership of the whole Local. Classical musicians are a very small percentage of that membership, and the classical musicians--be they symphony or opera orchestra--I think they just don't believe that the leadership understands the problem of the classical musicians vis-a-vis the Grateful Dead, and so forth.

It was an article of faith that you protected your local membership and you didn't let producers--it probably started in Hollywood--import musicians from outside. They might come in and work for less than some well-known principal who was getting over scale.

It was a traditional union kind of thing that the Local had that was reinforced by the International. I think once somebody like Jerry Spain, who is pretty smart and played a mean string bass, saw that the problems of imports of tuba players for the opera orchestra would not have threatened all the tuba players in Local 6, he sort of just quit being silly about it.

We tried to be judicious about it. If there was someone in town who could do the job and who was willing to demonstrate his ability and play for the musical director, Adler or whoever happened to be the judge of their musical competence, we hired the guy. Why go beating around to New York, or Philadelphia and Cleveland and Chicago if you've got somebody on your doorstep who can do the work?

Issue: Salaries and Time Off

Crawford: What were some of the other hot issues raised by Local 6?

Diedrich: Oh, what you'd expect. Money was always an issue, and money was always an issue in many different forms. That is, we'll keep the base rate the same for fewer services. That is a way of getting a raise. They were very ingenious and they understood the compensation system, and if they couldn't get it in direct dollars, they'd try another way.

One of the perennials that still does come up, and I think there is a fair amount of sympathy with this and they finally achieved some success with it, was time off. They said they should have enough musicians so that everybody could work a five-day week.

We said, "We only put on opera twelve weeks a year, and we can't do it." We would have had to put more people on the payroll, and that means all the added overhead costs and fringe benefits, and how are you going to schedule them--is a first horn for La Bohème going to play three Bohèmes and then the first horn on the second shift going to play the other two?

Operas don't work that way. You're not picking up eight sidemen for Glenn Miller's band; every musician is part of this and if he doesn't play well it will be noticed. We fought that fight time and time again and we finally--and I'm quite sure still not to the union's satisfaction--agreed that they would have from Sunday afternoon until Tuesday off. That's why the opera house is dark on Monday.

Crawford: No rehearsals either.

Diedrich: No nothing! We built some flexibility in that you could substitute free days--so many a season, not very many--because some of the artists we wanted we couldn't get unless we had a Monday performance or something like that. But that was one of the big issues--other than the economic package--one of the big items of importance. I think Adler had a great deal of sympathy for it. Working with the intensity that those people work without a chance to go off and draw a breath or without being accountable to somebody was very taxing.

Issue: Tenure

Diedrich: I think the other major breakthrough for the opera orchestra besides the economic package was tenure, the agreement that we would notify people within a certain period after the conclusion of the season as to whether they would be reengaged. If they have performed two-and-a-half seasons, they are virtually automatically reengaged, unless you are willing to go to arbitration to prove that they have lost their competence to play in the orchestra. And we have never won one of those!

Crawford: Talk about that.

Diedrich: Well, I think it was probably borrowed from the field of education, but it was fairly common. After a player had been in the orchestra a certain period of time, he could not be terminated--that's the wrong word--but you could not refuse to offer him a contract for reengagement, unless you could substantiate a reason for failing to do so. You couldn't do it because a better player was in the wings, if the one you had was adequate.

##

Crawford: We are talking about the arbitration process in case of non-reengagement of players in the opera orchestra. You said that tenure was something you regretted.

Diedrich: Well, yes, because first of all I don't know how it got into the contract, and I don't know why. I won't disclaim responsibility for it, because I can't remember that much, but if I ever drafted that clause, I must have been under the influence of something, because it was atrocious. In the last round of bargaining, they got it fixed.

Finally in that last round, it was said that you cannot refuse to reengage a tenured player unless you can demonstrate a deterioration in [his or her] performance ability. Well, that meant if he was terrible the season before, he had to get demonstrably worse the next season! It was the standard that once you accepted him for what he was, you weren't allowed any mistakes.

The other thing it meant was that there was almost no hope of upgrading your orchestra, unless somebody died or retired. It is very difficult to demonstrate that from 1985 to 1986 Bill Diedrich's playing got so much worse when you compare '86 to '85 that you were justified in terminating him. It's a standard



that is almost impossible to reach. We tried several of those cases, and the problem is that you could never get any players to substantiate the opera's conclusions.

We had cases where players in one section or in an adjoining section would complain about a particular player being just a little off beat or a little out of tune, which upset the concentration and ability of the neighboring players to play properly, because they were hearing all this discordance.

They would complain, and then we would try to get them to testify and they would say, "Gee, I don't remember anything like that!"

Crawford: Protecting their peers.

Diedrich: Sure. I never had a Local 6 person testify in an arbitration case against another Local 6 person in all the cases I tried--ten or more.

Crawford: How many of those did you win?

Diedrich: I guess 50 percent, maybe. On artistic grounds, my batting average is 0-0-0. In terms of failure to reengage for artistic reasons.

Crawford: What other kinds of cases were there?

Diedrich: Oh, we had one horn player that refused to play backstage parts. He was a regular member of the opera orchestra, but they wanted him in a backstage band. He refused to do it, and we fired him for insubordination.

We've had an arbitration more recently in which the required orchestra was smaller than the normal orchestra complement. There are some operas that require an orchestra of no more than forty-five players. That means you've got thirteen surplus players for that particular orchestra, and we took the position that we had the right to pick and choose which thirteen we were going to ask to sit that orchestra out. We still paid them the guaranteed base rate, but they didn't get any of the extra hours--or rehearsal pay.

The union's position was that we had to do it by seniority, and we said no, we'd do it by the suitability of the player for the particular music that was going to be played.

The arbitrator agreed with us, which restored some right for us to determine who was going to play.



Crawford: Otherwise, who would have made the decision?

Diedrich: It was going to be a formula: you couldn't lay off the senior second violinist, even though a [better] violinist had come into the orchestra later. [The one] who played less well would have been given the job by the union.

### Spring Opera Theater Negotiates a Contract

Crawford: What about the last orchestra contract for Spring Opera Theater, which put the players on a casual rate, as I understand it? Did you advise the company to reject the players' demands for more money?

Diedrich: Yes, I did. I told them to do that unless they believed that Spring Opera Theater was absolutely essential. I did that for two reasons, and I don't think this violates any attorney-client privilege: One has to do with collective bargaining. If I commit suicide voluntarily by spending money I don't have, why not just fold up shop and go out of business?

Secondly, if you give in on this, why will the opera orchestra ever believe you when you say no again? You're putting your whole credibility out there to dry. Well, they went ahead and did it. And as I've told other clients, "You just paid for my advice, but you don't have to take it." And in this case they didn't even pay for it! [laughter]

Crawford: Had the union simply waived the standard fee for the Spring Opera orchestra before that time?

Diedrich: You'd have to ask about that--the compensation schemes of the opera orchestra.

### Artists and Arbitration

Crawford: Let's talk about the singers now, about what one opera staff member has called the "most egregious welches" on the part of some of them: cancellations and "indispositions," as they were always called in program inserts. Adler had few of them; McEwen more, I think.

Diedrich: A lot more! [laughs] Terry's first season as general director, I think he appeared in front of the curtain more than most performers did!

Crawford: What cases arose under Adler, and did he take a hard line or make deals, so to speak, as we are told Mr. McEwen did when Placido Domingo cancelled in 1985?

Diedrich: We were never faced with a Domingo situation. But principals in grand opera all too often enter into contracts which they subsequently refuse to perform, and Adler could do nothing. Kurt would call [imitating Austrian accent]: "Bill, Sutherland isn't going to come. She says she and her husband need time in Australia. Can we sue?"

"Sure. Can you find her in this country? Do you want to sue her in Australia?"

Crawford: When Mr. Domingo cancelled, a special arrangement was made for future commitments, as we all know. Were his reasons better for cancelling than Margaret Price's, who was taken to arbitration for cancelling the same production?

Diedrich: No comment! [laughs]

Crawford: Would you talk about that arbitration case?

Diedrich: We just won it.

Crawford: Is that the first time an artist was ever taken to arbitration?

Diedrich: The first time. The reason for that is twofold: first, you can't find them. These people live abroad--how do you sue Pavarotti or Domingo? You have to catch them in Italy or Spain, and then they will be tried in Italian or Spanish courts, and then if you can catch them and serve them and try the case here, fine.

Secondly, who is going to sue Pavarotti or Domingo or Sutherland today if you ever want them to sing in the house again? The answer is, nobody. It is a much deplored situation where artists sign contracts two or three years hence, committing themselves, and comes the time they would rather do something else. They just say, "I'm sorry. I'm obligated to inform you that I cannot perform during the weeks of such and such, for which you have had a written contract for two and a half or three years. You ask, "What is the remedy?" And I say, "There are all kinds of remedies, but none of them are effective."

What happened with Margaret Price was that she said she was sick, but sang a concert in Paris three days after she was supposed to report here for rehearsals. We had had costumes made for her especially, at her demand, to the tune of about nine thousand, which are unusable by anybody else--there are not too many other women of Miss Price's proportions! [laughs] Terry McEwen said, "She welched, and I'm not going to let her get away with it."

So we filed a grievance and went to arbitration. She did not appear at the arbitration, although the union did appear, but not technically as her representative. And the arbitrator said that it was pretty obvious that Miss Price cancelled because she did not want to be in San Francisco, and we would have a judgment against Miss Price for nine thousand dollars. The first time she appears in the United States we will have a judgment that will be levied against her fee for whenever she appears in this country.

It's the first time that any opera company in the United States has had a neutral third-party arbitrator say, "The artist did it, and violated the contract by doing it, albeit."

The other problem with this thing is, one, you can't, under American or British law, get a court order compelling somebody to perform. The courts are sometimes pretty dumb, but sometimes they are smart. How can you compel a first-class operative performer to give you a first-class performance by court order? You wouldn't want to.

You can enjoin their appearing anywhere else in the United States during the period when they are supposed to perform in San Francisco, but at the fees most of these people are getting, it's another fifty thousand dollars or more, and it's no great penalty.

They'll get a concert in Europe somewhere or take it as an unpaid vacation, and you have difficult, proving damages. How do you prove that so many hundreds or thousands of people didn't attend because of Domingo cancelling??

Crawford: In this case the production was to be televised, and that went by the board when the two of them cancelled, so the damage was somewhat measurable.

Diedrich: Well, there were some flies in that one too. And the philanthropy of Pillsbury, Madison & Sutro ended when it came to litigation. I would do the routine kinds of things like

arbitration, but if it went to court, we would not take it on without charging a fee.

Crawford: You knew Mr. Adler well. Did his retirement surprise you?

Diedrich: No. He had been here a long time, starting as chorus director. I think he wanted a little more time for Sabrina and his son, so I wasn't surprised by it.

#### The Adler Style vs. the McEwen Style

Crawford: You've worked with both general directors Adler and McEwen. How do their styles differ?

Diedrich: Radically different. Kurt was into the opera 150 percent, as is Terry, but Kurt expected everybody else to work with him with the same kind of zeal and with the same hours and the same singleness of purpose that he had.

Terry does not expect that. He says, "Look, staff, there are enough of us around here that we all don't have to work seven-day weeks, fifteen-hour days during the season. I want to see schedules with people getting time off, and on occasion I may inquire why you are here.

So he runs a much more relaxed ship as far as the time expectations are concerned. I don't think he runs a more relaxed ship as far as results are concerned. He just believes that people should do their job and leave some time for themselves. I'm not sure Kurt quite believed that.

#### Impact of the Adler Era

Crawford: What are Adler's special qualities that led him to build the San Francisco Opera in the way that he did and what will be his impact on the company?

Diedrich: Number one, I think his impact is still recognized on the scene. He is not the opera director, but he is alive and well. I believe that the reputation of the company as one of the major opera companies in the world, as demonstrated by the numbers of artists he introduced, the novelty on occasion of the company's repertoire, revivals of operas that haven't been here in years,

productions of operas that, as Kurt would say, are not the old warhorses--all the operas I like--I would think that if there is a single man that has brought this reputation into being, that Kurt Adler did it.

He has done it in such a way that his contemporaries in the opera world recognize his knowledge of virtually every aspect of opera. The fact that he is consulted often reflects to the credit of San Francisco Opera Association. I just don't think you can discount his impact on the reputation of San Francisco Opera and its place in the fine arts picture of the United States.

You can't say enough about that. Sure, he is not going to win a lot of popularity polls, and some people will throw rocks at him for various things he may have done or not done, or things they disagree with, but the only person who has never inspired strong feelings is the person who has never done anything.

Crawford: It is interesting to me that both Don Tayer and Eddie Powell have emphasized what a sensitive person he is, which is not a characteristic always associated with him.

Diedrich: Mr. Adler has always been the most gracious, appreciative, sensitive man to me of any person I've worked with professionally, but on the other hand, I think I would last as a subordinate of Kurt Herbert Adler approximately thirty minutes. I fear that I would differ with him when he didn't want to be differed with.

Crawford: Did the famous Adler temper flare up in negotiations at times?

Diedrich: Well no, because I'd give him a Dutch rub before we went in. I'd say, "Listen, Kurt, if anybody is going to blow their top in there, it's going to be me. You be the nice guy, because you have to live with these people." If ever he rose in righteous indignation in there, it was because it was time to rise in righteous indignation to make a point.

Crawford: That's a good interview. Would you like to add anything? Is there any area we may have touched upon?

Diedrich: No, but I would want to reaffirm that there is no personality that I've ever been associated with that I started out knowing less about and wound up being the greatest booster and having personal affection for than Kurt Adler.





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Kurt Herbert Adler and the San Francisco Opera

Eddie Powell

BUSINESS REPRESENTATIVE AND SECRETARY, INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCE  
OF THEATRICAL STAGEHANDS

An Interview Conducted by  
Caroline Crawford  
in 1986



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## INTERVIEW HISTORY--Eddie Powell

Eddie Powell has been business representative and secretary of Local 16 of the International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees for nearly twenty-five years. In this capacity, he is involved with virtually all of the theatrical crafts, from grips and gaffers to set designers and makeup artists. He is also chairman of the San Francisco Theatrical Federation, which consists of the guilds and unions that service the entertainment industry.

A stagehand himself as a very young man, Powell is now in his late fifties, a bluff, likeable individual who admits to having had a troublesome ulcer off and on during his career.

The union offices are in the block of Jones Street close to Market. In Powell's office, where we met for the interview, is a television monitor focusing on the hallway and the elevator, at which he glanced often. He had told me that Monday was normally a busy day, but there was little traffic on the screen, and he asked that his calls be held during the two hours we talked.

Powell talks in the following interview about how difficult Kurt Herbert Adler could be during the years they worked together--the 1940s through Adler's retirement--at the same time, his respect for Adler was clear. At one point he asked to have the recorder turned off so that he could talk more candidly; it was clear he didn't want to leave anything negative on the record.

Adler considered Eddie Powell a close friend for three decades. Even after his retirement they met for lunch, and Adler often asked Powell to speak to groups such as Opera America and Adler's classes at San Francisco State. To Powell he paid considerable tribute by telling him once before they were about to go into negotiation: "You are the only union representative I will sit down with without my lawyer."

Powell returned the transcript of the interview with no changes.

Caroline Crawford  
Interviewer/Editor

October 1987  
Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library  
University of California, Berkeley





BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name EDWARD C. POWELL

Date of birth 02/03/1929 Birthplace SAN FRANCISCO

Father's full name JOSEPH THOMAS POWELL

Occupation \_\_\_\_\_ Birthplace \_\_\_\_\_

Mother's full name URSULA MARY POWELL

Occupation \_\_\_\_\_ Birthplace \_\_\_\_\_

Your spouse DORIS MARY POWELL

Occupation \_\_\_\_\_ Birthplace \_\_\_\_\_

Your children STEPHEN POWELL, CATHERINE POWELL  
AND ROBERT POWELL

Where did you grow up? \_\_\_\_\_

Present community \_\_\_\_\_

Education \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Areas of expertise \_\_\_\_\_

Other interests or activities \_\_\_\_\_

Organizations in which you are active \_\_\_\_\_



Kurt Herbert Adler and the Stage Crew

[Date of Interview: October 5, 1986]##

Crawford: Mr. Powell, would you describe what IATSE does?

Powell: Okay. First of all, I would like to just correct the IATSE-- we're called the I.A.T.S.E. And the I.A.T.S.E. represents all of the people in the technical crafts backstage in legit theater, opera, ballet, and symphony. We also represent people in the film industry as far as the technicians are concerned, from the camera personnel all the way down.

Crawford: And when did you get started in the business?

Powell: I started in the business around 1947 at the Curran Theatre, and then worked that same year over at the opera house, where I first met Kurt Adler. The '46-'47 era--you always get mixed up going back that far. It's hard to picture each and every job that you had. But I think 1947 was the first year that I actually worked for the San Francisco Opera.

Crawford: Before Adler was actually general director, then?

Powell: Oh yes. At that time Kurt was the chorus director.

Crawford: All right. How would you describe the relationship of the opera company to the stagehands and the union over the years?

Powell: Well, I think that we have always had a very close relationship. But I believe that the Adler years cemented that relationship even closer. Kurt was always understanding of the working people that assisted the opera company. He was not, let's say, in his ivory tower without any knowledge of the stage people, as some of the opera people are.

Merola, for instance, when he was the director before Kurt Adler, rarely paid any attention at all to the people on the stage. But when Kurt came in as the general director he more or less took everything control, and he wasn't far from any entity

of the opera, whether it be the chorus or the stage or the wardrobe and costuming. He had a grasp of everything that was going on. So he and the stagehands always were very, very close.

As a matter of fact, a cute little story, as I think of it. I traveled with the opera company to Los Angeles and San Diego in 1957. I was the flyman, which is an assistant carpenter. In those years we had very difficult times on the road because our crews weren't as large as they are now. And our operas were mainly flats, parallels, and drops, which caused an awful lot of work on the stage, hanging, unhangng, and changing from show to show.

I remember we were doing Aida, and we took the show to San Diego. We played at that time at the Fox Theater in San Diego, and the loading and unloading facilities were very difficult for opera, because our drops were 70 feet long and a lot of our scenery was 28 feet high. And we had to load, literally, through an elevator in order to get on the stage.

The stage was much smaller, of course, than the opera house stage or the Shrine stage where we played in Los Angeles. So consequently, with a huge show like Aida, we had to cut an awful lot of it out.

They were using projections as I remember it that year, and we had to hang the projections on the front pipes in order to get the image on the cyclorama. So we were going quite late.

I remember Kurt standing by the footlights, wanting to know when we were going to get finished, and we said, "As soon as we get the stage swept we're going to be finished. Why don't you grab a broom and help us?" And by golly, Kurt grabbed a broom and helped us sweep the stage so that we could get the audience in the house.

Crawford: [Chuckles] Well, I knew he was involved, but I didn't know he was that involved!

Powell: Oh yes, he was very involved.

#### Adler and Negotiations with the Union

Crawford: How did Mr. Adler relate to the unions?

Powell: I've heard Kurt speak, I believe at least three times, in front of the Opera America group. And each and every time, he always addressed the unions with respect and admiration, and related that if anyone wants to run a good opera, the first thing that they have to do is make friends with the unions, which Kurt did very, very well. As a matter of fact, we've called him a couple of times since his retirement--myself; Don Tayer, representing the AGMA people; Jerry Spain, representing the musicians; Ada Philpot, representing the costumers--and we've taken him out to lunch. Because we have a very warm affection for Kurt.

Of course, one of the last times we had lunch Jerry Spain accidentally tipped a wine glass over on Kurt. I hope he didn't think it was intentional!

But in retrospect, when you have the traumas that opera naturally thrives on, and this is repetitive, year after year, and you are called upon from time to time to assist, as I have been, with three different strikes--I've been called in by Kurt to help mediate in two with the musicians and one with the American Guild of Musical Artists--you get to have a much clearer understanding of one another. You're not competing for, let's say, recognition or understanding as you do in the early part of your relationship.

Kurt came from the old school in Europe, which means that the person on top looks down at everybody. And what we've tried to do over the years is to try and get an understanding so that we can both look at each other at our own levels and communicate in that fashion.

In the early years of my tenure--and you can dress this up a little bit, Caroline, because I don't want this to sound one-way--but I had just moved across the Bay. I guess the year was about 1964; I believe it was '64, and I think it was my first season as the business agent.

I negotiated a contract that year, and one night about 10 o'clock I got a call from Kurt Adler. I had had an ulcer at that time, and I had taken one of these tummy pills that, you know, kind of makes you sleep.

So here, I'm in a new house--we had just moved in in September--and I'm trying to go to bed early, and the phone rings and it's Kurt. And he is in hysterics. I've got to come down to the opera company--as only Kurt could do, you know--I've got to come down to the opera company immediately.



I politely tried to tell him, you know, not to yell at me, that I'm not one of his people. But he demanded it to the point that I just hung up the phone. I got a call back about fifteen minutes later. It was Kurt again, and this time he was twice as vociferous as he was the first time. And I again hung up the phone.

So the next morning I got up early, and I went down to the opera house to find out what the problem was. And it was a problem that was very simple to correct, and we corrected the problem.

So about 11 o'clock or so that morning, I got a phone call from my international president in New York, asking me if I had any problems at all, and I said no. And then he read a telegram that Kurt had sent him, relative to my position, that he had to intercede immediately or the opera wouldn't open on opening night, and Eddie Powell was not paying attention to the job, and so forth. So I explained that I was down there early that morning and I had taken care of it.

I got a little burned up at this; I just got a little burned up at this. So I called Howard Skinner up. And I said, "You know, Howard, for some time you've been asking me to go to lunch. Do you want to go have lunch?" Well, I guess Howard must have gotten wind of the situation before I called him, because he said, "I'd like to have lunch with you, Eddie, but I want to tell you, if it has anything to do with the opera company, I've got to have Kurt Adler with me." And I said, "No way, Howard. No way will I sit down with that man at the table." As a matter of fact, I'm a little bit more polite now than I think I was then.

That afternoon I got a call from Kurt. And he was like a cat purring over a bowl of cream. [Imitating a German accent] "Eddie, Eddie, Eddie." And he said to me, "I couldn't believe that you would ever go over my head." And I said, "Kurt, I couldn't believe that you would go over mine." And from that day to this we have never had a cross word between us.

Crawford: That's a great story!

How well did Adler know the stagehands' business technically?

Powell: Oh, I don't think he knew the absolute function of the stagehands, but he knew what we did, basically, and he always negotiated the contracts that we had. He personally negotiated them, along with, at that time--well, let me digress a moment.

When Kurt first came in, it was in 1953, I believe. That was the year that Merola passed away. And at that time a gentleman by the name of Howard Skinner was also the general manager of the opera, as well as being the general manager of the San Francisco Symphony.

Neither one of the two entities was large enough to have a complete orchestra. So the orchestra used to shift back and forth between the symphony and the opera, and it did for many years subsequent to that time. And Howard Skinner was the company manager, and also a manager with Merola as far as the business administration of the opera was concerned.

So when Kurt first came in, Howard was his co-worker. And that existed until about 1971. So Howard was present in the early negotiations.

As Howard phased out, then Max Azinoff came in and took the business part of the opera job, which I guess put him, certainly under Kurt. And then Evelyn Crockett also assisted him.

So I negotiated with Kurt. He was very demonstrative in his approach in those early years, because he had a keen business mind. As a matter of fact, when I went into the job as business agent, Kurt had held back a contract on behalf of this local for a year because my predecessor did not give a timely notification under the terms of the contract.

So I wasn't quite sure what to expect from him, because we went without a contract with the opera for a year on that particular issue, plus another two or three years preceding that where there were no increases at all.

So my first negotiations with Kurt back in 1964 were suddenly climactic. Here I was, the new guy that worked his way up, and of course Kurt was looking at me to try and figure out what kind of a curve ball I was going to throw. But we came out with a fair and equitable contract, I think.

Crawford: Was he anticipating that you would make demands?

Powell: Well, it's the union's position. I would like to say requests, really. We came with a portfolio of changes that we would like to have seen made, and my recollection is that Kurt saw the issues, and saw that the issues were fact, they weren't fiction; that they were honorable. Since that time I've never had a problem with Kurt Adler or the San Francisco Opera company in any type of a contract.

Crawford: So you never came as close to striking as the other unions did?

Powell: No, never. We never even discussed it, or never thought of it, much less discussed it; let's put it that way. Each side has to recognize the other's position. There were a number of years where there were many inequities against our people, mainly because of the long hours. People don't realize when they see an opera that see an opera that there is a stage crew that literally works from eight in the morning until the time that the curtain comes down, and sometimes even after that, in order to achieve the high caliber of presentations which the San Francisco Opera gives to the paying public.

So when you take this into consideration with overtime, with loss of sleep, the only way that you can compensate this is at the bargaining table. And I think that we've done a fair job in doing that, and the opera company in turn has been responsive. When I came into office, it was normal for people to work seven days. And Kurt kind of balked at the fact of going into a contract where he would be in a position to pay overtime on the seventh day, because he didn't think it would work. But we made it work.

Since that time the opera has voluntarily let us go to five days a week. No penalty for the sixth day, mind you, but we can work five days a week, and most of our people do work five days a week now. You get away from that heavy pressure. So our relationship with Kurt has been very, very good.

Crawford: What was he like as a negotiator?

Powell: Well, I would say he was on top of everything. Kurt had everything at his fingertips. He did a good job; he was fair. His favorite word was "impossible." But after you let him get the gas out and you brought him down to reality, then he understood and you could usually have some type of a quid pro quo where each side could leave thinking that they got the best of the deal. And I think that's the secret of any negotiations. Kurt is a master at that.

He told me one time, and I don't know whether he would even remember it, but he told me one time, "Eddie, you are the only one that I will sit down with without my attorney." So we did have a mutual trust.

The Trials of a Stagehand

Crawford: What are the kinds of problems that make it difficult for stagehands doing opera?

Powell: Well, I think I can sum that up in one word. I'll just relay a small story to you. Kurt was very involved with an association called Opera America. And Opera America is made up of all of the opera companies in the United States and Canada. I think that they've also called upon opera companies in South America, and certainly a number of opera companies in Europe.

Kurt asked if I would speak to them. As a matter of fact, while my mind is going now--you asked when he got the Gold Card. He got the Gold Card from us at his fiftieth anniversary lunch at the Clift Hotel.

We gave him the Gold Card at that event, and then the following day he asked if I would address the opera companies from around the world and the American companies, and I said that I would do that on his behalf. And when they asked me what the one singular problem was between our people and the opera, I answered, "overtime." And of course I think I shook up a lot of the European people, because we're the only country in the western world that doesn't have the government subsidize the arts.

I explained to them at this meeting that it was the tremendous amount of time necessary to put on an opera within the given season that causes the most problems, because the men are literally working from eight in the morning until almost midnight, with hours off for lunch or hours off for dinner. But in most cases they can't go home, because the majority of our people live outside of the city. So they're more or less confined to the opera house for the days that they work. And that seemed to be the biggest issue that we had in negotiations, was the overtime.

Crawford: What is considered overtime?

Powell: After eight hours.

Crawford: After eight hours. And we have an opera that's five hours long this season.

Powell: It's the scheduling of the operas, in other words, the rehearsals of the opera that we're going to do the following day or the day after--trying to correlate the chorus activities with

the schedule of the stars. Because everything has to start at the top.

First you get the opera, then you have to get the star for the opera. And that star may only be available certain days, or they can only rehearse certain days. So the entire stage has to be correlated around these priorities. And this means that you could have two huge operas set up and taken down within one day--the opera that you're going to do that night, and the opera that you're rehearsing, maybe, for a week, hence. And that's the problem. And of course when you're in a repertory theater, which opera is, you're going to have those problems.

#### Changes and Improvements

Crawford: What changes in the company have you seen?

Powell: I would say that the opera company has changed over the years for the better, as far as our people are concerned. The scheduling is a little bit more to our liking. Number one, Kurt tried for years to get a chorus together that would be a full-time chorus. And it only was a matter of a few years ago that that came to maturity. Before that, the chorus worked part-time. So the operas that had chorus rehearsals had to be rehearsed at night, when the people were off. They couldn't do it in the daytime. So it was trying to work around a king-size problem which has since been corrected. That's not the only problem, incidentally; that's just one of many.

Crawford: The new facility must be helpful, too.

Powell: That's a major step. Zellerbach is being used to help free the stage up for other things--they can do a semi-dress rehearsal at Zellerbach, on an act-by-act basis, or an opera-by-opera basis, while at the same time being able to perform or set up or take down at the opera house.

Before, they couldn't do that. Before, I remember, the chorus used to go to Fugazi Hall, when I was working at the opera, and they would have chorus rehearsals at Fugazi Hall. We used to go out and hang drapes around the hall to kind of absorb the sound, and that's where the chorus would go.

The old chorus room where the Archives are now, was only good enough to sit around the piano and get into certain things.



They really couldn't get the volume of the chorus up there; it wasn't large enough.

Now Zellerbach is a great area for them. They not only rehearse singing, but also go through the steps, the entrances, the exits, the different pieces of scenery and props that are on the stage.

Crawford: How about the scenery?

Powell: Well, let me put it this way--it's not easier now, by any means. This is always the difference of opinion between the present-day people and then the people from yesteryear like myself. When we worked at the opera company years ago, there were approximately thirteen people in the carpentry department. Today there are thirty-five. The difference is that years ago our scenery was softer than it is now. It was drops and it was flats. Today they're using a tremendous amount of bulk in units. And it takes more men to set these up and to take them down. Because literally they are building huge sets on casters, on platforms, that they wheel in and out, as opposed to the drop system and the woodwings that we had in those days.

Crawford: It would seem easier.

Powell: But for the amount of people that we had on the stage and the amount of work that we did, I would say that everything was pretty equal. We still had operas that were big operas with choruses. We still did Aida, we still did Tosca, we still did Barber, we still did Giovanni. We did the operas, but they were done in a different way than they're done now. Let's say more of the old-style theatrics, which was drops and flats.

Today the new style has come in with specialized lighting, specialized units. In the old days we would interchange pieces in opera. One piece of scenery could maybe double in three or four. Now all the operas are completely intact. And each opera has all of its own pieces, all of its own scenery and props.

Crawford: Where are they stored now?

Powell: They're stored in a huge warehouse that they have, which is a combination scenic shop and warehouse at 800 Indiana Street.

Crawford: Where Mr. Cayard is located.

Powell: That's where Pierre is, yes.



Crawford: What's your total complement at the opera house during the season?

Powell: Well, I think that the people on the stage, with the relief people, would number in the neighborhood of seventy-five. However, there would be people added to that amount for operas that need more people.

There's also a shop crew, and there are also midnight crews that are entertained from time to time in order to get the stage clear and set up for the next day. So I would say that at the end of the season, we would probably have in excess of 150 to 200 people who work for the opera. And this only is for the stage people. This doesn't include the other unions that the I.A.T.S.E. represents, such as wardrobe and costuming, and wig and makeup.

Crawford: Is San Francisco Opera the largest employer of I.A.T.S.E. people?

Powell: It was until Lucas Films started in Marin County in 1978. Now Lucas is number one and the opera would be number two.

Crawford: So it's true that a stagehand can make a very good living here, in this city?

Powell: A stagehand can make a good living providing that he or she is willing to put the hours in and to give up their private life for the season, because there is very, very little private life when you're working day and night for five days a week.

### The Famous Crabfest

Crawford: What do you remember of Mr. Adler and his relationship with the people working in the opera house? Did he know them on a first-name basis?

Powell: Almost always. He would come down and say hello to the people as he walked by. And many of the people who worked there for seasons--and I'm not talking about the heads of departments that he knew, but I'm talking about a lot of the rank-and-filers--he knew by their first name.

Crawford: How about the crabfest?

Powell: Well, the crabfest started years ago--I'm trying to think now, how many years ago, and it was a lunch done by a few of the people just to say thanks to the crew for a job well done. It wasn't anything like it is now, nor was it open. It was just basically for the people in the stage area that worked the opera. At that time it might have totalled maybe thirty, thirty-five people.

As they went into it and Kurt started to come and so forth, then it started to expand. Now they have it for almost everybody that works in and about the opera: front-of-the-house people, the people downstairs, the people in the administrative office--and it has become kind of a roast, where everybody goes in and gets a lot of the tension out towards the end of the season and just has a good time.

One of the first--not the first, but one of the first awards that were given by the rank-and-file to Kurt was, I think, the Golden Tack Award. They had a tack made out of gold, and they put that into a little plastic block which they presented him. And then another time they made up a board and had a hammer there and, you know, little things that Kurt had in his office for a couple of years.

Crawford: That's right. And the Gold Card--that was an honorary membership card?

Powell: The Gold Card was an honorary membership card that we gave him the year that he had his fiftieth anniversary in opera and his twenty-fifth as the director.

Crawford: He was very proud of that. And I remember there was pig once. Am I wrong?

Powell: [Chuckles] No, you're right. Yes, they gave him--I can't remember that, but I think that Kurt put it out to a farm someplace. I haven't made all of the crab feeds. I've made some of them, but not all of them. Because sometimes when we get busy we just can't get away.

Crawford: You're right, it's a great tension-releaser. Is it still done now?

Powell: Oh yes. Every year they do it. I'm not sure what the date is this year, but it will probably be--if the opera goes down in December--it will probably be late November or early December.

The McEwen Administration

Crawford: Have the relations with the opera changed at all under the new administration? Do you see any appreciable difference?

Powell: No, I wouldn't say so. I think that the format that was entertained during the Adler era is still entertained. We have an excellent relationship with Terry McEwen, who I think has done an excellent job with the opera. And we have an excellent relationship with Pat Mitchell and Bob Walker.

As a matter of fact, Bob Walker both during the Adler years and presently is one of the trustees of our health and welfare and pension trusts. So he represents the opera company on that.

History of Union Benefits

Crawford: Good. Maybe we can talk historically a little bit about union benefits. I would like to ask you, when you joined the opera company as a stagehand, what were the benefits like?

Powell: There weren't any.

Crawford: There weren't any!

Powell: The benefits were the check that you received at the end of the week.

When I first came to work, let's say, for the opera company, the opera scale as I recollect it was about 25 cents an hour higher than the scales that were entertained in the rest of the industry. And I can't really answer why. This was 1946-47.

The scale at the Curran Theatre at that time, I remember quite vividly, was \$2.00 an hour. The scale at the opera house \$2.25 an hour. Let's say the performance scale that we had at the legit house, which was the Curran and the Geary were, I guess, in very close proximity to that. There really weren't any other legit houses, although we did have the Alcazar which operated from time to time, and we had the United Nations at that time, which they tore down, the old Tivoli. But at the opera for some reason the scale was a little bit higher. Like it was \$1.00 a performance more and 25 cents an hour more.

This was for the technicians, not for singers. The hours were very, very long. I vividly remember my early years at the

opera, barely ever having a good night's sleep. I was the youngest in the crew, so naturally--"Hey kid, do this; hey kid, do that."

The average age of the stagehands in those days was, I would say, at least in the mid-fifties. There were not too many young people. Early fifties to mid-fifties, I would say. This was in 1946, 1947. The local had not brought a lot of younger people in, and during the war years, naturally, they were all away in the service.

So at any rate, getting back to the rates and the conditions and the fringes, there were no fringes per se. The hourly rate was good, and in parity with the building and construction trades at that time. I would say that ours was as good or better, although building and construction trades may have had different overtime properties. And fringe benefits were just starting to come into the scope of those unions that could negotiate them into the contract.

We did not negotiate any fringe benefits into the contract until I became the business agent. That was in 1963, and the first contract that I negotiated with the opera was in 1964.

My recollection, if I can just go a step farther--is that in 1964 I negotiated the opera contract before I negotiated the health and welfare fund into the multi-employer group that I negotiated with. And I had to go in and buy out the health and welfare by virtue of taking money off of the wage package and putting it into the fringe package.

Crawford: In other words, those were the first health programs for Local 16?

Powell: For Local 16, that's right. And I believe that was in 1965.

Crawford: So there was no pension plan.

Powell: The pension plan didn't come in until--I negotiated that in 1967. And I don't believe I got it into the opera contract until 1968.

Crawford: What are the other benefits over the years that have come into the contract?

Powell: Well, we get overtime if we work on the seventh day. That rarely ever happens now, because the opera and our heads of departments have correlated a process whereby people can be

given a day off. If they have a special job to do, they have a backup.

We now have one of the finest health and welfare plans that exist in any union across the United States. We have the best pension plan that exists in any union in the United States. This may sound a little pompous, but it's true. I mean, if you check it and see what we give back for the amount of money that we get, then we have an excellent plan.

We have holidays written into the contract now, we have overtime written into the contract now, and we also have what we call rest periods written into the contract now, whereby they have to have x number of hours between calls, or they would come back on a higher rate of pay.

I think we've proved to the opera company that, unless we have these things, that they're really working with people who are in a zombie state. If you don't get to sleep, then you aren't giving the employer the productivity that they deserve. And it's a two-way street. We believe that we should get a day's pay for a day's work, and the employer believes that they should just get a day's work for a day's pay. Well, it's just a question of changing them around.

Crawford: Well, divas take rest periods too, don't they?

Powell: Oh, I'm sure that everybody in their own field takes a rest period from time to time.

Crawford: For comparison's sake, what is the average age today?

Powell: According to our actuarial evaluation, which is probably the best frame that you could put this into, it's thirty-three or thirty-four, I believe.

Crawford: And how about the hourly wage?

Powell: The hourly wage at the opera right now is, on an average, around \$17 an hour; \$16-\$17, because of the lower people and the higher people. Certainly the lower people outnumber the higher people.

Crawford: So you negotiate autonomously? There isn't a standard for the country or for other cities?

Powell: No, each area is autonomous and negotiates their own wages and conditions. Ours is not the highest, incidentally; I would say



Chicago Lyric and the Metropolitan and possibly even the New York City Opera are higher than ours.

The Metropolitan has a much different type of a contract than we have, in the sense that the people that are hired there for the stage are paid fifty-two weeks a year. They have crews in each department, fifty-two weeks a year. And then for that they have x number of hours that they work per week.

Crawford: Is there a network of information among companies?

Powell: The unions get together the same as the employers get together, certainly. We call it the grapevine. I'm sure that the employer has the same thing.

[Interruption in tape]

#### Why Opera in San Francisco?

Crawford: Why does San Francisco sustain so much cultural activity in your opinion?

Powell: Well, I think that this goes back to the turn of the century. San Francisco has always been a great show biz town, and certainly one that has looked to some type of cultural base.

I remember stories from some of the old-timers whereby the opera company played at the Civic Auditorium. They did everything that they could to make sure that we had the higher form of arts in San Francisco, long before the opera house was built. As a matter of fact, a recent issue of the Archives magazine had a picture of an old opera house down on--what was it, Hayes Street? It's on the front cover of the new Archives.

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It's out in the Hunters Point area. As a matter of fact, it's one of the few houses in the country that had a raked stage.

It's used as a theater, but they made it into a community-type theater for one of the ethnic groups in the area.



Stagehands and Opera

Crawford: We should resurrect all those grand places. Tell me this: Do stagehands and your other union people, do they like opera, generally?

Powell: Oh, I think that the majority of the people that work in opera become very attached to it. They enjoy the music, they enjoy the atmosphere, they enjoy the history. And a lot of them read up on it, you know. They know the composers. It's the old saying: if you're around something long enough, a little bit is bound to rub off.

We had some people that had worked with the opera company for many, many years. George Pantages, before he retired, worked there in excess of thirty years. Ivan Van Perre has been there for thirty years last year. Pierre Cayard will be there thirty years this year. Mike Kane will be thirty years in a couple of years. And there are lots of people who have been there in excess of ten or twelve years.

So while we do have a turnover of people who want to go out and see the daylight once in a while and watch the grass grow, we still have a good amount of people who stay with the opera year after year.

Crawford: Would this be true of your other companies? Is there a basis for comparison?

Powell: Yes. People who go to work for Lucas Films stay with Lucas Films. When people get a steady job that they like they'll stay with it, you know, providing that it can give them an income. But our business is made up of so many transient companies that you can go literally for thirty years and never work for an employer for more than a couple of months at a time.

As a matter of fact, some of our people work for thirty and forty different employers during the course of the year.

Crawford: That's hard, isn't it?

Powell: Yes, but some people like that.

Crawford: Well, you know, a question I always ask artists is why they like to come to San Francisco. They go way out of their way to come here, and these names always crop up: Ivan Van Perre, and Richard Stead, John Priest, Pierre Cayard. These people mean something to the artists.

Adler Compared with Other Directors

Crawford: How would you compare Kurt Adler with the other directors that you have known, in terms of their involvement with the personnel and with their effectiveness?

Powell: Well, I think that it's not fair to compare. For instance, I never knew Merola, other than seeing him occasionally on the stage.

In those years, I was just one of the indians over there anyway, so I never had an opportunity, nor did anyone else, really, to know a person like Kurt Adler.

But Terry McEwen, Kurt's successor, is a lot like Kurt, in the sense of being gregarious. Much different in operation-- Terry has thrown out a lot of the things that Kurt did personally to his subordinates.

Kurt more or less oversaw everything that happened there. I think Kurt--there's no question in my mind, I don't think-- Kurt was a genius and still is. I mean, he's a top musician, he's an excellent conductor, he's a great administrator, he's a negotiator. He did everything.

But that doesn't mean that you can compare one with the other. I like Kurt for what he is and what he was; I respect him for that.

I also respect Terry for what he does. We work very close, we have the same congeniality as was entertained during the Adler years. And I would hope that if and when the time comes that Terry leaves, that we would have the same with his successor that we had with Kurt and with him.

Crawford: How about theater in San Francisco--do the directors normally get involved in negotiations, or do they have assistants who do that?

Powell: Right now, for instance, with the Shorenstein-Nederlander organization, my dealings with them are through the officers of Jim Nederlander in New York, and I deal directly with Arthur Ruben. I think it's because Arthur knows the industry inside and out, as Kurt would know the industry inside and out.

It's much easier to sit across the table with a cup of coffee--whether it be the negotiating table--those sometimes are the best kinds of negotiations that you can have. You can come

to an understanding between you [about] what exactly is going on. You can't do this with a surrogate.

A lot of companies now bring outside professional negotiators in to negotiate contracts. In my mind, that destroys, let's say, the negotiation on a one-to-one basis, because you can't stop every time and explain what you're trying to do. When somebody knows the industry as Kurt knew the industry, it was very easy to communicate, extremely easy to communicate.

Crawford: Good. Any stories?

Powell: Well, just turn it off for a second.

Crawford: Not for the history?

Powell: No.

#### Company Building at San Francisco Opera

Crawford: How did Adler build the company?

Powell: What a lot of people have forgotten is that the Italians felt that they controlled opera in San Francisco. From the days of Merola and before Merola, it was the Italian people who felt that they had the pulse of the opera.

When Kurt came in in 1953, it was questionable whether or not a German was going to be able to be the head of the opera. And Kurt's personality and his expertise excelled, and he became the head of the opera. But I can remember some different people saying that he'll never last, he'll never do this. But what he did is he brought a complete new style of opera to San Francisco.

It took him a couple of years to do it, but he hired Harry Horner; he hired George Jenkins, as designers. They came in [in the 1980s], and not only did they bring new scenery, but they also brought new lighting concepts, which completely revolutionized the way that we were doing it since 1934.

Most of the lighting in those days was done by virtue of the house board, and adding the same old equipment that we had hanging in the house. There were very few outside electrical instruments rented, but when George Jenkins and Harry Horner

came in, they collaborated for a completely new lighting system, where we had to bring new switchboards in to control the lights on a one-on-one basis. There were many more special lights involved than before.

He also brought Paul and Ghita Hager. Of course, in the early years, that didn't go over too well with the stage crew, because we literally saw them with scissors, cutting up these old Kranke drops. Fritz Kranke was a beautiful painter and painted most of the German operas in very dark blue hues. But slowly, they changed the opera.

And then, of course, in those days, in the fifties, we had more than one opera company here. We had maybe four opera companies in San Francisco. We had Cosmopolitan Opera, which was Campbell McGregor's; we had the Dollar Opera; we had the San Carlos Opera; and I believe there was one more. Did I say Pacific?

Crawford: No.

Powell: Pacific Opera. Plus we had the San Francisco Opera. And Kurt very wisely understood that you had to get the young people interested, because they were the box office future. So it was with that concept that he started Western Opera Theater, which has had its format changed half a dozen times since.

The principle of Western Opera Theater was to go into the schools and go into the ghettos and teach--or not teach, but show people that there is an operatic world that they've never heard of, and probably didn't know that a lot of the music has been made popular over the years.

And so he started this concept, and I'm trying to think of when it was. I believe it was in the late sixties.

Crawford: Western Opera started in 1967.

Powell: Yes. Spring Opera took over for Cosmopolitan, more or less, in 1961. I was the carpenter with the Cosmopolitan Opera, I think in '60. As a matter of fact, I think '60 was the year that Jussi Bjoerling sang Bohème in the Cosmopolitan Opera.

And then Adler started Spring, and I believe Spring first went to the Alcazar Theater before it was torn down. But at any rate, he had vision; he was a man of vision. And he was able to get the elements to support the main opera, which was fall opera, as well as get the fall opera to support these

educational facilities. It's unfortunate that Spring Opera went the way that it did.

Crawford: Yes. I know he felt badly about it.

Powell: Yes. But then again, opera now has expanded to twenty-two weeks, by virtue of the summer season. And I believe that that's what Adler liked to see. Kurt was the one who started the summer season.

"Ten-Thousand-Watt Miller"

Crawford: How about Robert Watt Miller? We didn't really mention him.

Powell: He was a fine man. I enjoyed seeing him there. I remember Robert Watt the years that he was the president, We used to call him, very lovingly, ten-thousand Watts, because he was the millionaire, and he was the head of PG&E. To the best of my knowledge, Robert Watt Miller never missed a performance at the opera house when he was the president. Never missed a performance. He was always there, and most of the time still had his hat on, and his three-piece suit, and his little perfectly-tied necktie.

He was a remarkable guy, very loyal to the opera. Very loyal to Kurt, I might add. I believe, now that you mention it, that Robert Watt Miller was probably the person who was responsible for Kurt taking over the general directorship of the opera. He was a very fine man, and a very compassionate man.

Crawford: To what extent do you think he was responsible for building up the opera, for sustaining it over the years?

Powell: Well, he was certainly important with his support, both morally and financially. There are a lot of supporters of the opera who give considerable amounts of money, but Robert Watt Miller also gave his time in addition to that. He was knowledgeable of the opera. He knew the stars, he knew the music. He was there at every performance; he had to like it.

And so with that and the support that he gave Kurt Adler, I would say that he was probably one of the most important people that the opera has ever had as a president.



Some Tricky Lighting for Tosca

Crawford: How about ending with a story--you mentioned Kirsten's Tosca.

Powell: It's a cute story. Dorothy Kirsten was singing Tosca and Bob Weede played--I can't even remember the name now. And it was the second act, where she kills him.

Crawford: Scarpia.

Powell: Scarpia. And we had a couple of people in the electric department who were going to travel with the show.

During the last part of the second act she has a candelabra, and she places it down on the floor, and she sings this aria over Bob Weede's body, and she blows the candles out one by one, and that's the end of the act.

Well, one of the fellows was going to go to San Diego with the show, so the other fellow says, "Look, let me show you how to do this so that you'll know." And the guy says, "No, no, I know. Let me do it now; I know what I'm doing." So reluctantly the first person said, "Okay, go ahead and do it."

So during the aria she blows the first candle out, and it goes out. She blows the second candle out, and it goes out. She blows the third candle out, and the first one comes on. And as she starts to blow the candles out, the fellow who was operating the switches got all loused up, and the lights were going on and off. The audience was in hysterics!

Bob Weede, which I found out later, didn't know what was going on. He couldn't open his eyes. Dorothy Kirsten was trying not to laugh when she sang. And so when we had this luncheon where I presented the gold card to Kurt, I was reminding Dorothy of this. We had a great laugh that afternoon, reminiscing about the lights that came on again during the candle scene in Tosca.

Transcriber: Elizabeth Eshleman  
Final Typist: Pelly Fan





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Berkeley, California

Kurt Herbert Adler and the San Francisco Opera

Don Tayer

ATTORNEY, AMERICAN GUILD OF MUSICAL ARTISTS

An Interview Conducted by  
Caroline Crawford  
in 1986



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## INTERVIEW HISTORY--Don Tayer

The American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA) represents all of the singers, choristers, and dancers who perform with the San Francisco Opera as well as the stage directors and managers and choreographers. Don Tayer has been the attorney for AGMA since 1967, negotiating for the union in its dealings with the San Francisco Opera and working closely with Kurt Adler and members of his staff. The opera is the major employer of AGMA members in the Bay Area.

In this interview, which took place in his office at Beeson, Tayer, Silbert & Bodine, he was very circumspect in his discussion of union sanctions, especially in specific cases past and present (notably the issue of Placido Domingo's 1985 cancellation in a production that was to have been televised).

Tayer was more candid about the two general directors under whom he has worked, Kurt Herbert and Terry McEwen, and about Adler's dealings with the union, describing him as both shrewd and sensitive.

According to Tayer, "Mr. Adler was a much more forbidding kind of person to the outsider, and had the appearance of being much more autocratic [than McEwen] . . . but was well known to have a really soft heart when it became a problem with particular individuals--people who were having personal problems of various kinds. He would, just as he would get into the details of a production, get into the details of someone's personal problems and try to help them. He was that kind of a person."

Tayer also documents the development of the full-time chorus, and members' benefits, and talks about some of the critical issues and how they were resolved.

Following the interview, he added some material and edited the transcript lightly.

Caroline Crawford  
Interviewer/Editor

July 1988  
Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library  
University of California, Berkeley





BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name Donald S. Tayer

Date of birth April 23, 1932 Birthplace New York

Father's full name Nathan Tayer

Occupation Business Birthplace Poland

Mother's full name Pearl Tayer

Occupation Housewife Birthplace New York

Your spouse Joyce Hill Tayer

Occupation Teacher and Artist Birthplace New Jersey

Your children Lisa Lance (1957)  
Marc Tayer (1959)

Where did you grow up? New York

Present community Tiburon Ca.

Education BA. Swarthmore College  
L.B. Harvard Law School

Occupation(s) Attorney

Areas of expertise Labor Law and Employee Benefits

Other interests or activities Tiburon City Council & Mayor - 1974-1978  
Yerba Buena Gardens Center for the Arts - Exec Bd. 1985-1993. President 1990-91

Organizations in which you are active American Jewish Committee - Nat'l Bd.  
Bar Ass'n of S.F. - Chairman, Labor & Employment Section



The American Guild of Musical Artists: Its Purpose and Function  
on the West Coast

[Date of Interview: April 24, 1986]##

Crawford: Mr. Tayer, when was AGMA founded and when did it begin to operate on the West Coast?

Tayer: AGMA is fifty years old this year. They're about to celebrate their fiftieth anniversary. And it's been active on the West Coast since quite early--I don't know the exact date, but certainly in the late forties they were active here because of the significance of the San Francisco Opera.

Crawford: Exactly whom does it represent vis-a-vis the opera?

Tayer: At the opera it represents all of the performers. That includes the soloists, the chorus, the ballet, solo dancers. It also represents choreographers, stage directors, stage managers.

Crawford: Designers?

Tayer: Not designers, no.

Crawford: Who are they represented by?

Tayer: There is an organization of scenic designers. I'm not sure whether there's a contract at San Francisco Opera, but there is a national organization of scenic designers.

Crawford: What, briefly, were the early benefits for the chorus and the singers?

Tayer: Primarily, in the early years, it was negotiating appropriate minimum performance fees and establishing the principle of compensation for rehearsals. In the early years the rehearsal period was treated as a learning period or an educational period. The concept was that people were educating themselves and therefore did not have to be compensated for that time.

During the early Adler years, it was recognized that people were in fact working for the company when they rehearsed and therefore should be compensated in some way for it. At first the compensation was kind of rudimentary, but over the years it has been developed into a standard hourly compensation for rehearsal and compensation for performances. And eventually, we have established a concept of weekly guarantees for people.

San Francisco Opera Gets a Full-Time Chorus: 1981

Tayer: One of the great achievements, I think, of Mr. Adler's final years as director was to achieve what we call a daytime chorus, a chorus whose prime occupation is working for the opera company and earning a living at that work. That was achieved in his last year as director, 1981.

Crawford: Is that something he pressed for?

Tayer: It's something he felt very strongly about, yes. Of course, he didn't want to overdo the amount of money that would be spent on that, but he felt it was an important change to go from a chorus that was basically something that people did in their spare time, at night, to a full working chorus.

Crawford: The New York City Opera and the Met had full-time choruses in the 1940s--so we were quite a distance behind?

Tayer: Yes.

Crawford: Are local artists protected in any special way? I'm talking now of singers and so on.

Chorus Benefits: Working conditions, Salaries, Medical Coverage and Pensions

Tayer: Well, in addition to wages and rehearsal rates and conditions as to when people can rehearse and how late they can rehearse and how long they have to have breaks before they can perform again--in the last twelve to fifteen years we've established health and welfare and pension benefits for the singers. And that was, again, a very important move forward to cover them in a traditional employment kind of relationship.

Before that, not only were singers badly paid, but they had to provide their own medical benefits, and of course there was no such thing as a pension plan. And now, all of the regular choristers and many of the regular singers--the ones who stay here for a full season--and the regular dancers are all covered by year-round health and welfare protection that the opera company pays for.

Crawford: This would not be for the principals who come in for five or six performances.

Tayer: No, that's right.

Crawford: Are they dealt with separately or do you establish fee minimums for them?

Tayer: Well, there are minimums established for them, and surprisingly there are some who don't get much more than that, because the fees are good. But, of course, when you're talking about the true stars, people--agents, managers--negotiate for them and negotiate substantially higher fees.

Crawford: And there's no ceiling, I suppose.

Tayer: And there's absolutely no ceiling. That's one of the basic tenets of AGMA, that AGMA can never establish a maximum salary. It can only establish the minimums.

Crawford: So the agents deal with the general director and staff.

Tayer: With the general director and with the staff. Sally Billinghamurst now, I think, is one of the people who deals with the artists. But of course when you talk about the real stars, I'm sure Mr. McEwen and certainly Mr. Adler before him had to get involved.

#### Kurt Herbert Adler and AGMA

Crawford: What were your dealings with Kurt Adler?

Tayer: Well, Kurt Adler, during his years as director, was involved in everything. There was rarely a thing that went on at the opera house in my experience that he didn't have knowledge of or get directly involved in. He certainly participated in all of the negotiations with AGMA, and, I believe, with the other unions.



He felt that was an important part of his responsibility, an important part of the need to maintain some lid on the costs, and maintain the relationship with the unions. I think these were the factors that led him to do that. And he really did not delegate that kind of activity. He did have people who were good people who worked with him, but he rarely missed a meeting himself.

I remember one memorable one when we were having a major problem involving the Spring Opera, which was then still in existence, when the issue had gotten so tough that he had to get on the phone from Moscow. He had gone there to attend some event, or to hear some singer, and we actually had a conversation and resolved the matter over the transcontinental telephone line.

Crawford: In 1972 he returned earlier than planned from Moscow to deal with the question of re-auditioning senior choristers.

Tayer: I think that may have been that same period.

Then we had a problem about the minimum--it sounds funny, but--the minimum call, if I remember. We had established a minimum call of three hours for rehearsals. Minimum call meaning that people would be paid for a full three hours and they wouldn't have to come in and just receive an hour or two of compensation. And we wanted to extend that concept from the fall season to the Spring Opera which was, at that time, run by a different board of directors and was a separate agreement. My recollection is that that was the big issue, and of course the company felt that that would involve them in extra expense, that they really didn't need three hours of rehearsal, and so on. But the singers were absolutely adamant, that they wouldn't want to interrupt their day, and travel across the bay, and park, and the tolls, and gasoline, and all that stuff, for two hours of work. We eventually resolved that. And I think that may have been the time he did come back.

Crawford: How was it resolved?

Tayer: There was a three-hour minimum. Well, there was a three-hour minimum call. Of course, Spring Opera is no longer a separate thing and is now part of the overall season. Yes. Spring Opera had its last year in 1980; the Opera Center had its first year in 1982.

Crawford: What was your impression of Mr. Adler as a negotiator?

Tayer: Oh, very effective. He was always someone who had a strong idea of what was proper, and certainly a good idea of where the opera company should be going. As an example of that, I mentioned before the change from the night time to the full daytime rehearsals, or rehearsals that could be called at any time of the day. And he knew how to get there. He was a very strong person for advocating his position.

He also, however, was willing to recognize that there needed to be some flexibility. And he was willing to compromise on important issues that we felt were important and make the appropriate adjustment. But when he didn't want to do something, he made that clear, and it usually didn't happen. Fortunately, on the issues that were truly meaningful to the singers, he was willing to bend sufficiently, and I think that's why there have been relatively few problems over the years of a serious nature.

There was a dispute in 1961. I think it was a dispute primarily with the musicians, although I think there was some involvement of the choristers in it as well.

Crawford: Yes, was it primarily a question of unemployment insurance?

Tayer: Probably, yes. Yes, that was a big hot issue, because in those years unemployment insurance was a voluntary thing for a nonprofit organization. Now it's required by law.

Crawford: State law?

Tayer: Yes. But the opera company ultimately started to pay that before they really had to. And that was an important factor, because when you're dealing with singers who are employed only part of the year, if they can't find other employment in the down season, they really have no way of getting income.

It's really in some ways like other industries that are seasonal. There are seasonal cultural workers; there are cannery workers who are in that same position. When they work in May, June, July, and August they get paid, and the rest of the year they have to rely on unemployment insurance.

Crawford: And the company pays what percentage of that?

Tayer: Well, it varies from time to time. But it's really also important for the industry, because that's the only way you're going to maintain a pool of talent. If people can't find a way to support themselves, either through unemployment insurance or

through actual work, they're going to have to go into other jobs on a full year-round basis and therefore won't be available for the activities that the industry needs them for. In this case, the good singers wouldn't be able to continue to maintain that as their profession. So it was a very important thing, and the company ultimately saw that.

### Adler and the Issues

Crawford: The fact that Adler is a musician and was a musician during his term--did that produce a more effective negotiator, would you say?

Tayer: Well, sometimes it did. Of course, not only was he a musician, but he had been the chorus director, so he had a very close relationship--sometimes negative, but mostly positive--with many of the choristers. He had had a reputation of being a very harsh taskmaster as the chorus master--the same kind of reputation I think he developed in later years with regard to the whole company, that he did not accept anything less than excellence.

I think that carried over into his feelings about the chorus. It also carried over into certain things that he felt strongly about were not an issue for bargaining. If he felt that something was a matter for the artistic concerns of the opera house, he would say so and he would absolutely refuse to even discuss it. And frequently he was right on that subject.

Crawford: What might have those questions been?

Tayer: Well, one of the tough issues related to questions of employment or termination of particular singers. In the early years he felt that the company had to maintain the absolute right to hire whom they wanted, which I don't think we ever had a problem with. But also to terminate who he wanted whenever he felt that they weren't doing the artistic job that he thought was necessary.

That was one of the big sore points over the last five or ten years of his directorship--developing a system by which people would be informed of the opera company's concern with how they were doing vocally.

Ultimately the company was willing to negotiate that kind of a provision that would establish a procedure by which people

would be notified of a desire to terminate their employment. And ultimately, if there was a disagreement between the union and the company, to have an arbitration, to have an independent party determine whether the company was right about the ability of that person to maintain the singing with the company. And that was a very difficult period, getting that kind of an agreement. Because, as I said, at the beginning he felt that this was a totally artistic matter.

Crawford: Were there many of those kinds of conflicts brought to arbitration?

Tayer: There were several. Several among choristers and at least two or three dancers where we had an arbitration. There hasn't been one in quite a few years, but during one period there were at least four or five.

#### Auditions: Protecting the Choristers

Crawford: This question of the chorus having to re-audition--they always had had to re-audition, and I'm told that the senior choristers felt that was unfair. How was that taken care of?

Tayer: Yes--well, again, I think we worked out a procedure. And I think that was one of Mr. Adler's strong points. He ultimately saw ways to get around his resistance. And they would usually be procedural ways. What it ultimately came down to is that people resented being picked out and addressed, "You sing individually," in a rehearsal; someone who had been there for many years. They felt that cast a negative light on them. And it became a really emotional issue with one particular chorus director whose name I don't remember and therefore it isn't important. But it goes back quite a few years.

What we ultimately worked out in the contract was an understanding that yes, the company did have the right to ask for auditions, but it was only at certain times and only on proper notice, so that the person could prepare himself and not just be picked out in the middle of a general chorus rehearsal to do an individual audition.

The other aspect was, and it was an important point, that in the contract we reserved the right for the individual who was being auditioned to audition in a group as well as solo, on the theory that if you were being hired and employed for a chorus



position, you really shouldn't be required to demonstrate your ability as a solo singer.

I think it's well understood that there are some solo singers who really do not have the ability to blend into a choral situation, and we do have protected in the contract the right of an individual who is called to audition to bring in some other members of the section so that the audition would also include the individual as a member of the section, the tenor section or the soprano section.

So it was kind of a procedural solution to the problem, recognizing still the company's right to hear how people can sing.

Crawford: And then a warning was given a specific time beforehand, if dismissal was desired by the directors.

Tayer: Yes, that's right. Originally, it was really two different issues, the dismissal part and the audition part. But ultimately I think everybody recognized that one of the reasons to audition singers is not only to hear how things are going, but also to hear if they can still pass the muster and keep singing. So it became part of the overall procedure by which people will be terminated if the company is not satisfied with their singing.

Crawford: Robert Watt Miller--do you remember him as a negotiator?

Tayer: Not really. Mr. Miller, I know, was involved in the early years in some negotiations, and certainly when there were some of the famous disputes involving the mayor and such other things, Mr. Miller got involved. But to my recollection, he never got involved in the years since 1967 or so.

Company Policy and Cancellations: Callas, Domingo and Others

Crawford: The problem of cancellation of artists--you talk about the mayor, and I know Mayor Christopher was often influential, as other people were, in resolving disputes. How often did that come up? And did the opera company press to sue?

Tayer: The opera company has, from time to time, threatened to. In fact there is one matter pending right now that I really can't talk about. At least now I can't. But it has been a growing concern. And, well, it was well publicized that there was a

genuine concern about Mr. Domingo's cancellation last year, and it was a very serious blow, not only to the opera company, but to the singers.

That did result in a cancellation of a television production that was to be made of that opera, resulting in the loss of income for people. So it is a serious problem.

Crawford: Now Mr. McEwen has said publicly that he's made a deal.

Tayer: That's my understanding, yes.

Crawford: Do you know about the details of that?

Tayer: No. But there has been some publicity about the fact that Mr. Domingo will be opening a subsequent season. And I think that was part of the deal.

Crawford: Did the union take any action at all against that?

Tayer: No, we were not asked to. We were advised of the problem early on, but we were also advised that there were efforts being made to resolve the problem. And we were informed that the problem had been resolved with Mr. Domingo, and that was the end of it as far as we were concerned.

Crawford: We lost the soprano too in that production, as I remember.  
[Margaret Price]

Tayer: Yes, well, you may hear more about that.

Crawford: But not now.

Tayer: But not now.

Crawford: All right. Of course, in 1957 there was a famous case with Callas. She indicated she would not sing her full season as contracted with the company and the union responded. What are the ways the union can respond?

Tayer: Well, the union really is quite limited in what it can do. Primarily it's an issue of whether this is conduct unbecoming a member of the union. It's more a question of having the moral weight of the union thrown behind the company in saying that this person is not acting properly as a member.

I don't believe the union has even attempted to or succeeded in actually assessing damages against a member for something like this. And the law is very limited on the subject



as well. But it's very tough, and I'm sure you will hear more from the company itself.

There are the problems of how much you can do to a prominent singer without offending other singers that you might want to hire. Because people do occasionally have completely legitimate reasons for bowing out of an engagement. And opera singing is a very demanding activity. It isn't something that you can do on a half-hearted basis. If you're physically not well, or if you're emotionally having a problem--

Crawford: So the union would be reluctant to fine a singer. I'm told that the union can also prohibit a singer from performing in the United States for a period of a year.

Tayer: Well, I don't even know if it can or would do that, but we'll see.

Crawford: How, if you were to compare the styles of Adler and McEwen, would you describe them?

Tayer: Well, they are both extremely personable individuals, both extremely warm individuals, at least in my experience. Mr. Adler was a much more forbidding kind of person to the outsider, and had the appearance of being much more autocratic. But he was well known to have a really soft heart when it was a problem with particular individuals--people who were having personal problems of various kinds. He would, just as he would get into the details of a production, get into the details of someone's personal problems and try to help them. He was and is that kind of a person.

Mr. McEwen is also a very gracious and charming person--two words that a lot of people don't use about Kurt. Or at least not gracious; some people think he's rough. I don't particularly, but others do. Mr. McEwen in the professional setting is much more willing to delegate responsibility, and he does not participate as directly in day-to-day negotiations and matters of that type, but rather leaves them to a very good staff that he has.

He does participate when he thinks there is something very significant that he wants to convey, or when a very serious problem arises, he will certainly be available to meet. But it happens a lot less frequently than it did with Mr. Adler. I think nevertheless he remains aware of what goes on, and I think his staff does keep him informed of where the problems are or may be, so that he knows what to expect. But the style is quite different.

Adler, Chorus and Staff

Crawford: Who in the chorus did Adler rely on?

Tayer: Well, he developed a long and close relationship with certain members of the committee. One was certainly Gunther Anderson, who had been there for many, many, many years and was chairman of the committee. One who is still now chairman of the committee is Eugene Lawrence, and they've had a long and close relationship. There were some others. Louise Corsale, I think, was one who had sung there for years and was on the committee and that he relied on. He tended to pick out somebody that he trusted and worked in that manner.

Crawford: And they trusted him.

Tayer: And they trusted him.

Crawford: He has that reputation.

Tayer: Yes, oh yes.

Crawford: Was his word good?

Tayer: Yes, his word--there was never--never, never a questions--and his memory was also good!

Crawford: And is.

Tayer: And is.

Crawford: Among Adler's staff, whom did he rely upon?

Tayer: Well, the staff changed a lot over the years. I suppose that was one of his problems. Since he didn't delegate a lot, a lot of people didn't stay very long. But he had some excellent people. Ann Darling was here for a number of years and was one of his strong people. I know he respected Patricia Mitchell very highly, and she, of course, is now the executive director. Those are two. Ruth Felt--he certainly felt very strongly about Ruth, and she did a fine job. Those are the people I have dealt with more, so I know more about those relationships.

Crawford: Max Azinoff--was he important?

Tayer: Oh, Max! Oh yes. He relied on Max enormously in the years he was in charge of financial matters. Of course, Max died some

time ago. But on questions relating to numbers, Max was very, very important and very close to Mr. Adler.

### The Negotiating Committee

Crawford: Let's talk about the negotiating cycle a bit. I suppose that the chorus would have a union steward that would bring their causes before the meetings.

Tayer: Yes, there is a committee, an elected committee, that is responsible and consists of choristers, dancers, solo singers, throughout the area. Of course, most of them are with the opera, because the opera is the major AGMA employer in the area. And the San Francisco Ballet--those are the two major AGMA employers.

The committee is the one that works with the membership to develop proposals for changes in the contract, and keeps itself informed about problems that arise. And it's actually the body that negotiates the contract. It actually participates directly in the negotiations as a committee.

Crawford: So that's the committee dealing with all three groups; they're not separate.

Tayer: That's right. That's correct. There are, in addition to the executive committee, stewards or representatives that are specifically at the ballet and at the opera. And those people also serve on the executive committee. But they are the ones that deal with the day-to-day problems about rehearsal schedules, about safety conditions, about things of that type that really don't get to the level of bargaining or contractual matters.

Crawford: How often are the contracts renewed?

Tayer: Usually three years. We've occasionally had a one-year extension, and one time we had a two-year agreement, but in recent years they have basically been three-year agreements.

Crawford: Are the benefits more or less parallel between our company here and the Metropolitan Opera, say?

Tayer: Well, the Metropolitan Opera has, certainly, the highest wages. I think ours are next. And there are certain conditions we have here that are, I think, perhaps even better than the

Metropolitan contract. But certainly the wage isn't quite up to that level. Primarily, in terms of the annual guarantee, the season just isn't as long. The Metropolitan, after all, operates from--I think they start rehearsals sometime in August, open in September, and run through April.

Whereas our company, with the choristers at least, starts rehearsals--this year it was quite early--in March, and performs until December. Which doesn't sound that different, except that the Metropolitan, at least up till this point, had a tour that followed the New York season, which pretty much guaranteed them year-round employment. Our people have something like nine months guaranteed employment, the regular people. So it's expanding, and that of course just happened a few years ago. That was another achievement of Mr. Adler's, to develop the summer season, which is basically another five weeks of performance, and expand the whole work opportunity for everybody.

More About the AGMA Pension Plan and Benefits##

Crawford: You were mentioning the developments within the chorus and chorus benefits in talking about Colin Harvey.

Tayer: Well, as I started to say, San Francisco is part of the national AGMA pension program, whereas the Metropolitan Opera has its own pension program, which all of its employees participate in. But it was hard to get the pension program in in San Francisco, because a lot of people really thought it was purely avocational and no one was ever going to make a full living at the opera, therefore they would have their regular work, whether it was secretarial or insurance or whatever, and that if they were going to get any kind of pension, they would look to that other activity.

But we felt, the committee felt that it was important to get one started, and we did get it started and the company went along with it. And contributions started to build up, and of course the employment started to grow, as I mentioned earlier, which meant that ultimately people were looking to this company or this employment relationship as the primary relationship from which they could expect a pension when they had to retire.

And Colin, I believe, was the first person in San Francisco to receive a pension arising out of the San Francisco Opera contract. And I remember we had a little ceremony when he got

this first pension check. I don't think it was much, but he was the first. He was always very gracious about it, and always a very active participant in chorus activities, and very knowledgeable about all aspects of it.

Crawford: What are the terms of the pension? In other words, the details?

Tayer: The company pays a percentage of the salaries into the AGMA pension plan. That includes salaries of the principals, not on the full amounts they earn, but rather on the AGMA minimums. And that provides a pension credit in the national program. And when they are vested in that program, which I believe is ten years, then when they retire they get some amount of money a month, based on how much had been put in during their working career.

Crawford: What is the maximum amount one can be earning?

Tayer: I don't know offhand, I really don't.

Crawford: Is the symphony chorus somewhat parallel?

Tayer: I think the symphony chorus does not participate in the AGMA pension program at the present time. There is a much more limited amount of work, both the San Francisco Symphony and the Oakland Symphony. I don't think there's any participation. The ballet people do; the San Francisco Ballet members do.

Crawford: They do?

Tayer: Yes.

Crawford: They have a pension plan and health benefits and so on?

Tayer: Yes.

Crawford: What are the other benefits that have developed over the years, while we're talking about that?

Tayer: For the ballet, you mean?

Crawford: For the ballet and the chorus.

Tayer: Well, I would say the principal ones are guaranteed amounts of work, guaranteed pay for rehearsal periods, which is something I'm sure Colin Harvey referred to, because they weren't paid for rehearsals, as I said before. The pension, the health and welfare, certain guaranteed rehearsal positions. A free day--a very important thing.



In the early years, the opera rehearsed simply round-the-clock once it started to rehearse, and there did develop a concept of extra compensation, like overtime compensation if people rehearsed on their so-called "free day" which would be one day a week. But one year, I remember, the chorus had worked, I think it was sixty-seven days straight, without any stop. And at the next negotiation, there was a great hue and cry for a guaranteed free day, that everybody would have to have a free day. And the first one I think we put in--it didn't sound like much, but it was sort of like a guaranteed free day every twenty-seven days, or something like that. In between they would be paid extra if they worked on their free day.

Now in the contract we have a guaranteed free day--I believe it's once every week or once every two weeks, and that was very important, because people would feel they needed one day, even in the height of the season, to be quiet.

Crawford: What other opera companies does AGMA represent?

Tayer: Only Western Opera Theater in the Bay Area.

#### The Soloists and the Union

Crawford: What are some of the other issues that the singers have brought up, apart from the chorus?

Tayer: The solo singers? One of the major issues I remember, and it was brought up by a very famous singer who was disturbed because she had been onstage singing a Wagnerian role until, I think, five minutes to midnight, and then she was called to an early morning rehearsal for something else at nine o'clock the following morning. And she felt that, although I'm sure she was very well paid, that the AGMA contract should have required the company to give at least a certain minimum call. I think we now have a ten-hour requirement of rest time, before your last rehearsal or performance until you're called again the following morning. Again, it doesn't sound like much, but it's important.

Crawford: When was that brought up? Do you remember?

Tayer: Oh, that was about four or five years ago that we put that one in the contract.



Crawford: And she would have simply gotten in touch with AGMA and pressed for that particular thing.

Tayer: Yes. Well, through one of the committee people.

One of the other things that there has been concern about is how rehearsals are scheduled. Some people are employed for a number of different operas during the season, and there used to be a fairly lax practice by the company, in terms of how they notify singers, when rehearsals would be had for which opera.

The singers would come here and they would be prepared to rehearse, perhaps the first opera of the season, and then they would suddenly be told they'll start rehearsals for the opera you're going to sing in at the end of the season. I'm talking about solo singers; maybe not the star singers, but the comprimario singers, the people who have the smaller roles.

We've now established in the contract that there had to be notice as to what the schedule would be, so that when the singer came, he or she would be prepared to rehearse for the appropriate role. First the opera company said, "Well, they should really know all the roles they're going to sing," and that may well be true, but even if they do, they weren't psychologically prepared to start rehearsing a role that they didn't think they would have to rehearse. It would upset some singers. So we put some provisions in the contract on that kind of thing. Those are the major kinds of things that the solo singers concern themselves with.

Once we had a problem--when a particular singer wanted to also direct. There was some concern about that, and that required, under the contract, a waiver.

The best example is Sir Geraint Evans, who wanted to sing in the same production as he was directing, and there was a strong feeling that he created some problems, by having someone the star of a production and also the director. But that was a waiver situation, and generally we granted it. But only in extraordinary circumstances like Evans.

Other than that--oh, we would hear about problems with particular stage directors. Some of them were more difficult and demanding on the chorus than others. We heard more problems with certain choral directors over the years, and we sometimes had to deal with that as an interpersonal relationship rather than as a contractual relationship.

Crawford: How was that dealt with?

Tayer: Kind of personally, with Mr. Adler or someone else. You know, just letting them know the problem, trying to anticipate it before it became a really serious issue. But we had the chorus threatening to walk out because they were being abused.

Crawford: Did that happen in fact?

Tayer: There were occasions when it happened.

Western Opera Theater and Union Status

Crawford: All right. Let's talk for a moment about Western Opera Theater, because I think that there was some, if not dispute, at least discussion about the status of that company.

Tayer: Well, that has developed and I've been involved in that really from the very beginning. It really developed as a touring company that would go into schools and nonprofit situations where there would be no charge. It has been a very good thing from the standpoint of developing young singers.

Early on, the rates were extremely low. Over the years I think, again, we've managed to develop some kind of a decent weekly wage that is appropriate; even though these are young singers, they are professional singers. And we did establish the health and welfare program for them, so that if they sang with Western Opera Theater for--I think it's a minimum of twelve weeks--then they would be covered year-round for health and welfare benefits, so that if they couldn't get another singing job during the rest of the year, they would at least have their health insurance protected.

Crawford: Was it the case that Mr. Adler thought of that company as a studio, and thought perhaps they would not be covered under a contract?

Tayer: At one time I think he felt that that was the case, but ultimately he saw that it was appropriate to have a contract.

Crawford: Yes, he said so in his own discussions, that he felt that it was much better in the long run. But now, there are companies, such as West Bay Opera, that pay a stipend but no fees.

Tayer: Yes.

Crawford: How does that work out?

Tayer: Well, that's not an AGMA company, so I really don't know what they do. I'm sure there are a lot of companies around that just pay an honorarium or a stipend. And there are singers that are willing to accept that. But my feeling is that if people want to be truly professional, and if the companies want truly professional singers, then they're going to have to work out some arrangement to compensate people so that they can keep doing it. Not everybody is able to draw on private financial resources to keep them going.

New Opportunities for Employment: Television and Radio

Crawford: What new directions, if any, do you see the company taking?

Tayer: Well, I think the company is pretty limited in how it can expand its season. The opera house does have limited time. The new directions that I have been hoping the company would take--and there have been a few starts--are in broadcasting and television. The Metropolitan has gone very far in that direction.

The San Francisco Opera had a good start, and the radio broadcasts, as you may know, have not been on for some time. Television was about to get started again, and the company had an agreement with a national company for televising its work, and the first one was going to be Un Ballo in Maschera with Mr. Domingo and Margaret Price. That did not come off because of the cancellation of Mr. Domingo.

I certainly think that is a very important thing for the opera company and for the singers, because it's a way for the singers to get more exposure, to receive additional compensation, and to work in a new medium. It really is a new medium, even though it may be a taping of a live performance. And I think that's one of the important directions.

I think the Metropolitan is also moving into that. They have said, at least, that they're going to substitute the tour, where the tour is being cancelled, and try to do more recording, telecasting, and so on, during that period so that people will continue to be employed. The direction has to be to give people more opportunities for employment.

Crawford: It's very costly; televising especially is costly.

Tayer: It's costly, but the revenues can be good. Cassettes seem to be doing well, video cassettes. People are willing to pay for high-quality performances.

Crawford: I don't know if you're in a position to know this, but was that a priority of Mr. Adler's? Did he work with the unions on this at all?

Tayer: Yes. I think he felt quite strongly about it, and I think he helped develop it. And he felt strongly about the radio broadcasts and helped develop those. I'm not sure about the present commitment to that. I know the present administration says that they feel strongly about it, but since we haven't seen a lot of evidence of it, it does concern me. I hope that is not a sign of a direction in the wrong way as I would see it.

#### The Adler Style: Shrewd and Sensitive

Crawford: You've dealt, no doubt, with a lot of artistic directors. So I would like to ask you what you think Mr. Adler's special skills are.

Tayer: Well, his special skills are knowing where he wants to go and knowing how to achieve it; and how to work with people to accomplish that. He is a remarkably sensitive individual, although it isn't always obvious on the surface. He does know what people are thinking. He's a very shrewd observer of people's desires. And he goes out of his way to deal with those things. I think that has been one of the reasons for his great success over the years.

Crawford: Was he remarkably tough as well as being remarkably sensitive?

Tayer: Oh yes! When he decided something was not going to change, it was very difficult to change it. Fortunately he reserved that not for peripheral issues, but for issues that were truly against what he thought should be done. He didn't make a big fuss about everything but only about the matters he regarded as critical.

Crawford: What do you think his overall impact will be?

Tayer: Oh, it's an enormous impact. Obviously he's brought the San Francisco Opera into a situation where it's one of the major

companies in the world. And I think he has established the notion of excellence throughout the company. I think one of the things that people look to this company for is that every aspect of it is expected to be at a high level. And I think that is attributable largely to his insistence upon that--his attention to detail and his attention to the needs of the various aspects of the company.

Crawford: What kind of a reputation does San Francisco Opera have with labor? Has it had fewer serious problems than the Met?

Tayer: The San Francisco Opera has a reputation of being very fair with the unions, which represent many of its employees--performers, orchestra, technicians and others. It's a reputation that has continued with Terry McEwen but had a strong foundation develop during the Adler years.

There have definitely been fewer problems than at the Met which is probably attributable to a more reasonable approach in San Francisco by both management and labor.

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University of California  
Berkeley, California

Kurt Herbert Adler and the San Francisco Opera

Arthur Bloomfield

MUSIC CRITIC AND AUTHOR

An Interview Conducted by  
Caroline Crawford  
in 1987





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INTERVIEW HISTORY--Arthur Bloomfield

Arthur Bloomfield, author and for many years a music critic of the San Francisco Examiner, has been a close observer of the San Francisco Opera since the 1940s. Born in San Francisco in 1931, he graduated from Stanford University in music, and served as a reporter on the San Francisco Call-Bulletin before joining the Examiner in 1965. He is a correspondent for the London-based magazine Opera, and has authored several books, including Fifty Years at the San Francisco Opera, 1922-1978.

Bloomfield is an unabashed opera enthusiast, and in this interview gives Kurt Herbert Adler high marks for both repertoire and casting, as well as for Adler's appearances on the company's podium. He also discusses directors and productions he considers less than successful.

Mr. Bloomfield was pressed for time on the afternoon of the interview, which was held in the living room of my San Francisco home, since he was due at his publishers to look over galleys for his forthcoming book on a different art form: cooking.

The interview as it appears here was transcribed directly from our conversation and Mr. Bloomfield made no editorial changes.

Caroline Crawford  
Interviewer/Editor

July 1988  
Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library  
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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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Special interests or activities

Literary Writing, Cooking, Travel





The Development of San Francisco Opera During the Adler Era  
 [Date of Interview: February 11, 1987]##

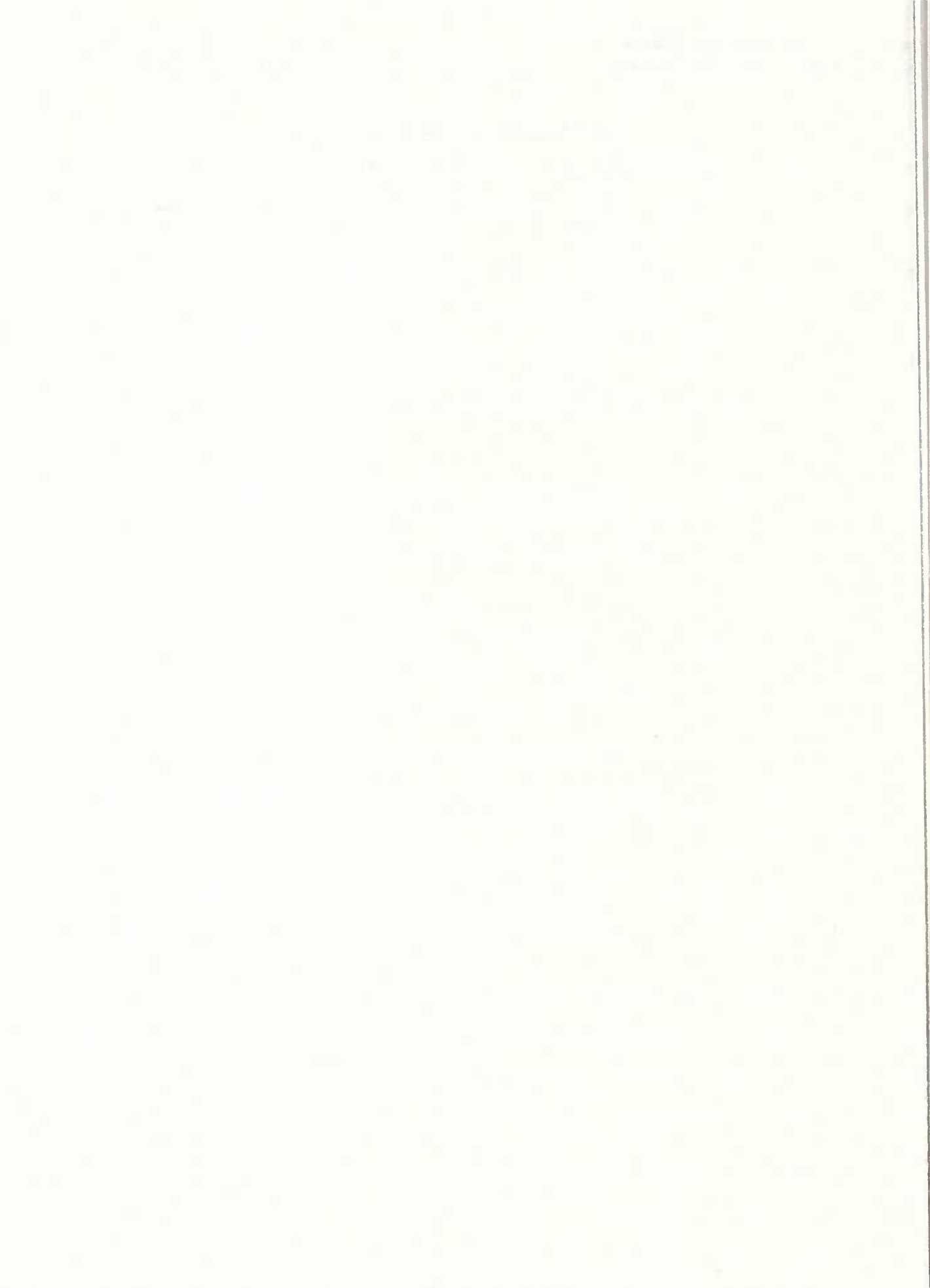
Crawford: What do you consider to be the major developments and innovations at San Francisco Opera during the Adler administration?

Bloomfield: I would say that among the major developments were extending the length of the season, doubling it over the years, so that there were many more series and many more people introduced to the opera. One should observe, of course, that the population of the area was increasing too.

And then, of course, the repertoire became much more interesting and has remained so on the whole. A footnote to that would be that Adler was very careful not to go too far out in repertoire, so that most of the unusual, newer operas that he was doing were still operas which were "palatable" to the average serious music-lover and opera-goer, as opposed to musicologists and strictly academic people or avant-garde people.

Then also the company graduated--this is a little bit of an aphorism, perhaps--graduated from stage management to stage direction. The emphasis was shifted in favor of having as many of the shows and seasons as possible be conceived individually as productions, not just as assembly-line instruments or productions with a so-called stage director briefly telling some of the singers, "you go here you go there."

So--the longer season, the more interesting repertoire, the greater emphasis on stage direction. And I think I added the footnote to the more interesting repertoire that Adler was careful to do theatrically striking pieces, such as The Visit of the Old Lady by [Gottfried] von Einem or really musically satisfying pieces, like [Dialogues of the Carmelites].



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Perhaps one exception would be Angle of Repose, which was not terribly interesting musically, I felt. But that was a local composer. And I might say also--this might sound like absolute heresy--that the Dello Joio opera Blood Moon is perhaps not quite as totally horrible as most of the reviewers said. Everyone pounced on it and it was just dead and buried immediately.

Crawford: You felt it should be produced again?

Bloomfield: Well, I would say that it might have been interesting to hear it once more.

But in any case, there was always interesting repertoire: Honegger's Joan of Arc at the Stake in 1954; Troilus and Cressida, Dialogues of the Carmelites. Wozzeck wasn't new, of course, but it hadn't been done on the West Coast. A Midsummer Night's Dream by Britten. Christopher Columbus of Milhaud was interesting; it was worth doing once more. Perhaps that was a courageous one to do.

#### Unusual Repertoire and American Premieres

Crawford: Let me ask you a question. You mentioned some of the American premieres, of which Adler did six in his first ten years. Then in the remaining years, from 1965-1981, he did only four. Why the slowdown?

Bloomfield: Well, let's see--those were American premieres?

Crawford: Yes, of Frau, Carmina Burana--

Bloomfield: Well, it's curious that Frau hadn't had an American production for all those years. I think maybe by that time what had happened was others caught up, doing their own American premieres. That may be just a fluke of categories, because in terms of new operas or unusual operas, there was no slowdown, really.

Crawford: What else stands out to you among all of the unusual works?

Bloomfield: I think one has to also mention Katerina Ismailova, Capriccio, The Rake's Progress.

Outstanding Production Teams

Crawford: What about production teams that were outstanding? I seem to remember that in your book you wrote about Adler's use of certain people on a routine basis?

Bloomfield: Yes, that was the case. Right or wrong, Adler very much believed in teams. I think he tended to use the same designers, directors, and conductors for quite a number of years. He felt that there was a valuable continuity in this, and that the performers would feel it and benefit from it. I suppose you could argue it the other way, too.

Then, with someone like Ponnelle, there were always surprises. Everything had to astound, and there was a tremendous variety in his productions through the years. Especially in the standard repertoire--the Rigoletto, the Otello, the Tosca. That was a long-term, special relationship he had with the company.

There were a number of good things that Wolfram Skalicki did with the company.

I wouldn't be the first one to say that Adler perhaps overused Paul Hager as a director, and perhaps Leopold Ludwig as a conductor, but I think the idea was to use the same team until it seemed to have been proven that it had outlived its maximum effectiveness.

Crawford: So that was a conscious shift that he made, say from Skalicki and Hager to Ponnelle?

Bloomfield: Well, actually, they are parallel, because Ponnelle goes way back. You know, he goes back at least as a designer to the Frau and the Carmina Burana in the late fifties.

Crawford: Yes, the Carmina Burana was 1958, and Frau was 1959, I think, and Paul Hager was there from 1954 to 1973.

Bloomfield: Yes, well, I think already Hager was kind of out of the picture here. But it's also perhaps that Hager represented a kind of a quasi-Bayreuthian style which was in the air and which was a change from what had gone on before. I don't want to castigate him too much, because he was in a different system; he was part of a different system that was less refined in production values.



The History of New Productions

Crawford: Let's look at new productions for a moment--there were so many in the sixties, close to fifty new productions. There were less than twenty in the fifties, and thirty in the seventies. What is missing? What don't we have?

Bloomfield: In regard to what?

Crawford: In regard to the standard repertoire. For instance, the 1976 Forza has been criticized as less successful than it might have been.

Bloomfield: Oh, you mean which are the less successful new productions?

Crawford: Yes. In other words, if you look at the repertoire as a whole, what productions are you less than satisfied with, if any?

Bloomfield: That Forza. I just have to run through--off the top of one's head, if one takes, let's say, Verdi--there was actually a very good Falstaff production in the sixties. I think it was Skalicki and Hager. It was done with an Elizabethan set, with the staircase up and down.

I'm trying to think, parenthetically, who did the recent Falstaff--oh, it was the Ponnelle production from Glyndebourne, recently. But there was a very volatile and amusing and quite stylish production of that in the sixties. It would probably be considered kind of low-budget now. I mean, a lot of the productions from the sixties were quite low-budget.

I sometimes feel that perhaps I over-praised them at the time. We have grander productions now, but grandeur is not always the only positive factor. And I think that in a number of a those productions, the scale really was right, it was appropriate.

To run through Verdi, then, there was a Ponnelle production of Otello. Aida--there was actually, I think, a very nice, simple, clean-lined Skalicki production of Aida in '69, which was scrapped rather early on. I think they borrowed from the Met and then they came up with a more monumental, grand production that they have now. But I still have a soft spot for the Skalicki one. The colors were marvelous, and authentic, and the space was marvelous.

Continuing with Verdi, the Rigoletto of Ponnelle was very controversial. But I always felt that if it were well conducted and well staged it came alive, even though the flashback has become a cliché now.

Crawford: Did you like the revival of it?

Bloomfield: I saw one in the summer a few years ago that was a bore, but that was partly because the cast was not very strong, and the conductor--I can't remember what it was, but there was something about the conductor's style that didn't quite fit.

Crawford: That was Adler, was it not?

Bloomfield: No. No, actually it was good again for me with Adler. It was not so good a few years earlier with somebody else conducting. He was not bad; he was an interesting conductor, but perhaps it was something in the feeling of the conducting that didn't quite go with that production. Although it was more the bad luck in the casting; a lot of translation was added. There just were not people who seemed to identify with that production.

This is a constant problem in the business of revivals which are put back on the stage by an assistant, an associate of Ponnelle or whoever. It really depends on whether the cast and conductor identify with the show. If a cast and conductor are strong, then a production that made a good effect the first time will make it again.

I just want to slightly continue this Verdi thing, because I think of others. There was the Toni Businger Traviata from '69 which was actually a relatively grand production from that period when maybe we feel that some of the shows looked a little more low-budget than perhaps they should have.

Trovatore had what at the time seemed a rather refreshing approach; it wasn't the old cardboard cut-out scenes. It was much darker than usual, and kind of in a great well, most of it. That production now perhaps seems a little bit primitive, but I think it was a good shot for its time. And then there was a fairly lavish Nabucco, actually, from the sixties.

The Macbeth, I think, was made up of platforms and lights. It would perhaps seem a little minimal now; not as marvelous and stylish and altogether as minimalist as one got in this last year's Macbeth of Pizzi.

Then with Puccini, they had the old Jenkins Bohème. That was fairly lavish, with good atmosphere. But it was fun when they borrowed or rented the Ponnelle Strasbourg one, which was very stylized and very creative. But actually the new production of last year seemed like just kind of going back to George Jenkins, but perhaps not as attractive.

Then there was the Ponnelle Tosca--I'm not being terribly precise here, and I'd like to be, because it's very effective in many ways. Although actually, the original '32 Tosca was surprisingly viable still in the sixties. I think it's one of the few surviving shows from the very early days. Then there was a perfectly adequate Butterfly that a friend called a "Hallmark card" Butterfly.

Crawford: Was it Skalicki?

Bloomfield: No, I think that was Businger.

Crawford: I think you're right, it was Businger, 1966.

Bloomfield: And then, of course, as far as productions go, the L'Elisir d'Amore of Lotfi Mansouri [designed by Robert Darling] was memorable--you know, it as the turntable effect. It looks rather small-scale and simple in a way, but when it comes back it seems right.

That reminds me that there was actually a Don Giovanni around 1965 or '68 [Oliver Smith, 1965] that everybody jumped on, but which was quite fascinating. It had a lot of turning features, like a little machine, which I thought was kind of fun and worked. This is another of those things that everybody jumped on and it was scrapped.

But there were some disasters, like the grossly over-furnished Fledermaus in '65. I think that was Hager and Oliver Smith, I believe. And I remember Adler saying that the idea was that they thought that Fledermaus should be very grand. Well, when it was brought back in '73, they edited it, and that was a good idea. But there were very few outright staging mistakes of that sort.

Another marvelous production, visually, was the Bauer-Ecsy Wozzeck. [In] that kind of opera, the expressionist operas, Adler was very much at home with the directors. He perhaps applied that expressionistic style to too many operas.

Crawford: Another opera that is often criticized is the 1974 Manon Lescaut of Piero Zuffi.

Bloomfield: Oh yes, right. I remember Renato Capecchi telling me that it made him seasick. That was Zuffi, yes. That was a trendy show, not one of my favorites.

### A Changing Esthetic

Crawford: John Priest told me that Adler often worked on "minuscule budgets." Did it always show?

Bloomfield: Yes. I think in retrospect perhaps it showed a little bit more. But as I've just been thinking and recalling a lot of those shows now, I find that many of them--I mean, for instance, the Skalicki Aida by Met standards would be considered not plush enough. But it was very attractive, I think.

There were two things here, at least. One was financial. I think that Mr. Miller really only allotted so much, and it wasn't as much as is standard in New York, and probably not as much as they're paying in Chicago. But in Chicago the esthetic, especially in those years, was to have a kind of a La Scala West--a singers' company and big rented productions from Italy. Whereas here--and I'm not the first person who said this--it was more like a Hamburg West, with emphasis more on production and repertoire, without shortchanging the singers. A little less money was not so much of a detriment when you were concentrating on these factors.

One more production that was really an elaborate production was the [Alfred] Siercke Barber of Seville [1963]. It had been done in Hamburg, but that doll-house sort of production had not been done in the U.S. before. And it's still very viable. One only thinks in terms of that. I don't want to be inflexible, but it's hard to think of any other Barber after that.

Crawford: What is all this money buying us, then? I'm looking at the 1970 Cosi, which was well received. It came in at \$41,000. Now we're spending \$250,000.

Bloomfield: That's inflation, I guess.

Crawford: It can't be totally inflation, can it?

Bloomfield: You would have to ask John Priest.

Crawford: Well, I asked him that question, and he said you're getting bulk, basically. Today we don't use drops to the great extent that we did, and projections.

Bloomfield: Yes, there are many more solid pieces--not always, but often, yes. Does he say that it is simply more the style now, the esthetic?

Crawford: Yes.

Bloomfield: Well, I think maybe that's also the company catching up, because there was probably back in the sixties more bulk in Chicago and New York. But that is not always an advantage. I remember seeing a Manon at La Scala once where the first scene was like a great warehouse. It was so huge, it didn't look right or feel right at all.

#### More About Repertoire

Crawford: Let's look more closely at repertoire. What other credits would you give Adler in the selection of repertoire?

Bloomfield: I think the repertoire before Adler was kind of spotty. Before Adler, you wouldn't have had a season with Wozzeck and Rake's Progress.

##

Bloomfield: You would not just have Bohème, Butterfly, Tosca, Cav, and Pag each year, and you would probably have a new show or two by Ponnelle. So there was this expectancy, [and] it can be said that he therefore improved or guided the taste of people. I mean, it's an open question whether perhaps in the late Merola period if he had put on Wozzeck and The Rake's Progress, which was composed while Merola was still alive, the public would not have run away. They might well have accepted it. But it's also true that Adler was pretty careful about pacing these things so that there was a balance. The balance was always good. You would not find what has happened at least once in the era of his successor, when we had a season that was mostly a bel canto season, with an imbalance of bel canto operas. You always felt, in virtually every season of Adler's regime, that the balance in repertoire was quite fine.

Crawford: And challenging--he challenged his audiences?



Bloomfield: Yes. Not too much; just enough. You know, you wouldn't get the Bassarids of Henze, which I saw in Santa Fe, which was extremely difficult. They were pretty much operas that you could either listen to, or there was something very striking about them theatrically, and often both.

Crawford: Well, that's a very good treatment of productions and production values. Let's talk about casting for a minute. How do you rank him on this?

#### Unusual Casting and Risk-Taking

Bloomfield: To play devil's advocate first, there were always people who said, and perhaps with some rightness, that there were some shows that wanted a starrier cast, more stars. He was rather careful and clever about balancing the budget so that there would be shows in which--some of the talent came more cheaply than others. But that's not to say that it was usually the kind of case that the castings were unbalanced. I'm kind of shifting over to emphasize that there were a lot of interesting castings.

This was a kind of an American base for Geraint Evans, for instance. He did Pizarro here in Fidelio, which I don't think is something he was terribly well connected with. It was a very good casting, and I'm not sure whether Richard Lewis always was doing the Captain in Wozzeck in other places, but you could cast him as the ideal. It seems to me that this was the place, and New York, where Ramón Vinay was coming back as a bass-baritone, especially here. There were some unusual castings for Marilyn Horne. Of course, this was before she got so deep into bel canto, as high into bel canto! She did an Eboli which I'm still kind of on the fence about. But that was an interesting and not entirely usual casting.

Crawford: He got some criticism for that, though, didn't he?

Bloomfield: Yes, I think so. Sure. Perhaps the greatest criticism of his casting is that sometimes he was a little bit too faithful to workhorse people who were good--perhaps a character baritone who had bailed out a performance when someone else cancelled. Perhaps then that person would be rewarded with a role that was more of a star role as opposed to a character role. But there is an impressive list of people that he hired here: Eberhard Waechter and Hermann Prey; Marie Collier is another



interesting performer. This was kind of her U.S. headquarters. In wildcat roles, she was marvelous and developed a following.

Crawford: So he took risks, in other words?

Bloomfield: Yes. He was not afraid, for instance, to do a Trovatore in which none of the four principals were really well-known, and that worked.

Crawford: By that do you mean less balance?

Bloomfield: Well, no. I'm not sure about this, but I think if you sat down and made some comparisons, you might find that somewhat more lustrous singers--that certain roles that had been done by a quasi-comprimario mezzo, for instance, in the sixties would be done in the late seventies by a more illustrious singer. Not that illustriousness is always a positive factor. Then there were some interesting castings in terms of bringing old singers back. For instance, Fedora Barbieri doing a character part in Gianni Schicchi.

Crawford: Did he promote a star system?

Bloomfield: Oh, absolutely not. I think he was quite brave in not doing that. He knew that he should have and wanted to have some of the biggest names. And he certainly had those performances. There were a lot of Pavarotti performances and quite a few with Domingo and Carreras. I think if one did it all over again, perhaps one might say that about 5 percent of the casting might have been upgraded a little bit. But over the years I think there was so much that was interesting in the way of casting, and quite a bit that was unpredictable.

#### Conductors During the Adler Era: A High Ranking

Crawford: Let's move on to conductors. What is your opinion of the conductors Mr. Adler brought to San Francisco over the years?

Bloomfield: Well, he used to cast in terms of his team, or in terms of having a kind of house Italian and a house German and a house Frenchman. Right or wrong, good or bad, this used to be more feasible when he had seasons of seven or eight weeks and the team was all here. But there was Molinari-Pradelli, who in San Francisco was usually very effective. He had less success at the Met, which seems to be a different atmosphere for

performers sometimes. But here he galvanized the orchestra. Although he was not always the most interesting of interpreters, he was considerably above the routine. This isn't any news; there was a life and a grace to his performances.

After he left there was a little bit less of a house-Italian-conductor kind of situation, as I recall. I think that as far as Leopold Ludwig was concerned, perhaps he was [here] a little bit too much. Then there was Otmar Suitner, who was very controversial. And he was quite uneven, not as precise as I would like to hear. On his best night it was very special and rewarding. Adler was certainly criticized for using him as much as he did. I think it was because he saw something in him that he liked; Adler got the best out of him.

Adler was faithful to his performers; he was faithful to the company. Also sometimes people were available and they were affordable. Those might seem like negatives. There were some mistakes.

There were also some very interesting conducting castings. I remember Gunther Schuller doing Ariadne, which was very effective. And there was [Charles] Mackerras and [Mario] Bernardi. And there was an Italian named Paolo Peloso who got very bad reviews that I thought was a very good conductor.

And then, of course, there were occasionally star guests like [Rafael] Kubelik and [Jean] Martinon for Pelléas. So except for a few instances I can think of--usually nine out of ten operas would be anywhere from well conducted to brilliantly conducted. I know he was criticized for not having more star conductors, but that's not always the most positive way. There are conductors who are not so well known who can be very effective.

You know, it's not a perfect score. But it was not too often that you felt that the conductor was someone who had been pulled in at the last minute to back up some superstar singers.

Enlarging the Opera Orchestra Pit: "Half a Ring"

Crawford: What about the issue of the pit? Why did he wait so long to enlarge the pit?

Bloomfield: Well, that's always been my most major criticism, that he waited so long to enlarge the pit. I think that under Robert Watt Miller it was probably just absolutely ruled out as something that we couldn't afford. And then the Ring came in '72 when Miller had only been dead two years, and I guess the Ring had already been, obviously, in the planning stages. And it was a little too soon to be unfaithful, as it were, to Mr. Miller and his budgetary ideas, or whatever.

But I still wince when I remember Harold Rosenthal's very tart reviews about "half a Ring," complaining about the reduced orchestration. And it is true that with the reduced orchestration, less players, the music sounds louder because it's less rich, because you don't have all the variety of brass instruments, the depth.

Crawford: But it wasn't fair to say half a Ring, you feel?

Bloomfield: Well, actually, now I think he was right. I mean, it was very annoying at the time for us provincial chauvinists. But no, he was right; I think it was terrible that in '72 they didn't enlarge the pit. I remember Jess Thomas saying to me some years later, why didn't he do it? Why is he just doing it now for other tenors? So it was like many things--sometimes you don't think something is wrong in the house until the roof just about literally falls in. It was when he wanted to get [Karl] Böhm to do Frau ohne Schatten and Leonie Rysanek told him, well, you just won't have him unless you enlarge the pit. And once it was done, it was easy to do from then on.

#### The "New" Opera Orchestra

Crawford: How much better is the new orchestra that Adler built in 1981 when Davies hall became home to the symphony?

Bloomfield: Well, you've got a situation here where the people in the symphony who wanted to play in the opera are playing in the opera, rather than perhaps people who want to and people who don't want to. You also have the infusion of so many new players because of there suddenly being two orchestras in town to fill up instead of just one.

I think it's technically a better orchestra. The old opera orchestra that was mostly from the symphony was always, though, a very alive orchestra in terms of expression. I always thought the Met orchestra, though technically better, sounded very blasé in comparison to the sound of the San Francisco Opera Orchestra, which seemed really to put heart and soul into most of the performances. We did not very often have a performance that was pragmatic or dull musically. It was something about the cast and something about the situation.

[Tape interruption]

Adler as Impresario: Taking the Advancing Pulse of the Public

Crawford: Tell me what you consider to be Mr. Adler's special strengths beyond casting and repertoire?

Bloomfield: One thing I've always talked about--he had a sense of how far to go. I mean, he was careful not to suddenly throw something that was terribly difficult at the audience. He had his finger on the slightly advancing pulse of the public. As I said before, it's hard to say whether people would have revolted against Wozzeck in 1945. Not necessarily, because for instance there was Ravel's Spanish Hour about that time. We mustn't forget an occasional offbeat opera with Merola.

The balancing of the repertoire--we talked about that. And he did make the opera something which the intellectuals had to go to, because the repertoire usually had some relatively far-out things.

Crawford: How did he do that? Did he do it through publicity? He said something to the effect that he caused the press to think opera was important.

Bloomfield: Well, actually they thought opera was important before, I think. He certainly made it more of an artistic event than it had been before.

The General Director and the Press

Crawford: Now that we've mentioned it, what were his relationships like with the press?

Bloomfield: His relations with the press seemed to me very cordial and candid. He always struck me as confident enough--there was a kind of gracefulness and calmness about it--so that he never really seemed bitchy or vindictive. He might say at a press conference, well, you know, I really disagree with you on that; we had this problem, or that problem.

But he always struck me as being absolutely rock-solid in feeling that he was doing a professional job and dealing with the problems as well as he could. And he seemed so basically confident that he didn't have to compensate through being vindictive. This is not to talk about what his relations with his staff were, which as I have occasionally observed were not utterly ideal.

Crawford: The press didn't see that side, didn't see the legendary temper?

Bloomfield: Not especially. And it wasn't so much that he was putting on a front. There were company manners, perhaps. But I would say that it wasn't so much that it was company manners; he obviously edited out the kind of sardonic or nasty tone that apparently he could use inside the house. He fielded questions gracefully. But he was usually the bringer of good tidings; he was usually the bringer of interesting news about interesting seasons. You weren't going to go and hear that you were going to have a season of just Bohème, Butterfly, Tosca, Lakmé, Carmen, Faust, and that's it, all conducted by assistant conductors (although in some cases they might be marvelous). You knew the season was going to be interesting. And you also would hear a number of interesting, amusing stories about what was going on in the operatic world and what he had found on his travels, searching for the materials of the season. And observations about what worked and didn't work staging-wise, which were intelligent.

#### The Question of Educating Audiences

Crawford: You mentioned the slightly advancing pulse of the public. Adler has said he respected the public. Did he train them consciously?



Bloomfield: Well, I don't know--. This is a hard thing to say. I think he really had ideas about how far he could go. For instance, there is the business of cuts. Back in the sixties he was still cutting the Wagner. Then in the middle seventies he was not--less and less--so that by the end of his career he was not cutting Wagner at all. And I don't know whether this represents simply a change of mind on his part, or the feeling that the audience isn't ready, or whether it was just in the air and it was no longer considered appropriate. So I would say that he tended to be maybe half a step ahead of the public rather than half a step behind. He was moving; he was being creative. And he didn't upset relations with the public, I don't think.

Although there was a year way back in the fifties when there was a move around town to impeach him, because there were some weak castings. I think that he didn't perhaps quite hit his stride until, oh, maybe about the end of the fifties. I think in his first five years there were some very good things that happened repertoire-wise. The casting was perhaps a little shaky at times. And also the productions were often a kind of minimalistic backlash to the old-fashioned productions. It's hard to separate sometimes how fast ideas in general are advancing and how fast one impresario is advancing. But he tended to favor something that was new.

Spring Opera Theater and Adler's Operatic "Empire"

Crawford: What about the subsidiary companies that Adler founded, principally Spring Opera Theater?

Bloomfield: Well, he didn't exactly found Spring Opera, but once it was finally delivered, then he picked up the ball and most of the time was quite successful. Most of the time; there were a couple of times he didn't seem to have his mind on it so much. But I don't know that he deliberately set out to have this empire. He started up a number of things and then other things appeared and he was conscious of how important it was to keep the operatic ball rolling around the year. I think that was something that appealed to him a lot, to have it be available, and I think it's unfortunate that we're sort of in reverse at this point. But this is not the place to go into the rights and wrongs of the Summer Opera.

Crawford: Well, we might talk a little bit about Spring Opera Theater and why it didn't survive, because it seemed to be so successful in the seventies.



Bloomfield: Well, I don't know the figures, but it was always difficult for Spring Opera to really be financially terribly successful in a city that had so-called grand opera as well.

##

Crawford: Well, let me ask you this--Spring Opera Theater found its way to the Curran Theatre eventually. Was that an appropriate home?

Bloomfield: Yes, that's where it really belonged, because of the scale of a lot of the repertoire, like the Offenbach shows, I think. And the repertoire became extremely fascinating, with Mahagonny and the Offenbach. I think it really had a following for those things. Maybe what killed it is that a couple of times there was a weak season.

It was a tricky thing to put together. You had to have interesting repertoire, but not weak, unusual pieces like L'Amico Fritz, for instance, or Meeting Mr. Ives. It was tricky in that way, and it was also tricky in terms of getting people to go to a Marriage of Figaro in English with a cast of unknowns when they could hear Kiri Te Kanawa, etc. As I say, I'm not sure of the reasons.

I think some seasons went very well, and then there were some--this is something of a criticism, although Adler was very busy, of course--there were a couple of later seasons that were really weak. And it was a fragile situation in any case. I feel very frustrated now to read that in St. Louis there is a company very much like the Spring Opera, and that this is Andrew Porter's favorite American opera company and all that. But, of course, in St. Louis there is not a big company doing Frau ohne Schatten and Marriage of Figaro with Kiri Te Kanawa.

Crawford: Do you think it was pretty hard to administer two major companies?

Bloomfield: Yes, I think that perhaps someone else on the staff might have been able to put together a season in terms of casting and selection and all that but I don't really know if it could have been delegated or not. I don't know; I really haven't looked into it closely. I would say that it was a very tricky situation in terms of having to get the right repertoire. They often did, but sometimes they didn't. You know, it was a house with a much smaller capacity and different prices, so the production expenses were much less clear.

Crawford: Was it a training ground for young singers, a good training ground?

Bloomfield: Well, it could be another place on the circuit for singers who were, and this is not to put them below or above other people, but who would be in the kind of New York City Opera-Santa Fe Opera orbit. I don't know exactly what I'm saying by that, because that doesn't mean they are better or worse necessarily. There are people at the Met, people who often go back and forth from one to the other. But it certainly presented a good showplace and an interesting repertoire to perform for people. It seems to me that Carol Vaness was in the Spring Opera early on. There were a lot of people, like Frederica von Stade--a lot of these people who really have very big careers now--who were singing in Spring Opera. It wasn't by any means the only place they were singing, but it was one more place where they were heard. Maria Ewing, also.

So Adler most of the time had a very good, strong finger on the pulse--it's a terrible metaphor! Sorry. He was aware of who the rising young singers were. And the company sometimes fed singers into the fall season; or they might even appear, I guess, practically parallel.

I've forgotten now why it suddenly became unviable. But I suppose it was more difficult to sell the Spring season, and I remember one season when the repertoire was awful. I think it was 1976, when the company performed L'Amico Fritz and the Ives piece [Meeting Mr. Ives], and then there was the year at the Palace of Fine Arts.

But Spring Opera Theater was competing with the grand opera. I'm trying to think on what basis they could have made it work--and I don't know whether touring it, or giving it some more mileage might have helped.

#### San Francisco as a Base for Opera

Crawford: Does it seem to you that San Francisco has sustained an extraordinary amount of operatic activity?

Bloomfield: Yes. Per capita, it's like the restaurants; we have more per capita than most cities. We are a city of 600,000 or 700,000 and we're the second or third most active in opera. Of course, Western Opera Theater was more out in the hinterlands,

and Spring Opera doesn't exist anymore. We have the little Opera Center, which I think is an unfortunate name. In a way, I think the Showcase at the Opera Center should be renamed Spring Opera. If they are doing Abduction from the Seraglio and then some contemporary opera, this could be packaged as something like "Spring Opera at Herbst." It wouldn't sound so doctrinaire or institutional.

#### A Comparison of Adler and McEwen Administrations

Crawford: Let me ask you this: do you think there is the same kind of excitement about opera here as there was ten years ago?

Bloomfield: To give credit where it is due, a lot of McEwen's castings have been very good, and a lot of his repertoire has been very good. I don't know whether this is out of bounds relative to the Adler story. But there have been several points at which I have felt, either because one got a rash of bel canto opera in a row or one got several not very good conductors in a row, I felt McEwen didn't quite have the overall control that Adler had. But then he'll come up with a whole procession of marvelous shows, with a taste that is somewhat a reflection and a continuation of Adler.

To have the juxtaposition of the Macbeth and the Canadian Onegin and the Manon with a rather unusual casting of Sheri Greenawald, which was very effective, a kind of a daffy Manon. Those last three shows of the last season were a collection of shows Adler would have been very proud of. And then there's the Ring, of course--the complete Ring is a marvelous achievement.

So, allowing for a few McEwenisms--like that I think he's about 5 percent more relaxed about conducting assignments; and something that is probably not to be gone into here, but I have grave doubts about Sir John Pritchard as a music director. He is a good Mozart conductor, but there are grave problems there that I have not totally sorted out.

If we're setting up Adler as a standard, then McEwen, I think, is perhaps a little shaky occasionally on conductors. One has to be careful here, though, because there have been a lot of conducting assignments that have been extremely strong.

Also, perhaps McEwen sometimes will favor an old-time London Records singer like [Fiorenza] Cossotto, for instance,

that I think are over the hill. I'm being very candid--. But it may average out about the same; I don't know.

Obviously McEwen operates quite differently; he is not a capital M musician who goes and reads the scores and finds the new opera himself. He's not there as much, I understand. He's less of a hovering presence. But, you know, one certainly could not find any better opera than the three I've mentioned in the past season and the Jenufa and the Figaro and the Meistersinger--six shows.

Crawford: That's a pretty good accounting for a season.

Bloomfield: It's hard to say. There were some dips that I thought were more marked than what I remembered in Adler's time. So the balance is not quite as skillful, but there are many inspired things that McEwen does. He obviously is one of the few people who can put something together on this scale. But I think Adler set up an atmosphere and a standard and expectations.

Crawford: Well, that's probably the best answer to my last question, which is what do you believe his impact has been, will be?

Bloomfield: That's it.



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Kurt Herbert Adler and the San Francisco Opera

James Matheson

PRINCIPAL OBOE, SAN FRANCISCO OPERA ORCHESTRA,  
AND UNION REPRESENTATIVE

An Interview Conducted by  
Caroline Crawford  
in 1988





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INTERVIEW HISTORY--James Matheson

James Matheson, principal oboe with the San Francisco Opera Orchestra, was auditioned by Kurt Herbert Adler in 1961 and began playing with the orchestra the following season, and with the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra in 1962. Adler suggested that Matheson be included in the oral history as a musician highly respected by his peers, and for his work as a union representative.

Matheson first served on an American Federation of Musicians committee in 1964 and became a member of the board in 1971. He served on the seven-member orchestra committee off and on until 1985, integrally involved with opera management in contract negotiations.

In the interview, which was conducted at my home in San Francisco, Matheson discussed musicians' concerns in some detail and the development of the union, the mechanics of negotiating contracts, the building of the new opera orchestra in 1980, and reflected on Adler and the opera company he ran from a player's perspective. Of Adler the negotiator, he says: "When you'd get down to the wire you'd go eighteen hours a day [in contract negotiations]. Adler had no trouble holding up under that whatsoever. And he was running the operation at the same time. The man had great energy." Of Adler the man: "He could charm the socks off people, or be extremely belligerent, and I think he played those roles in order to run the company as he thought best."

Matheson reviewed the interview transcript and edited it lightly.

Caroline Crawford  
Interviewer-Editor

February 1992  
Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library  
University of California, Berkeley



BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

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Organizations in which you are active ANCHOR CHAMBER PLAYERS.

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A Musician's Perspective: San Francisco Opera

[Date of Interview: October 8, 1988]##

Crawford: Let's begin with your first impressions of Kurt Adler, whom you have known for many years.

Matheson: Well, I met him when I was in the service, at the Presidio from 1951 to 1954.

At the time he was conducting out on Sacramento Street--the S.F. Conservatory Orchestra, and they were always looking for the off-beat instruments--double reeds, horns--and it wasn't a large orchestra. It was almost strictly for rehearsal purposes, and we would meet once a week and there would be twenty to thirty people in a rather small room. There were maybe one or two concerts that I can recall over one or two years.

Then I was later hired for the 1962 season, and I was auditioned in about December of 1961, if I'm not mistaken. He seemed to remember me and asked me if he had seen me before. In the audition he put various pieces of literature in front of me. I'd been practicing over a number of years out of an excerpt book operatic passages for oboe, and he must have been impressed with that; otherwise he wouldn't have hired me.

Otto Guth was there and one other person whom I don't remember. Things worked out quite nicely.

Crawford: And then you were hired by the symphony in 1962 without an audition?

Matheson: That's correct. At the time the two organizations [symphony and opera] were very much linked administratively. They had separate contracts for the separate entities, Enrique Jorda had one more year as conductor, and also at that time it was much more common to be hired by a personnel manager rather than a

conductor--what we call musical contractors. They were much more powerful then than they are today.

Ralph Murray was the personnel manager of both the symphony and the opera, and so my opera playing was my audition for the symphony. For a number of years, two-thirds of the symphony personnel played for the opera orchestra. The opera orchestra at the time was sixty-three to sixty-four people--later on it expanded to sixty-nine--whereas the symphony was always functioning at around ninety-five to ninety-six and on up to a hundred.

Crawford: How would you describe the two organizations?

Matheson: Because there is so much more going on in opera, it is much more akin to a show-type operation. The attention and efforts have to be spread out over a much wider variety of disciplines, and so the sense of timing has to be much more acute. They have to keep everything together.

In the symphony, they only have to pay attention to the orchestra, which has more detailed attention paid to it. As a result, the musical aspects of the opera; you have a feeling of being more independent and you have to be much more measured to carry your musical load, as it were. You are in the pit, and so you have to maintain the connection with the conductor so that you can stay together as a unit.

You can't go on your own to follow a singer, you have to do it via the conductor, otherwise things get pretty messed up. [laughter] But usually the hiring was the other way around. Players would come into the symphony, and then he would pick and choose whom he wanted for the opera. But I think as it turned out he had a regard for me that might have been different than for a number of other players, since I was not in the symphony.

Crawford: How about Jerry Spain, president of the musicians union for many years?

Matheson: Well, I had known Jerry before he was president of the union, because we had worked some shows together. He was a bass player, and I'd played in some of the Broadway-type musicals with him at the Curran Theatre. He had run for the board of directors of the union about 1960. He's a go-getter and very much of a workaholic; very good at working on detail as far as contracts are concerned.

He essentially became a negotiating guru for us up until the time he resigned as president of the union around 1984.

Because of his particular talents and, to use a sort of corny word--"devotion"--to the job he wanted to do, we had a very successful representative.

As an indication of his abilities, when he was vice-president of the union he was going to night school to finish up a law degree. At the same time he was carrying the load of administration and negotiations for the union. There are dozens of kinds of contracts the union has to deal with--hotels, restaurants, owners associations, and numerous others.

Crawford: How did you as a musician perceive the opera and the symphony?

Matheson: Well, when the 1980 split came and the opera established its own orchestra, the thirty-five musicians who were in both the symphony and opera orchestras had to make a decision between the two operations, and a lot of that had to do with dollars. The symphony was offering a year-round situation at the time that showed more promise than what the opera offered, but in terms of taste, that varies.

I tend to prefer the pit work myself. I had a better position with the opera, but all those things being equal I might have stayed with the opera in any case.

Crawford: In terms of administration, which was thought of as better?

Matheson: I think we were thinking that the opera management was more effective and efficient, even though a lot of mud might have been thrown their way, because they have so much more to take care of. They're bound to have more experience in handling a lot of detail--everything from the wig department to the sundry visual disciplines and the variety of musical things that they have to deal with.

Crawford: How about comparative benefits?

Matheson: Because so much of the orchestra was in the symphony, the basic benefits were covered by the symphony contracts throughout the year so the opera wasn't really beholden to set up some of those things until we started up [the new orchestra]. Adler started hiring people who weren't in the symphony so you had more reason to add fringe benefits.

The opera salary tended to be a little higher, because it was a season crammed into about ten weeks, and you'd have up to forty hours a week rehearsing and performing, sometimes more

than that, whereas the symphony was functioning around twenty hours.

Crawford: How about women?

Matheson: Well, in S.F. it was always more liberal. There was always little hesitation to hire women here, and in the sixties we had 20 percent women in the orchestra. It's getting more so now as more are in the work force. At that time in Boston there was a harp player and then I think a flute player--other orchestras sometimes had one or so.

Crawford: Let's talk about Mr. Adler and his rapport with the musicians.

Matheson: He wanted to be regarded with respect, and my feeling is that he maintained a rather strong respect as being able to run the organization. There were things we joked about: for example, office help were often short-lived, but he tended to maintain a position somewhat apart from people. He wouldn't be unfriendly, unless he was having trouble with some organization or group of people. He was an excellent actor and could play whatever role he wanted. He could charm the socks off people, or be extremely belligerent, and I think he played these roles in order to run the company as he thought best.

The American Federation of Musicians, Local 6, and the Issues

Crawford: Good. How about your own union affiliation?

Matheson: I was on an orchestra committee in 1964. For the most part, the orchestra committee, seven members elected at large, elected their own chairman. But I didn't really have an official position until I went on the union's board of directors in around 1972 for a two-year term.

Crawford: Adler said the union sent too many people into negotiations. Do you agree?

Matheson: Well, Spain and sometimes another union official were involved, and then the committee--seven people. To our way of thinking, it was a kind a safety-in-numbers kind of thing. In Adler's thinking, it might have seemed to muddy the process.

The problem we had as a committee is that you cannot really stick out your neck on the hook as an individual without going back to the orchestra, and as a result it's more sluggish than



what Adler could do. He had a plenipotentiary role which he could fill, which we never could do. We never had that kind of authority given to us by the orchestra. And if the union officials tried to do that, they could take an awful lot of heat if they guessed wrong.

One thing that is very difficult about union leadership is that you have to forge ahead to make some progress, or else tons of time gets consumed, but they are really stuck out there a little bit worse than the representatives of the orchestra are, and I'm sure Spain thought many times things were going too slow, and we'd have blowups occasionally as a result of wanting to push in a different direction.

Crawford: What was Adler's grasp of the issues?

Matheson: I don't think he had much of a problem with the issues. He might argue in such a way to cloud over the way you thought things should go, but that is a part of the quasi-adversarial setup anyway. But I can't remember a time when he had difficulty grasping any principle we tried to get across.

#### Relief Time and the Five-Day Week

Matheson: He knew his operation from his side. For example, when we were trying to get relief time, we used to propose a five-day week, and in order to get the proposal on the table, it used to drive the administration up the wall, because there's no way to get a five-day week going! [laughter]

But we wanted to get it on the table so we could finagle something in the way of relief time, because the orchestra would be exhausted by the time we'd get around to the symphony season. It's just now getting into a sort of for-granted-day-off system, and they can still hire you to come in on a day off--it just costs more money.

So it's essentially a seven-day week, but you get into premium wages when you get into a seventh-day situation.

Crawford: Are you talking about Sunday night to Tuesday morning? I thought that time off was sacred.

Matheson: Well, to change it is expensive, let's put it that way. [laughter] They have some flexibility, and they can move that time period to some other time during the week once or twice



during the season. It's not rock-ribbed like the symphony, which has had a five-day week for years.

The opera tries to adhere to it as much as they can. I think the seventh day gets into double time.

Crawford: Time off was a big sticking point for Adler--what were some of the other issues?

Matheson: Well, in 1964 we proposed putting a 50 percent premium on the sixth day and 100 percent on the seventh day, and to avoid that, to hire more musicians to rotate for schedule relief.

He was concerned about the artistic aspect of the thing, but because there was such a huge amount of work being done at the opera by fewer musicians, we thought we'd spread that around. They're getting into that now--a rotation in the string section.

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Crawford: What do you think? Was he right about the quality of playing diminishing under a system that allowed for rotation?

Matheson: No. The heavy schedule was debilitating. Even with twenty hours in the symphony there are lots of carpal tunnel problems.

Crawford: We're looking at a 1966 orchestra schedule, and there is a reasonable amount of time off; not as tight as the 1962 schedule.

Matheson: Yes, a couple of Sundays off. The idea behind the forty-three-hour schedule was to get what amounts to a day and a half off. Currently we have two and a half days off at times. One of the ways of thinking about it developed with the symphony on tour when we thought in terms of a six-day week. You'd work five days and have a day off, and so we worked that out for touring and then transposed that later into the opera day-off times.

### The Salary Issue

Crawford: Was Adler tough about salary raises to the same degree?

Matheson: Yes, he kept them very much in line. There wasn't all that much pressure from the players to get extra money, because wages tended to be higher than at the symphony, and on top of it you

were working at least 50 percent more time, so your weekly check looked bigger.

You had a weekly guarantee of six services, which was a four-hour service in the sixties, so you had twenty-four hours worth of work, and that was the base, whether or not they used them all up, but they almost always used them all up; they were very efficient that way. There was usually another ten to twelve hours of rehearsal time added to that, at a lower, daytime rate.

If you worked evenings in the job market--for shows or dances--and had to rehearse, you were supposed to be paid a performance rate instead of a daytime rate. Daytime rates were cheaper because people were normally more free at that time, and there was more competition for the work.

Crawford: What were some of the other points Adler held fast on?

Matheson: Well, he wouldn't split principals' duties, with the exception of the French horns. If you were hired, you were hired to play everything throughout the season, a very burdensome task. And all the rehearsals were in the daytime, so your time was highly restricted in terms of what you could do outside, which as far as work is concerned was not so bad, but you have to take care of other things, and it was a time when you put many things off you couldn't take care of.

It doesn't sound like a lot to people who work in other kinds of jobs where they are doing seven to eight hour days, but we were putting in that kind of time and then normally you had to do a certain amount of preparation, like practicing the music; you didn't know it cold, so you had to keep brushing up on it, many operas being quite difficult. So your seven hours in the pit doesn't do justice to how much more time you have to put in to even play just adequately.

#### Adler in the Pit

Crawford: Let's talk about Adler as a conductor. How was he in the pit?

Matheson: Well, he was respected musically. The difficulty was in the realization; in the use of his hands as far as beating was concerned. He would try very hard to be as clear as he could, but he wanted to pay attention to dynamics, and when he was playing something that was very quiet, he would pay so much

attention to getting things quiet that the pulse he should have kept going would diminish to the point you wouldn't know where to play.

This is not a unique situation. Musicians as a lot are fairly critical as to how these things should go and what technique should be used. If you had a specific detail, you could take a bit more time and things could be worked out with him. The best performances he conducted were in 1980 or 81. When we did Tristan and Isolde, he knew that thing backwards and forwards. It was very much a part of this heart, and I think he felt like it was his forte musically. It was quite a brilliant performance, and people who might not have cared for him so much in the past were quite taken with the performance.

#### Other Issues: The Annual Guarantee

Crawford: Let's go back back now to the issues. How did the musicians perceive the issues in order of importance? You told me that many musicians in the sixties were living at the poverty level, and they could make more playing at Bimbo's than at the symphony or opera.

Matheson: Yes. There were a number of musicians who were offered jobs at the symphony who couldn't take them because they turned them down to stick with the work they were doing. A friend of mine, now deceased, who played theater work and radio station contract orchestras, got paid more than the symphony offered and didn't work as much time. He'd been offered a job in the late forties and turned it down for that same reason.

This is not uncommon; symphonies around the country didn't pay all that much, and the symphony was sort of a sideline job for them compared with their other musical activities.

At this time the opera was only three months; it was the fall season from around Labor Day to Thanksgiving, and then they would head off to L.A. for three and a half weeks; six performances a week at the Shrine Auditorium. The symphony would start up as soon as that was over, so they would have maybe two weeks before Christmas--twenty-four weeks at the time. In 1962 it was \$156 a week for four services [at the opera] and the symphony was \$137 a week for eight calls, they would be about two and a half hours a call.

It wasn't too terribly bad; in my case it worked out quite nicely. We owned a home in Colma at the time, and housing costs in terms of your take home pay were about half of what they are now, so if you add the two it made a reasonable living. There were some holes. The summer pops was not a part of the contract situation at the time, so that was a gap that people had to fill.

I was playing at the Curran Theatre at the time, two shows, or about twelve weeks a year, and it paid better than what the symphony or opera did per week; 25-30 percent more per week. It was more commercial, and they didn't have the nonprofit guise to hide behind as far as wages were concerned.

The symphony and opera associations didn't have the kind of sponsorship they have now--now they have a much larger community involvement. Contributions are spread over a far broader group of people than what they were in the early sixties..

Crawford: According to what I have the fee negotiated in 1987 is close to \$1000 per week. Is that something the musicians are comfortable with?

Matheson: Well, we don't discuss things so much in terms of weekly salaries, but more in terms of what the employer is able to provide us throughout the year. The emphasis in 1984 and 87 was for annual wage, and the basis for that was set up by Adler when he wanted to have the summer season, a two-week tour in Los Angeles, the ABT coming in, Spring Opera Theater endeavors--piling all this together, you essentially had what the symphony is doing on a fifty-two week basis.

Since that time, though, because of the system by which things can be cut, and services can be cut because of the nature of the contracts the had with the various unions, we weren't keeping up with the symphony. There was a gap of about \$1000 by 1980. By 1984 there was already close to a \$13,000-14,000 gap between the two. That was with summer opera. They had cut back on the time they wanted to use the orchestra in the fall, even, and cut other areas without real damage to the fall season.

Crawford: So in fact you had no annual guarantee?

Matheson: No. There was a sort of de facto one when they put the thing in place, and that was the basis on which we worked; that is what Adler put in place. Now if he had been a younger man and continued on, he would have kept on promoting this whole fall, spring, summer business to where it would hold up the group on a continuing basis.



In these last two years, I think the contract gets up to a \$36,000 guarantee in our 1987-90 contract, and in the last year up to about a \$40,000 guarantee. So the gap is getting narrowed down from what it was. The sixty-nine players now have this annual guarantee floor.

So the first specific annual guarantee was in 1984, and that was \$21,100, and a few other things could be added in before the season to \$24,700; 1985 was \$28,500, and the third year was \$30,000--something like that. 1987 was \$34,000, and \$36,000 this year. 1991 is \$40,000. I haven't been involved for the last three years, but having dealt with it over a long period of time, my thinking tends to go in that direction.

### Tenure

Crawford: It's a complicated recipe, isn't it? Well, let's talk about tenure now, always an important issue.

Matheson: Before 1964 there was no tenure. You were just given a notice at the end of the season whether or not you were going to be employed again and you had to answer in a certain time if you would accept employment for the following season.

It had been that way essentially since the inception of the opera, I think--your pleasure or theirs--which is not so unusual in the music business in those years. There had not been anything anywhere with any sense of tenure whatsoever. I think it was incorporated from the school system thinking. But the orchestra got its back up and demanded tenure as a result of eight firings.

Crawford: Was that going on all over the country?

Matheson: Yes. In some respects San Francisco was a leader in some of these issues in the sixties. They might not have been the first to jump into the fray, but there was an atmosphere here that if you thought your employers were bad guys out here you didn't know what organizations in the East were having to deal with.

Philadelphia Orchestra always had an eight-week strike every three years, like clockwork, because of a lockout offer, or else there hadn't been a redress of problems they were having, so they would vote to strike even if the offer management had made hadn't been construed as a lockout offer.

We had much easier times in this area, by comparison, even though we might have thought we were having more difficult times. The only really full-blown strike or lockout situation we've had here was in the 1968 symphony situation; with the opera we'd get down to deadline--in 1980 we took a vote that was hung up on a parking hassle five minutes before opening night!

Crawford: Would you have stayed out?

Matheson: To tell you the truth, we might have voted down that contract. It so happened that five people were late getting to the orchestra meeting because of parking problems, and if they had had a chance to vote on the issue it would have gone the other way. But there might have just been a delay.

There had been some circumstance in the past where we hadn't had redress of two or three areas, before we had a no-lockout clause in the contract, and you could essentially strike any time you wanted to. We were held out of about forty-five minutes of a performance a number of years before that; a Don Giovanni performance. We didn't even go into the pit. Jerry came down and said, "Don't go into the pit," and then he and Adler resolved the problems.

Crawford: Do you remember the grievance?

Matheson: There was a sick pay grievance, and two other issues--maybe an argument with the trombone section of the day--quite a number of ruffled feathers and an apology about that--three or four things that had started grabbing cobwebs.

Crawford: Would this have originated with Jerry Spain?

Matheson: As far as the tactics are concerned, yes. He had brought a confrontation up to get resolution of these matters. He'd used up every other avenue.

Crawford: Back to tenure--there was no tenure in 1964 of any kind?

Matheson: We got something in 1964.

Crawford: Bill Diedrich had said that Adler turned his back and gave tenure away.

Matheson: I don't think that was the case with Adler, because he said quite recently that he believed in tenure, which surprised me. In our eyes, it isn't giving it away, in any case. The reason we find it necessary is that in any institution you are dealing



with such an ephemeral area of expertise, and since it's a subjective business, a leader can have subjective feelings about wanting to get someone out of an organization. Somebody who has a politically weak demeanor is the first to go, because they have no protection despite how well they play.

Crawford: What was tenure based on?

Matheson: Well, I think Adler's rationale for releasing a player was, "I think he's all right, but there might be somebody better."

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Matheson: At the time we were looking for tenure, everybody was having to piece together a living through teaching, through playing a variety of jobs. And the more you could find a consistency of employment the better off you were. Then you didn't have to have these anxieties about where you were going to be working next season or next year, that sort of thing. I think if changes by conductors had not been abused in a general fashion around the country that the tenure issue wouldn't have been brought up.

As a result of abuses, musicians all around the country felt very defensive when a new conductor would come in. He would want to do his particular form of housecleaning, and then hire his particular bunch of people that he wanted with him. Whether they followed him from some place else or not is not germane, because he might have his eye on somebody else in an orchestra he'd never conducted before that he wanted to bring in.

And given the wages that were involved, it was almost like being a migratory worker. So trying to get to some sort of consistency for a family life situation was the main thing that was driving musicians at the time to go for tenure.

I know of one incidence where a man was given a release every year, so for nine years he didn't know whether he was working the opera or not. He was working in the symphony and he was renewed each time there, but there was a question whether he should look for something else to do during that period.

Crawford: And what did he do, just come and get reinstated?

Matheson: Well, he would be given some sort of notice to come back, but those things many times weren't given until a day or two before the season started.

Crawford: When they didn't find somebody else, I suppose.

Matheson: Yes. Well, that was the thinking. You know, the greatest oboe player in the world might come into town at the last minute and beat out this guy. It's just trying to keep your options open as long as possible in terms of selecting the personnel. So I think that was Adler's thinking at the time.

Crawford: Did tenure go in in '67?

Matheson: Well, we had some form of tenure come in, but I don't remember what it was specifically. It wasn't as strong as it is now. It's a rather strong tenure clause that we have.

Crawford: It's a two-year probationary period, right?

Matheson: Yes. The person is entitled to be informed about what areas are deficient, if any, and then is reviewed by a committee from the orchestra and also reviewed by the management. There are meetings between the management and the review committee of the orchestra as to whether a person should be retained or not in the orchestra. So it's a combined effort between the two as to whether a person should be kept in the orchestra.

We used to just have one-year probation. Then for a ten-week period it seemed like too little. It was management's suggestion that we go to a two-year probationary period, and it wasn't even a tradeoff, I don't think [chuckles]. Every so often you get into, well, we'll give you this if you give us that, but for the most part things have to go on their merits.

Crawford: Would there be arbitrations if a player's competence was called into question?

Matheson: Well, if the player wanted to fight it there could be that kind of thing brought up.

Crawford: How many times did that happen?

Matheson: Under the tenure clause there was one person whom I remember was given a notice and he elected not to fight it so he just accepted the dismissal. And there was another one; they tried three times and he won his arbitrations in each case.

Crawford: Three times he went under arbitration?

Matheson: Yes. Later on he resigned. There might have been some others but those are the only ones that stick in my mind right now.

Crawford: William Diedrich said that management never won a case on an artistic basis. What would be the other decisions they might win?

Matheson: If there was an argument over some principal on the contract; somebody who felt he should have been paid more for this number of services, and you could get into a disagreement over interpretation of the contract. You would have situations like that that were much more of an administrative, technical nature that would sometimes fall in their favor and sometimes not. I don't have any specific cases in mind.

Crawford: Perhaps if someone didn't come to rehearsals?

Matheson: Well, yes. I don't know of anything on a personal basis where somebody was fired for cause.

Crawford: I think once somebody did go on a honeymoon and wanted to miss some rehearsals.

Matheson: Oh yes, I remember that now. Yes, they were over in Europe, if I recall. And the point was, Adler just didn't want to--he ended up hiring the person back a year later anyway because he liked her as a violinist.

Crawford: Was it was the precedent?

Matheson: Yes. He didn't want to get wrapped around a pole because somebody had just taken off on him, saying, "Well, I'll see you in a few months." I think they were already on the honeymoon, if I'm not mistaken, and they wanted to extend it for some odd reason. Well, not an odd reason [chuckles]. But they wanted to extend the honeymoon.

Crawford: Would he stand up for precedent?

Matheson: Well, I think he had certain standards that he adhered to rather strictly as far as that's concerned, but I don't think he was really a non-negotiable type. He could be awfully tough but I think that given a fair discussion on something, you know, you could get a hearing on things.

Well, certain things I guess you would call non-negotiable because he wanted certain people in position for all the operas. You know, that was just his system of functioning and that's the way he wanted it and he felt he was going to get his top performances that way. And as a result, that would be a non-negotiable item. But I didn't get the impression that he was an irrational man in that sense.

Crawford: These were artistic concerns that were reasonable.

Matheson: Yes. He had quite a control over the chorus and over soloists that he would hire. You know, your star singers. There's free reign as to who he can hire in those cases, in particular the soloists. Of course soloists had a better betting edge than say an orchestral player has because they have a name that might draw large numbers like Domingo or Pavarotti, that sort of a thing. It's a big contrast in terms of what their clout is in comparison to an oboe player in an orchestra.

The chorus itself has not become organized to the same extent as the orchestra or stagehands. I would imagine the stagehands have as strong a situation as anybody in terms of contracts. However, they don't have a tenure situation, but it's a closed union by comparison. Technically speaking, they have a limited membership, somewhat in accordance with what number of jobs they actually represent, whereas the musicians union membership is totally open. We have about three or four thousand musicians for maybe eight, nine hundred jobs in town.

Crawford: There's a big pool. So what you're saying is that your clout is weakened by that.

Matheson: Not so much, because in that pool of musicians there's such a variety of skills, everything from piano bar to Mariachi band.

Crawford: I think the musicians are perceived as the element of most value because you can always get other singers, you can always replace choristers.

Matheson: Well, all you need is one other person who can play respectably well and you have competition [laughs].

William Diedrich: Company Counsel

Crawford: Let's talk about William Diedrich, whom I think you described as Adler's hired gun.

Matheson: He came in in the 1960s, and we were at loggerheads about some issue, I forget exactly what it was. Adler invited us to have a lunch, and they had catered in some sandwiches, rather good quality.



He had Bill Diedrich come down, who was working pro bono for the opera. He was a partner of Madison, Pillsbury & Sutro, and he did sort of a boom-lowering type thing that just totally backfired. Everybody just sat there and glowered at him. [laughs].

Crawford: You mean he talked tough?

Matheson: Yes. "No way are we going to..." You know, this sort of stuff. Blustered at us. From what I gather, he said, "that's the last time I'll ever do that."

Crawford: Did that come from Adler?

Matheson: I think he brought Bill in in order to put more pressure on the situation and try and make us more considerate. I really don't remember what the issue was at the time, but as I recall, it was something of a rather cardinal nature, because we wouldn't have really holed up on a thing in that fashion about it.

Crawford: Was he the point man?

Matheson: Adler was his own point man and in the main handled his own negotiations. He would have some staff around him to give him materials to which to refer, and he had them work different projects and bring in stats for whatever information he needed and to bring up rationales for what his particular point of view was. But he was basically his own negotiator, and he was a rather good one, too.

Crawford: How so?

Matheson: Well, he was effective. I mean, you couldn't really muscle him around. He might get angry, some of us might get angry and blow up at a meeting, that sort of thing. Spain would get angry, but that was sort of to be expected; it was sort of a normal course of events that things would run that way.

Unfortunately, the negotiations are sort of a waiting game that goes on to see how pressure will hit: they hope to bring it about so that you get resolution of your problem. So many times you'll have discussion and conversation that doesn't seem to be going anywhere.

Crawford: How many hours did you spend in negotiation?

Matheson: Oh, when you get down to the wire you'd go eighteen hours a day.

Crawford: And Adler would spend all that time there?

Matheson: Oh yes. He had no trouble holding up under that whatsoever. And he was running the operation at the same time. The man had great energy.

If you're getting close to the end of the negotiations you'd go three, four o'clock in the morning and then maybe take the morning off, come back in the afternoon. But that's sort of part and parcel of what our negotiations have been like, both at the symphony and the opera.

The opera company always tried to get their negotiations out of the way and their contracts signed somewhat in advance of the opera season because, a month or so beforehand, they'd have to put on any number of employees such as stagehands, to finish up productions. They didn't want to get totally committed without all union contracts in place.

They set their own deadlines, which worked in our favor as far as that's concerned. And Adler normally wanted a contract signed a month before the season ever started.

The only times that I can recall offhand that we really went down to the wire was that 1980 contract on that parking issue, and everything else was taken care of. And then the 1964 situation where virtually nothing was really taken care of. Robert Watt Miller had made some announcement about the ship having sailed and things like that, that the season had been cancelled.

Crawford: I understand that Mayor Shelley did put pressure on you to play.

Matheson: Well, some of the negotiations took place in his office; he'd have caucuses and go back and forth between us, trying to resolve different issues. He would act as a mediator. Later on [Mayor] Alioto did the same thing in at least two different negotiations that I know of.

Crawford: Opera negotiations?

Matheson: Yes, opera, and well, symphony too, come to think of it. So they would tend to act more as a mediator. They weren't necessarily really putting the screws on in the same sense that Bill was brought in to do that one meeting where it sort of blew up in his face. We didn't get angry and you know, shout and yell at him, as I recall. I think we just refused to budge at the time. I guess they thought it was a wasted sandwich on us [chuckles].



Crawford: What did Diedrich actually do if Adler was always there?

Matheson: As I understand it, Bill was a labor attorney and I think he had to keep Adler apprised of what areas they had to be respectful of, and certain regulations and federal laws, state laws.

Crawford: But he didn't sit in there for the eighteen hours a day.

Matheson: No, oh, he might be called in half a dozen times, and it might have been more than that in certain situations, but it wasn't like he was sitting by Adler's side every minute of the day during those negotiations.

Crawford: What do you remember of Robert Watt Miller?

Matheson: Rather tall, sort of imperious type of an individual. He really didn't try to be a public figure in the sense of the people in the organization itself. So you'd just see him around; I think most of his doings had to do with how he wished to chair the board of directors of the opera association.

So it wasn't as if he was like a boss around the job or anything like that, whereas Adler was always keeping his finger in everything that was going on. He had specific suggestions to make about this and that. Even if he wasn't conducting he'd talk you in the hallway, ask you to do something differently as far as phrase was concerned, play a little louder here or there.

At one time he used to get on people's backs. That was before I was in the company. I think they had some sort of a set-to between him and the union president at the time, Charles Kennedy. Because he would come over and start talking to people in the pit while they were playing. "Why are you doing it that way?" etc.

Well, it was rough on the players, because you get sort of anxiety-ridden. And since there wasn't any tenure, it was sort of a straw in the wind in many cases.

I think that the president of the union was able to curb that to a large degree, but Adler would once in a while ask me about doing something about the pitch in this passage or something like that, or things were too loud here, too soft there, and ask that I say something to other players about it. So I'd pass the word along if need be. If he happened to be just upset about something and there wasn't really anything that could be said, I wouldn't say anything because I knew it would just upset the other people all the more and it wouldn't do any good to bring the point up [chuckles].

Enlarging the Orchestra Pit and Other Issues

Crawford: Let's go on to a couple of other issues that we didn't touch. One is the enlargement of the orchestra pit in 1976. How did that come about?

Matheson: Well, it has specifically to do with ticket sales. I think there were approximately seventy seats across the opera house in the front row. You're talking about people that essentially will their seats to their heirs, so it was somewhat of a political pickle within the opera association itself as to how he's going to handle these people.

And they're also big contributors, because you don't buy a season ticket in the front row without having to add a contribution. Right now it's advertised as such. Anybody buying these tickets has to make a sort of enforced contribution of X amount.

So we always had this kind of a fight, and now we have two rows fewer in the front of the opera house than what were in existence before, and you multiply that by seventy performances; and it's a considerable amount.

Crawford: How did that improve quality of performances?

Matheson: It gives the string players more room in which to bow. For instance, with the smaller pit, we would play these large Wagner operas with more string players, and they could only stay in the middle of their bow--they'd be running into the wall with their fist.

Crawford: Bowing vertically!

Matheson: Yes [laughs]. So that would be one of the main things that would be helpful.

Crawford: Was pit enlargement an issue with the players?

Matheson: We kept on suggesting it. One thing we suggested that I think he caught on to was a suggestion from the orchestra to do more performances of the same opera-- more performances and more ticket money.

Crawford: How did the players feel about auditions?

Matheson: Auditions, until the 1980 season, were entirely controlled by him. He had the final say, he could hold them any way he wanted to. He didn't have to hold them if he didn't want to.

It wasn't until he got the opera orchestra as a separate entity from the symphony that some committee involvement started. Adler would have the final say. The audition committee was strictly advisory in final hearings.

Since that time it's been somewhat strengthened from the musicians' viewpoint in the sense that the music director can't hire over the heads of an orchestral audition committee, so if the committee says no by whatever system they have, the conductor cannot hire an individual.

Crawford: Is that something they pressed for during the Adler years?

Matheson: We didn't care all that much at the time. We wanted it very much at the symphony, because we'd had quite a few difficulties hiring personnel in the sixties. 1968 was the inception of the audition system in the symphony.

The opera at the time was considered just sort of an adjunct of the symphony where you could make some bucks and get out quick and work your tail off doing it. But at the same time you didn't have time to think about all these things because you were so busy with the opera. You just wanted to get in there and do it, collect your check and get out [chuckles].

Crawford: What were some of the outrageous demands? The ones that were called outrageous demands.

Matheson: Oh, I think probably the rotation system was considered outrageous, and yet it was in place in Vienna and Paris, and any number of other companies. [chuckles] But it was entirely new and against the employment philosophy that Adler had at the time, so it was considered an outrage.

I would imagine some of the original tenure demands might have seemed outrageous in their estimation at the time. But these things are already mellowed quite a bit. Even the management would think that way about it now, whereas twenty-five years ago those were thought of as impossible.

I remember once we wanted soap in the soap dispensers in the men's room--we never had it in '62 and '63. The War Memorial board never kept it up, so we thought, well, the opera company should take care of this because they're our employers.

Well, they had to put heat on the War Memorial to keep these things up. [chuckles]

It sounds outrageous that somebody should ask this for a contract demand, and yet I can point it out chapter and verse where they have to come up with this stuff.

Crawford: And they did.

Matheson: Yes. Well, they agreed.

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Crawford: What about the questions of importation?

Matheson: Importation meant bringing in a player from outside the area for a key position in the orchestra. Normally speaking, what happened was the symphony would ask for an importation allowance to bring in somebody for a first oboe, concertmaster; an individual who was not a member of the local union here in San Francisco, Local 6. And by union bylaws, importation had to be okayed by the board of directors of the union.

Crawford: The implication being--.

Matheson: --that there is nobody locally available that's good enough to hold that particular position.

When audition systems were negotiated around the country, it opened up the situation so there was a fair competition. As a result, it involved opening up jobs to everybody in the country. Essentially, the importation philosophy was done away with years ago by federal regulation (NRLA). At the same time, there was an upgrading of the quality of musicians getting jobs in all orchestras as a result.

Crawford: So if Adler wanted to bring a concertmaster in before this change, how was that worked out?

Matheson: Well, the union asked him to prove his point and hold auditions. [Michael] Piastro was the agreed arbiter at one time. He said, "No, I think that these folks aren't necessarily what they should be for this particular position." Therefore, he felt Adler was justified in asking for an import. That was some years ago.

Because we only had approximately twelve weeks of work, we seemed to change concertmasters once a year or two. It wasn't solid enough employment, basically. They'd get the job and leave. So we had a variety of concertmasters for several years.



A New Opera Orchestra

Crawford: Let's talk about building the new orchestra, because you were involved in it, certainly, and the results of what happened when Davies Hall was built in 1981.

Matheson: Well, first we heard about it was during symphony negotiations, in 1978 or so. [SF Symphony Director] Peter Pastereich announced in the negotiations that they were having this new concert hall built, and that by the third year of the contract that we were in the process of negotiating, he wanted the whole symphony orchestra fifty-two weeks out of the year in that hall.

Anybody that was in both orchestras had to make a decision as to what they wanted to do by the third year of that contract. So it was a rather fascinating time, people wondering what the opera would do and what the symphony would do. The opera's proposal was very forward-looking, so we at least felt some potential for having a choice in the matter.

Crawford: Did that promote the summer season, do you think?

Matheson: It certainly made it possible. Once the symphony was out of the opera house, the opera and the ballet had a free hold on the place. They could start developing what they wanted to. I don't think the ballet had quite the ambition that the opera company did as far as expanding and making use of the house.

Crawford: Is the ballet orchestra essentially the same as the opera orchestra?

Matheson: No. There are, I think, about ten or twelve people in the opera orchestra that are also in the ballet. The ballet orchestra, I think, has the largest membership under contract during the Nutcracker part of the season. Then the orchestra's reduced for the regular ballet season.

So at their fullest, I think they're fifty-four, fifty-five players. And then it's down from there a few players.

Crawford: So essentially we're talking about three orchestras.

Matheson: Yes. The current opera contract endeavors to incorporate the two orchestras together for use in the opera house. I don't know if anything has effectively been done yet, I haven't heard

anything about that. (As of 1990, the clause is out of the contract.)

Crawford: How was the opera position made tempting to the symphony players?

Matheson: Well, it's sort of like a gas tank empty or half-empty or the gas tank half full. Apart from the opera season itself, you'd have quite a bit of flexibility in terms of what to do with your time. If you're working so hard for three months it amounts to, you know, more than three months worth of income, as far as the fall is concerned. And if you have the American Ballet Theater and the summer season, that added up to a nice substantial solid foundation with which you could do other things.

So if you were one of the thirty-five players that had not been in the symphony but were in the opera orchestra, it was a great expansion; it was almost double the wages that had been involved before.

I think the '79 wages were around ten, eleven thousand dollars for that three-month period. And then if you worked everything it went up to \$26,000 the following year, so if you didn't have anything really solid it just all of a sudden ballooned for those other thirty-five people.

Crawford: So thirty-five opera musicians, and then ten from the symphony stayed.

Matheson: Yes, so you had to have twenty-five new faces; twenty-five, twenty-six. There was a great flurry of auditioning, both locally and in other towns, to fill those vacant spots.

As I recall, it was David Agler, Zaven Melikian, and Tom Heimberg that were running around to the different cities. Then those players that they thought were promising, they'd invite them to come to San Francisco.

Crawford: How many local players got jobs in the orchestra?

Matheson: I know one or two of the five horns were local. Bassoon was local. A couple clarinets were local. The oboe section stayed the same. Flutes, no locals there. Let's see, one local trumpet and two local trombones. In the strings I don't know exactly what the numbers were. But I would say you're talking about--most of the replacements in the winds and the brass were local replacements.



Crawford: And the pensions were transferred from the symphony to the opera?

Matheson: The symphony has its own pension plan. It's a private one set up by the association and it has a joint committee between orchestra members elected and those selected by the board of governors in the symphony society, so it's a private pension plan specifically for the symphony members.

The opera pension is handled by a contribution to the American Federation of Musicians Employers-Musicians pension fund, which has both management and union reps as the trustees; it's national in scope. Those offices are in New York City and it's a defined benefits program where how many dollars you put in determines how much you're to be compensated when you choose to retire or elect to collect on that.

The opera has been a participant in that since the late 60s. Currently, they contribute 8 1/2 percent of the gross wage to that particular fund, so if you go to another orchestra in another town and they're a participant in that same pension fund you don't lose any credits here that you earned here. If you happen to hit all the wrong orchestras, you'd have to go through vesting every time you changed orchestras, whereas in the Federation pension fund plan your rights and credits are open to transfer wherever you go.

Crawford: What about the quality of the new orchestra?

Matheson: When you're in the middle of it, it's a very subjective business. It's easy to become chauvinistic about it, to say we're the greatest and all that sort of stuff. But it's a different kind of orchestral playing than what you run into in the symphony. Each individual has to think more in terms of having a vested interest in the show, whereas in the symphony you feel much more under the thumb, under the control of the conductor.

I think there's an improvement.

For instance, when we did the Ring with [Edo] De Waart conducting, I was sitting right in back of the first violins. And you'd hear every note played in all those terrible Wagner rips that the fiddle players have to play. Everybody in the back stands there just really knocking it out like crazy. Terribly difficult parts, and thought to be impossible at the time that they were originally played.

For years orchestras really never played all that well from what we read in historical sources. And to hear that stuff played as well as it is, and then twenty, twenty-five fiddle players just really crunching into it in unison and nothing else going on, it sounded incredibly good.

There's a lot to be said for the improvement and the development that's come about in the orchestra since the fifties. It is essentially more technically proficient, I think.

Crawford: What would you say about the opera conductors through the years?

Matheson: When you just play in this city alone, there are a lot of conductors you never see, so it's hard to compare, and it's a question of different groups' perception, too. There was one man we thought of as being quite outstanding--[Francesco] Molinari-Pradelli, particularly for the Verdi works. He just had tremendous vitality, and was really solid rhythmically. And yet when he was back East at the Metropolitan he was thought rather ill of; they had very negative things to say about him.

Then there was a man in the Chicago Symphony, Jean Martinon, and they just tore him to shreds. I think a lot of it was backlash from the Reiner years, but he came out here and did Pelléas and Mélisande in the late sixties, and I was astounded how great things sounded. I never thought that an orchestra could sound that good technically and that good musically at the same time, filigree things were incredibly beautiful!

Crawford: So guest conductors can produce really outstanding results?

Matheson: Yes. It depends on what their specialty is and whether they create an atmosphere which really brings out a very positive effort from an orchestra.

It used to be that you'd have some of the tyrannical conductors and they would develop anxieties to such a degree that people were playing strictly on adrenaline, out of fear. You get a certain electricity out of that, but there's too much of a penalty for it that way.

Crawford: What do you remember of James Levine, who conducted for the company in 1970-71?

Matheson: I had a very positive impression of him. We did the Butterfly with him, as I recall [1970]. It was very brilliant, it sounded quite exciting. It was a bit irrepressible in certain ways, but there was a lot of flash to it.

The 1964 and 1972 Contracts and a 1981 Crisis Averted

Crawford: We could go on about conductors until midnight, if we wanted to. But I'd like to explore the 1964 crisis with you. We talked about 1964, when there was a season cancellation for twenty-four hours. Would the musicians have stayed out?

Matheson: Well, they had a lot of jobs on the line, because if we had struck the whole company would have been out.

Crawford: What would that have meant for you? Would you have been paid?

Matheson: Oh no, no. The feeling I had at the time was, we've got to hang in there and get some sort of resolution to these things. You feel the pressure. I don't think you necessarily feel you're a bad boy for striking. I didn't feel that. There are individuals that have that kind of feeling about it, but I think that essentially comes from some form of snobbery. Not wanting to be associated with blue-collar type meetings or something like that.

At the time I was about thirty-two years old, so I don't know exactly what players who were, say, in their fifties or sixties were thinking. But we had a very unified orchestra; otherwise we couldn't have gone anywhere near that far. We had a committee elected that everybody knew and they were all go-getters.

Crawford: So they brought the demands to Jerry Spain?

Matheson: Yes, well, to the union. Then Charles Kennedy was the president at the time and Paul Rosen was the secretary. It was a new development to have the orchestra this involved and a committee that aggressive. Jerry was with them in negotiations.

We had all had some sort of relationship with Jerry or another, through other union activities, so we were sort of looking to him for guidance and assistance in dealing with this quasi-maverick group that was coming out. Up to that time the orchestra hadn't developed that much of a demanding manner, as far as making changes in the contract.

Crawford: You mentioned earlier that the opera company was having a very, very hard time and Jerry Spain advised to kind of lay back in the late sixties.

Matheson: Yes. There was a man that worked in the symphony administration that we trusted quite a bit, Victor Wong. So we asked him if they were having any particular problems in the opera, if he knew anything.

He said that they were having hassles and we asked him, "Is that just a line, or is that really true?" And he said, "No, they really are having some troubles." So we took it a bit easy; we barely passed a contract, I think it was one of those twenty-five to twenty-two type votes.

The next contract came around in '72. It turned into a different kind of situation. By that time the company wasn't going to Los Angeles anymore, and I think that's one of the reasons they were running into money problems, because L.A. used to help resolve any financial problems that they might have had.

Crawford: Then in 1972 you got your big breakthrough in terms of an increase?

Matheson: Yes. The pension fund went up to 7 1/2 percent, and all in all the rate increases went up around 26, 27 percent, if you add all these things in there, which was, you know, quite substantial and quite generous on their part. We ended over schedule relief up in Mayor Alioto's office that time.

##

Crawford: Jerry Spain said an interesting thing to me. He said that the San Francisco Symphony contract was now so developed that they don't really need a union behind them. Is that true of the opera, would you say?

Matheson: I think what Jerry was talking about was the nature of federal laws and that only the participants in that particular marketing unit being able to vote on it, that essentially only their own people have to be involved as far as their contract is concerned.

But there are other areas where they have to be members of the AF of M. For instance, anything that has to do with recordings is all covered by the AF of M. So in a sense, if another organization wanted to start their own union or become just their own mini-union, like in a symphony or opera orchestra, and they had performances that were to be televised or recorded, they'd have to be in both unions.

Crawford: I see. We didn't talk about Max Azinoff yet. We should mention him.



Matheson: Until Max died, Adler would have him in the all negotiations. It was Max who pushed for a cost of living clause in 1972, for instance.

I think so, I think so. I think he had an effect on Adler, but at the same time I think Adler was very close to him. And Max was sort of a lovable teddy bear-type guy. Not quick speaking. Never a cold, hard look. If something went negative he'd just say it. There was never anything ominous about the way he handled himself. He was a very personable guy. Well, I think the best term as far as what face he put forth was guileless. Like some people you inherently trust right away.

Crawford: Jerry Spain said that of Adler, that he was someone he trusted.

Matheson: I think that developed over the years, because they developed a relationship. I mean, Adler had ways of trying to do things around corners and you'd get caught off guard and be surprised by him from time to time. But I think Jerry worked closely enough with him and the two of them developed a regard for each other that they wanted to maintain that type of a relationship between the two of them.

Crawford: They worked at it, in other words.

Matheson: Yes. And they didn't want anything to get in the way of it. Even if Jerry had a bunch of negative stuff to throw at Adler, there was still this relationship underlying or underpinning the whole thing.

Crawford: Even in that 1980 situation, when by an oversight the season contract hadn't been signed, and the players demanded parking spaces hours before opening night curtain?

Matheson: Oh, yes. That was one of the least acrimonious things that we had. Jerry and I went up just a couple of hours beforehand with Adler and Pat Mitchell [executive director]--I don't know if Max was actually there or not. I don't think there was an oversight, ratification had not taken place.

Crawford: No, Max died in '74.

Matheson: And I think the president of the stagehands union was there.

Crawford: Eddie Powell.

Matheson: Yes. So there were at least five of us in the room, there might have been somebody else, but they were just sort of playing it out. It was just as conversational as we are now. It was

getting down to the wire, and Jerry and I were just hanging out through the day waiting for news from them and waiting for this meeting to start up--sort of a nerve-wracking type wait. At least I was getting nervous about it, and I think he smelled it, and he kept on saying sort of soothing things, trying to calm me down. Like, "We've been here before."

But when we got into the room, Pat Mitchell said that they thought that this was just some sort of a cheap way of getting a few more bucks out of them. And without getting upset about it we just said, "No, that's really not the case." Truthfully, we want a resolution of the parking difficulty. It had become a very difficult problem in that area of the city.

So they asked what we thought about how the vote would go. I said, "Well, it will be very close. If you don't have anything in there it will be a close vote negative, and if you do have something in there, a close vote positive." And sure enough it turned out to be that kind of a voting situation.

But if it had gone negative, I don't think Adler would have let it go any more than a half an hour and he would have come up with some sort of a resolution.

Crawford: Half an hour into the performance?

Matheson: Yes.

#### The McEwen Era: 1981-1988

Crawford: How about with McEwen? How did things change?

Matheson: Terry was a good talker, and meetings could easily turn into a situation where he would talk at length about a variety of things. It was sort of a hail-fellow-well-met kind of meeting he would have with you.

We had meetings with him, and he was always rather pleasant. I've heard of other meetings people had that were acrimonious. I don't know specifically what all the issues were, necessarily, but in our case, when we had orchestra committee meetings with him they were all quite affable.

Crawford: Did he allow the staff to do more of the actual negotiations?



Matheson: He did not negotiate himself. In the '84 contract it was Kip Cranna, Pat Mitchell and Bob Walker, and there was some fellow, I forget his name, an intern in arts management from UCLA, in 1987, who took part in it. But essentially it was Cranna, as far the people in power, that were on the job in the operative administration.

I'm sorry, I forgot Joel Patterson. In '84 he had a lot to do with financial details. He was a cracker-jack; he could nail things down like crazy as far as where money went and how it should be paid. There were a lot of very labyrinthine types of puzzles that we could run into. He was quite good at handling all that.

Crawford: So McEwen didn't have Adler's approach to contract negotiations?

Matheson: No, as far as the negotiations were concerned, he came in for the last. In '84 we had a ratification from the orchestra, and he gave sort of a party at the Fairmont with the committees. I guess it was on the largesse of the expense account that he had that party. [chuckles]

### Summing Up

Crawford: In retrospect, what do you think about the Adler years?

Matheson: Essentially he had, in the best sense of the word, a conservative regard for maintaining the company on a sound basis. He thought in terms of making it a solid part of the community. On a personal basis, I think he measured his status on that. I think that was quite a positive accomplishment.

It's an incredible kind of an operation when you have, off-and-on through the season, anything from just a skeleton crew to the whole place running around like ants in an anthill.

I think he enjoyed the involvement in the whole thing; it was essentially his life, and he was totally devoted to the whole enterprise. You can say as much as you want about employee groups trying to kick things along; it's necessary for them to do that, but at the same time you have to have somebody in charge of the operations who has some notion about how to bring it off. At heart, he had only the success of the company as his goal.

Transcriber: Pelly Fan  
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Kurt Herbert Adler and the San Francisco Opera

James Schwabacher

ARTIST; PRESIDENT, MEROLA OPERA PROGRAM;  
CO-FOUNDER, SPRING OPERA THEATER

An Interview Conducted by  
Caroline Crawford  
in 1986



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INTERVIEW HISTORY--James Schwabacher

James Schwabacher has been involved with San Francisco Opera since the 1940s. Scion of several old San Francisco families--the Fleishhackers, Dinkelspiels, and the Schwabachers--he is an unusual observer of the opera scene in that he has been a performing artist with the company (he appeared in fourteen roles between 1948 and 1952), an administrator, a teacher, and a member of various boards of directors. In 1948, Kurt Herbert Adler first engaged him to sing the role of one of the Masters in Die Meistersinger; since that time he has known Adler as coach, general director, and friend.

Although Schwabacher performed his last role with the San Francisco Opera in 1952, his "10-or" license plates were not retired, nor did his involvement with opera affairs diminish. President of Merola Opera Program since it began in 1957, he was one of the founders and vice-president of Spring Opera Theater and he sits on the parent company board as well as several other boards of musical organizations. His Schwabacher Recital Series at the Vorpall Gallery features young vocal talent.

A special interest was Spring Opera, and in this interview he recalls having been in the privileged position of working on casting and repertoire with Kurt Herbert Adler, who shared his belief that Spring Opera served a very special function as a training ground for young singers at an important time in their careers and as a showcase for the new and unusual.

Schwabacher knew Gaetano Merola well, and remembers in the interview the help and advice he offered to an aspiring tenor; he also remembers Robert Watt Miller, "a unique character," and his unswerving support of Adler at a difficult time in the 1950s; he is candid about some of the difficulties of working with the general director and he chronicles the development of the subsidiary companies. Summing up the Adler era he says that it was characterized by "imagination in every way."

The interview took place in the Schwabacher home in Pacific Heights; the transcripts were edited and added to by the narrator.

Caroline Crawford  
Interviewer/Editor

April 1991  
Regional Oral History Office  
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SPRING OPERA OF S.F. (FOUNDER) SCHWABACHER DEBUT RECITALS (FOUNDER)

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S.F. Conservatory of Music - former Board Chairman, present vice-chairman.



San Francisco Opera in the 1940s: Coaching with Kurt Herbert Adler

[Date of Interview: March 21, 1986]##

Crawford: Mr. Schwabacher, when did you meet Mr. Adler, and what were your early impressions?

Schwabacher: I met Adler when he came to San Francisco as chorus director, under Maestro Merola, and I don't remember our first meeting, but I do know he heard me sing at Stanford and it was because of him that I was engaged to sing one of the Masters in Die Meistersinger in 1948 with the parent company.

Maestro Merola was a more or less close friend of my Dad's--not a close friend, but they met from time to time to have lunch. Mr. Merola had not heard me, so it was really Adler who engaged me for Maestro.

During our early affiliation, we worked together, he coached me, and what was really interesting was that some days the coaching would really be superb, depending on his mood, and some days it wouldn't work too well because of what he was feeling that particular day. So consequently we didn't accomplish as much--it worked against the whole grain of the coaching.

However, he taught me some things that I have retained all through my musical life, and that I find especially helpful as a teacher, and I always include two or three very basic principles that Kurt taught me. I've always been very thankful for that.

So those are my first recollections of him. He came to hear me sing at Stanford--it was either Freischütz or Peter Grimes, which led to my engagement with the opera.

Crawford: You have performed more than a dozen roles with the company since 1948, so you know it very well. Would you give your



impressions of San Francisco Opera in terms of staging, orchestra, chorus, and so on.

Schwabacher: Well, one thing was a very personal recollection. The training I had had was minimal. I had sung with Jan Popper's company and we did about seventy-five performances of Così fan tutte, and I had sung leading roles in two productions at Stanford, but that was about all. There was no Merola Opera Program or anything.

So when I got thrown on the opera house stage, I had a small voice, and that was against me. Also, my greatest talent was standing still on the recital stage singing recitals or oratorios like the St. Matthew Passion, where you could express great emotions but not move around a lot; just intimate movements of the body.

If I had a stage director at San Francisco Opera who cared enough about young people I would be successful, but if I had a sort of cop who said: "You go here on this note and there on this phrase," I would be lost. I remember working with Carl Ebert, the great stage director and the man who started Glyndebourne; I worked with him in the Barber of Baghdad in L.A. and that was a joy. He wouldn't let you move unless there was a reason, unless the motivation was there. Under those conditions I guess I was smart enough to know what to do, and I came out okay.

Every time I had a stage director who would give me extra time, then I was successful. Especially a guy like Willy Wymetal, who was the son of another famous director. We always teased about him, saying that he was working by the book of his father, but I didn't care. He beat the heck out of me. But he would keep me hours overtime when I sang the leading role in The Magic Flute [Los Angeles, 1950]. It was so rewarding, and when I walked out on the stage that night, I just knew I was going to be good.

Crawford: How did performance preparation differ in those days from what it developed into later?

Schwabacher: Staging rehearsals are a little vague to me, in terms of how many we had. But I do remember that we had sixteen or seventeen vocal rehearsals--rehearsals of parts--(that's a little too many) of the four Jews in Salome or the Masters in Meistersinger. We had many many rehearsals so we were very well prepared. Staging rehearsals depended on the director.

Crawford: But you would say that the quality of production was high?

Schwabacher: Yes, because you think back about the great voices you remember--when you talk about singing with Flagstad or with Björling and people of that ilk, what do you say?

I remember singing the sailor's voice with Flagstad in Tristan; I just stood a few feet from her backstage waiting to sing the lines which open the opera. She would sort of get herself settled on the couch and smile and bow to me and I would bow to her, and the curtain went up and I sang.

Well, we're not talking about Mr. Adler, but I will tell you a story about Adler, going back to The Magic Flute, which is rather a negative story. Do you want negative things?

Crawford: Sure.

#### Working with Kurt Herbert Adler

Schwabacher: Okay. You know, Kurt always carried a chip on his shoulder one way or another. Certainly he is a man of genius and imagination, and as much as he needled me--no, he never made trouble for me, as much trouble as he gave me (he was one of my best friends that way)--because he did more for me than anybody else in terms of advancing me as a musical host on the radio, and as a singer when he found it appropriate.

I remember after Merola died, I hadn't sung, and Adler came up to me one day and said: "Look, I want you to get back into opera." I auditioned for him, the Astrologer in Coq d'Or, and he took me for the part. I had to sing a high C-sharp, and as we progressed, that high C-sharp began to get me down. I turned the part down, but he did engage me for it.

Crawford: So he promoted you.

Schwabacher: He promoted me, even after I was president of Merola, whatever it was, he still kept after me. Time after time--one time he wanted me to be the announcer for the broadcasts and he had me do a tape.

He said: "That's lousy, do it again!" I did, and he said: "That's okay, that's the way you should be." They turned me down at National Public Radio, but it was Adler's thought that I do that.

I remember he saw an ad that I had done a series of lecture recitals concerning the teaching of opera, and he sent me back the brochure and said: "That's what you should teach at Merola." Time and time again he did these things.

Anyhow, the negative things--he had this feeling that he always had to feel bigger than the next guy, unfortunately. And I can remember so well that as chorus director he was standing backstage before my entrance as Tamino in Magic Flute, my first big role, and I had been sick to my stomach that day before I came on the stage, my family was sure that was because I was nervous--but I had taken some kind of new vitamin pill and I am sure that affected that.

Anyway, I couldn't wait to get onstage. Mr. Adler, before I went onstage, said: "Your tights are baggy." Of all the put-downs! Despite this I still went onstage feeling like a million dollars and I had a big success in that role.

Crawford: But he noticed those things, those details.

Schwabacher: That's the other thing. One was sort of the put-down thing, and the other was that that was the way his mind worked. If somebody had the wrong color glove on or a step wasn't painted properly, he would make sure that was done--it worked both ways. But as I say, he gave me ulcers.

When you worked with him on repertoire for Spring Opera for instance--we were most involved with that together--we could sit up all night. I remember being with him and Otto Guth in New York together at one point casting opera and listening to auditions. At 11 o'clock at night we were in his suite at the hotel, probably at the Essex House, and I had a date at 11 o'clock, and he was incensed because opera was his whole life, so why shouldn't I be there until 3 o'clock discussing it, you know?

Crawford: But did he demand as much of himself?

Schwabacher: Oh, absolutely. It was a kind of love-hate relationship, but love would win out, and when you worked with him and got bogged down, he would think of an opera that would fit perfectly into the Spring Opera situation.

The most unexpected things he would do. That kind of imagination was so exciting. Working with the opera company in those days was special for me because, I think, the following: He respected me as a musician, even though I

didn't have the greatest voice in the world. But he knew where I fit in, knew my musical taste, and it even stretched at times to his asking questions about the fall opera season, even that.

So when you worked for a guy like that, you knew that he respected you musically, so you felt very confident working with him.

### Remembering Gaetano Merola

Crawford: If you could describe Mr. Merola's approach briefly--how did it differ from Mr. Adler's?

Schwabacher: Well, I didn't know Mr. Merola that well, but there is a Merola story that doesn't belong on Kurt's tape.

When I first sang for Merola, that was the year after Meistersinger, and I didn't sing very well. I came to this part in Bohème where the tenor sings: "Talor dal mio forziere" from high E-flat to A-flat, and Merola stopped me and said: "Jimmy, I think you better go home and study some more."

The following year, after hearing God knows how many singers (he had a great memory), he had me do that same excerpt for him, and that's when he engaged me for Tamino in Magic Flute.

I remember the story of someone who was standing next to a couple of chorus members who were not paying much attention, and they were laughing about this circular beat that Merola had. And so this other really savvy person said: "Listen, if you will really watch what that man is doing and feel what that man is doing you will see how successful he will be." So he had this sort of strange, sort of circular beat, but there was a way of following it, and he made music with it.

I remember he walked me onstage once in Chénier, and I've forgotten what the word was now--but there was the matter of how you pronounced a certain word and I remember him sauntering around onstage going over and over again discussing how this word should be pronounced.

I don't know how it affected the opera budget, but it sure took time at rehearsals to discuss how a single word should be pronounced.

Another time Merola was at my mother's house looking over a score, the Meistersinger score of Alfred Hertz, conductor of the San Francisco Symphony. Herz came here from the Met, where he had been chief conductor of the German wing, and there were red pencil marks, special emphasis marks all over that score, that the old Dr. Herz used to put in his scores. And so, just little things like that.

Also, when I sang that performance with Dr. Ebert in Los Angeles, Merola and Kurt came down to hear it. This was after I had done The Magic Flute, and he was very high on me. I guess the truth of the story was that he and Kurt were going to the races. But they did come to the performance, which was very touching.

Crawford: Do you think Merola would have developed the company in much the same way that Mr. Adler did had he lived?

Schwabacher: I suppose so. When the company was young, he would bring out some stars and those stars would sing two or three roles a season. We didn't have many big artists, but the ones we had were biggies.

Claudio Muzio would one season sing Cavalleria, Traviata, and once she did a Nedda, Pagliacci. Two or three roles in one season, it was sort of unbelievable. Lucrezia Bori would do the same thing and I think Lily Pons did the same thing.

So that was a whole different thing. We hadn't expanded very much then.

#### The Adler Era: Staging and Repertoire

Crawford: Mr. Adler is generally credited with having improved the quality of production in terms of staging, and in terms of repertoire.

Schwabacher: Certainly staging and certainly repertoire. Certainly that. Adler brought in some new stage directors. Ponnelle has been with the company a long time, when you think of it. He was attached to the company during World War II and then he was



called to the service and never quite finished Frau ohne Schatten.

Crawford: It was during the Algerian war, I think--1959.

Schwabacher: Oh, that was it. He never quite finished the sets for Frau ohne Schatten.

Crawford: Would that be one of the major areas in which the company improved?

Schwabacher: Yes. Staging would be one of them. It is awfully hard to compare the two men because I was in at the very end of Maestro's life. He died in '53 and I stopped singing in '52.

I didn't know much about what was going on around me, let's put it that way. When you are in a production you don't look around and say "well, this and that..." You just do your job and go home.

I'm not very good visually, so I can't tell you which sets were more gorgeous or more interesting under Kurt, but obviously people were thinking more of staging than they did with Merola, for sure. And don't forget that Merola had a resident stage director, which we don't really have.

Crawford: Armando Agnini?

Schwabacher: Agnini, right. And he directed most of the operas. He was "family". Plus the fact that Wymetal would come in and one or two other directors, but basically that was it.

I worked with the famous Dr. [Herbert] Graf once, in Fidelio. The operas I was in did not concern Agnini much, and the ones that were with Agnini were not much of a help to me, unfortunately.

Adler as Administrator: "A Finger in Every Pie"

Crawford: Let's move on to Mr. Adler, whom you know very well and are still close friends with. Describe him as an administrator.

Schwabacher: As an administrator, he had a knack for engaging a very strong staff around him. That's A number 1. People who were first class.



I don't know if he allowed them the latitude where they could blossom most completely, because he kept a finger in every pie. I'm sure everybody else has told you the same story. It was going on all over the house. But by the same token he had good people.

Crawford: What qualities was he looking for?

Schwabacher: Well, professionals, first of all. And strong minds, basically. That was the interesting thing, because if you came back at him in a way that made sense to him, he would think a second time. He wouldn't just say no because he was the czar of the opera company--which he certainly was.

But there were certain artists who talked back to him, I remember, and he liked the perky, spunky people. He enjoyed the fight. I think he always loved the union negotiations that way too, because they were tough, but he liked that.

#### The Adler Staff

Crawford: You mentioned Otto Guth--certainly a close advisor. Who else did he rely on?

Schwabacher: I think he relied a lot on his staff. People like Ruth Felt, who was with him so long. She handled union negotiations for him, as I remember. He had a great love for Richard Rodzinski and relied on him.

It's interesting. I think that there are some people of a certain amount of stature he relied on, but very often I think you should say, rather than "relied on", you should say, "Who are the young people he brought up and fathered?"

Like Philip Eisenberg--

Philip is a real character. You know Philip came to us as a very young person. He was in his teens--at least he says he was. and Philip would cause him a little bit of trouble from time to time, but it didn't bother Adler. He admired this huge talent and fostered it.

The same thing with Warren Jones, who meant a great deal to Adler. He was a fine pianist who did not know how to coach or know the operatic repertoire that well.

Whatever the climate was, it was wonderful for somebody like Warren, because he worked very hard and today he is one of the outstanding coaches in the country--in the world--and pianist.

And Rick Rodzinski grew under him. Some people didn't; some people just didn't fit at all, and there was always the joke about the secretaries who came and went.

Crawford: Yes, and public relations staff.

Schwabacher: But then there were people like Jane [Claudio] who came back year after year; she was a part of the family. He inspired a great amount of love. No doubt animosity too, but the love overrode that.

The thing about Kurt was the loyalty that he had in your defense. If the outsider was attacking you, Kurt would defend you, even though he might not agree with you.

There was a very, very long story...about a mother and a daughter, both very persistent, and I had made them angry because at an audition I had laughed and at another audition I had walked out of the room because I had to go to the bathroom, and the mother saw me do this and she wasn't even supposed to be in the hall.

That lady and her daughter sat outside Mr. Adler's office--in those days the office was in a place where he couldn't leave the office without passing that chair...

Crawford: Where was it?

Schwabacher: I've forgotten where it was now, but outside it there was a chair that held two people, and to get out of his office he had to pass that chair.

So he had to call them into his office, and I'm sure he made all kinds of excuses for me, because he didn't know what the heck was going on anyhow.

But he was very supportive in that kind of situation. He supported his staff. He would reserve the right to give them hell, but if anybody attacked them they were his people and he was devoted to them.

Crawford: I wanted to ask you about Howard Skinner.

Schwabacher: He was a wonderful guy. I really knew Howard much more in connection with the symphony than the opera. I think Kurt relied upon him to a certain extent.

Once in a while he would come in and discuss Spring Opera with us. He was still alive then, wasn't he?

Crawford: Yes, he died in 1971.

Schwabacher: Okay, then he was involved in that.

The early days with Howard were very important to me, but that was the symphony, and I don't have very strong recollections of Howard working at the opera. But I do know that Kurt was very fond of him. And in those days Howard held both jobs, at the symphony and the opera.

Crawford: The size of the staff in 1976 was thirty-one (staff and administration); today it is sixty-three. Does it produce better opera? Does it reflect that we have gone on into a new era?

Schwabacher: The same thing has happened to the symphony, exactly. We didn't know what a development department was; we didn't know what marketing was. It was all sort of thrown into P.R. and this kind of thing.

Crawford: Is it possible still to run an opera company in this small-staffed, personal way?

Schwabacher: I don't know. I wonder. Certainly with the big money involved, I can't see how. The whole picture is so big and so much planning has to be done. No, I don't think you can do it any other way.

It seems to me that both the opera company and the symphony could have one bad season and go broke, in a sense. This super staff makes super seasons, it seems to me.

Crawford: So the marketing staff is an aspect of the times?

Schwabacher: Definitely.

#### Remembering Robert Watt Miller

Crawford: What about Robert Watt Miller?

Schwabacher: A very, very strong man. I loved meeting him, because even though he never put me on his board, if we were at a social gathering with his peers, he would come and talk to me, because he loved opera and knew opera, and knew that I knew it, and so there was always a very nice relationship there. I can still see him walking on the stage with his hat--was it a Homburg he wore?

Of course the most wonderful story, which has probably been told to you before, was his support of Adler at the time Adler had a very, very shaky season or two.

I think there was a lawyer called Graham of Graham, James and Rolph, and I hope I'm not throwing people's names into the hat without being sure of who they were.

I know that Mrs. Thomas Carr Howe and several dissidents were putting down Adler and saying unpleasant things about him in public. And these rumors eventually reached Robert Watt Miller and Miller called a board meeting and he called Adler to the board meeting and he said: "There has been talk of the lack of success in the past seasons, and I want Mr. Adler to hear those of you who have been the dissidents in the matter. I would like you to be kind enough to tell Mr. Adler to his face the things that you don't like."

So the meeting went on, and complaints were aired, and then he excused Mr. Adler and continued the board meeting. And he said: "Now this is all out in the open, we will decide whether we want to retain Mr. Adler or not. And if it is not a unanimous opinion, then I think we should do something about it. I would like a unanimous vote, either to support him or let him go." And he got his unanimous support.

I think that was a superb move on Mr. Miller's part. He was a very, very strong man...you just don't find these people. He was a unique character.

I remember that when Adler was first appointed he was pro tem, right?

Crawford: Yes.

Schwabacher: The one thing that hurt Adler very much was when Mr. Miller stopped him from conducting. Adler would never admit that to me, but I know he talked to Otto Guth about it, because he was very hurt that Miller wanted him to stop conducting.

I don't know what Miller's reasons were--whether he felt Kurt's conducting wasn't so great or whether he thought wearing two hats was just too much for anybody to handle. But he did stop Kurt from conducting, and Kurt started conducting as soon as he [Miller] died, it seems to me.

But Kurt did conduct at Stern Grove [while Miller was alive]; it seems to me that was one thing he conducted all year--maybe one or two concerts out there, and that meant a lot to him, because he loved to conduct, naturally.

He was a performing musician, and it was a terrible frustration to him, and I can see him still at rehearsals, conducting the conductor in the pit! Any professional musician would feel that way.

That must have been really rough on Kurt, but I think Bob Miller made the right choice. He didn't do this right after Merola died, and when Merola was alive Kurt was conducting. I sang an Aida with him--I sang the awful part of the Messenger, which I hated.

Crawford: Mr. Adler did conduct off and on during Robert Watt Miller's presidency after Merola died, in 1960 and 1961. Then there was an eleven-year hiatus and he came back with Beverly Sills in La Traviata in 1973.

Schwabacher: That was after Bob Miller was gone.

Crawford: That's right.

#### The Merola Opera Program Develops

Crawford: Let us talk about the Merola Program. How has the Program grown and changed since 1957 when it was started?

Schwabacher: There is a change in the Merola Opera Program now and the kind of singer we have. I said once to Mr. Adler: "We don't have many good people this year," and he said, "Look, if we can find one outstanding singer per year, that's okay. Someone who is really going to develop and who has star quality--then we have done our job. Well, now I think we are proliferating in that respect.

Crawford: Name some of those you consider to be in that category.



Schwabacher: Well, talking about proliferation, one year we had Michael Meyers, Quade Winter, and a third tenor, equally good.

And then the little birds we've had: Ruth Ann Swenson and Cheryl Parrish, all on our property at the same time. That's really un embarras de richesses. That's just unbelievable. So we have had years where we've had the proliferation of artists of star quality.

Then hopefully there is one voice every year that just overcomes you that has a certain style and a certain sound that remains in your ears.

Should we mention names of people with great potential who haven't quite made it?

There was a fellow called Bill Harness, William Harness, who was twenty-nine years old when he came to us. He worked for the National Cash Register Company, he had a family and a number of kids and a wife who wasn't too interested in a career for him, and he was fantastic. He came and sang Bohème at Stern Grove and knocked the socks off us. Probably never had seen an opera before. He was a slow learner. Didn't have any languages. But he was the only person in my memory for whom we raised money. Arthur Rock hosted a small cocktail party, and a number of us contributed to this fund for Bill Harness so he could continue his studies and so forth.

I remember the San Francisco Opera board president calling National Cash for whom Bill worked--I think he was a repairman or serviceman. He said to National Cash, "Look, there is a great talent here, can you give him some time off to accept engagements and study?" and National Cash said no.

But in any case, Bill, although he had no background, made New York City Opera, and debuted in the role in which he was always great--Tonio--who has the nine high Cs in the Donizetti opera Daughter of the Regiment.

When he came back here he sang the St. Matthew Passion in our first great production with Spring Opera, which was just an unbelievable performance--we made a drama out of it; and he had the tenor solo to sing.

Bach is a very difficult composer, and I remember in the second performance he made a rather big mistake--he got lost, and when you do that with Bach it's pretty hard to get back



on track. And I remember after the show he said to me in all honesty, "I didn't know you were supposed to look over your score before a second performance if you did the first performance okay." I didn't mean to put Bill down, but that is the kind of mentality you're working with.

What I'm saying is that the Lord our God puts gorgeous sounds and voices into people who don't have enough talent-- have the languages, have the ability onstage, have the ability to come into a lousy motel at three in the morning and sing at a rehearsal the next morning at ten o'clock--they have to be tough.

There are so many things that go into making a complete artist. Some of this talent you have to be born with. You can't learn it all without this head start.

We had another boy, Roger Bryant, who I think has one of the most beautiful tenor voices I've ever heard. And he, differentiated from Bill, did not have the "family" problems. He just had not the interest. He could sing Bohème for you, and the second year we did the St. Matthew Passion, he did the arias. So here you had Puccini on one side and Bach on the other, and the style was perfect in both. Roger did not have the interest, and he's never made a career. But the voice was there and the musicality. There again God placed this sound, and also this musical intellect, into someone who for some reason didn't have the push to do it.

Crawford: Was he here as a very young person?

Schwabacher: Yes! I spoke to him after the Merola Program, or maybe it was Spring Opera and asked him: "What are you going to do next? What are you going to do next?" I tried to push him on a little bit.

This could go on and on. There was a girl named Vicky something or other, from Salt Lake. I had met her several years before at the airport where we had started talking about the Merola Program and she finally made the Merola Program. It was a spinto voice, and in anybody so young, this dramatic sound in the voice is very unusual, and it was quite a wonderful sound.

She went through the Program--I think it was the year we [San Francisco Opera] celebrated our fiftieth anniversary at Stern Grove. (I don't know if you remember that, but we had a big performance at Stern Grove and I sang Orlofsky. That was the last time I was on the stage for San Francisco so it

must have been 1972. That was the year my mom died, and she was out in the audience at the time--the last time she went out. That was just a few months before Melchior died and it was a great big celebration.

Onstage we had artists from the San Francisco Opera, and what we did was a shortened version of Fledermaus, and then the second act of Fledermaus became a ballroom scene, and we had people like Florence Quartararo, Claramae Turner (who sang the song written for her: "I lost my heart in San Francisco"), Licia Albanese, Jagel, Dorothy (Warenskjold) came from Los Angeles, Cesare Curzi came from Germany, and then we had the first soprano who sang with San Francisco Opera--Bianca Saroya--there with her husband Dimitri Onofrie. I had to introduce them all, as Prince Orlofsky.

The point of this whole story is that I think we used for chorus the singers from Merola that year. And Vicky was one of those in the chorus. She had her fiancé with her. Now she went through the program and got nothing out of it, as far as I could tell. She sounded worse after the program than when she came in. That may have been our fault or hers, I don't know what.

Anyhow, at the end of the program I was backstage and I spoke to her and her fiancé, who was a very attractive young man, and I said to him: "I hope that your wife will continue with her voice studies, because it is really an exceptional talent."

He said: "We will do what we think is the right thing to do...what best suits us." And I said to myself: "You dumb Schwabacher! It is none of your business. She has to be the one to have the drive." So in this case I said: "Thanks a lot," and walked away. They live in San Jose now, and from time to time she pops into view, but not much.

Crawford: You are talking about drive?

#### The Master Class: Working with Young Singers

Schwabacher: Right. And I think about Adler with respect to some of these singers. How he would work with them in class. He was very, very tough on them. He would sometimes stop them after the second or third note. He would be teased about the way he worked with singers and the way Schwarzkopf worked with

singers. She was our guest artist with the Merola Program for several years, and Schwarzkopf would stop singers so often after two or three notes and build an aria note by note.

Kurt had a tendency to do that too, but he had one thing I thought was very good. First of all, he would let the singer sing halfway through an aria, maybe a whole aria, but then he would pick it to pieces, and if he had time he would make them put the aria back together again.

He had a lot to contribute to young singers. Sometimes he would go off and tell us stories about Reinhardt and Toscanini, but they were fascinating stories for the kids if they had any sense of history. Most of them don't have that, unfortunately...they don't have the background.

Still he brings to master classes that wealth of experience and some very basic ideas about what an opera singer should be and should do, and also musical ideas that are very important.

The first thing he asks the singer is, "what is this aria about? Who sings it? How old is that person? In what situation are we now? How is your character relating to the orchestra and what instruments are playing in the orchestra while you are singing this part--is it an oboe?"

You must know that...what instrumentation is under the line you are singing, so you can change your voice, or color or modulate your voice to match what is going on in the orchestra or to contrast with what is going on in the orchestra.

He has so much to say about that kind of thing, because he is a conductor, he is a coach, he knows voices, and sometimes he will talk about the little things that change the quality of the whole voice, because of the note that approaches the top note, for example. He will ask, "Why not change the color of that note, sing that lighter?"--all kinds of things. And these are the kind of things that have stayed with me and have helped me as a teacher.

Crawford: By way of background, the Merola Opera Program is ten weeks of very hard work, covering all aspects of opera production.

Schwabacher: Right, and we must also say that Adler "birthed" Western Opera Theater, Brown Bag Opera, and then of course Spring Opera.

Spring Opera Theater and the "Umbrella Group" of Companies

Crawford: Let's move on to Spring Opera Theater and talk about its creation.

Schwabacher: I was a sort of messenger boy in that operation. After this rich gentleman [Campbell McGregor] finally stopped covering deficits for Cosmopolitan Opera, the company folded.

Cosmopolitan Opera was interesting only because it brought stars out here; even some who had not sung very much with San Francisco Opera like [Zinka] Milanov. But [Jussi] Björling came back to sing with Cosmopolitan Opera.

Florence Quartararo, towards the end of her short but glamorous career, sang with Björling in a Faust performance. Richard Tucker sang, and these were people, except Björling, who had not sung a lot out here, but the rest of the performance was pretty tacky, and what was so expensive about that whole operation was that they had to create their own sets, their own chorus, their own orchestra, and engage their own impresario, and so from the beginning it was just a financial mistake. But it filled houses, and it filled a certain need for an opera public.

Then McGregor stopped picking up the tab--every year there was a forty or fifty thousand-dollar deficit, which in those days was huge. I've forgotten the date when Spring Opera started...

Crawford: 1961.

Schwabacher: Okay. So in 1960 a \$45,000 deficit was a pretty fat deficit. Anyhow, a public meeting was held after Campbell pulled out, then Mary Louis Adams and Mrs. Leon Cuenin called a public meeting about the future of Cosmopolitan Opera, and some of my Merola Board members went to the meeting--I couldn't go.

William Kent III was certainly there, George Hale was there, Hart Smith was there, and some of my younger friends were there and they came to me and said: "Look, these ladies want to do something about continuing the opera."

My idea was that--since over the years we had always talked about a spring season of young American singers for San Francisco Opera--I should talk to Kurt Adler. I thought Adler would be interested in this kind of thing, so I was sort of a messenger boy, because I was on both sides.



I did finally go to a meeting, and I said to Adler: "Here is this new group that wants to present spring opera, why don't we do something about it?"

He then picked up the ball, and then as I remember, Bill Kent and I went to see Robert Watt Miller about it, and I said: "If we raise thirty-five thousand dollars, something ridiculous like that, would you put on a season of operas for us at the opera house? And Bob Miller, who noticed this very small ant crawling on the floor, which was us, and felt that it would be unfair to put his great big foot on us and crush this poor little ant, said: "Yes."

So that's how Spring Opera Theater was born. I was a sort of middleman, bringing the remnants of the Cosmopolitan group together with Kurt and then Bob Miller.

And talking about singers growing on vines in the right year and having a good vintage! Remember that most of our artists we brought out from the East; we didn't have them here then. Now you can do a season with resident artists, which is wonderful.

Crawford: That's because there is so much more to support them?

Schwabacher: Yes, because Adler created all of these wonderful auxiliary organizations, but they were never fed directly over into the other (Adler's style was by divisiveness, by fragmentation).

Now we have a Merola Program that feeds directly into Western Opera Theater which tours for six months. Then from Western Opera Theater they choose Adler fellows, five to ten singers who join a residency program for one or two years. So the singers are here--they are available--and they are all very good people.

All of these things had been created by Adler, but the overall organization wasn't there. Western Opera had its own manager, who would go off and do auditions completely separate from the Merola Program. Now when we hold auditions, we hold auditions for the whole shmear together.

Crawford: When did you begin doing that?

Schwabacher: When Terry McEwen came in 1981. When the San Francisco Opera Center was formed, the umbrella group comprising Merola, Western Opera Theater, even the Schwabacher recitals, the Adler Fellows with the residency program, Brown Bag Opera, what have you. There is something else called the Center

Singers who go out and do things like Fledermaus for a few weeks at a time. Now they send artists out on the Viking Line for a three-week cruise, and we keep adding to this kind of thing.

Crawford: So young singers are really sustained by the company?

Schwabacher: Absolutely. And this wasn't true in Adler's days. So back to Spring Opera--we opened with Romeo and Juliette in the opera house with a gorgeous tenor from Canada called Richard Verreau, an adorable Juliette who was a very good friend of mine, Lee Venora, Richard Fredricks was the Mercutio, John Macurdy, a former Merola singer, and Donald Drain. Janis Martin, who has subsequently had a great career, sang Gertrude, and the conductor was Joseph Rosenstock, a big shot in the East, conducting at City Opera, as I remember.

That was the year that George Shirley won the Met auditions and sang Tamino in Magic Flute and also in Bohème with Lee Venora. And then Mary Gray, who I believe came out of the opera chorus was in Martha with Margot Blum, who has now gone on to do other things.

In any case, that first season we did Bohème, Romeo, Martha, Traviata, Magic Flute (also interesting because we had a young director/designer named Vincent Porcaro) who now lives in New York and runs a bookstore for Columbia University.

Adler was quite upset with the sets, because they were nothing like you would see in Vienna. Mozart was his god, you know, and he thought for a while that the sets desecrated the memory of Mozart. But it turned out to be very successful.

And of course at the top of the pile that year was the Carmen with Marilyn Horne. She had first been here with the company in Wozzeck, singing Marie. And James King, who had come from the cornfields some place--before he went to Europe he sang Don José, and it was unbelievable. It was even then a very fine voice, but it was very, very green, and not quite completely formed. But a marvelous sound.

Crawford: Was that first season well attended?

Schwabacher: We did very well. There were six operas that year, and we did very, very well.



Successful seasons continued, but then for some reason the box office began dropping, and at that time we made a very important move, I think.

I felt that the opera house was too big for young voices, so (with the help of Prentis Hale, president of the San Francisco Opera board) we moved to the Curran Theatre and there I think Spring Opera Theater--emphasizing theater--had its nascence, had its birthing.

Great productions most memorable were Viva la Mamma of Donizetti (it ran at least three seasons), Offenbach's La Périochole, which had two performances: One with Neil Rosenshein and Maria Ewing--the two most gorgeous kids I've ever heard in opera. Now Maria is singing Carmen at the Met, married to Peter Hall, and Neil is coming out to sing here next season.

The next time we did it Pam South sang with David Eisler, and that was wonderful also.

We are talking about dramas and interesting works. As far as drama goes, the two performances of the St. Matthew Passion directed by Gerald Freedman were outstanding.

Then we had unbelievable performances of Britten's Death in Venice, and that was one of the most beautiful sets we've ever had. This kind of thing made opera history.

We also did other contemporary works--a work by John Eaton, whose Tempest was done this summer in Santa Fe. We tried to include one contemporary work each season, and that season became very popular. We lost money from time to time, and San Francisco Opera would pick up the tab, as I remember.

But these young voices bloomed in the Curran Theatre--it was just the right size.

Crawford: Wasn't there top quality direction and conducting too?

Schwabacher: Yes. Dennis Russell Davies, who has just been in Stuttgart and now heads the Cabrillo Festival, started with Spring Opera. Evan Whallon, Henry Lewis, Andrew Meltzer started with Spring Opera; Joseph de Rugeris, who is still around the company, started with Spring Opera. So Adler brought in young conductors who have made their mark.

Crawford: Would there be room for Spring Opera now?

Schwabacher: Yes, with the same size theater and the proper financial support. We now do something called the Spring Showcase--we're doing two operas this year--I would hope we could do that again. Things became terribly expensive; the Curran Theatre was too expensive, because there weren't enough seats. It was one of those problems--strictly monetary problems. But artistically, it was so good.

And then we made a great mistake during Adler's last seasons. We did a season at the Palace of Fine Arts of all American works. It wasn't that the operas were bad, just that it isn't a good place to give opera. And then we went back to the Curran, and that was the year that we didn't plan well. We didn't plan ahead of time and we didn't get the kind of casts we should have had or the direction we should have had. Even though there were interesting things in the repertoire, we lost our touch somehow. So that was a mistake.

Crawford: Do you think Bay Area audiences grew in terms of accepting contemporary works?

Schwabacher: I don't know if they grew or not. It is very hard to say. I think in general because of tv and stereo and the proliferation of recordings there seems to be a bigger audience. I remember Karl Kritz, who was the assistant to Maestro Merola years ago, used to get very incensed that thirty-four hundred people would fill the opera house for an opera and yet forty-five thousand people would go to the 49ers. Well--they are different ball games, is the answer. So opera has a limited audience, a good audience.

Certainly there has been a proliferation of opera companies in this country that is unbelievable. Really, I think that in the last fifteen years more opera companies have been formed than symphonies. Some symphonies fail where opera companies seem to keep growing. I don't know if it's television or not, but it's certainly happened. There are companies you didn't hear about twenty years ago--one in Tulsa, for example, and even Houston wasn't anything very big twenty years ago, yet they did have some opera.

Just think about the Bay Area and the number of small companies we have here, that all seem to survive one way or another. You have West Bay, Scholar Opera, the opera in Marin County, something in Berkeley. And then the small things like Donald Pippin, which has been very successful--the Pocket Opera.

It all seems to attract people, despite the fact that we are all fighting viciously for the entertainment dollar. And we always complain about it: How far can we stretch it?

Crawford: How far can we stretch it?

Schwabacher: We are stretching it like mad. Ticket prices are going up, you have to pay a certain amount of money to even buy a ticket. Along with the ticket goes a certain guarantee. So it's dangerous.

### The Adler Regime and Boards of Directors

Crawford: Focusing on Mr. Adler now, how did he work with the various boards?

Schwabacher: He hated committees. With the Merola Board, he worked through me, and I became the hopefully politic assistant czar. Vis-à-vis Spring Opera, he worked with me on repertoire and some casting, and with the president of the board of Spring when he had to.

Crawford: How have things changed since he left between the boards and the administration?

Schwabacher: I am shocked at how little the officers of San Francisco Opera know about how the general director and his staff operate and how little they know about artistic matters the general director and staff deal with. Despite the fact that the general director is engaged by the San Francisco Opera board.

Crawford: How about Adler's retiring? What brought it about?

Schwabacher: Needling from the press about finding an assistant who could take over. It wasn't that the press wanted him to resign. It was only that he should find an assistant who might succeed him.

John Ludwig might have been an answer, but he didn't work out. Adler was just never one who could find (or could work with) that kind of talent. He may have been needled by the executive committee of the board along the same lines.

Summing up the Adler Era: Imagination in Every Way

Crawford: Summing up, if you had to describe his genius, how would you describe it?

Schwabacher: It was something like my father, who could have a financial report on his business in his desk drawer, and he could smell the figures before he looked at them. Adler had that sense, too. Just by the smell of things, he knew which way to go.

Okay. First of all, he was a fine musician, and he had an interest in contemporary works as well as standard repertoire. He knew how to mix repertoire in such a way to attract an audience; he had imagination, let's put it that way.

A tremendously imaginative man. Despite the fact of his kapellmeister upbringing in Vienna, there was the imagination...well, that's one of the greatest compliments to give to anybody. Imagination in every way: in working with his staff, in choosing operas, in choosing singers, what more can I say? I guess that one word best describes him.

[End of Interview]



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Berkeley, California

Kurt Herbert Adler and the San Francisco Opera

Alfred Fromm

FRIEND AND ADVISOR

An Interview Conducted by  
Caroline Crawford  
in 1987





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INTERVIEW HISTORY--Alfred Fromm

Alfred Fromm emigrated to the United States from Germany in 1936 to represent his family's wine interests in this country. He obtained the exclusive representation of The Christian Brother's Winery in 1937, and in 1941 moved to California from New York, where in 1964 he founded Fromm and Sichel, Inc.

Early in the 1940s Mr. Fromm met Kurt Herbert Adler, and the two have been friends ever since. It was a close friendship, one in which Adler sought and valued Fromm's advice about business and fund-raising.

Despite different backgrounds, the two had like perfectionist styles and high aspirations. "I started to serve an apprenticeship when I was fifteen, while Kurt had the whole gymnasium-university training . . . our careers were entirely different, but I think our goals and our attitudes were quite similar," he says.

In 1973, Adler invited Fromm to join the San Francisco Opera Association board of directors to formalize his involvement with the opera company, which extended to opening his home to artists and staff during the opera season. He joined the board and is still active.

In this interview, Fromm talks about the democratization of operagoing and opera giving, future prospects for arts patronage in a time of dwindling personal fortunes, and the very personal friendship he enjoyed for forty-seven years with Kurt Herbert Adler.

The interview took place in Mr. Fromm's Montgomery Street offices, and he returned the transcripts of the tape with minor editing.

Caroline Crawford  
Interviewer/Editor

October 1987  
Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library  
University of California, Berkeley



A Longstanding Friendship: The Fromms and the Adlers  
[Date of Interview: October 29, 1987]##

Crawford: Mr. Fromm, you are not a newcomer to oral history.

Fromm: Well, I am no expert, but I have done it before.

Crawford: I enjoyed reading your transcripts.

We are going to focus in this interview on your friendship with Kurt Herbert Adler and your involvement in the arts in the Bay Area. So let us begin with your talking about how you came to meet Mr. Adler and his family.

Fromm: We lived in New York when we first came in 1936 from Germany. I was in the wine business all my life and I wasn't the first generation: our family in Germany were vintners for a few hundred years.

When I, with my associates, developed a business in the United States for California wines, it was necessary for me to go to California, as our firm had taken the representation of the Christian Brothers in Napa, which is a religious order of the Catholic Church.

The Christian Brothers at that time didn't know very much about wine, and so I moved in 1941, with my wife and our son, to San Francisco to counsel and to help.

Some friends of ours knew Kurt Adler from Vienna, and they introduced him to us. Mrs. Adler at that time was pregnant with Ronnie. As we both had started our profession to build a life in the United States we became good friends. They came to our house, and we came to theirs, we knew their children, and it was really a personal friendship. We exchanged our experiences because we were both newcomers. That's the way it started, and has remained so, this friendship. It's now forty-six years that we have known each other.



Crawford: What do you remember of Mr. Adler when you first knew him, in the 1940s?

Fromm: Well, I could see immediately that Kurt was a very active, ambitious person, a real doer. He was first chorus master at the opera, under Mr. Merola.

Mr. Merola, a very intelligent man, soon found out that Kurt Adler was a very unusual person. A man who worked immensely hard, who needed very little sleep, who had a lot of good ideas, and quickly, in a very short while, Kurt became Maestro's assistant.

When Merola died, Kurt was appointed the director of the San Francisco Opera.

During his long tenure he had done a fabulous job. It is not easy to be the director of a first-rate opera company, because you are dealing with a lot of egos and some I would consider kind of nuts.

Crawford: You are thinking of artists now?

Fromm: Yes. And I remember that once we were at the opera backstage when they gave Boris Godunov, and I saw the people running around because the star said that he wouldn't sing for whatever reason.

Kurt came down and talked to him, and ten minutes later the opera opened and it was a fabulous performance. But then I said to Kurt, "Kurt, believe me, I'd rather be in the wine business than in your crazy one."

Crawford: And what did he say?

Fromm: He laughed. He said, "I wouldn't mind being in the wine business, but I know nothing about it."

#### Kurt Adler as Impresario

Crawford: Was there anything that worried Mr. Adler about the business?

Fromm: Well, there were always serious negotiations with the unions, and the need of cutting expenses to a reasonable level. The public in San Francisco is quite spoiled. They want a first-class performance; they want some famous stars singing.

Of course all this unfortunately costs lots of money, and Kurt was fabulous in all these matters; he was a first-rate money-raiser, because he knew how to talk to the right people. He had this great gift of communication, regardless of whether the people were large or small. It is a gift that very few people have. He could be charming or tough; whatever was called for.

He was a tough taskmaster too, but I think he was the toughest with himself.

Crawford: Did he like fund-raising?

Fromm: Well, I don't think it was a matter of liking, but a matter of necessity. During that time, the opera was smaller, and there was a lot less money than there is today.

I remember when the Adlers were at our house for a dinner party. Tom Clausen, a friend of ours who was at that time president of the Bank of America, and is presently its president, was one of our guests. Kurt talked with him, and he did it with such enthusiasm that the Bank of America sponsored one of the performances of the opera. That was a personal experience that happened in our home.

Crawford: The story illustrates that he was always working.

Fromm: Yes, he did. During the years we knew each other we always gave after the opening of the opera a party at our house. This was before the Fol de Rol existed, which is a money-raising affair. Kurt gave us a list of all the stars and they came at twelve or one o'clock, when we could feed the artists with a good dinner because they mostly eat very little before they sing.

There was plenty of wine and champagne, and the conductors and singers came--all the top people--and it generally went on until three or four o'clock in the morning when I said to our guests, "There is still plenty to eat and plenty of wine, but I'm going to bed because I'm a working man!" [laughs]

I think we had almost every one of the illustrious opera stars in our house through the first fifteen or twenty years that we knew each other.

Crawford: And you knew the children then. Kristin and Ronald.

Fromm: Yes. It might interest you that before Kurt and Nancy were engaged they came to our country house in Kentfield. We have a

pool there and it was summer, and he said to my wife, "This is a very important day, because Nancy will tell me within the next ten minutes if she will marry me or not." And he said to my wife: "What do you think?"

Hanna said, "Well, if I had a daughter I would think twice too, because there is a big difference in your ages." We knew each other so well, that it was an honest answer. Kurt said to Hanna, "Are you for me or are you against me?" She said to him, "You wanted an honest answer." Anyway, they did get engaged in our summer house in Kentfield. It was a good marriage because Nancy is a very intelligent, spunky, and pretty woman with a great love of the opera.

Crawford: You've shared some important moments, then.

Fromm: Well, yes. We are old, old friends.

But what he did for the opera was unprecedented, and I think there was never anyone else who could do that with limited funds. He was a master in spending the money where it had to be spent, and not spending where it could be saved.

#### Opera in San Francisco: Fund-Raising

Crawford: Do you think it is extraordinary that a city the size of San Francisco supports such an opera house of world-class stature?

Fromm: It is, definitely.

I'm a director of the opera for a very long time; I think about fifteen years.

Crawford: According to my list of the boards of directors, it is since 1973.

Fromm: Maestro Merola and Adler have done so much to make the opera a glamorous undertaking that it has its local roots. The difficulty I believe is that when the old families who have given so much money to the opera in previous years are not alive any more, the children inherit and have to pay heavy taxes and it will be much more difficult to get these large amounts donated.

So it is necessary for the opera to be on a broader basis. This was for a long time a very social affair, but will become less and less so as time goes on.

Crawford: Is there a different kind of distribution of wealth today?

Fromm: Well, it's not the same kind of old wealth, where taxes were almost nonexistent or very low. When people die with a very high inheritance tax and large fortunes get split up, it means that the children and grandchildren don't have the large funds available that have been in the past the main part of the opera's income.

Crawford: What about corporate giving?

Fromm: Corporate giving is still not at the level it should be. Corporations are generally not generous; of course they always have the excuse that they are spending the money of the stockholders, which is true, but on the other hand, San Francisco is not a manufacturing town--it is a headquarters town, and in order to be a headquarters town it is necessary to have cultural advantages that do not exist somewhere else.

For example, let's take Detroit, which is a larger city. It has three or four hundred thousand people more than San Francisco but it doesn't have an opera.

A cultural enterprise can only be successful, Miss Caroline, if it is broad-based and the opera in San Francisco is a San Francisco institution.

Crawford: So you expect that the population here will continue to support the opera and the other arts?

Fromm: Yes, but in the long run it will perhaps be a different sort of people and not anymore such large gifts. There are such wonderful people here, like Louise Davies, but one day Mrs. Davies will not be here, and I don't know if Mrs. Davies's children will be willing to spend that kind of money. Those are all in the future, but they have to be considered today.

In addition to that, I feel that the opera has to spread out and not just be a San Francisco institution but a regional institution for Northern California.

Crawford: When do you attend performances?

- Fromm: We have box seats at the opera. First we went on Tuesday nights, but that was such a bad night for me, so now we go on Fridays.
- Crawford: Is that a different audience?
- Fromm: Yes. Much more democratic. .
- Crawford: In 1978, patrons with preferred seating had to begin paying a surcharge for their tickets. Some called it "blood money," and it did represent a change in policy.
- Fromm: Yes, there was a resistance. When you ask people to pay, not everybody will come forward. But it was absolutely necessary to do this, because a very substantial sum comes in this way.

On the other hand, if you can presently afford to pay \$62.50 for a ticket for each performance, then you can afford this surcharge.

#### Serving on the Opera Board of Directors

- Crawford: Let's go now to the board, because you have been a longtime member of the San Francisco Opera Association board and have bridged two administrations; that of Mr. Adler and also Mr. McEwen. How did you come to join the board?
- Fromm: Well, Kurt and I, since I am a businessman, often talked about the business aspects of the opera, with which Kurt was very familiar. One day he said, "Alfred, why don't you join the board?" I said, "I can't contribute anything to the artistic endeavor of the opera, but maybe I can assist you in financial and administrative matters. If I can help, I will be happy to do it." And that is the way I joined.
- Crawford: Could you compare the boards on which you have served? I know you have been on the Conservatory of Music board and others for a long time.
- Fromm: Well, when I joined the San Francisco Conservatory of Music board, it was an awful mess. The Conservatory was in really bad shape as an institution and in its financial setup.

As you know, Miss Caroline, nothing can be done without money. If you run an institution like that, it cannot be self-supporting.



Crawford: It cannot be.

Fromm: No, it just can't be. But a few of us at the conservatory could see that something would have to happen or it would disappear completely. When Milton Salkind came in, he took hold of it--he is a friend of ours too for many years--and he has done a wonderful job of making the conservatory an outstanding institution. It is one of the best in the country, and very many of the graduates have made fine careers.

The fact that we have the conservatory here and the opera, they really complement each other. That is what got me involved here. I figured that between the conservatory and the opera some good could be done.

As you know, the opera had been for many years a social affair, and that did not really appeal to me, because I felt that you need to involve many people, and I discussed this often with Kurt. He understood it well; Kurt is a very intelligent man, and he knew the way to get the cooperation of the so-called social strata of the opera.

Crawford: Tell me, what was Mr. Adler's rapport with the board?

Fromm: It was excellent. He really knew how to talk to people. You know, if you can run an opera house and deal with all the stars and unions, you can deal with almost anyone.

Crawford: What about Robert Watt Miller? You weren't on the board when he was president, but you must have known him.

Fromm: Yes. He was a great friend of the opera, and he did a great deal. But his time has passed. Today, the opera has to be a more democratic institution that needs a broader basis.

Crawford: Did the board ever resist Mr. Adler's wishes--his desire for new productions, for example?

Fromm: Not that I know of. No, I think he had the full cooperation of the board. When I joined the board, Walter Baird was president.

Crawford: What was his relationship to Mr. Adler like?

Fromm: Very good. Wally Baird is still on the board; I know him for a long time. He was with Price Waterhouse, the large accounting firm, and I think he was very helpful to Kurt. In fact, it was one of the gifts Kurt had, that people would extend themselves to help him accomplish something that he felt was necessary.



It is a very well known fact, Miss Caroline, that most of the work is not done by fifty people on the board, but by a few.

Crawford: How has the board changed?

Fromm: Well, the entire board management has changed. The president and the other officers are mostly business people, practical people, and I think this change is something that was absolutely necessary. People who see that the funds come in and many who give large amounts themselves. It's a different board today; much more democratic and much more effective.

Crawford: This relates to what you were talking about earlier, the need to become more broad-based.

Fromm: Yes.

Crawford: What was your role on the board, as you saw it?

Fromm: I didn't have a role of any importance on the board. I think I could do more by talking directly to Kurt, because if you have forty or fifty people there, it isn't conducive to do much.

I have for many years helped the opera financially to the best of our ability. Whenever there was anything that needed to be done, my wife and I were there to assist, like inviting certain artists, which I understood was part of Kurt's public relations.

Some of the stars came to our house for dinner, and we became with some of them quite friendly.

They were sometimes narrow, but with fabulous voices. And there were also some fabulous voices who were broad-gauged. I hope you don't mind that I'm so outspoken!

Crawford: Not at all. That makes it more lively and a whole story.

#### Dealing with the Unions

Crawford: You mentioned in your own interview that you suggested to Mr. Adler that he get the unions to help sponsor lower-priced tickets. Which unions came forward?

Fromm: Very little has been done in this area. But I always said to Kurt, "We have got to get the union people interested because that makes it easier to deal with them, too." This was one of the great jobs Kurt did, to be able to deal with the unions.

But there are today a lot of union people who make very good money and could become gradually interested. I am not thinking of a union in a steel mill; it's people who made already years ago good money and who want their children to be culturally better educated. That's one thing.

The other thing is to go into the suburbs, and I mentioned this often to Kurt. The opera needs directors from San Jose; they need directors from Oakland, from the outlying districts of the Bay Area, because San Francisco as a headquarters city has cultural facilities, and the population of San Francisco is really too small to raise all the money that is needed. We should expand into the very wealthy outreach territories that we have around San Francisco, and Kurt understood this very well.

Crawford: Was this implemented?

Fromm: Only to some extent. I think it will be implemented now with the people who are running the opera, the businessmen.

Crawford: Do you think the board is strong now, in the eighties?

Fromm: Yes. Particularly the officers of the board are successful, active businessmen. And you know, if you are successful in your business, you learn how to run things and the opera is a business too, a cultural one.

Crawford: Is Mr. McEwen as much of a presence before the board as Mr. Adler was?

Fromm: Yes, but in an entirely different way. Kurt was an all-around man. He could do almost anything, and McEwen is probably not that versatile. As I told you before I cannot criticize or account for the musical level because I'm not educated for that and I hate to talk about things I don't know much about.

#### Donors for the Future: "A Great Reservoir"

Crawford: Let me ask you then about something you said in an earlier interview. You said that in earlier years there were few Jewish members on the boards of directors. Are there more now?

Fromm: Yes there are. You know being Jewish is not always an easy life, but that has changed greatly in this country. I can talk about this because I came from Germany and I lived through the Nazi hell. We escaped in time, otherwise we wouldn't be alive.

I think today you have in general in the country less prejudice among the various religions and races, because in the end you know there are good people in every religion as well as bad ones. We have a great number of Japanese and Chinese citizens, some of them extremely wealthy, and also from the Asian countries.

Think also of the many people of Mexican origin, who are becoming integrated in the American way of life.

There is a great reservoir for the future, but we must start now to get them interested. They are hard-working and their children will look for the finer things in life.

If you look back to the great disagreements between Catholics and Protestants, they were without good reason. If one wants to go to one church and someone else to another, well, let them do it. After all, we all live together in one place, and we have to get along together.

Crawford: We have talked about the donor community a little and it seems to me that individual sponsorships of opera productions in the last few years have been increasing. I'm talking about contributions in the order of a quarter of a million dollars now. Do you think those sponsors are diminishing in numbers?

Fromm: Ultimately, they will, yes.

##

Most of the large sponsors of the opera belong to the older generation, who were interested in the opera and did so much for it there will be in the future fewer and fewer of them. It is the natural way of life. In my opinion it is of utmost importance to get young people and people from all walks of life interested so that the opera becomes an institution that is close to the hearts of all the people, all of them looking for some romance. You know, if it becomes strictly a cultural business, without some romance, then the average person says, "What the hell do I have to do with this?"

Crawford: I like your way of putting it--the idea of romance.

The Fromm Family and the Arts

Crawford: What about your own children? Are they as involved in the arts as you and your wife?

Fromm: Well, my daughter Caroline is, but my son David is less so. He is a surgeon and the chairman and chief of the Wayne State University department of surgery, which has one of the largest surgical departments in the United States.

So he has four hospitals under him and thirty-two surgeons. He seems to be an outstanding surgeon, but I don't know anything about surgery. My wife does, because she is the daughter of a doctor, who was very well known.

Crawford: So that was a natural avenue for him. And Caroline?

Fromm: She is a psychotherapist and has her own practice. She just had a little girl so she is not doing much professionally right now. She is married to Brian Lurie, who is one of the most intelligent and well known young leaders of the Jewish community.

He is the head of the Jewish Welfare Federation, which is one of the principle Jewish organizations. He is a really outstanding man. They live in Sausalito. You know, most fathers think there is no man good enough to marry his daughter, but my wife and I are happy.

Crawford: Oh, that's remarkable.

The Adler Temperament and the Question of Retirement

Crawford: Let me now concentrate on your friendship with Mr. Adler. How would you describe that personality?

Fromm: Well, I know that in his work, Kurt was rough and had to be rough. It was necessary to accomplish what he had to do.

In our relationship that never played any role. We always enjoyed ourselves and talked about what was going on in the world. It was a strange country to come to in some ways, when you grew up and had your roots in Europe.

On the other hand, I am one of the America-firsters. There is no place in the world like it, even with all its wants. I've been around the world quite a bit, because our firm in Germany was a very large exporter, and I traveled very extensively throughout the world, so I know what I am saying.

Crawford: Was Mr. Adler ever tempted to leave San Francisco and return to Vienna?

Fromm: I don't think so.

Crawford: Even when Maestro von Karajan invited him to Vienna as his administrative chief?

Fromm: Well, the San Francisco Opera was a bigger and more fulfilling job, that Kurt has developed. It was his child.

Crawford: Did his retirement come as a surprise to you?

Fromm: Well, Kurt and I talked about it quite a bit. The time comes for everyone. I am eighty-three, and I retired when I was seventy-nine and I did it because I thought it was time, although I must say I'm busier now than I was for many years when I ran a substantial wine and brandy business.

Crawford: Some retirement!

Fromm: Well, I don't know what else to do. I've worked since I was fifteen years old! Retirement though has given me a chance to do substantial pro bono work. I spend about 80 percent of my time doing it. There is not the need to make money any more, and there is not the continuous demand on my time for business matters.

You know it takes simple people who are willing to work and who have common sense. It is not a question of the smartest people. I have met a lot of smart people and they have made such a mess of their own lives, that it is really pitiful.

Crawford: Tell me, if you would, what Mr. Adler is doing at the Fromm Institute.

Fromm: We have always had courses in music, which were very popular, since we started twelve years ago. Since we knew Kurt very well, we asked him to become a professor at the Institute, and he enthusiastically accepted.



He gave fabulous lectures, and the elderly ladies swooned, because he addresses them in the proper way, and his was one of our most popular courses.

He teaches of course about opera, and there are so many stories that it's an enjoyable course, and at the same time, the students learn a great deal. It's so mixed in with anecdotes, and Kurt is a master in telling it.

So we are very happy with him, and of course all our professors are paid--some twenty-five or thirty of them, and we have a waiting list of many professors now that the Institute is known. Professors have the same problem as everybody else. They say when they retire that they don't want to teach anymore, but soon they feel like fish out of water.

Crawford: Teaching is what they know.

Fromm: It is what they know, and they need the adoration and the feeling that they are important. It has a lot to do with ego, I think; I'm not a psychiatrist and I don't worry about it. (laughter) Even so, I'm aware of psychiatry since Erich Fromm is my second cousin, and a few members of our family practice it.

Crawford: I didn't know that. I read his books with great pleasure.

Has Adler been content with retirement?

Fromm: Only partially I believe.

### The Adler Legacy

Crawford: Well, let me move on now to the last question: the Adler legacy. What has he left to the region and to the Bay Area?

Fromm: He has left an opera organization that is known throughout the world, which he created. When Merola ran the opera, it was a very nice local institution, but it was not an opera of world class. It was Kurt who did this. This is his greatest accomplishment, and he did it with less personnel and less money than anyone else who has followed after him.

Crawford: Was there genius there?

Fromm: Definitely.



I think of my own life. It's like going up a ladder; you go up six steps and then you look up and try to go another six steps, and when you are up twelve steps you try for another six. After that you don't have to do it for the money anymore because you most likely are financially secure; you do it because you want to prove to yourself that you can do it.

If you put a great deal of effort on yourself and you want to see how far you can go, I think that's what Kurt's life was. Maybe that's why we were always on a common level, and I think that's why I did understand Kurt. He wanted to do something outstanding for his own satisfaction.

Crawford: Was your background similar to his? Your education and upbringing?

Fromm: No, not at all. Kurt has had an entirely different education than I had. I started to serve an apprenticeship when I was fifteen, while Kurt had the whole gymnasium-university training and then started in the music and theater field. Our careers were entirely different, but I think our goals and our attitudes were quite similar.

Crawford: I appreciate your answering my questions.

Fromm: You're welcome. I hope it was what you wanted.

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Kurt Herbert Adler and the San Francisco Opera

Otto Meyer

SPONSOR, PAUL MASSON VINEYARD PERFORMANCES, 1959-1981

An Interview Conducted by  
Caroline Crawford  
in 1986



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## INTERVIEW HISTORY--Otto Meyer

Born in 1903 in Bingen, on the Rhine, Otto Meyer entered his family's wine business in 1927. When it was confiscated by the Nazis, he came to the United States, associated with Alfred Fromm (whose sister he had married) and in 1959 became president of the Paul Masson Vineyards, in which Fromm & Sichel had acquired an interest earlier.

Otto Meyer met Kurt Herbert Adler in the 1940s through Dr. Angel Gropper, a long-time friend of Adler's whose family came from Vienna. Meyer was an avid operagoer, and when he told Kurt Adler of his interest in training young singers, Adler invited him to join the Merola Opera Program board of directors.

Otto Meyer was instrumental in establishing a highly successful Music in the Vineyards program at Paul Masson, and in 1959 the Merola Opera Program began to offer several performances of a single production there each summer, giving the young singers a chance to sing in a pleasant, intimate environment with good acoustics (Adler himself had noticed the fine acoustics on a visit there some time earlier) and young designers and directors a chance to try their wings with some unusual works or unconventional approaches to standard works. The program was a success and continued until the company was sold in 1981, when it moved to Montalvo Vineyards.

Meyer also served as president and chairman of Spring Opera Theater and has been on the parent company board since 1979. In these two interviews, which were conducted in Meyer's large home in Seacliff, he talks about Adler's career in San Francisco and specifically his work with young singers, and about raising funds for the arts and the diminishing role of wealthy individuals and families. Of notable donors to the arts, he comments, "Some of the old families like the Haases and the Koshlands were in the forefront of giving, not just for the opera and the symphony. It's a Jewish characteristic--like chicken soup!"

Meyer, who served throughout the oral history as an advisor, edited the transcripts very little, but he discussed the project with Mr. Adler before the second interview.

Caroline Crawford  
Interviewer/Editor

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The Bancroft Library  
University of California, Berkeley





## Otto E. Meyer — Vintner and Patron Of Arts, Education

Otto E. Meyer, a noted vintner and patron of Bay Area arts and education, died yesterday in his home in San Francisco. He was 90 and suffered from a heart condition.

Mr. Meyer was born into a wine-growing family in Germany. He was president and later board chairman of Paul Masson Vineyards from 1959 until his retirement in 1974.

He devoted a major part of his life to community service. He was long active with the San Francisco Opera, serving as president of Spring Opera in 1975 and 1976, and as board chairman for the next four years. He was a founding member of the Merola Program Board in 1963 and a member of the Opera Association Board from 1974 until his death.

He also helped initiate the Music at the Vineyards summer concert series at the Paul Masson Vineyards in Saratoga in 1958 and then oversaw its operation. He was a founding trustee of San Francisco Performances in 1979 and a board member of the Performing Arts Library and Museum starting in 1982.

In 1991 he established an endowment fund for the string quartet program at San Francisco State University to ensure the residency there of the Alexander String Quartet. He was given an honorary doctorate by San Francisco State

in 1990.

Mr. Meyer also played a leading role in memorializing the work of photographer Ansel Adams, as a founder and trustee of the Friends of Photography.

He emigrated to the United States in 1938 when the Nazis seized his family's firm. Joining the Christian Brothers firm in 1940, he developed its brandy production. Five years later he took over production and development of Paul Masson Vineyards. He directed the building of its champagne cellars and a new winery in Soledad in Monterey County, developed new vineyards and initiated the export of Paul Masson products into 40 foreign markets.

In 1969, Mr. Meyer was awarded the University of California at Davis Centennial Citation.

He also served as a director of the California State University Foundation and Chancellors' Associates and was a trustee of the World Affairs Council of Northern California.

Mr. Meyer is survived by his wife, Susan; a son, Thomas of San Francisco; a daughter, Ursula Gropper of Sausalito; two grandchildren, two great-grandchildren,



Kurt Adler, His Supporters and His Young Singers  
 [Date of Interview 1: February 26, 1986]###

Crawford: Mr. Meyer, would you describe your first meeting with Mr. Adler and your early impressions of him?

Meyer: Well, I met Kurt Adler through mutual friends, Dr. and Mrs. Gropper, from Vienna. They were great opera fans, and knew most of the people coming from Vienna who were involved in opera. So that when Kurt came from Chicago, he had his first contact here with these old friends. He was of course engaged here as the chorus director, and it was obvious that he built a chorus of a quality that did not exist before.

The chorus is of course important for opera production, and he was then appointed by Robert Watt Miller as an assistant, or it was suggested by Mr. Miller, that Merola make him his assistant, which gave Kurt an opportunity to get involved in the production of an opera and in the performances beyond his activities as chorus director.

He built up good relationships with visiting artists--conductors, singers and directors--and when Merola died obviously Mr. Miller and the other people involved had a good reason to appoint him as Mr. Merola's replacement.

Crawford: What do you remember of the transition, and what changes began to take place?

Meyer: I am really not too much aware, because I didn't have too much to do with the company in this time.

Crawford: Could you speak about your relationship with Mr. Adler through the years and your involvement with the various boards of directors?

Meyer: Well, Kurt Adler had a great ability to interest his friends and involve them in what was going on in the opera company and therefore built these relationships within the community which

may never have developed beyond having dinner together. I think this is a characteristic of Kurt Adler that he was able to give people who had an interest in opera, who knew very little about the difficulties in production and selection of repertoire and of singers to get first-hand knowledge of it, and in this way he built his own following.

I remember that people on the board, and not just Mr. Miller, who was the strongest man, supported him. There was Mrs. Stanley Powell, Mrs. Cuenin, Mary Louise Adams--all people who went to work to make a success of San Francisco opera--stimulated by Kurt in the same way he stimulated us and others involved.

He not only talked about the traditional function of the opera, he also talked about the training of young singers. He started the Merola Program not just out of the necessity to give singers from the West Coast a chance to have auditions here, but also because of his interest in getting new material and finding new material and training these young people to become good singers and loyal followers of San Francisco Opera.

Before that time, West Coast singers had to go to New York to audition for the Met, and they had few chances for training there, because to go to Juilliard and other schools was a very expensive proposition and he saw the need to create that opportunity for West Coast singers and others.

Crawford: So he has done a great deal for young American singers.

Meyer: Yes. I think there is no other institution today that has developed as effective a training program as the Merola Program and the outcome of that as the Program grew was that the singers could perform with Spring Opera Theater. This he did from a much broader viewpoint. He didn't just want to have performances for the young singers to test them, he also wanted to engage topnotch conductors and directors for Spring Opera in order to make it possible for the young singers to come up to that higher level in their work.

So it was not just a showcase; it was part of the objective to bring those who had the talent to the top. I always compare it to a tennis game: if you play with the good players, you play better tennis, and that is basically the thing he did with Spring Opera.

Of course, before Spring Opera, when the Merola Program was developing, there were performances, but they were not of a caliber where you could sell tickets and get a larger audience.

They were performed up at the Vineyards at Paul Masson in the open air, where people are not as critical as when they are listening to opera in the opera house.

Opera in the Vineyards: The Merola Program

Crawford: You were president of Paul Masson at the time and were instrumental in bringing the Merola Program to the Vineyards, where from 1961 to 1981, they gave summer performances, including some very memorable ones: a Cenerentola directed by Mansouri, I remember, and Virgil Thomson's Four Saints in Three Acts.

Meyer: I was president of Paul Masson, and we had at that time a series of concerts called "Music at the Vineyards," but the Merola performance on Saturday and Sunday over three summer weekends was intended to give the singers this kind of performance opportunity, and at the same time it was a fund-raiser for Merola. Jimmy Schwabacher was, as you know, the president of the Merola Program right from the start.

Now of course the Merola Program concerts are at Montalvo, not at Paul Masson. With the change of ownership it was difficult to continue, but there were performances for twenty years at Paul Masson, and Montalvo is a beautiful setting for opera and there is a group of people equally interested in these performances as we were at Paul Masson.

Crawford: How has the quality of the Merola Program changed since its founding in 1957?

Meyer: The Program has grown since it has become recognized as one of the main training endeavors in the country and even beyond. Artists such as Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and Sir Geraint Evans have made themselves available to coach the singers, and of course the master classes were always conducted by Kurt Adler himself, and it was his ability as a musician and a judge of singers and conductors, etc., which made it possible to have such a select group each year who could grow into their roles, and an enormously high percentage of them made it into the big time.

Many of them go right into Western Opera Theater, a touring company with a limited repertoire but performing in many parts of the country, in Hawaii and even Alaska. They perform in places where audiences are not as critical as they are in New York and San Francisco, where they are not used to these top



performances by the stars. This builds up the confidence and the experience of the singers, who then go on to bigger roles pretty soon.

Crawford: How has the community supported the Merola Program?

Meyer: The Merola Program is totally independent. The fund-raising is done by a board whose members were not just opera supporters but people who were capable of going out and raising money and getting involved in the activities that made it possible to sustain the training program and build it from about three weeks to ten weeks. And without any subsidy from the San Francisco Opera company.

Building a Company: Kurt Adler and Robert Watt Miller

Crawford: Focusing on Mr. Adler, would you tell me your impressions of him over the years in his various capacities--first, as administrator.

Meyer: Well, Kurt is one of those unique people who I wish we could find more of. He is a musician first of all, who knows about production, who is a good judge of talent, and knows how to pick it, and at the same time has a good sense of economics.

I think one of the main reasons the company grew into a first-rate opera company from one with great limitations in the beginning was that particularly Mr. Miller had such confidence in Mr. Adler's ability to run a first-rate company and to do it within the means that were available. He told me once that never in his relationship with Mr. Adler did he have any unpleasant surprises when it came to the budget.

There were adjustments to be sure, which in this kind of business are unavoidable, but they were so confident--both of them--that they could grow and produce within the budget, that Mr. Miller, rather than have a small over-run on the budget, covered it out of his pocket when necessary, so that everyone involved had the feeling of security; that they could rely on what was being produced and that there would be very few surprises.

This makes a big difference to people who contribute to something they enjoy but have very little knowledge of the difficulties and the financial details. This combination of

Kurt Adler and Robert Watt Miller was the basis, I think, for building this company.

Crawford: What do you remember of Robert Watt Miller?

Meyer: He had, I would say, sound judgment. If someone made a presentation to him, whether it was about artistic matters or about the budget, his judgment was extremely good. Once he said yes or no, he said it clearly. You always knew where he stood. That made it possible for Kurt to operate without all the uncertainties that are common in this type of operation.

Crawford: How did Mr. Adler interact with the boards on which you served?

Meyer: Well, Kurt could be abrasive as you know. But it was so obvious that he was highly competent that people took the rough edges in stride. And he always kept the board informed about every aspect of what was going on.

Crawford: Turning to the staff now. What do you think Mr. Adler was looking for in his administrative staff?

Meyer: Well, Kurt was very demanding, and he found some very competent people. And he asked of them what we would have asked of himself: full devotion to the work and no matter how much time and effort was involved, he expected that from them.

#### An Energetic Impresario and a Charming Negotiator

Crawford: He was successful as a fund-raiser. What was his approach?

Meyer: His approach was really to make people feel that they knew what the money was used for and how it was used and what was being built. He did not just rely on the figures, he also had something for people to understand and something new. And this is important for people who give money, to know that it is being constructively used, and he had no trouble in conveying that impression and he got the support which just on the basis of figures would probably not have been given.

Crawford: How would you describe him as an impresario?

Meyer: I think this was one of his greatest strengths. He not only had an excellent knowledge of opera, he also knew what was going on in the world, what the reactions of audiences were; he traveled every year to Europe to listen to performances. He could see not

only individual singers in this way, but he also could judge the ensemble. Even if you have a star, and the rest of the cast is not on the level to balance that, you never have a first-rate performance, and he was tireless in finding out who was available and he asked everybody about stage directors, conductors, and singers.

He auditioned singers even in his hotel suite in Europe, and I remember very well at one time when he and Nancy came back, Nancy said: "I can't keep up with this pace anymore, he tires me out!" In spite of the fact that Nancy is quite a bit younger than he is.

Crawford: The Adler personality is very well known. What shaped Kurt Adler in your opinion? Was the Viennese factor important?

Meyer: I wouldn't say so, but of course there is a certain breed of people involved in music in Austria which is somewhat traditional, but he has gone beyond that. One of the things that makes for difficulties of course is that he is a perfectionist and he has very little tolerance for those who make mistakes. Mostly, that is a plus--sometimes it makes for difficulties. But that you have with a strong personality in all things.

Crawford: Do you think the relationship with Nancy Adler mellowed Mr. Adler over the years?

Meyer: I think so. I think Nancy has a very good influence on him, and has mellowed him in many ways. It couldn't change his personality, but he is certainly a happier man and that was reflected in his relationships with other people.

Crawford: Do you think the famous Adler temper was counter-productive in any way insofar as opera production was concerned?

Meyer: No, not in the production. But the uniqueness of it was that if he was a little too rough on somebody and got into a shouting match or rough conversation, once he calmed down he knew when he was wrong and he immediately called back the person with whom he had the argument and said so and made up. In the end, this sometimes developed a greater friendship than existed before.

Crawford: He was apparently a very skilled labor negotiator. Did you observe him ever in that context?

Meyer: Yes, he usually got what he wanted. He kind of charmed the labor people he had to deal with, who were used to small-time bickering. He exercised all the charm he could and usually got

his way. And there was trust. In everything he did, you could rely on his word, and you could rely on his figures, and this of course made people comfortable.

Crawford: To what do you attribute his success?

Meyer: Well, I think his being a good musician and having good judgment. As an example, he attended all rehearsals. And of course if things aren't going right and are corrected in rehearsal, then the end result is so much better. He spent an enormous amount of time at those rehearsals, and the performers knew that his judgment was good and he was very effective.

So, hard work, and if you have a general director who is a musician and an administrator, that is very lucky, because look at the Met today. There you have a big problem, because the music director is a very strong man and overpowering, and many administrators who find it difficult to reconcile the artistic needs with the financial situation.

Of course, the Met has the advantage that it regards itself as a national institution, and is raising money all over the country, and therefore can absorb a lot of luxury that San Francisco cannot. This is a relatively small city, without too many big donors, and so we have greater limitations. But if you have a general director who himself can balance these two factors--the quality of production and the financial decisions--that is a great advantage.

I think this ability exists less and less today. In opera and in business as well, you have a split in responsibilities where the end result depends on an agreement between the artistic people and the financial people and the fund-raisers and everybody else. If it doesn't work out all together then you have big problems.

Crawford: Do you think that the fostering of young talent could be considered Mr. Adler's highest priority?

Meyer: Absolutely. He saw the shortcoming of the European and the American systems, where everything is so concentrated on "stars." All the promotion goes to the star who is supposed to sell the tickets. And he saw the need to develop young talent, to give young talent the opportunity to develop. He had not only the compassion to do it but also felt the absolute necessity.

If somebody wants to put together a repertoire today, and if some good talent is available, you will find the Metropolitan

in signing up these people for three, four, five years, and other houses as well. This is not really constructive; it's much better to have singers with good voices and great talent being given the opportunity to grow into all these jobs which are available than to have the houses competing with each other and spending money out of proportion to get the few top singers. And this goes for conductors and stage directors as well.

### Criticism and Conducting

Crawford: Mr. Adler was often criticized for not getting the best conductors for his roster. Was it true and if it was true, what was it a function of?

Meyer: Well, he had some problems, but it is a very strange business. You can hear a conductor working in opera somewhere, and it works beautifully. The next time around he is conducting another opera and it is a disaster. There is a certain gamble there, and sometimes he would have faith in a conductor and it didn't come out well, but I would say his average was not all that bad. Of course, when there is a problem, the critics love to talk about it (laughs).

Crawford: Did the critics bother him? Did they get to him?

Meyer: Well, that may be the area where he wasn't the greatest diplomat. When he felt he was right and the critics were wrong, he didn't hesitate to tell them so. And the critics are human beings too, after all. But the critics respected him too. But whenever there was an opportunity to be critical they seized it, same as Kurt would!

Crawford: Do you think Mr. Adler wanted to conduct more than he did during his administration of the company?

Meyer: Sure, this is a bit of an ego matter. But I don't think it was ever the most important ambition in his life. He liked it, because it is nice exposure and is a part of being an opera director, but I don't think that was a major factor.

Crawford: So he didn't feel that being an administrator sacrificed in any way his artistic career.

Meyer: No, he developed it that way himself. He conducted when Merola was still alive, so he conducted and served as chorus director,



and then of course when he became involved as assistant director and took over, the conducting necessarily had to come second.

Music and Coffee Houses: A Shared Background

- Crawford: Let me go back a bit. Both you and Mr. Adler come from a German-speaking background--Mr. Adler being Austrian and you German--and I would like to ask you to comment on the implications of Mr. Adler's early education. He finished grammar school, the Volksschule, in four years instead of five and went on to the Gymnasium. Did that indicate that he was moving forward quickly?
- Meyer: Well, yes. The schools in Europe are organized so that the first two years of college are equivalent to the last two years in high school or Gymnasium. So he was just a very bright student.
- Crawford: And while he was at the Gymnasium he studied at the Music Academy as well. Would that have been a very heavy load for him?
- Meyer: Oh, I think that in Austria music was a great part of life. Music and coffee houses. (laughs)
- Crawford: Would music have been considered a good career for a young Austrian at the time?
- Meyer: Oh, yes, I think so. I am sure. Because it went beyond the borders. The international language.
- Crawford: Mr. Adler doesn't talk about post-war Vienna, which must have been very difficult, except to say that he had to walk to the opera house because public transit was limited, and he stood for several hours and then walked home (a walk of two hours round-trip). Must it have been very difficult?
- Meyer: I really have little knowledge of life in Vienna.



Raising Money for the Opera: The Decline of Individual Giving  
[Date of Interview 2: November 23, 1987]##

Crawford: Let us begin by discussing fund-raising as it relates to the opera and the donor families who have been so important to the company over the years. My question is this: what direction will giving take as these families disperse?

Meyer: This is a very good question, and all organizations have this problem. The problem is that individuals who were heads or owners of companies have been little by little replaced by foundations, either family foundations or business foundations. Therefore, giving has become more complicated. There is a professional team, aside from the boards of these foundations, influencing the system of giving, and this may not be very helpful, for instance, to opera.

If an individual takes a liking to a particular form of art and has the power to decide the amount and frequency of the donation, that is an entirely different premise than if a committee decides. So it requires a professional activity on the part of organizations asking for money, which replaces some of that person-to-person relationship. Still, in the end, somebody's vote on the board is more influential than others in the foundation, so it doesn't replace the old system entirely, but the individual influence isn't as strong anymore.

We have very few individuals left in San Francisco anymore, if you talk about people like Gordon Getty, where the fortune is so great that even if he is not successful with the foundation, he has enough means to make substantial donations.

So this is a problem, and the only answer is to find a way to appeal to whatever the organization is doing in the way of giving. I am inclined to believe that a good opera company, with all its attractive social situations, should be desirable for young people who are coming up in their professional and social lives.

It is necessary also that a company do something tangible, which San Francisco Opera is doing, like having an educational program for young singers, directors and conductors. The number of young singers who have been successful national and international stars coming out of the Merola Program is amazing.

This is important in my view because it brings San Francisco out of regional importance into national importance. For companies and foundations located in other areas than San

Francisco, or which are directed from headquarters elsewhere, it is important to have national recognition. For that reason, I think there are other ways of raising money which can replace the individual donors, who, unfortunately, are diminishing.

Crawford: Who are some of these people who have given individual productions over the years: Cyril Magnin, Cynthia Wood, James Robertson, the Koshlands, and more recently, Evert Person?

Meyer: Who are they, or what are they?

Crawford: What I mean to say is where do they come from and how have they been placed in such a position to be able to give large gifts to the opera and other arts and social organizations?

Meyer: These are people who not only have substantial assets, but also have a sense of generosity that is characteristic of people who give.

The other characteristic, which doesn't apply to opera, is the desire for publicity. This is a part of business incentive, but forget about that in conjunction with opera. You have to have people who are interested in opera as an art form or in artists and in the education of new talent who recognize that there is no other way to maintain these centuries-old high art forms than with individual involvement.

#### Public vs. Private Support and Untapped Sources

Meyer: You have in Europe today, of course, a great deal of public support, and operas and theaters are completely dependent upon government support. I don't need to tell you how detrimental that is; particularly in this country, you would have a change of policy with each administration and you would have conditions where people would vote against something that the general public isn't interested in, and it would make it almost impossible to have a solid foundation for expensive productions or even to continue the art form on a high quality level.

Crawford: So what you are saying is that local support is necessary in large part, and you see that support coming from other sources.

Meyer: Yes, now that applications are looked at by so-called professionals within foundations and executives who may know their own business well but whose hearts are not in this kind of thing. An organization has to offer something that is

acceptable from a financial and business point of view in the judgment of those who handle foundation money. So it's no longer something that depends on a personal liking or feeling. It has to be somewhat formalized.

Crawford: Before we were talking about Silicon Valley, which is almost untapped in terms of development efforts.

Meyer: Well, with few exceptions, the people who move there do not have too much feeling for the traditional, local support. There are exceptions. Hewlett, Packard and others, of course, are helping to a high degree, but they are the old-timers. The young people moving there don't seem to give much priority to the cultural life of the community, because their interests lie someplace else.

Crawford: Have the boards of directors tried to develop their support?

Meyer: Yes, but it has never been too successful. I wouldn't say it's impossible to do; it takes people who can really influence donors and it is constantly being talked about, but even the good example of people who are on the Peninsula doesn't seem to stimulate others.

Crawford: On a relatively small economic base, how has the Bay Area supported a world-class opera house? Was it Mr. Adler's efforts that brought that into being?

Meyer: Well, the opera company is one of the nationally recognized institutions, and it had a great deal to do with personal contact and efforts by Mr. Adler and members of the board. It comes back to what I said before, that the individuals who have the power and the incentive to make their larger contributions are becoming fewer and fewer and are being replaced by institutions.

#### Serving on the San Francisco Opera Boards of Directors

Crawford: Let's move on to the boards. You have been a longtime member of the parent board, as well as Spring Opera Theater and the Merola boards. What was your role, and how did Mr. Adler relate to the directors?

Meyer: Well, there were different circumstances at different times. The executive committee was the body that made the major decisions even though they were approved later by the full

board. There were always a lot of individuals who had a lot of respect for Kurt Adler's positions, because the proof was there that he had built up San Francisco Opera to a nationally recognized company, took charge of the financially responsible management of it, and attracted topnotch singers who came all the way from Europe to San Francisco. All this success [resulted in] the board's agreeing to give Mr. Adler a pretty free hand.

Going back to earlier days, Mr. Miller had a tremendous influence. Mr. Miller loved opera, and he was very knowledgeable, and he had a great deal to do with educating Mr. Adler as to how to run the company. Mr. Adler was primarily a musician, and when he was chorus director and later assistant to Mr. Merola, he conducted a great deal. When the time came for him to succeed Mr. Merola, Mr. Miller told him, "No conducting." By that time, the two men had grown to respect each other so much, that Mr. Adler said, "Yes."

Crawford: Of course Mr. Adler did conduct during three seasons in the Miller years.

Meyer: Yes, on rare occasions, but he understood that Mr. Miller had his good reasons for having a man who gave priority to the administrative and artistic direction of the company, and did not diminish the use of his time by conducting individual operas. As difficult as that is to a musician, all of the people working in opera, including the critics, want to be conductors (laughs).

So it must have been difficult for Kurt Adler to accept Mr. Miller's request, and as time went on, he saw the importance of it, and that was one of the reasons that it was such a wonderful relationship and no serious problems arose and there was less opportunity for conflict between administrators and musicians than happens when you have a split in responsibilities.

Crawford: How did you come to join the board?

Meyer: Well, at the request of Kurt. In our many conversations I expressed my interest in the educational arm of the company, the Merola Program. That is what intrigued me.

Aside from that, and through the friendship of Kurt, I met all the artists and all the people involved with San Francisco Opera, and we had them as guests after the opening nights, and it was very stimulating, so I indeed wanted to be involved.



I offered the facilities of the Masson Vineyards for performing, and that proved to be very helpful, because somehow there is a big advantage for young singers with not much stage experience to perform in surroundings less inhibiting than a big opera house where people compare and judge them with world-renowned singers and conductors, when the singer is in the first stage of development.

Jimmy Schwabacher became very enthusiastic about the experiment at Paul Masson Vineyards and it went on over twenty years, and then moved to Montalvo, where it is equally successful. That happened after Paul Masson was taken over by another company.

Crawford: How about Spring Opera Theater?

Meyer: Mainly I have been involved in the area of training, in Spring Opera as well as Merola. Spring Opera was born out of the merger with the Cosmopolitan. There was quite a degree of independence regarding that board. I became president and then chairman of Spring Opera, and I enjoyed the sessions with Kurt Adler, where I got a feeling of what was important and what was not important, and I became knowledgeable about it through Kurt's openness. He spared nothing in explaining why he did one thing and another, which made it possible for me to convey that to the board and get them enthused about the organization and the way it was run and the purpose of it.

There were two purposes, really. One had to do with the past--with the Cosmopolitan background, that is, to perform operas on a smaller scale. We had the cooperation of Mrs. Cuenin, Mrs. Adams, and Bill Kent, and Spring Opera opened in May of 1961 with the objective of performing operas that the big house could not afford, because either the opera was not too well known or it would have been too expensive to produce. The second objective was to give young singers who came out of the Merola Program a real opportunity to present themselves in a unique way.

Kurt engaged first-rate conductors and a number of first-rate singers to join in the productions, the result of which was that the young singers grew to the higher standards in this surrounding.

This was a tremendously successful operation that brought to the foreground operas that were almost unknown and could be produced for twenty thousand dollars or thirty thousand dollars on the smaller scale of Spring Opera; they would have cost a hundred and fifty thousand or two hundred thousand in the big

house. The loss in the big house would have been large, while with Spring it was negligible. So this was considered to be part of the educational process for young singers.

### More About Giving

Crawford: Turning to the parent company board for a moment. Mr. Adler has described the board as passive with regard to fund-raising, and indicated that much of that was left to him. Is that your view?

Meyer: Well, of course there is no board raising enough money, but he did help tremendously--his effectiveness and his prestige. I would say that the fund-raising wasn't too impressive, but it always covered the operation, as the budgets show.

Crawford: Did the board become more active after Mr. Miller withdrew from the presidency?

Meyer: I would say that there are quite a number of people today who make quite a respectable and effective effort to raise money. You cannot say that the effort isn't there.

Crawford: What were the major issues the board had to deal with in your experience?

Meyer: Well, in the early days, it was really a two-man operation--Robert Watt Miller and Kurt Adler--and then through the executive committee. The board really had no great influence on the policy. The issues discussed during meetings weren't really the important ones. It was more or less just accepting or criticizing the programs presented by Kurt Adler.

Crawford: What about the 1978 decision to assess preferred seating? That represented a policy change--some patrons called it "blood money." Was that a decision taken by the board at large?

Meyer: Yes. That was a board decision. I forget if Kurt approved it or not. But if you have problems raising money you look for new techniques to do it. It cannot always be done by big donors.

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But there wasn't too much opposition to that. Everybody wants to be easy on people who can't afford a high-priced subscription, but the majority agreed to do this to produce more income.



Crawford: I'm reminded of a humorous story told by Philip Boone, who, when he was president of the symphony, launched an individual-donor fund-raising campaign. It was successful, but the Jewish community protested that the non-Jewish community didn't do enough, and at one point, he was told that the Jewish donors wouldn't give any more money until the amounts given were matched. Did anything of that kind occur regarding the opera?

Meyer: Well, I never made a study of who gives and who doesn't! But some of the old families like the Haases and the Koshlands were in the forefront of giving, not just for the opera and the symphony.

### The Adler Legacy

Crawford: Good! Let's focus on Mr. Adler, a longtime friend of yours. Would he still like to be running the company today?

Meyer: Well, it depends how. This is something that is difficult to judge. I think Kurt sees that there comes a time in everybody's life when things have to be delegated, but that kind of organization he never built; it's not within his nature. He is in so many areas a perfectionist that it makes it very difficult to delegate the way it could have been done. Delegating means that someone responsible for some activity can make decisions and not just take orders.

Crawford: Where did he get that terrific determination and perfectionist quality?

Meyer: He was born with it.

Crawford: What will his legacy be?

Meyer: Well, he built the opera into a first-rate, recognized opera company. Beyond that, the educational arm, which today is still number one, and this is most important, because it has resulted in a company so far away from the center of activity not being called a provincial company. New York is the center for the arts in this country and San Francisco is geographically far away, but that doesn't mean it has to be secondary in the performing arts.

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University of California  
Berkeley, California

Kurt Herbert Adler and the San Francisco Opera

Nancy Miller Adler

WIFE AND ASSOCIATE: THE VIEW FROM BOX A

An Interview Conducted by  
Caroline Crawford  
in 1986





Kurt Herbert Adler and Nancy Miller Adler in the early 1970s.

*Courtesy of Nancy Adler*





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INTERVIEW HISTORY--Nancy Miller Adler

Nancy Miller and Kurt Herbert Adler were married in the summer of 1965. Their marriage took the opera community by surprise and generated a considerable amount of controversy because of the nearly forty-year difference in their ages.

Among their strong supporters was Robert Watt Miller, president of the San Francisco Opera Association board of directors from 1937 to 1971 (except during World War II), Adler's boss in the strict sense, and a first cousin of her father's.

Nancy Adler, who had wanted to train as a stage director and was working for the company at the time, undertook more than a full time career as the wife of the general director, an occupation that diminished only with the birth of their two children, Sabrina in 1980 and Roman in 1982.

Nancy Adler learned the opera business and provided Kurt Adler with, as she said, "an extra pair of eyes and hands," particularly on the annual European trips, when she took copious notes on all the auditions and performances they attended, and when, by her own admission, she struggled to be equal to Adler's celebrated energy.

In this interview, she speaks of the qualities she most admired in her husband during their nearly twenty-two years of marriage, their private lives, and the problems and crises involved with the running of an opera company.

The two interview sessions were held in my San Francisco home, and Mrs. Adler subsequently added substantially to the interview transcript.

Caroline Crawford  
Interviewer/Editor

November 1988  
Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library  
University of California, Berkeley



A First Meeting with Kurt Adler: The Beginnings of a Career in Opera

[Date of Interview 1: July 23, 1986]##

Crawford: When did you first meet Mr. Adler, and what was your early association with the opera company?

Mrs. Adler: I don't know for sure the exact time. It had to have been the end of 1964 or the beginning of 1965. I had graduated in the middle of the year from Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York. I had just moved to New York, where I was going to art school, to learn how to render, because I wanted to work in scenic design.

At the same time, I was a "super" at the New York City Opera. That was mainly to get acquainted with an opera company and to learn how it ran. Supers can do that fairly easily, because they don't have a lot to do. They stand around for long periods of time. I wanted to get a flavor of the backstage and the basic clockwork of an opera company. I had actually already started "supering" when I was still in college, before I moved into the city.

Crawford: You had quite an extensive background and exposure to opera here, I gather.

Mrs. Adler: Not so extensive. My interest in opera developed while I was in college, at which time I spent two summers at the Aspen Music School as an apprentice scenic designer. It was a unique position. I was a sort of jack-of-all-trades.

There was a professional designer who was doing scenery, costumes, and makeup for their opera workshop. And I was his apprentice for two summers there. Nobody else had ever done it before.

When I applied to their opera workshop, I specified my interest. Everybody else was either a musician, a singer or a



conductor. They accepted me as an apprentice to the fellow that they had hired to do the scenery and costumes, etc.

In my last year of college, I decided that I wanted to pursue a career as a scenic designer. The most obvious "in" was through a San Francisco connection, because Robert Watt Miller, then president of the San Francisco Opera Association, was my father's first cousin. And I felt that perhaps through him, I could get a job in San Francisco, an extension of what I had been doing in Aspen. I also applied for a job as an apprentice at the Santa Fe Opera, where they have an extensive technical apprenticeship program. And I had been accepted there.

It was winter, December 1964 or January 1965. I proposed to my father that I speak to Robert Watt Miller and inquire about getting a similar job in San Francisco. I had been away from home for eight years, in boarding school and college, and I had some desire to come back to San Francisco. But more importantly, the Santa Fe job was only a summer job. I felt that if I came to San Francisco I would have a more permanent association with an opera company.

So, my father asked his cousin Bob Miller if it was possible for me to talk to him. Apparently he was very cautious, not wanting a relative riding on his coattails.

He insisted that I meet with him. He was then chairman of Pacific Lighting. I was home on vacation--it must have been Christmas. I had an appointment in his office, and he sat me down and grilled me very extensively: what it was I wanted to do, what had I been doing and studying. And after the discussion, he said, "Well, I really think you are serious about this, and I will talk to Kurt Adler about it," which he did.

So I was then told that I should contact Kurt Adler, who had been traveling in Europe and was returning via New York. Bob Miller said I should contact him on such-and-such a date in New York City at the Essex House. I called him and woke him up. [Chuckles] He had just arrived from Europe and was asleep.

Crawford: Operating on a different time.

Mrs. Adler: Exactly. In my enthusiasm, I called on the dot of 9:00 in the morning and woke him up. But he was very cordial. His boss must have said, "Kurt, this cousin will call you, and maybe you would see her." He asked, "Well, what are you doing right

now? I have a meeting in two hours. Would you come and I'll talk to you?"

I arrived at his hotel, and that's when I first encountered Kurt's close associates: Paul Hager, Ghita Hager and Otto Guth. Also there was Oliver Smith, who was preparing to design Giovanni. They were having a long session on this production. I was invited to observe, and although I didn't know the names Hager or Guth--I certainly knew Oliver Smith. He was an idol to any young designer. I sat and listened carefully to their discussion. They were going through the score, the sets, etc.

Maybe an hour after I got there, Kurt said to me, "May I talk to you separately?" He took me into a bedroom and started asking me what I wanted to do, and what I had been doing. And then he put me through the test. The test was, "What's going on in there? What do you think about those sets? How do they relate to what you know?"

It was all unexpected, but I must have answered the questions satisfactorily because he said, "Call me in a few days," and when doing so he offered me a job at San Francisco Opera. I was to be, like before, an apprentice to the designers who would be working the fall 1965 season. They would come and go throughout the summer to rehearse technically the productions for fall.

After a designer left the "tech period" I was responsible for making sure that his instructions were followed correctly and that his designs were realized accurately. In addition, I was to work with the Merola Opera Program in the summer and design the sets for both Stern Grove and Paul Masson. I told Kurt that I had also been offered to go to Santa Fe. And he said, "This is what I will offer you." A perfectly appalling sum of \$125. Unbelievably \$125 a month. Well, fortunately, I knew I could live with my family. He said, "Think about it."

Since then he has always said I impressed him, because I thought about it for only twenty minutes, called him right back and accepted. Apparently he liked that decisiveness. I promptly packed up my car, cornered a friend whom I knew was unhappy in New York, and said, "Come on, we're going to California." And within something like a week, I was here.

It was easy for me to give up art school, where I was only studying rendering. I moved in with my family, because that was the obvious and convenient thing at the time. I saw this as my opportunity to get into a large professional opera

company, to start from the bottom and work up. I got here early spring, April or May 1965.

Crawford: According to what he has said, it was May when you arrived.

A Job with San Francisco Opera: "Getting Your Feet Wet"

Mrs. Adler: I got out here early in May, and went right to work. Initially, I worked very hard on the Merola operas--I was not only the designer, but I had to build the set. I worked in the scenic shop. I had a little corner of the Armory.

Crawford: But it was where Pierre Cayard and all of his forces were.

Mrs. Adler: They were all very busy building the Don Giovanni. I don't remember the other opera that season, but there were lots of Skalicki and Oliver Smith designs. During this time I also made scale models of Smith's Don Giovanni sets. I would pick up scraps and build and paint with "leftovers." We had virtually no scenery budget.

Crawford: What was the Merola Opera production?

Mrs. Adler: I worked with Lotfi Mansouri on Bohème in Stern Grove. I did La Cenerentola for Paul Masson with Richard Pearlman.

Crawford: Did you rotate through the departments in San Francisco?

Mrs. Adler: No, I did scenery, not costumes, although for the Merola Program I did it all. I had to do the costumes, too. But, I almost forgot, I also got roped into doing rehearsal department for Spring Opera that year. That's why I came West so fast, because Spring Opera was about to start. And in the very beginning I got thrown into the rehearsal department. The idea was for me to get my feet wet--completely.

Crawford: That was the idea, to put you around in the various areas?

Mrs. Adler: Yes, that was the idea, and simultaneously, I was working in the scenic department. Spring Opera was performed in the opera house those years. I worked with Martha Miller and Jane Clegg in the rehearsal department.

Crawford: Those two departments, those two areas.

Mrs. Adler: Yes. But I didn't expect to be working in the rehearsal department in the fall.

A Whirlwind Courtship and a Well-Kept Secret

Crawford: What happened to your plans to continue on the staff? You were married in August?

Mrs. Adler: In August, yes. We determined that I should not be both an employee and wife.

Crawford: Well, that was a whirlwind courtship.

Mrs. Adler: Yes. It was a whirlwind courtship. It was not convenient to prolong it.

Crawford: Did you see that right away?

Mrs. Adler: Yes. It was obvious. You have to remember, in 1965, this was unique and unusual. Twenty years ago, people with great age differences didn't get married.

Crawford: Yes. I know you made headlines.

Mrs. Adler: Yes, exactly. Today we wouldn't have, at all.

Crawford: Did you personally have any qualms?

Mrs. Adler: Oh, surely, anybody does, obviously not enough. But it was very much not the accepted thing to do. Therefore it seemed really sensible to hurry up and get married. Once we were married, it would be an established fact. That was real motivation for the speed with which it all happened.

Crawford: That's right. As I remember, you left a release with Paul Hager.

Mrs. Adler: Paul Hager came to City Hall with us as a witness. The idea was to send him back to the opera house with a news release. And I think we caught a lot of people by surprise. It had been a very well-kept secret.

Crawford: How did you manage to do that? That's almost impossible in the theater.

Mrs. Adler: Well, in 1965 people weren't quite so open, you know. We were very discreet. Obviously, my family knew in advance. Also Bob and Betty Miller, Paul Hager, and a personal friend of mine, whom I had asked to come as the second witness. A few people may have suspected something was between us.

But nobody expected we were getting married. They had no way of knowing.

Robert Watt Miller: A Cousin and a Strong Supporter

Crawford: Let's move on to Robert Watt Miller, and let me ask you some questions about him. What do you remember of him, first, as president of the Opera Association board and his relationship to the company.

Mrs. Adler: Well, I only really got to know him in that capacity. I had not known him at all before that.

Crawford: He and your father were not close friends?

Mrs. Adler: The families didn't get together often. I knew his mother, because she was the matriarch of the family when I was growing up. And as my grandmother died when I was fairly young, Aunt Janet was the senior member of the family to whom we would make annual Christmas visits.

Betty and Bob--I may have seen at family weddings or big events--but our relationship was not close.

When I went for the original meeting with Bob Miller, I was rather intimidated. He was a tall and impressive man. Very respected. And it was a very formal meeting. I was only a twenty-two-year-old kid who was being questioned whether or not I was going to be deemed suitable for him to suggest to Kurt Adler, "Will you please look at this relative who is interested in the profession?"

Crawford: And he was formal with you?

Mrs. Adler: Yes, he was very formal with me. I think he really wanted to make sure that my interest wasn't just momentary. Anyway, I slowly became familiar with him when he would come to the opera house; he was a regular visitor. Even during Spring Opera, although he was not on the board of Spring Opera. He always came through the backstage, often with Betty. And he



would always have a very friendly word or two, greeting performers and talking to staff and to the stagehands.

Everybody knew who he was and respected him. Also, the company was much smaller in those days. I got to know Bob and Betty. We shared our mutual passion for opera. Then, when we got married, they were terribly supportive. Some people weren't, believe me.

Crawford: Is that true? Within your family?

Mrs. Adler: Indeed, there were a lot of people--not only family, also friends, so-called. For them it was a very unusual thing, and they must have felt embarrassed and didn't know how to handle it.

Crawford: Have they come around since then?

Mrs. Adler: Oh, yes. Time, twenty-one years has made a total difference. That was the same time that Frank Sinatra married Mia Farrow. And everybody was thinking, "Oh, my; why?"

Our situation wasn't that much different. But Betty and Bob were always supportive. There were a lot of functions where we would be together, Opera Guild benefits, cast parties, etc. They would invite us to their home or to Tahoe in the summer.

Crawford: So you had time for socializing?

Mrs. Adler: Yes.

Crawford: That was a question I was going to get to later on.

Mrs. Adler: Betty and Sheldon [Cooper] are very close friends. Now Betty comes to see the children, and we visit them often.

Crawford: She has said how much that relationship has meant to her.

Mrs. Adler: Absolutely. I didn't know Bob as well as I know Betty. Bob died after I had known him only four or five years. We came back from Europe especially, because he was to have open-heart surgery. He wanted to see Kurt before he went into the hospital.

So we cut short our trip and returned to see him. Unfortunately, he never survived the surgery. I think he almost knew he might not. I remember his daughter Marian



saying, "You know, he had this foreboding sense, because he sealed up all business, he got everything in order."

A Working Relationship: Robert Watt Miller and Kurt Adler

Crawford: What was the basis of that very exceptional relationship between Mr. Miller and Mr. Adler? It needn't have been so close personally.

Mrs. Adler: I think it was a deep mutual respect. Bob Miller had a lot of faith in Kurt. He's the one who chose him and appointed him General Director in spite of others' objections that Kurt lacked experience. Kurt had been chorus director and Merola's right-hand man, but had not previously been the head of an opera company. Bob Miller ran the show single-handedly, as far as the board went. The board was simply names on the letterhead. And those years, it worked beautifully.

Crawford: He could run the company almost personally?

Mrs. Adler: Yes, exactly. Everything was done, and it could be done, by one person, one person who was capable. I heard stories about board meetings--I never went to one--where Bob would come in and give the members of the board a little basic background on what was going on and where things were. Mickey Hellman would read the financial statement, and Kurt would give them a little information about the coming season, and that was it. I don't think they voted on anything. He was the type of person who preferred to run the show alone. And as long as it ran successfully, nobody interfered.

One board member, Whitney Warren, who was a very opinionated fellow, would now and then say, "Well, I'm not sure we want so-and-so to sing such-and-such," and Bob Miller would let him ramble on for a while and then drop it.

Crawford: That was in the mid-sixties?

Mrs. Adler: Mid to late-sixties.

Crawford: And then he retired and went to the chairmanship in 1967. Why was that, do you think?

Mrs. Adler: I really don't know. It may have been that he wasn't well. Prentis [Hale] became president. Then the whole scene

changed, because the cast of characters changed. Prentis expanded the board with a lot of new names.

And times were changing, too. The small, tight-knit group that had run the show--Kurt and Bob Miller, and artistically assisting Kurt, Paul Hager and Otto Guth--was changing. As the season's grew longer the staff had to be expanded. The company grew and diversified.

Crawford: How much time did they spend together, Mr. Adler and Mr. Miller, in your memory?

Mrs. Adler: During the opera season, especially, Bob was in the opera house regularly. Sometimes he would come from his office in the late afternoon to catch the end of a rehearsal. He would stop by Kurt's office and that's where they met if there was an important issue to be discussed. He attended evening rehearsals and performances, or if he had been out for the evening, he would stop by on his way home to catch the end of a performance. He did not mingle in artistic affairs except when he was asked to. He didn't take control, but he represented authority to everybody around.

Crawford: In other words, he didn't deal integrally with casting or repertoire?

Mrs. Adler: No. Now and then an issue would come up--I remember one of them. Were they going to do Rheingold without an intermission or not, and things like that. I'm sure you've heard that story.

Crawford: Yes.

Mrs. Adler: Yes. Then he was consulted, definitely. And I can remember that there were certain budgetary matters which needed to be discussed with him. So no, he didn't participate in casting or choosing repertoire. All the artists and staff knew him and respected him. And it never happened that way after him. None of his successors were involved in quite the same manner.

Crawford: Had that relationship--

Mrs. Adler: None of them.

Crawford: --with either the house or with Mr. Adler.

Mrs. Adler: No. And I think that the basis for their relationship was their tremendous mutual respect.

Crawford: Some sort of chemistry? It was very positive. Because they weren't much alike, would you say?

Mrs. Adler: I wouldn't say that. They're both very driven people. They were both very conscientious about their responsibilities. They were both very principled people--men of integrity.

Crawford: To what does that apply in particular?

Mrs. Adler: They were totally honest to their responsibilities. I think that's something we don't see often these days.

Crawford: That's a good way of putting it.

Is there a counterpart to Robert Watt Miller in the community today?

Mrs. Adler: I wouldn't pretend to know all the individuals now. I think that times have changed greatly. He was a very conservative fellow, very conservative. I don't know anybody like him today.

Crawford: I think Mr. Follis spoke to that same point.

Mrs. Adler: Well, Mr. Follis is very similar--also of the same generation.

##

Mrs. Adler: Bob might not have liked The Rake's Progress; he didn't like too much contemporary opera, but he understood the need to produce new works. Regardless what his personal tastes were, he loved the whole profession. He played the organ. Did you know that?

Crawford: No, I didn't.

Mrs. Adler: They had an organ in their home in Burlingame where they lived before moving to San Francisco.

Crawford: A pipe organ?

Mrs. Adler: I never saw it, I only heard about it. When I got to know them, they had long since been living in San Francisco. I might add that I also became much closer to all the Miller family, his children and grandchildren.

Crawford: So you got to know them a little bit as the years went on?

Mrs. Adler: Yes.

Nancy Adler and the San Francisco Opera

Crawford: Let's talk about your working relationship with the company, as Mrs. Adler.

Mrs. Adler: As Mrs. Adler?

Crawford: Yes.

Mrs. Adler: Oh, okay. None. Officially none. Opera is a very small world. Everybody in the opera business knows everybody else in the opera business. In the '60s everybody involved in the San Francisco Opera was like a member of the family. Max Azinoff, Howard Skinner, and Evelyn Crockett, Paul and Ghita Hager, Otto Guth, they all worked together like a tiny close-knit community.

Nowadays, the development department doesn't know who builds scenery. I had worked in the company, so I had a sense of how it runs. And I had no other outside responsibilities--no children, yet. So I sort of hitched on as a member of this operatic family, by virtue of being married to Kurt. I liked it, I was interested in it.

More often than not I put in as much as an eight-hour day at the opera house both during the day and late into the night. I was sort of everywhere. Kurt needed to work in his office so I would often watch rehearsals and report to him what I saw. Everyone else had his own responsibilities and often would not watch the overall results. I guess I was sort of an extra pair of eyes and ears for Kurt. I would roam the opera house, sitting in different locations during rehearsals. You would be surprised how different things sound and look from different perspectives.

Because of the fact that Kurt as general director had a box at the opera, it fell to me--and this was the side I probably least liked, actually--to have to coordinate the guests that might be invited. He had established a tradition of bringing official guests to each performance. When he started out, there were many fewer performances. By the time Sabrina was born and I therefore spent much less time there, the number of performances had grown triplefold from what they were in the beginning.

It became a major job to fill that box every night. Therefore I accumulated files of names of people, from the city and the Bay Area and the state, who somehow should or could be brought into the opera house.

Crawford: What was the objective?

Mrs. Adler: To involve potential big donors, individual, corporate foundations, government officials, and the international community. For example, Kurt would have to call the consul general of somewhere at 8:00 in the morning to get Madame X on the airplane, because he had a cancellation and had to get somebody. Naturally he had to have friendly relations with people who could be helpful in solving certain problems. Also considered were people from the newspapers and television, politicians, the hotel tax people, police and fire departments, on and on.

I tried to include everybody. It was a tremendous task. I can't tell you how many hours I spent doing that.

Crawford: Did you do all of it?

Mrs. Adler: I did it alone. From the beginning--I started when we got married. But it got far more complicated as time went on, because the number of people increased as the seasons grew. I had at least four guests every single performance. I went to performances Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday--at one time twice on Saturday--and Sunday. I had to be there as hostess. It was exciting when we had as guests presidents, kings, princes, princesses, or movie stars, and celebrities.

Crawford: You did the inviting and the follow-up?

Mrs. Adler: Everything.

Crawford: That's a full-time job. It has to be.

Mrs. Adler: It was almost--when it got extensive, I will say, it got tedious. I started then to have the development department take the responsibility for some of the performances. At the very end of Kurt's tenure, they did much more with it than I did, because by that time I had Sabrina and didn't have the time.



Remembering Box A

Crawford: I always wondered why you kept Box A.

Mrs. Adler: It was Kurt's choice because it had quickest access to backstage. I often argued why it had to be. Kurt and I had always seen the performances from orchestra center during rehearsal. From that angle the guests saw only a tiny little pie wedge of the stage. But they loved it, because you were so close to the stage, it gave you a very different perspective. The celebrity guests loved being seen by the rest of the audience.

Crawford: Was Mr. Adler always in the box at some point?

Mrs. Adler: He always sat through the first performance of each production. As there were more and more repeat performances, while he was always in the opera house, he was seldom in the box. He would come and go, but he used performance hours to work in his office, especially as the business grew more complicated.

Crawford: But he also saw the artists, did he not? Did he not visit them backstage?

Mrs. Adler: Yes. He was there every evening and at least part of each performance. There were nights when we had to go somewhere else for whatever reason. Even then he would go to the theater before the performance and stop by afterwards.

The Adler Work Day

Crawford: What was his working schedule, generally?

Mrs. Adler: He was usually in his office by 10:00. Most often he ate his lunch at his desk. When there was no opera season he would get home by 7:00 or 8:00.

During a season, he would try to get home to have dinner and sometimes change clothes and then go right back again. But there were lots of times when I brought his dinner in a paper bag to the opera house. And he was there until whatever time the performance ended---sometimes later if there was a crisis such as a cancellation.



Crawford: He said that he relied on you during rehearsals, the implication being that he was at those rehearsals too, but that he often took suggestions.

Mrs. Adler: I got to know the opera business fairly well. I learned from exposure. I used to sit in on a lot of Kurt's meetings. And then, of course, when we traveled, I was with Kurt all the time, acting as his assistant. I took all the notes for all the meetings. I also attended all major rehearsals and all performances. I think I knew enough after several years to participate, offering my ideas and opinions.

Ghita and Paul Hager: A Powerful Chemistry

Crawford: I want to ask you about Jean-Pierre Ponnelle and Paul Hager, I think both of whom you were rather close to--and Wolfram Skalicki--because they've given a certain stamp to the company.

Mrs. Adler: Oh, yes. Hager certainly did. When I came, Hager was very involved. You know, he joined the company when he was fairly new in the profession. And he really, like anybody who was involved at that time, grew with the company.

He was very helpful to the company at a certain period of his own development, because first of all, he devoted an enormous amount of energy to it. It was his operatic home. And he had the European or traditional experience to bring to the company--he knew what the standard could be, and he helped Kurt to achieve that standard.

In those days, the European opera house still set an example. Opera in Europe was years ahead of opera in America, for a long time. I think that San Francisco's Spring Opera was one of the experiences in which opera in America broke away from the European tradition and started to find its own identity.

Eventually, Paul pursued becoming a general director in Europe. At the same time this company had begun to establish its own identity and style, which was not consistent with the Hager approach.

Crawford: Too conservative?

Mrs. Adler: Yes, and provincial German. I remember trying to convince Kurt that Paul really should be less involved, and that Kurt needed to find other talent with different styles. Paul also got ill; he had a heart attack which limited his involvement.

Ghita Hager was a vital part of the team. A very dedicated and hard-working associate. But when their marriage fell apart, I think there was a lack of that former powerful chemistry when the two of them worked together, that hindered Paul's contribution.

I can remember towards the end, Paul was making, I thought, really bad decisions. For example, mediocre suggestions about casting; possibly because he no longer had Ghita to bounce his ideas off of.

Crawford: That's interesting. How about Wolfram Skalicki?

Mrs. Adler: Skalicki was a very typical designer. He wasn't much involved in anything but design. That's all he really thought about. And if Skalicki was ever questioned about something or asked for a suggestion about casting, he just didn't know. The classic designer, in a visual world of his own.

### Jean-Pierre Ponnelle

Mrs. Adler: Many designers are that way. They often know very little else about what goes on on the stage. And that's what makes Jean-Pierre [Ponnelle] so unique. He's a rare individual who has an intellectual scope of the whole piece--very much like Kurt does. He sees the whole, which a lot of people don't. It is an important reason why they were so compatible.

Kurt and Paul were not at all alike, but Paul helped the company to grow and together they spent enormous energy and countless hours in doing so. But they really didn't think the same way.

But Jean-Pierre and Kurt get along so well because they both have an ability to perceive the total entity, while also being acutely aware of all the little details. They did think alike.

Wolfram Skalicki and Amrei Skalicki

Mrs. Adler: But anyway, Skalicki--Skalicki was Austrian, an artist and a sweet fellow. He worked very well with Paul, because Paul needed somebody on whom he could just lay all his ideas, and send him off to get the designs made.

Skalicki's wife Amrei was vital to his work, because she added a sense of good taste, especially with color. What he brought was a very then-popular German style--stark and often bare--not lush or very pretty. In the days when it was economically helpful to have that it was useful--but then it began to wear, artistically.

Crawford: Because it was limited?

Mrs. Adler: It was limited, yes.

Spring Opera Theater: Innovations and Limitations

Crawford: Who else stands out to you as designers? Because certainly Mr. Adler has enriched the roster of designers a great deal.

Mrs. Adler: Well, it's difficult--there are not many. I always admired some of the things that we've done in the Spring Opera season in the Curran. And those were not done by big-name designers. What they brought was a nonoperatic approach. To me, one of Kurt's best achievements was Spring Opera--when it was in the Curran. I think those were some of the most exciting and fun times--a real highlight of Kurt's tenure.

Crawford: Should Spring Opera Theater have survived?

Mrs. Adler: I don't know. The smallness of the theater limited the choice of repertoire and Spring Opera's raison d'etre was new works and innovative approach. I don't know how long that can be sustained, especially without the new works.

You see these innovative things being done now, like the Carmen they did in Paris a few years ago. And it was very much like the one done by Spring Opera, only now it's not new. That's one of the reasons I began to find opera less exciting and less interesting.

The repertory is small and many operas written have not gained acceptance. Also, how many times can we rethink the standard repertory?

Crawford: Do you feel that nothing is being written now that is worth staging?

Mrs. Adler: Well, I've heard many new operas but few have been successful enough to last. Some say that the Finnish operas are interesting, but I hear they are quite conventional. I have become a fan of Philip Glass. A lack of development of the art form called opera and economics have contributed to mass-produced opera, which seems to prevail today.

Crawford: Are the singers being as well trained, in your view?

Mrs. Adler: Oh, I think they're probably the best trained of all. But there are not enough to go around. Scarcity of big voices is the problem.

Opera companies are growing in size and in number, and there just aren't enough more singers to fill the demand. To have that incredible, big, powerful voice that can naturally fill a large auditorium is very, very rare.

Crawford: And all the insights that are necessary.

Mrs. Adler: Well, then, that too. More and more is demanded of them. I find it, in some ways, unnecessary that Pavarotti and Sutherland should go into places like the Coliseum and sing amplified performances. Although I understand it does attract a different and maybe new audience, I don't want to hear it as a substitute for a good opera performance. Maybe that's old-fashioned.

Working Vacations: "Absolutely Nonstop"

Crawford: Let's talk about the summer trips to Europe.

Mrs. Adler: No, we never went in the summer, because we were always here in the summer for technical rehearsals and preparation for the fall season. We always went in the winter.

Crawford: That's right, after the opera season.

Mrs. Adler: After the opera season, we would take off immediately, go to New York for auditions, and sometimes go from there to Europe, or sometimes delay Europe until after Christmas. Kurt became

instrumental in developing the service organization Opera America and the International Associational of Opera Directors--those meetings required more traveling. Then, towards the end, we often went to Europe twice. Frequently because Kurt had conducting engagements which altered our travel schedule.

But when we traveled, I took all the notes and I had to understand the business in order to take notes--often in several languages.

Crawford: Were these strictly working vacations?

Mrs. Adler: Absolutely nonstop, around the clock. When we got up in the morning, the phone would already be ringing. There would be a steady stream of meetings with people. In New York, it would go from 9:00 or 10:00 in the morning, until 10:00 at night.

Crawford: Could you keep up with his amount of energy?

Mrs. Adler: I didn't have much choice. I took up running and tried to run several miles no matter where we were. There would be a meeting of four or five people in the room, and I would buy sandwiches at a deli, and bring them back for lunch. We usually went out for dinner, but the discussion went on right through the meal. Or we would be attending a performance. And that was almost exclusively the topic of all of our conversations, "who really can sing this or who should be designing that." Kurt constantly thought opera business. Over breakfast he would discuss things like, "was this chorus director good enough to keep one more year or not?"

Crawford: Everything devoted to opera, even when you were away.

Mrs. Adler: Always.

Crawford: Was he thinking aloud?

Mrs. Adler: Yes, and then we were talking about it.

Crawford: And there was no leisure time given over to reading?

Mrs. Adler: Very little. We took few vacations. In the off season on a Saturday morning we might play tennis or in summer go swimming at friends'. Otherwise it was always opera. I used to say that I married an opera company.

Crawford: Well and good that you loved it so much.



Mrs. Adler: Yes, it would have been unfortunate if I hadn't.

Crawford: How did he keep in touch with the company when you were in Europe?

Mrs. Adler: It certainly wasn't by phone, because that was prohibitively expensive. I remember writing some letters, but not too many.

I think we didn't communicate that much. We were off on a people-finding, fact-finding mission, during which I took voluminous notes. On our return Kurt would sit with his staff and go through all those notes. But in later years, when the opera got a telex machine, at least once a day I sent a telex. Sometimes twice a day. And they could be three pages long.

Crawford: These were informational?

Mrs. Adler: Only informational, such as contract negotiations data, lists of possible singers for certain roles, etc., communication between the home office and the traveling office.

Crawford: And would Richard Rodzinski or whoever was musical assistant be in charge?

Mrs. Adler: Well, no. Before we went on a trip somebody was always delegated to be in charge. And in the early years it probably was Kurt's assistant, like Gary Fifield. Later he had two assistants--one for artistic matters and one for administration. For example, Richard Rodzinski and Ann Darling in the late 60s, early 70s.

### The Adler Staff

[Interruption in tape]

Crawford: Let's discuss the staff: Did you know Howard Skinner?

Mrs. Adler: I didn't ever get to know Howard Skinner well. His last year was 1970.

Crawford: What was Howard Skinner's role, as you saw it?

Mrs. Adler: Well, Howard had a double job, which was unusual. He worked for the symphony and the opera together. Eventually, he resigned from the symphony but continued with the opera.



The budgets in those days were fairly simple. Evelyn [Crockett] and Max [Azinoff] did the accounting. Howard's responsibility was as box office manager, which involved a lot of contact with subscribers and the community,

Crawford: Did he do some fund-raising, in a larger sense?

Mrs. Adler: Not that I can recall. He knew the donors, and made sure they got the seats they wanted. He also helped in planning subscriptions and determined seat assignments. And that's why he had the two jobs with the symphony and the opera, because then the box office handled all events which took place in the opera house. In those years the symphony also played in the opera house. He had little artistic input.

Crawford: But he had been close to Mr. Adler early?

Mrs. Adler: Oh, yes, because he had been there longer than almost any one else.

Crawford: Then he left the symphony and chose to stay with the opera?

Mrs. Adler: Well, I'm not sure it was a choice. I think the symphony wanted to have their box office separate from the opera's. Joe Scafidi became their manager. There was a lot of rivalry between the symphony and the opera. Each thought they were more important than the other.

Crawford: Yes, there was a lot of competition for top honors; you're right. Well, let's look at the function of administrator. I'm trying to get at how Mr. Adler relied upon his staff, how he related to his staff. You mentioned Richard Rodzinski, who must have been a key person.

Mrs. Adler: I would say that in the sixties, Kurt always was very much in command. And he had around him one or two people whom he relied on a lot for advice and artistic input, Paul Hager and Otto Guth.

#### Working out Rehearsal and Performance Schedules

Mrs. Adler: Gary Fifield had to carry out Kurt's wishes. He was the one who had to get the contracts out, make sure that the casting was completed, get the rehearsal schedule finished.

For years Kurt almost singlehandedly organized the rehearsal and performance schedules. He is an excellent proofreader--always finding errors in print or musical scores. Perhaps that same ability helped in planning schedules. His staff would make up a master schedule, and he would spend several hours rearranging and refining this complex jigsaw puzzle. In all those years I knew only one other person who could successfully make workable rehearsal schedules.

I learned from working in the rehearsal department how closely these things had to be meshed, for you had to make sure you used your full manpower at maximum efficiency for minimum expense. He was always concerned with getting the best results for the least dollars.

Crawford: So that he always had to oversee this?

Mrs. Adler: Always overseeing, even into the last years when it got to be terribly complicated and computers were used. I was always in awe watching him work on a rehearsal or performance schedule.

Crawford: And also working with directors--he made the comment that what the directors and designers gave him was always over budget.

Mrs. Adler: He constantly sought ways to cut budgets, especially scenery budgets, without sacrificing quality. He would hammer away at a problem until a solution could be found. He doesn't give up easily.

Crawford: How about casting?

Mrs. Adler: In the beginning, you were dealing with fewer people and fewer performances. And a lot of it could be done and was done at the last minute. But as it got more complicated, and artists became more sought after, it required working farther in advance.

The staff worked many long hours, and for most this was not just a job but a way of life. Very few were married or had families. They were dedicated and committed.

The Famous Revolving Door: Adler's Secretaries and PR Staff

Crawford: Various departments talk about the "revolving door," with the secretaries and the public relations people, for example. How much is there to that?

Mrs. Adler: Oh, that's the truth. Kurt is not easy to work for. He is terribly demanding. He demands the most out himself. His profession was a constant preoccupation. And he expected the same of the people working with him.

Crawford: That it be as close to perfect as possible?

Mrs. Adler: That they give as much as they could. And a lot of them just couldn't. That was the revolving door. It was difficult to find people who were that committed and that willing to give of their energy and their time. I believe that is why people burned out so fast. Some who had families found they couldn't do both.

Life with the Impresario: The Business of Socializing

Crawford: No, that was clear. Let's move on now to Mr. Adler as impresario. We've already talked about the time he spent with artists and the concern there, as they were performing in San Francisco. How much time was there for being with them in a social way, you as a couple, say?

Mrs. Adler: Oh, there was always some socializing. But again I go back to the feeling of commitment which brought us all together more often than normal working relationships. You know, we would spend whole days in New York with Otto Guth. He would show up for breakfast, and he didn't go home until after dinner. Otto was always charming and had a wonderful sense of humor.

It wasn't social in the sense of entertaining. Dinner conversation would focus on opera business.

Naturally, if you spend that much time with people, you eventually develop a relationship.

We would visit artists at their homes in Europe and entertain them here--when possible. Sometimes I considered certain social obligations as "occupational hazards." If a

consul general was giving a dinner party for some singers, you went. Period.

Crawford: And there must have been a good deal of that?

Mrs. Adler: There was, yes. Then artists were paid less here, so one wanted them to feel welcomed and comfortable. They enjoyed San Francisco for the most part. In the later years, if the social got in the way of the professional, which was Kurt, I got sacrificed for the social. [Laughter]

Crawford: You got assigned to do those things, run out to the consulate for dinners.

Mrs. Adler: Believe me, it could sometimes be tedious, especially night after night. But often it was great fun and unforgettable.

Crawford: I think that every artist interviewed said how welcoming San Francisco was.

Mrs. Adler: Yes, and that was an important reason for the social. If Richard Rodzinski and the Adlers ate dinner together, it was almost always because they were doing business over dinner.

### Singers and Temperament

Crawford: Were there artists who couldn't come up to Mr. Adler's standard, and who didn't sing here for that reason?

Mrs. Adler: Oh, surely. There were artists he just didn't strongly believe in. That wasn't true of the top artists. If somebody is at the top of their profession, there's a good reason why they're there. But there would be singers who Kurt felt didn't have what the San Francisco audience expected.

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Crawford: I guess you're saying the same thing, really, if the output, the working quality, the discipline, even if the voice might have been great, but if they're people who just felt they couldn't meet Mr. Adler's standards of perfection. Did many just walk out?

Mrs. Adler: Singers are considered very temperamental and I think the reason for that is simple. They are unlike any other

musicians, because they can't throw their instrument in the closet, slam the door and walk out. They live with their instrument forever and so they have to be terribly protective of it and themselves.

They are also public people, whose talent is always being scrutinized. They live, therefore, with a lot of tension, and some tend to be volatile--especially when there is a disagreement.

Crawford: So that might result in some simply not fulfilling their contract?

Mrs. Adler: Of course I saw arguments where contracts were broken. It might have been over the amount of compensation; it could have been over the fact that so-and-so won't sing with such-and-such conductor, they could have felt slighted in some way.

Today I think everyone makes an effort to try to be more agreeable and understanding. But I can't recall any singer with whom there wasn't friction at some time or another. It could have been for any reason.

Crawford: Well, if you can get two highly refined tempers like Mr. Adler's and, say, somebody like Jon Vickers, you could probably expect fireworks.

Mrs. Adler: Absolutely. Kurt has the same kind of temperament. If there was an argument, sparks would fly. I can remember, oh yes, real scenes, for all sorts of funny reasons. Often, Kurt had not the slightest idea that he had offended someone, regardless of their impression. Maybe he didn't stay long enough in their dressing room after the performance.

Crawford: Did you ever run interference?

Mrs. Adler: Often I was stuck in the middle of it, yes, on both sides.

Crawford: So add diplomat to your official titles.

Mrs. Adler: I would get involved now and then. Sometimes the singers, directors, or conductors would come to me complaining and crying. Or Kurt would sometimes send me into a dressing room because he didn't want to go. "You go down and see so-and-so."



Problems and Crises

Crawford: I'm sure you were very good at that.

What did he bring home from the office? What were the things that taxed him, if anything?

Mrs. Adler: Oh, mainly the pending issues of the day-to-day running of an opera company. If he didn't have his casting set, he would come home with the nagging questions about where in heaven's name was he going to find a Dorabella, or something like that. Or it might be that so-and-so had just quit, and who was going to take their place?

I can remember one very hot Indian summer fall night, when there had been a major crisis in the chorus. The chorus director then was Giannini. The union representative was Richard Stiles. He was an explosive guy, who had had an argument with Giannini. Stiles sent the chorus home--precious rehearsal time was lost over their personal clash. That one kept us up late that night.

Crawford: So the labor concerns did get to him?

Mrs. Adler: Oh, absolutely.

Crawford: People said he was such an expert in negotiating labor disputes.

Mrs. Adler: Yes. I think that one of the reasons he was a good negotiator was because he understood all aspects of the business and could empathize with the personnel. He was also clever at finding solutions to difficult problems.

Crawford: Yes. And he was trusted. From talking to the union people, they have all said that one thing.

Mrs. Adler: Well, he was fair. He asked for the maximum from everyone, but he never wanted to be unfair. And I think they sensed that. He respected their needs. But he surely wanted to get as much as he possibly could.



Running the Company: The Adler Qualities

Crawford: The qualities we've spoken about--the great energy and frugality with which Mr. Adler ran the company--are these characteristic of Mr. Adler in private life?

Mrs. Adler: The energy, yes. That exists in his whole being. But the frugality--he is not an extravagant person. He is cautious when it comes to money but not stingy. At the opera it wasn't his choice to be frugal. That was a necessity.

He was serious about his responsibility to maintain a balanced budget. Surely he always wanted to have more money, but without it he had to be vigilant because he knew perfectly well that others would spend it if they weren't held accountable. The frugality actually was almost a blessing. Nobody would ever want to admit it, but it forced innovation.

His attention to budgeting details, as well as his attention to artistic details no matter how small, was indicative of Kurt's style. The qualities that you talk about that he brought to the company were the same he lived with in his private life. The energy, the concern for prudent economy, the attention to detail and the quest for perfection were ingrained in his character.

[Something omitted from the tape here]

Crawford: Did you see any appreciable mellowing?

Mrs. Adler: Oh, I don't know. I think as the company changed, grew, developed, became important and developed its own style, it was less a mellowing and more a satisfaction that he was achieving, and could see the results of his efforts. Maybe that mellowed him, yes. But in my early years, there still was his determined effort to get this company where he wanted it. And as it got there--then maybe he relaxed. He's not the kind of guy who sits down and says, "Well, let's see, today we got to where we wanted to go." But as the successes mounted, I think that he sensed it, even if he didn't articulate it.

The Family

- Crawford: How about the children? What have they meant to him, in terms of his time now? I know that he devotes a great deal of time to them.
- Mrs. Adler: I think they've filled a very big gap, after he retired. All his time and his effort had been devoted to the San Francisco Opera family, now he had two young children to devote himself to. And he says it is a rewarding change.

Adler and the Press

- Crawford: What about the press?
- Mrs. Adler: His honesty got him in trouble with the press now and then. He told the truth. If he was angry with them, he told them that, which they didn't appreciate. Sometimes they would feel that they had been manipulated, and they disliked that, too.

On many occasions, I warned him that the press have the power of the printed word, and he didn't. I think they respected him and what he accomplished, but he could alienate them.

- Crawford: Are you talking about press conferences, when he would speak directly to the press?
- Mrs. Adler: No, I'm talking about a situation when Commanday, for example, would criticize a performance, Kurt would pick up the phone to complain--not very subtly, either. If he didn't like the what the critics said, he would say so.

He once hung up on Herb Caen. I happened to be in his office when he did that. And I said, "You have just written your obituary as far as Herb Caen is concerned."

- Crawford: But it didn't, really.
- Mrs. Adler: No, it didn't, because even if they might not have liked him, they admired what he achieved.

Crawford: They respected him.

Mrs. Adler: I believe so. He was never afraid to fight for his opera company.

Crawford: Did he read them all?

Mrs. Adler: Yes. Even the worst; he read it all. And he least liked being attacked unjustly. He would call Caen and he would say, "Herb, you can't do that." Herb doesn't like being told what he can or cannot do.

Crawford: When he would go into personalities, and so on?

Mrs. Adler: Yes. Probably his most famous battle with them was his disagreement with Stephanie von Buchau.

Crawford: About Rostropovich, that he should practice elsewhere, or something.

Mrs. Adler: Stephanie had written that Rostropovich shouldn't be here to practice conducting, but said it nastily. Kurt was not so much offended by her opinion as he was by her tone and her rudeness. He had her press pass revoked. The press went berserk. They concluded wrongly that he barred her from the opera house, and called him a dictator. But it wasn't true. She had her own season subscription. What he was saying was, "I will not give you the privilege of a free pass to come and insult people." He meant that the free press tickets are a courtesy to the media for which he expected in return a certain level of courtesy shown our visiting artists.

Crawford: Freedom of the press.

Mrs. Adler: Yes, you bet. He agreed she had the right of her own negative opinion, what he resented was her insulting, caustic rudeness.

Crawford: What happened?

Mrs. Adler: She got free passes again the next season because he felt he had--so to speak "punished the crime." Too much time was spent discussing that issue, which was blown out of proportion.

Adler and his Audiences

Crawford: How about all the audiences? Certain things that he has said in his tapes, as well as what he delivered to them, reflect his respect for the audience.

Mrs. Adler: Oh, he has great respect for the audience. He was very sensitive of his responsibility to give the audience what he perceived they wanted and deserved. Without an audience, it wouldn't exist. The audience is a part of the whole creation.

I can remember a certain occasion when they really behaved miserably. It could be frustrating, because everyone involved in any performance was trying their best to please the audience.

Crawford: What would they do?

Mrs. Adler: Once they yelled rude things to a singer. Ragnar Ulfung sang Ballo one year, and it didn't work. His was just not the right voice for Ballo in San Francisco, even though he had had tremendous success singing the same role in Stockholm in a very interesting production. Some also disliked his interpretation of the role. He was a great artist, and he contributed substantially over the years to the San Francisco Opera.

After one of his arias, someone yelled an obscenity, which upset the cast and ruined the remainder of the performance. That happened in part because our audience had come to expect a very high artistic level. They could be as excited negatively as they could be positively.

Crawford: And how did he react to that?

Mrs. Adler: Kurt knew Ulfung wasn't up to his par and obviously he was trying to make the best of a difficult situation. I found it curious that people would come up to him afterwards and say, "How could you have hired that man?" Opera fans are not always decorous and they are frequently fickle.

Crawford: Everybody makes mistakes.

Mrs. Adler: Well, of course. And was frustrating when people did that.

Crawford: How about his own conducting? Would he read the press after his own performances as well?

Mrs. Adler: Surely he did.

### On Conducting

Crawford: He has said, and I'm quoting here from a tape: "You can't count bars and dollars at the same time." Would he have wanted to conduct more, as general director?

Mrs. Adler: At the time he was appointed general director he was chorus director, which is a conducting job. He got caught up in running the company and as that grew his responsibilities increased. Before he knew it all conducting possibilities were sidelined. He was criticized for interfering with some of his conductors, or talking to the orchestra players circumventing the conductor; on occasion, he was frustrated if he felt that he could do better. Remember his musical training was in conducting.

As the company got bigger and more complex, it got more difficult to have total control of all of it. Then his desire to conduct became stronger, as his enthusiasm for running everything probably became less, because he could no longer do it alone.

### On Fund-Raising

Crawford: He has said that it was fund-raising that eventually just got to him.

Mrs. Adler: Fundraising was the thing he liked the least, and probably was the reason for his declining enthusiasm when the budget grew and fundraising demanded more and more of his attention.

Crawford: And he was very good at it.

Mrs. Adler: He was very good at it, but he didn't like doing it, probably because it's not in his nature to beg.

Crawford: Did he say that of himself, or Mr. Miller?

Mrs. Adler: Both. That's again where they were very similar. Kurt came from a family where he had everything he needed as a child--he



never had to wish for anything--which was the same for Robert Watt Miller. It was awkward for them to ask for money.

### An Offer from Karajan

- Crawford: He had mentioned that there was an offer from Karajan in Vienna in the early sixties--in 1962-63--to be the administrator in Vienna. Did he regret that? Did he ever express that to you?
- Mrs. Adler: Sometimes he regretted that he didn't pursue the Vienna job. There were times when he would get frustrated here, because he felt that opera as a performing art wasn't always respected enough. He knew in Vienna it would be. It is the most important thing in Vienna. And it isn't in San Francisco; it isn't in America. Naturally, in Vienna he would not have had to raise funds or skimp on productions.
- Crawford: But in retrospect, at this point, he probably doesn't--
- Mrs. Adler: I don't think so. I think that he realizes that if he had gone to Vienna that his career as an opera director, at least there, would never have been as long as it was here. Nobody's is! Karajan didn't stay.
- Crawford: And of course, government subsidization makes one's life easier.
- Mrs. Adler: Oh, yes and no. It would make the funding easier, but then the government also has a say in how the monies will be spent. I know in Munich, where Ronnie [Ronald Adler] works, for example, you have government employees in the opera house.
- Crawford: And they have a certain amount of artistic say?
- Mrs. Adler: Well, they have some say in production budgets, for example. They can veto new productions or refuse to pay certain fees for artists. So there are headaches that come with government subsidizations, too.
- Crawford: Mr. Adler conducted this year at Vienna. What did that represent for him?



Mrs. Adler: At least he fulfilled his childhood desire to at least once perform in the opera house in which he grew up. But the conditions were really pretty awful.

If it had been any other opera house in the world, he would have said, "No, I won't do it." But it was Vienna.

Crawford: It was the fact that it was his home.

Mrs. Adler: Yes, that's right.

Crawford: But he is conducting abroad a good deal.

Mrs. Adler: It's erratic--a series of engagements and then a quiet period.

Retirement and A New Era in Opera: A Business Without the Profession

Crawford: Is he happy with his decision to have resigned as general director?

Mrs. Adler: Well, I think for someone who devoted as much of his life to that job, it was very difficult to no longer have it. One day you're totally preoccupied with this--however you want to call it, monster--and the next thing, it's gone. So it wasn't an easy transition. I don't think it would be for anybody who put that much of their life into it.

Maybe it's different for somebody who goes and works from nine to five or does his job, takes his check, goes home and then has a whole other life. But with Kurt it wasn't that way.

Personally I think he left the opera at the right time, because it has become such an overwhelming and complex task.

Crawford: It's a different era, isn't it?

Mrs. Adler: Totally. Yes, it's a business. And I think it became far less fun in the last years, because it became a business. I mean, the professional side got less and less attention. It was the business side that became overwhelming.

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Mrs. Adler: But I'm not sorry. I've had great fun being a part of it. I loved it all. I think it's too bad, because I think that the audiences today just aren't having the fun that they could and did have at one time. I'm sure there are other people who would differ. Whenever I go to the opera, it's just a machine cranking this stuff out. It doesn't interest me as it used to. I may be wrong, but that's how I see it. And that's how I hear it when I talk to anybody who's in the business; that's all I hear from them.

Their frustration is that, in spite of each individual's efforts, the end production seems less cohesive, which is necessary to create the beauty. And I hear it from all sides, from anybody who is still involved in it, who was there early enough or long enough ago that had the experience of it the other way around.

Kurt Adler and Max Reinhardt: A Tremendous Hard-Working Ethic

Crawford: I wanted to ask you briefly about Mr. Adler's theatrical vision. How would you describe it, and where did it come from?

Mrs. Adler: Well, he always says it came from his years working with Max Reinhardt. Having not been there, I don't know, obviously.

Crawford: Does he identify with Reinhardt, do you think?

Mrs. Adler: I think Reinhardt was a mentor to him. He learned his theatrical values from Reinhardt. You know, we were in Salzburg two summers ago because Kurt was asked to participate in a symposium called the Salzburg Seminar, which is organized by Harvard University. It takes place in the old Reinhardt castle, which is the same one where they filmed The Sound of Music. Harvard owns it and maintains it as an Austrian national landmark. I think there were maybe eight men on this opera seminar staff who are recognized authorities in the business. Kurt was one, George Harewood was one, Michael Steinberg was one. The composer John Eaton was another. Students came from all over. For example, a woman who was a stage director in Poland, or the administrator of an opera company in Israel.

Kurt was the only one there who had known Reinhardt personally. And they were fascinated by his tales, because here they were all living for those two weeks in the Reinhardt house. The history of Reinhardt's career was all around them. So they were fascinated.

They had a session one afternoon when Kurt discussed Reinhardt and his experiences with him. The people who came as teachers of this seminar, and the students were very much interested. Kurt always said that his theatrical standards were modeled after Reinhardt's. Time and again he refers to the values he learned from him. I do know he emulated Reinhardt's tremendous, hard-working ethic. Reinhardt rehearsed incessantly until he got it the way he wanted it. Of course, unlimited rehearsal time was possible in those days.

The Adler Success: Building a Company

- Crawford: What would you guess Mr. Adler would consider his major successes with the company? And I don't mean that just in terms of productions.
- Mrs. Adler: That would be hard. I would have to go through the whole list of operas. I would say mainly that he built the San Francisco Opera from what was really a road-show company. When Merola ran it, productions were very simple and basic. Merola had obviously great finesse in casting, but I don't think he had a whole lot of care about much of anything else. Perhaps Kurt could be proudest of the fact that he built it into an organization of high standards, which had its own distinctive identity and style and which enjoyed a solid reputation.
- Crawford: In line with that, what do you think will be his overall impact on the history of opera?
- Mrs. Adler: Well, probably that he not only achieved what I just said, but he achieved it singlehandedly, for all intents and purposes. Today, I'm not sure that would be possible.

The Adler Standard

[Date of Interview 2: November 22, 1988]##

Crawford: We've talked about the development of San Francisco Opera. Did Mr. Adler consciously set out to build an empire?

Mrs. Adler: No. I never had the impression he started with or worked from a master plan. If you watched him at work, you realized that his ideas were spontaneous. He had high aspirations for the company but always wanted to reach beyond that.

For instance, in the sixties, his idea to perform outside the opera house and bring opera to the people in new venues and new formats grew from the protest movement. Although he wasn't politically active, the mood of the times probably gave birth to his idea to bring opera to the people, to take it out of its elitist confines in the form of Western Opera and Spring Opera Theater, Brown Bag, Opera in the Park, etc.

That was something he definitely did not envision when he first became General Director. He would get an idea and then go for it.

Crawford: What about the past? Did he talk about his past much?

Mrs. Adler: No. Certain things would remind him of the past every once in a while and then he would recall favorite memories, but he didn't dwell on it at all. As a matter of fact, I didn't know much about his past and I know his children don't know much about it. No, he was a person of the present and future. There was no doubt about that.

Crawford: Something that may have related to his background was his strong distaste for bad taste. Did he do things ever because they were fashionable in the sense of being trendy?

Mrs. Adler: No. He didn't believe in superficiality or trendiness. He was adamantly against anything that was in bad taste, and he had a good sense of what bad taste was.

I'm wondering if that came from his background. Where else it could have come from? He knew exactly what was correct, or what was appropriate. It must have been instilled in him as a child.

Crawford: It's fascinating, because outrageous things would be suggested to him and he would sometimes say, "okay." Like Orva Hoskinson streaking in The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein.

Mrs. Adler: He knew clearly how far you could go and how far you couldn't. He knew when something was in bad taste and beyond serving the purpose. Then he would put his foot down, sometimes vehemently.

After all, Jean-Pierre Ponnelle often did unconventional things onstage, and he would argue with Jean-Pierre when he went too far, but it was acceptable as long as it was consistent with the integrity of the piece. Like all of us, Kurt acquired his values from his upbringing and perhaps from his education.

He had some teachers in Vienna of whom he was very respectful. Wunderer was one, and those people must have imparted to him that kind of artistic integrity.

Crawford: And Reinhardt.

Mrs. Adler: Yes, as I mentioned, he said that about the years he worked for Reinhardt, who was unrelenting. He rehearsed, and he rehearsed, and he rehearsed, and if it didn't work this way he would tear it apart and start again and rehearse it one more time. Never giving up until it was right, in his opinion.

Of course those were different days, when one could afford the luxury of taking as much time as you wanted. He often talked about Reinhardt's perfectionism. Kurt was always very impressed with that.

Kurt was a perfectionist himself. He felt that something could always be improved; he never was satisfied with a halfway solution to anything, particularly in casting, for example. He never accepted the "status quo."

When we were traveling around Europe he would work tirelessly on casting (he was always thinking about casting). Telexes would go back and forth daily from wherever we were in Europe to San Francisco: "Who is possible for such and such a role?"



By return telex he would receive yet another long list of names for each role--as many as eight or ten names--and more frequently than not he would discard them just like that, saying, "No, still not the solution." Almost anybody else would have taken at least one of those names.

But he would go through name after name until you were sure there wasn't one left and he'd still cast about until he'd find what he wanted! He'd troupe off and listen to kids nobody had ever heard of before, singing the roles he was looking for, and sometimes he'd go through twenty-five names before he was satisfied. Often his staff was exasperated because they'd given him all these names and he wouldn't accept one. He was steadfast, if not stubborn, in his determination to find the best.

Crawford: After he had cast an opera, did he move on or did he worry about it?

Mrs. Adler: Well, especially in the later years when the demand for singers became greater and their availability became less, he was forced to compromise. But he was frustrated when he couldn't find his ideal solution.

Crawford: Did he ever have a formalized cover system?

Mrs. Adler: Towards the end he did, because the system began to change. Originally people would come to San Francisco to spend the whole season. Today they come for one role only and stay only for about a month. Before, you usually had somebody in another opera you could substitute at the last minute. Those were exciting, if exasperating, evenings when last-minute substitutions had to be made with no rehearsal. But Kurt liked taking risks and seemed to thrive on improvising solutions.

Crawford: He also had uncanny luck, didn't he?

Mrs. Adler: Well, he invented solutions that nobody would think of. When everybody else was just about to give up in despair he would come up with a clever resolution. He spent hours reading opera and music journals--hours. He noted names in these journals and when we went to Europe he made every effort to hear these new singers. He had a vast repository of possible names--mostly which he kept in his memory.

Crawford: How much did he rely on tapes?



Mrs. Adler: Almost not at all. He would rather send somebody he knew in Europe whom he trusted. For example, he didn't believe you could judge the size of a voice on tape. You certainly didn't know what you were looking at--what kind of personality this person might bring to the stage.

People sent him tapes but he seldom listened. Usually he let Richard Rodzinski, or whomever was his artistic assistant, listen. If Richard said, "this is interesting," maybe he would pursue it.

He did listen to tapes of new operas, because there was really no other way to hear them. He always read the score of a new opera, which he considered more important.

Crawford: How about the audition books he kept?

Mrs. Adler: They were extensive. He kept two kinds of books. Whenever he went on auditioning tours, and if I'm not mistaken, here in the opera house when he auditioned, he had little books which had especially been made by Colin Harvey for travel--little lightweight travel notebooks--and he had a very systematic way of recording an audition. He also wrote reports of all performances we heard when traveling--making comments about singers, conductors, stage directions, and sets, specifically noting any details he liked.

Later an agent would say, "you know, you heard Miss so-and-so and you liked her," and he would scrounge around in his book, flip pages and he'd answer, "No, I remember I didn't like her" and then he'd read why he didn't. He had similar books with all of his conversations and meetings when we traveled. Every important thing that happened in a meeting or on the phone was written down.

Crawford: He was first exposed to opera at a very young age when Franz Schalk let him come to rehearsals at Vienna Opera, and he said that even then he kept logs of what he heard.

Mrs. Adler: He has said that. I never saw them. But that is a habit he never stopped. He read six or so opera journals a month in different languages, and he read them from cover to cover, underlining names of people who sounded interesting. Even those who got bad reviews. It wasn't so much that he believed in reviews. He wanted to keep informed of new names.

Crawford: Did he have a photographic memory?

Mrs. Adler: He had an awfully good memory. I don't know if it was photographic. He was terrible about remembering names and faces--he never could remember the name that went with the face, but if an agent mentioned someone he would remember that he had read about that person. He had an uncanny memory for things he wanted to remember and a terrible memory for things he didn't want to remember!

Crawford: He always remembered the casts of operas he had seen decades before, it seemed.

Mrs. Adler: Yes, and he could remember every word of almost every opera there is in German. He learned them all as a child in German. We would sit in rehearsal and when it got really boring he would say the words in German---word for word the German texts.

Crawford: Did he work on scores always?

Mrs. Adler: Mainly when he conducted. If it was a new piece he would go through the score to familiarize himself with it to be prepared for rehearsals, but there were few he didn't already know.

I never saw him sit down and study the standard repertoire and even not-familiar repertoire. If there was an issue to discuss with a stage director, for example when should the curtain come down, he could go right to the score and by flipping a few pages find exactly where it was. He knew many scores thoroughly.

Crawford: So, when cuts were made--

Mrs. Adler: That's a good example. When there was a question about making cuts he knew the standard possible cuts and also which cuts had been used in previous years. The tendency to cut has changed over the years. During Kurt's tenure it became less possible to cut.

Kurt was flexible about making cuts as long as the cut was musically sensible. He would argue that they should be made dramatically logical and musically valid. He knew the operas such that he often discussed cuts with conductors, stage directors, etc. without having to consult the score.

Summing Up: The Formation of Kurt Herbert Adler

Crawford: What, in your opinion, formed Kurt Herbert Adler and what qualities do you think he engaged to build San Francisco Opera into what it later became?

Mrs. Adler: I obviously never knew his parents. I only met distant cousins of his. He spoke fondly of his father. But when it was a question of whom he emulated or learned from, it seems to me it was his uncle that he referred to more frequently.

His uncle, Otto Bauer, was a high-ranking official in the Austrian government, the brother of his mother. He admired his uncle, who was very much of a mentor to him.

Crawford: More than his mother or father.

Mrs. Adler: Yes. As a male role model, perhaps. This man was obviously a powerful person. When we were in Vienna he would contact a woman who had been very close to his uncle--his mistress, I believe.

He spoke at length with this woman every time we visited, until she died. He enjoyed reminiscing with her.

His uncle was in government at a time of tremendous tension and turmoil and political confusion. He held a powerful position and was widely respected.

Kurt admired his leadership ability and political savvy. As a youngster he revered these traits.

The capacity for leadership which he saw in his uncle is something that he definitely had, too. He was the leader, and he had a team around him, but he was always definitely, assuredly at the helm of the ship. It wasn't by coincidence

that he got nicknamed "the Boss." And he took total responsibility for both the failures and successes.

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Kurt Herbert Adler and the San Francisco Opera

Kristin Adler Krueger

A DAUGHTER GROWS UP IN OPERA

An Interview Conducted by  
Caroline Crawford  
in 1987







Son Ronald Adler (left) and daughter Kristin Adler Krueger (right), shortly after the general director and Nancy Miller Adler (second from left) were married, 1968.



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## INTERVIEW HISTORY--Kristin Adler Krueger

Kristin Adler Krueger is a small blond woman with her father's quick blue eyes, sharp sense of humor, and forthrightness. Born in 1942 in Chicago during the time Kurt Herbert Adler was chorus director of the Chicago Opera, she remembers in this interview her childhood in San Francisco and the many hours around the opera house where the family spent most of the time they had together. She also remembers her mother's various duties at the opera house, which included taking dinner to her husband on the streetcar and filling Box A with dignitaries, potential donors, and assorted opera patrons.

During her childhood years the Adler household accommodated the general director's fourteen-hour days, a schedule she thought altogether ordinary: "I had no idea there were normal, non-artistic people and peaceful lives. I took it at first as children do: That's the way life is." Summing up her life with her father she says, ". . . There may have been negative things along the way, but the entire result was so positive."

Kristin Krueger and her husband (she has been married for fifteen years to former 49er Charlie Krueger, professional football's great defensive tackle) own and operate a liquor store in Concord. Their home is in Clayton, close to the Marsh Creek Road, where she remembers speeding along in a succession of convertibles with her father between the San Francisco Opera House and the Pacific Music Camp in Stockton.

Kristin Krueger and her father are very close today, a relationship, she says, that began for her only in her thirties, and she shares with Kurt Herbert Adler and believes she inherited from him a drive for achievement and perfection and a tendency to thrive on crisis.

Interviewed at my home in San Francisco, Mrs. Krueger added some material and edited the transcript slightly.

Caroline Crawford  
Interviewer/Editor

May 1989  
Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library  
University of California, Berkeley





BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please print or write clearly)

Your full name Kristin Adler Kueger

Date of birth 7/22/42 Place of birth Chicago IL

Father's full name Kurt Herbert Adler

Birthplace Vienna Austria

Occupation General Director Emeritus - San Francisco Gen.

Mother's full name Dorothy Wirtel Adler

Birthplace Indianapolis, IN

Occupation Writer Music Teacher Novelist

Where did you grow up? San Francisco

Present community Clayton

Education Went to Oregon 2 years, University of Canada 2 yrs.

BA from University of California Berkeley

Occupation(s) Stage Director

Special interests or activities Music, Outdoor Activities



Childhood Recollections

[Date of Interview: May 27, 1987]##

Crawford: Let's begin with your telling me something about your background.

Krueger: Vis-à-vis my father, you mean?

Crawford: Your own background and, of course, as it relates to him.

Krueger: We commuted from San Francisco to New York for six or seven years. I was born in Chicago, as was my brother sixteen months later, so there were a couple of stops in Chicago, but the rest was commuting. We either drove across country, or I have a recollection of my mother taking the two little kids in a very small room on a Pullman train.

The commutes weren't wonderful, but I do have a couple of fond memories. One time the whole family drove cross country, and we had time to stop for a few days in Arizona on a dude ranch, The Flying E Ranch. I don't know how long the stay was, but Ronnie and I were allowed to gather the eggs from the chickens--a treat for a couple of city children.

Then from age seven on, we stayed put in one house in San Francisco, as opposed to the first seven years where we moved sixteen times or something outrageous like that.

Some of my fondest memories in connection with my father are from Pacific Music Camp. He started going over to Stockton long before I got involved with the camp, which was in high school. I can remember carrying his scores around there just like I did at the opera house--like a dutiful daughter, which I wasn't all the time.

Crawford: Were you at the opera house a lot?

Krueger: Oh yes, both Ronnie and I were. We were requested, I'd like to say requested, but we were required to take Italian lessons at

home so we could speak to singers. I mentioned to you that I was learning gerunds in Italian before I knew what they were in English.

I don't know how much Italian stayed with me, but I did major in French in college, so the languages rubbed off. Ronnie also has a very good ear for languages and he obviously uses it in his business a lot. I don't need French much for the liquor store, but it did get me to Europe for my junior year! [laughs]

Crawford: Did your father speak to you in Italian when you were taking lessons?

Krueger: No. He would occasionally speak to us in German, but he didn't push it then: I don't know why. As I look back on it, I think it's kind of surprising, and I think he regrets it. Ronnie has no trouble with German of course; he practically thinks in German, and I took some in school and can understand what people are saying.

Part of it was that we didn't see our father that much growing up, and it was often at the dinner table when we were together, so I can ask for the salt and pepper in German, but that's about the extent of it. Also when he was home he would talk over the problems of the day and what was coming up.

I was telling Nancy that one of the problems of my childhood was that we ate between rehearsals, and had to eat fast. I had to learn to eat at a normal pace like a normal human being when I got older. As children, we had to wait to eat 'til he came home and then we just inhaled; that was the only time the family was together really. He was always in a hurry and then would go back to the opera house.

Crawford: Did that change at all during the off-season?

Krueger: After the season he and our mother would go to Palm Springs for a week, but we had to stay in school. If I tell of my childhood memories, I remember that my poor mother used to have to put together Halloween costumes in the middle of all her other duties, getting ready to go to Los Angeles for the season there. She would go down to the Shrine, and then they would go on vacation in Palm Desert. We were fairly young when they started going to Europe in January for opera business.

There were some vacations when we were young. I remember going up to Drakesbad in Lassen County, where we stayed in tents or wooden cabins and rode horses. That was fun, because everyone was peaceful. It must have been at the beginning of

summer, because soon after rehearsals would start for fall season. We also went to the Carmel Valley a few times.

Crawford: So your father took that time with the family?

Krueger: Yes, but he commuted sometimes. He'd come back down to San Francisco and then drive up again. He loved to drive and was a speedy driver. Going to Pacific Music Camp, he used to go out Marsh Creek Road to Stockton, the back road out by Walnut Creek, because he could tear through there. Now our house is there! There was no freeway there in the 1950s.

Crawford: Did he have his red Mercedes then?

Krueger: No, the Mercedes was later. He had two Thunderbird convertibles, a Buick, an Oldsmobile convertible, etc. Nancy was asking him why he turned in his cars so often, and he said they wore out, but I think it was because he just liked to change cars.

One time I picked my parents up at the airport and he sat in the back seat and had the nerve to say, "Where did she learn to drive so fast?" As if he never had a ticket--he talked himself out of many tickets and nonetheless received lots of them.

Crawford: Other than music camp, what was your exposure to music as a child?

Krueger: There was music in our house all the time. We had three pianos, and Ronnie and I both played, although Ronnie gave up early on and picked it back up when he was sixteen or seventeen.

When learning scores, my father used to be in front of his music stand with the record player going AND the radio with the San Francisco Seals baseball game on it.

Then I was in Hansel and Gretel, which my father conducted at Stern Grove in 1947. I had to go through the ranks, first as one of the fourteen little angels. Then I graduated to head angel the following year, while Sabrina forty years later stepped right into the role of head angel in the Marin Opera production he conducted.

Also Ron and I were supers in La Bohème and required to donate our dollar earnings to a musician's fund.

Crawford: You were at Stern Grove when Maestro Merola died. What are your recollections of that day?



Krueger: To be honest, my mother and I were getting a hot dog when it happened. We heard the crash on the microphone when Maestro Merola collapsed. It was extremely traumatic. The rest of the day, Ronnie and I were sent outside because the phone was constantly ringing with important decisions to be made.

Now I go to Stern Grove concerts, and I know people enjoy them; however, I still have a mental block when my father conducts there. I think a psychiatrist could have a wonderful time with it--although it's very obvious.

Maestro Merola's death changed our lives considerably. My father started his uphill climb, and I must say it took him away from us. Our relationship has really been from my age thirty on, because I spent some time rebelling and he had to devote all his time to the opera. Prior to his promotion, he had to spend a lot of time at rehearsals and performances, but nothing compared to his work as artistic director.

I must say I had tremendous pride in him the whole time, regardless of what it did to the family; it didn't help family life, because we didn't spend any time together, but what he created was very worthwhile. I grew up thinking he was a god--that he could do anything he put his mind to. He was tenacious, to put it mildly.

I remember he conducted at the old Conservatory of Music on Sacramento Street. I took classes there on Saturday mornings and had Josefa Heifetz as one of my teachers for a theory class. He also conducted the childrens' concerts at the opera house. At that time I could still enjoy them, but after a while I got very personally involved. That is one of the reasons, I think, that throughout my life I am constantly looking for errors. I can't just sit and enjoy a performance, because at dress rehearsals we were brought up to look for things that needed to be corrected.

Crawford: Did he ask you to do that?

Krueger: I don't know that he asked us per se, but having watched him prowl the aisles of the opera house picking out the one wrong thing--the one pair of black socks out of twelve brown pairs, like Ronnie says--he would find it, and it got to where that was what you did at performances--you looked for problems.

I have season tickets now and still can't just go to a performance and say, "Okay, sit back and enjoy this." I remember in a Traviata dress rehearsal I noticed that the

flowers had been used in the bedroom and then again in a later scene. When I told my father, he shrugged me off. The next thing I heard he was chewing out somebody saying, "Those flowers--you have to find some different ones!" [laughs]

Crawford: You spoke of rebelling. What form did this take?

Krueger: Well, quite honestly, I think we just went in different directions. I pursued normal teenage activities and then went off to college in Oregon for a couple of years, off to Europe for a year, and then came back to finish college at UC Berkeley. I assume he knew I wasn't around, but he was just so busy--

### Paternal Grandparents

Crawford: Let's take a different direction here. What do you know of your father's background?

Krueger: Very early on, there was no doubt that he was extremely intelligent and very musically inclined. His mother pushed him--there is no other way to say it. They were in a position to be associated with people who could help him. It wasn't only his mother; he had his own drive and knew where he wanted to go. Being an intelligent person, he headed for it.

I don't know if anything was luck for him--as being in the right place at the right time. I think he made his own opportunities, aside from Maestro Merola dying, of course. That was not scheduled. He was already in a position there where he was helping Merola, and he just went on from there.

About his formative years, I don't know as much as I should. He didn't talk about them when we were growing up, because he was so engrossed in the here and now, and that was what was important to him. He simply had to devote all his energies to the company. He didn't have time for the recollections.

I know of his uncle, Otto Bauer, although I can't tell you very much about him. He was head of the Social Democratic Party and later the first Secretary of Foreign Affairs of the Austrian Republic. He evidently was exceptionally intelligent. I know his mother was a very strong influence. I've heard this from my godfather, Martin Magner, who at eight-seven is still directing at a playhouse in Southern California. My father still is in

touch with old family friends like Margit Pessl, now Cartright, in the East.

Crawford: From Vienna.

Krueger: Yes. Her sister Jella Pessl, whose name I remember growing up, was a harpist. One thing I will say is that he is very loyal. He still has the same friends--this Margit Cartright, Martin Magner, Walter Strauss, Lotte Zuber, who was the first woman he said he ever slept with. The story is that they both fell asleep in kindergarten and were caught! But here they are in their mid-eighties, still friends, and my father still talks to them regularly.

Crawford: How about Ernst Adler, your grandfather?

Krueger: I only knew later of how he died. I knew my grandmother because she lived with us in New York, but he had died before, and there was never any discussion about him. I knew my mother's parents because they were alive and came around. My maternal grandmother died at ninety-three, and grandfather, eighty-two. But the paternal grandfather--I have seen a picture, and that's it.

Crawford: You visited your father's home in Vienna.

Krueger: Yes. We just passed by, twenty-five years ago when I was in school in Europe. I met my parents for Christmas and traveled from Rome to Milan to Vienna. That's when I got my real insight into what kind of drive the man had, because he went from morning to midnight and didn't stop. If he wasn't at the theater, he was on the telephone and at meetings.

His energy level was just phenomenal, and it was always like that. Oh, sometimes at home he took a Sunday off and we would take a Sunday drive. Maybe you as a child enjoyed such drives, but Ronnie and I really didn't get too carried away with driving someplace, putting a couple of deck chairs out and looking at the scenery, which was what he enjoyed doing. That's about the only time I remember him sitting still.

Crawford: Where did you go?

Krueger: We drove off to Tamalpais and maybe to Sonoma or to Santa Cruz. It was long before the freeways, and I can remember us children sitting up on the back of the convertible with the traffic at a dead stop on Sunday afternoon.

But back to his parents, I don't know much about his father. Reading the first chapters of this oral history, he didn't give that much mention to his father even in that. The mother, though, obviously had the strongest influence and was ambitious for his success. I've heard stories about his not being able to play after school because she was waiting for him at the bus stop so that he could go in and practice the piano and do his studies.

Crawford: What was she like as an elderly lady?

Krueger: Well, you're right, she seemed elderly, although she was only sixty-three, which to me at age forty-four doesn't seem too elderly.

I remember her mostly when she was ill, but I have heard stories of her convoluted journey to the United States, which took some doing. I'm not sure to whom my father spoke to get the visa resurrected, because otherwise she could have stayed in Casablanca. My mother said that had she lived, I would likely have been spoiled as the oldest grandchild.

Crawford: She had some Jewish ancestry; was she forced to leave Austria and then France?

Krueger: I don't know, very honestly; that was something that never got discussed in our house. I know that everything was taken from them, because she came over with next to no jewelry.

I have also learned that she became Lutheran when she married my grandfather, and that they were well-to-do, because they had somebody for the baking, somebody for the cleaning, and a governess for my father, so they were not suffering prior to the war. Also I heard that my grandfather could afford to hire an orchestra to play music he himself composed; music my father called "lousy."

Crawford: He also mentioned being born at home, which he said had to do with being part of a family of means.

Krueger: My husband was born at home too, but that had nothing to do with being a family of means! [laughter]

The Adler Household in San Francisco

Crawford: How do you think he brought to bear his own education on yours and Ronnie's? We've talked about languages--he learned four at home--and he also went through grammar school in four instead of five years. Did he promote this with you?

Krueger: No. In grammar school there had been discussion of skipping me, and it was decided not to. I don't know why; they just didn't do it for me. In our house, the best grades were taken for granted. It was only when the first B arrived that I heard about grades.

Crawford: Was he strict?

Krueger: Absolutely. He'll deny it. He choked the other night at the dinner table, saying, "You really think I was strict when you were growing up?" Maybe in his eyes, he wasn't strict; it was just the way you did things.

In his house, you did certain things and it was automatic and there was no discussion. We were fortunate that my mother was more malleable, and eventually he wasn't home enough to enforce everything he probably would have liked to enforce, but he made his presence known.

He's not nearly as strict now, I must say, with the two youngest kids. I explained to them when they were about four or five months old how my brother and I had paved the way for them. He was recently telling a story of coming out of Long's Drugstore considerably poorer than he went into it because the kids wanted some toys. He explained, "I had to buy them." That is a switch from the old days!

Crawford: Mr. Adler has said that his father had one of the first private cars in Vienna, but that he kept it at the factories in order not to spoil his son. Was that his approach to raising you and Ronnie?

Krueger: Yes. He was never ostentatious about anything. He liked to live comfortably, but there was never any push to move on to bigger and better houses, that kind of thing--not that he spent any time in the houses. The first house he bought is the one in Marin.

Crawford: So you didn't own the Palm Avenue house?



Krueger: No, and I'm sure we could have bought it many times over. My husband and I were driving by one day, and Charlie stopped and asked the people in front if I could see the house, since I hadn't been back since I was twenty-one. They said, "Oh, is this Mr. Adler's daughter?" I don't know if they bought it right after we left or not.

Crawford: Do you think he didn't buy a home because he thought he might move on?

Krueger: I don't know. I always heard he was going to die in his chair at the opera. I don't know whether he was threatening us with that or what! [laughs] He said so over and over, and I realized when he retired that he fortunately wasn't telling the truth!

Crawford: The house in Vienna, he has mentioned, was full of artists and prominent people. Was that true of your home in San Francisco?

Krueger: No, here it was less social. I can remember having one or two big bashes annually at our house. Paul and Ghita Hager were in the house and another couple who were close friends, Masha and Dr. Angel Gropper. I remember the first time I saw Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, he was in his pajamas getting up off the couch at the Gropper's house. They had a lot of people there, but we didn't have so many at our house.

Crawford: What did he bring home from the opera?

Krueger: He had to have a sounding board, which my mother was, obviously. He talked a lot about the problems there and that's one thing Ronnie and I learned to keep still about. I learned the hard way, because I made a comment to the principal of my grammar school, Mrs. Roth, about Joan of Arc, which was on the drawing board to do here with Lee Marvin and Dorothy McGuire.

I said at the dinner table that I had mentioned Joan of Arc and then learned in no uncertain terms that you do not repeat anything heard at home about San Francisco Opera.

Crawford: What do you remember of the crisis times?

Krueger: In 1954, there was a crisis about Mado Robin singing a high E in Rigoletto. Maestro Cleva insisted he would not conduct if she were to sing it; Karl Kritz was ready to step in. In the end, she sang it, and Cleva did conduct after all.

Then life was somber right before the 1957 season when La Callas played scandalous games and did not come to San Francisco



Opera despite her contractual agreements. Fortunately, Leyla Gencer and Leonie Rysanek were able to take over in Lucia and Macbeth, respectively.

Another grave period was the cancellation of the 1964 season and subsequent negotiations with Mayor Jack Shelley and Robert Watt Miller. There was a happy ending to that difficulty, and the shows did go on.

Robert Watt Miller and Kurt Adler:##

Crawford: I'd like to know your impressions of Mr. Miller.

Krueger: My father had a tremendous respect for him because Mr. Miller knew opera. I think they worked well together. I would hear stories about the board and I think my father more or less led the way. I don't think they ever put their feet down. He knew what he was doing, and I think they knew that; certainly Mr. Miller did. The only time Mr. Miller did say no was to Wozzeck in the '50s; by 1960 the answer was yes and it was a resounding success.

Mrs. Miller (now Cooper) is still a presence in the opera house. She has always been such a gracious lady. She was always so kind to my mother, and they got along well.

Crawford: Was Robert Watt Miller at your home often?

Krueger: No. We didn't fraternize. It was an ongoing business relationship, and they met at a lot of parties and such. My father loves to tell how Mr. Miller often called him Mr. Adler in spite of all their years working together.

Diantha Adler

Crawford: And vice versa. Let's talk about your mother.

Krueger: She grew up in a small town in Illinois, and was very musically inclined. My parents met when my father conducted an orchestra in which she was playing. We knew she was bright; however, I didn't find out until after she died that she qualified for Mensa. She had taken a home test and never said a word to us

about it. So obviously she was bright and had a tremendous retention and did a lot of work for and with my father.

I don't know if this is supposed to go into the archives, but I have visions of her sitting in the bathroom with her note pad while my father was shaving, and that's where a lot of business was transacted.

Crawford: What sort of notes would she be taking?

Krueger: Maybe what he needed to talk to somebody about or be sure to write to somebody, whatever he needed to remember to do at the opera house.

Crawford: Would she then type up those notes?

Krueger: I don't know if she transcribed them later or just reminded him. When they traveled, she helped him extensively, because she kept very good notes. I know Nancy did later too.

Crawford: Was she at the opera house a lot?

Krueger: Oh, yes. She used to take meals to him on the streetcar from Parnassus Street in the early days, when he couldn't get home. She didn't drive until I was a teenager.

I don't know when she jumped into Box A so to speak, but then it became her job to keep the thing filled. I don't know if I'm allowed to put this in--but we had a list of "AFs," which was a list of "available fannies," in case someone cancelled!  
[laughs]

Something funny about that box--I grew up in that box, and never really realized what the entire stage looked like. I only had that third, or two-thirds, vision of the stage and never could see what was going on stage right.

Crawford: Were you an "AF"? How often were you in the box?

Krueger: No, by the time I was old enough, I was not around that much. I was in the house more when I was younger and then later when I actually enjoyed going to performances.

In 1977 when my father conducted Masked Ball, I put eleven hundred miles on my car from Clayton, which is only forty-five miles from the opera house. I rebelled at a younger age because if you put me in the box and said, "Sit there and enjoy it," I wouldn't.

Crawford: But you came out loving opera.

Krueger: Oh, yes. My father was speaking at a Wagner Society luncheon, and all of a sudden I heard him introduce me and say, "She's an opera freak." I don't know where he got that from. Perhaps it's because I still go to the opera now.

Crawford: Filling Box A must have taken a lot of your mother's time. Do you recall her doing that task at home?

Krueger: Yes. I can remember her on the phone when she was not wild about whomever she was talking to. She had a wonderful sense of humor and would mimic that person.

As the season grew longer and longer, it got more difficult and I believe the secretaries helped her. Politics had to be played and she was smart enough to know she had to do it, but I'm not sure she enjoyed it that much, very honestly.

Crawford: Did she go to all the performances?

Krueger: Oh, she went to all the performances, although she might not always stay in the box. I think there were times when she snuck out in the halls, but mostly she sat through all of the performances.

I remember Tuesday and Friday nights you had to get Daddy's tails or tux out and her dresses, because those were dress nights. I think it's down to Tuesday nights now, but it was two nights when she was going.

Crawford: She was a musician and a writer in her own right. How did she find time to do these things?

Krueger: She wrote her first book at the laundromat! For some reason we didn't have a washing machine, and so she would take the laundry; that was her only peaceful time. Nobody was yanking on her. I remember the call I got in college that she had sold her book to Dodd, Mead. She subsequently sold another one called The Violin Case Case.

Crawford: These were children's books?

Krueger: Yes. Although not written for adults, I must confess I enjoy reading them. The first one was En Garde, which used her fencing knowledge, since she had fenced in high school and college.

She was still playing viola in the Las Vegas Symphony before she died and teaching violin to young kids. I think it drove her a little crazy. She moved there in 1969 and lived there until she died.

Crawford: You and Ronnie have said how well your mother could tell opera stories. Do you want to read the poem you have that she later wrote you about?

Krueger: This was at a luncheon, and her letter to me said, "the decorative theme was for Carmen, black and gold fans among red carnations." She wrote, "During the speeches I wrote this and circulated it to appreciative stars surreptitiously."

Carmen leaps from bed to bed, she swings from man to man.  
Changing pals and scenery, as often as she can.  
Here we sit in fancy hats, the picture of propriety,  
Nibbling rice and chicken bits, like pillars of society.  
But yet, we're honoring Carmen, and from this my simple  
hunch is,  
Up with misbehavior and down with ladies' lunches.

This is typical of her whole attitude. She did all the things required of "the wife of," but perhaps not easily, because of her upbringing. I think Nancy had been around the environment and been backstage even before she and my father got married in 1965, so she was able to jump into the middle of it with both feet, which she did do.

Crawford: What do you mean by your mother's upbringing? She was musical.

Krueger: Oh, sure, the musical part was fine, but I'm talking about the society part of it and the politics. That's not putting her down, I think she did the best job she could and many people loved her because she was a gracious hostess.

Crawford: When she went to the opera house, who stayed with you?

Krueger: By that age, my brother and I could stay by ourselves, which was fortunate since it was five nights a week.

Crawford: Was there any religious education in the family?

Krueger: I think I went on my own to St. John's Presbyterian Church on Lake Street. I passed it coming here and recalled playing "Onward Christian Soldiers" when my hands weren't big enough for the octaves. I think I helped play with the children's choir. I went and got hats for Easter services; that's about it.

Crawford: How about politics?

Krueger: I don't remember much discussion. My father and I have differing views right now.

Crawford: Is he political?

Krueger: Not actively, but he is considerably more liberal than I am, and my godfather is extremely liberal [Martin Wagner], so I don't know that he realizes it, but we stay away from politics. Consciously on my part; I don't know about his. It really didn't come up; elections were usually when the company was down south anyway. I think they must have voted absentee.

#### Memories of Gaetano Merola

Crawford: We haven't talked much about Mr. Merola.

Krueger: He had a wonderful Italian accent, and used to call my father "Adelair." He came to my aid once when I didn't really realize it. I had cheated on a contest--a "draw your favorite animal contest." I had had a shot and was shaky because I had a reaction to penicillin. I traced some animals on tracing paper--it was blatant cheating. Later I listened to Jolly Bill on the radio and he said that Kristin Adler had won a dog. My father didn't believe me, and Merola said, "Give her the benefit of the doubt--maybe she's telling the truth!" The dog was named Bozo by my father. Later he realized the spelling should have been Buoso (as in Donati) and was the wrong character anyway; poor Buoso should have been Simone. The dog stayed with us for eleven years. As for Mr. Merola, he was always very kind to me and Ronnie.

Crawford: How much did you see of Merola when he was alive?

Krueger: Just in passing at the opera house when we'd take dinners to my father. He would be in and out of the office.

I remember that when he collapsed he was conducting excerpts from Butterfly. Within a week or two, my father conducted a Butterfly at the opera house in his memory and there was not a dry eye in the house. Albanese put her heart and soul into it because they had worked together for so long. It was one of those experiences you just don't forget. I probably have had only two or three operatic experiences like that.



A Father's Advice

Crawford: What advice did your father give you?

Krueger: Oh, let's see. One time I was singing with a Sutherland recording and he said, "Don't let her get voice lessons!" I was not allowed to take up the violin because he was not going to tolerate a beginning violinist in the house. That's how I ended up playing the flute, which I much prefer anyway. Thirty-eight years later he steered Sabrina away from the violin, too.

I don't remember him saying anything, but I had decided that music was going to be solely for enjoyment. It looked like too tough a life, frankly.

Crawford: Did that disappoint him?

Krueger: If it did, he never said anything because he never said to me as a child that he expected that. Probably if he had said that somewhere along the line, I would have attempted to be a dutiful daughter.

I did play the piano and enjoyed it. That was probably at his urging. But then I was of the era when you took piano lessons and you went to dancing school. That doesn't happen anymore. More and more kids look at a piano as a nice piece of furniture, and that's about it. But I enjoyed practicing, and somewhere my father passed on the compulsiveness to get things done. There's a real satisfaction for me in accomplishment.

I went back and played the flute in a local Concord community band for a while, but I didn't have enough time to go every week and then go to all the performances. I did play the piccolo one night at a rehearsal and we did The Stars and Stripes; I got through it the first time and then made a mistake when we went through it again. I absolutely blew it and got the entire front row of woodwinds laughing.

The piccolo was tough for me. I have recollections of music camp and of Konstantin Bakaleinikoff, who did music for movies in Hollywood. He was conducting his brother Misha's symphony (maybe I've mixed up the brothers) and I was playing the piccolo and having a terrible time. Finally he stopped the rehearsal and said, "You know, you look so cute with that, why can't you play it?" Because I didn't want to--they made me play it. I think I told you the story about music camp when I played a full half tone sharp without moving the flute because I was so scared of my father, who was our conductor.



My father's advice was that you must do your best in whatever you do.

Crawford: How was it when he was on the podium and you were playing?

Krueger: Extremely nerve-wracking! But he pulled the most incredible things out of kids, when anybody else would have said they couldn't do it. It was just a bunch of amateur, high-school kids--maybe a little more advanced than your local high school orchestra, but under him we did The Reformation, the Fourth Brahms and the Borodin B minor. It had a definite influence on me.

He'd go between opera rehearsals to Stockton from the opera house just to rehearse, and then come back to the opera house, and then come back for two long rehearsals, and then go back to San Francisco. It was an insane schedule, but he would do it, and he enjoyed it. He always insisted that nothing was impossible.

Crawford: How was he as a conductor?

Krueger: Fine. You knew he was in total control. There was no question. We had varying degrees of abilities in our guest conductors, and he was a pleasure to play under. He was very generous, and he would never say anything to me directly. Occasionally it was "first flute, this, or first flute that." Then one time I remember he said to the cello, "You've got to play a little softer, that's my daughter playing the solo." But that's the only time in three years he ever referred directly to me.

#### Kurt Herbert Adler as Maestro

Crawford: Do you think he wanted to conduct more than he did?

Krueger: Oh, absolutely. That's basically his first love, but he had to pour all his energy into the administrative part of his career.

I've been reading about Beverly Sills recently--she did a couple of interviews for her new book, and she said that Mr. Adler said you have to run a company autonomously. He said that and believed it and did it. I believe he knew what was going on in that house from top to bottom and it showed. You don't just get a world-renowned opera house without doing that.

It takes such phenomenal energy to conduct, and you can't really do both. He had no time to learn scores as he wanted. In the European houses, I guess the administrative duties generally are broken down differently, although some administrators are conducting and theoretically running the opera house, but I don't know how you do that. And of course my father didn't delegate a lot of authority--I don't think that's any secret. [laughs]

The Later Years: A New Family

Crawford: How about his retirement? That apparently came as a surprise to you.

Krueger: To a point, that's true. However, he went through an evolution particularly in the last years. Having Sabrina on hand and maybe wanting to watch her grow up, he needed time, and there just wasn't much left over when he was general director.

It tugged at my heartstring when he retired, yes. Marilyn Mercur had asked if I wanted some tapes when he retired and I said that I would like that Forza and the Ballo that he had conducted but I didn't take the Carmen because I just couldn't deal with it at the time. I finally got the tape last year, years after he had retired. The Carmen tape has become a real treasure since he and I listened to it together when we recently came back from his conducting Fledermaus in Fresno.

Somehow that last performance--being in the box for the last time, watching him as both general director and conductor for the last time--was very emotional for me.

Crawford: How was it for him at that point?

Krueger: Like everything he does, he had thought it through. He thought it was time, I'm sure he misses running the house, but I don't know how long he could have gone on putting that kind of energy into it.

I think he developed a tremendous loyalty in people. You might complain about him a lot, and again it's no secret that a lot of people bitched about him. He was a tough taskmaster, demanding artistic integrity, but the results I think justified the means.

It's unfortunate that you have to drag quality out of people by that method, but he got what he wanted by the best method he knew. He still has a phenomenal following among people who, again, maybe have a love-hate relationship with him. Heaven knows he could be so angry, although he was right most of the time.

Crawford: How would you describe his personality?

Krueger: I have visions of him prowling through the opera house--he was so involved with every facet of it--with all of his medals and his tails, poking around every part of the opera house. He was there, and I think probably when he wasn't there in person, he was there. His personality was so strong that I think even if he wasn't standing next to you, you knew he was around and expected something. And people gave it.

On a very different level, he has become "Daddy" to me since he retired and has had more time for personal relationships.

### The Adler Temperament

Crawford: How about the temperament?

Krueger: That's a tough thing, because some of the qualities aren't necessarily admirable, but again, I think the ends justified the means. He would probably tell you he isn't temperamental, but that isn't quite accurate....

Crawford: He has said that he created crises; that in the atmosphere of a crisis people respond, so that when there wasn't a crisis, he produced one.

Krueger: Well, he passed that on to me, unfortunately, and I had to unlearn it. It drains you! I don't know if you ever read Your Inner Child of the Past, but one thing that comes out is that you always resort to the "comfort zone of your childhood," whether that comfort zone was comfortable or not. Our comfort zone was growing up with crises and so he passed that on to me, so I functioned best under pressure. He functioned that way very well and heaven knows he had enough crises. The crises came home, because obviously he had to have a sounding board. He would go back to the opera house and resolve the crisis; it was that simple. We grew up in a state of tension, and that was my comfort zone for a long time. That's how it was.

Crawford: What would you choose as your father's most special qualities?

Krueger: I guess loyalty and the fact that he operated according to what he thought was right. He was committed to the truth and paid such close attention to the details. He believed that people should be their best. His story about "Nothing is impossible," we heard more than once, although I've also heard him yell, "Impossible!" [laughs] He always displayed his strength in heading toward what he felt was right.

Another special quality was his belief in and dedication to young artists. He has helped foster an incredible number of careers. He wanted the world of opera to continue and flourish.

He created a special aura for us growing up. I took it at first as children do as, "That's the way life is." I had no idea there were quote normal, non-artistic people, and peaceful lives. I didn't learn otherwise until I was an adult. But he gave us something so special with the appreciation of music and the opera, and then giving us some treasured memories along the way--the wonderful Forza--I can't tell you how special that moment was. His seven Meistersingers conducted at age eighty-one were monumental achievements.

I was so impressed with him and proud of him when he conducted and with what he gave to San Francisco and the rest of the world. That's a very positive thing--and while there may have been negative aspects along the way, the end result was positive. There were people who helped him along the way, but he was the spearhead behind what he created.

Crawford: Who did he rely on most?

Krueger: In the early years, Paul Hager, Otto Guth, Mr. Miller, Jean-Pierre Ponnelle; these were people whose thread remained through the years.

I don't know if my father talked a lot about Otto Guth, but when they did a Forza in his honor after he died, with Leontyne Price singing that's the only time I went home and wrote a letter to her and to my father. I had never been that overwhelmed by a performance. That was in 1976.

Otto and I had a standing date, from '65 on I think, to have lunch at the Chapman Park Hotel by the pool if I went down to Los Angeles. I remember my mother and I went to lunch with him in 1975 in San Francisco, and when we went back to his

apartment his fiancée Vally called. I heard him say in German, "I have two women in my apartment."

He and my father worked together extremely well. I think I heard fewer complaints about Otto Guth than anyone else, because they had a tremendous respect and admiration for each other. Each knew what he was doing. I know Otto's loss was felt tremendously. There are vast numbers of names of singers, conductors, directors, and in-house personnel who were necessary parts of the master plan.

Crawford: When he talks about his career as a general director now, what does he say?

Krueger: He doesn't really talk about it that much. I am sure he knows he's accomplished a lot--singers whom he helped, composers, the whole company's renown in the world--there are so many different areas where he was extremely productive.

#### Adler and His Public

Crawford: What did he feel about the community?

Krueger: He respected the public immensely, and I think he tried to give them what they wanted as well as what he thought they should want--it worked both ways. His expansion of the length of the season and of the company show how much he wanted the public to be able to enjoy opera. Imagine the phenomenal exposure from his annual concert in the park, televised each year immediately after the opening of the season.

Crawford: When you go to the opera house now, do you get the same sense of excitement?

Krueger: Not as much, because I'm not as personally involved. I have this problem still, as I say, of sitting down and looking for the things that are wrong on the stage. You can talk to yourself until you are blue in the face, but if you were brought up that way, it stays with you.

But there have been a few things that I've enjoyed--the Jenufa last year was a very moving production, so I still get that feeling occasionally.

Crawford: Any other stories occur to you?



Krueger: From my father's upbringing, one touching moment he brought into our life was a dance lesson. I remember having a grammar school graduation party, and we were doing some dances and my father said, "Oh, you should do this"--he actually took me and did some folk dances he must have learned as a child. I don't think he went to a lot of dances, and don't remember his dancing when we were growing up, but he went through the motions of making a window with his arms. I don't know why this came up. There were nice moments at home; it isn't as if he was never there, just mostly never there. [laughs]

Father-Daughter Relationship and a New Son-in-Law: Charlie Krueger

Crawford: When did you become close?

Krueger: I think my father and I got together when my now-husband came on the scene. Charlie pointed out to me, "You only have one father," and I hadn't been spending much time with him.

When Charlie and I first started dating, my father would talk to him as an equal because my husband was at the top of his profession. Charlie played for the 49ers for sixteen years and he was a star. My father was also at the top of his profession, and so my father was very responsive to Charlie. The Maestro did play soccer growing up and was a goalie. But football, he didn't know from nothing.

The first year Charlie came on the scene was the first year the 49ers went to the playoffs--1970--and my father went to the playoff game. He was so proud of himself because Charlie had tackled the quarterback and my father actually saw and understood what happened. I think he had been to one football game in his life prior to that.

At one game, I remember a friend came by and took a picture of me and my father, and my father said, "He won't show that to anybody, will he?"; there was a performance that afternoon, and it was so unusual for my father to leave the opera house. Needless to say, he wound up back at the performance before the final curtain.

At our wedding in 1972, Coach Nolan and my father had a wonderful discussion about how you work with prima donnas, because they each in their own fields have similar problems working with stars. It was terribly funny! And one time in the



parking lot, my father said, "Stop the car, I must talk to Dick." Charlie called him coach, period. He was Coach Nolan and there my father was busy talking to "Dick"!

I remember too at our wedding that the 49ers had gone off to Chicago on Friday, beaten the Bears and flown off to Dallas on Thanksgiving and lo and behold they won for a change and our rehearsal was Friday night and the wedding was Saturday. Charlie had three games in one week. After the wedding, my father was very busy proudly having his picture taken with one of the defensive players who had scored two touchdowns.

The wedding was a real melange of people from the opera world and the football world--quite a group.

Crawford: And they've remained close friends, Charlie Krueger and Kurt Adler.

Krueger: Oh, yes, they respect each other. They have a mutual understanding of retirement--each from his own arena. My father occasionally watches games, but he doesn't have the same interest in it, and Charlie doesn't go to games now, because he definitely doesn't have the same interest.

Charlie had to learn to like opera. It was his idea in 1971 to go to opening night, which I didn't care for. I always made calculated efforts to have babysitting jobs on opening nights--I think there is too much society involved and I don't think people really go to hear the opera. But Charlie wanted to go that night, it was Beverly Sills as Manon, and I remember him nudging me and saying, "When is half-time?"

He knew as many people as I did opening night, and backstage all the crew knew who he was and they thought that was wonderful. He and Beverly Sills later struck up a real friendship, and I think the best Christmas present I've ever given him was an autographed picture of Beverly Sills.

Another amusing story was when my father did a concert in the park, and Beverly Sills was singing. I went to park in the back of the bandstand, and they wouldn't let me in. I told them I was Mr. Adler's daughter, and they said, "Who's that?" I said, "I'm Kristin Krueger," and they said, "You're married to Charlie Krueger? Come right in!" Both Beverly and my father laughed.

At one park concert, Charlie carried ten-month-old Roman on his shoulder and enjoyed asking, "Would you like to meet my brother-in-law?" Nobody believed it.

Everything in our lives has been so unusual and, as I say, growing up I assumed it was normal, because I think children assume their environment is the way life is. But obviously for an eighty-two-year-old to have a seven- and a four-year old and a forty-three- and a forty-four-year old is unusual.

Crawford: How about their education? Does he have big ambitions for them?

Krueger: I'm not sure. We have to get down to that discussion because Charlie and I are guardians of the kids and if anything happens, we need to know that also. They are in such a good school system now that we figure they will go through that and then I don't know where they will go to college, but I don't think it will be in music.

Sabrina is taking piano lessons--she practices and my father likes to help her, and that satisfies him. My brother and I did it on our own. But it's a pleasure that he gave us all that musical background. I inherited my grandmother's piano when she died. She is probably rolling over, and my father wouldn't like all the mistakes, but I still enjoy playing the piano.

Crawford: Your paternal grandmother?

Krueger: No, my maternal grandmother. She played literally until she died. She remembered more at ninety-three than I've ever learned.

### The Adler Legacy

Crawford: What will be the Adler legacy?

Krueger: It's a fact that the Maestro established a world-class company with high standards and known for innovation and creativity. I hope from the bottom of my heart that San Francisco will maintain the standards which he achieved during his leadership. Knowing my father, I'm sure he would want San Francisco Opera to go on to bigger and better things by building on the solid foundation he provided.

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Kurt Herbert Adler and the San Francisco Opera

Dr. Walter Strauss

CHILDHOOD FRIEND FROM VIENNA DAYS

An Interview Conducted by  
Caroline Crawford  
in 1988



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INTERVIEW HISTORY--Dr. Walter Strauss

"My friendship with Kurt goes way back to when I was about six and he was about three," says Dr. Walter Strauss. "His mother was the best friend of my mother. They were somehow distantly related, but that was not the essential thing. It was the friendship."

Walter Strauss and Kurt Adler were equally close. They spent their boyhoods in Vienna, lived in the fashionable 19th district just blocks from each other, attended the same Gymnasium, and often spent summer vacations together in the Alps.

Both of them were baptized as Lutheran in keeping with the trend toward assimilation among liberal Jewish families, and both studied music and languages in addition to their rigorous Gymnasium course work.

Dr. Strauss remembers in the interview the elder Adlers and Otto Bauer, the uncle who was to become first foreign secretary of the Austrian Republic in 1918 and who was to influence Kurt Adler so significantly. He also recollects the pre-war climate in Vienna and the economic ups and downs both families experienced.

In the late 1930s, under the threat of Nazism, both men left for the United States. Dr. Strauss, a cardiologist, settled in New York but always remained in touch with the Adler family, and took care of Ida Bauer Adler until her death in 1945.

In 1981, Mr. Adler's final season as general director of San Francisco Opera, Dr. Strauss and his wife retired to Walnut Creek, and the two friends were able to see more of each other, meeting regularly for lunch.

The following interview took place in the Strauss apartment at the Montego Heights Lodge in Walnut Creek, in a sunny living room filled with paintings of Alpine landscapes. After the transcripts were reviewed, we met again for several hours to edit them together.

Caroline Crawford  
Interviewer/Editor

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Walter Strauss and Kurt Adler were equally close. They spent their boyhoods in Vienna, lived in the fashionable 19th district just blocks from each other, attended the same Gymnasium, and often spent summer vacations together in the Alps.

Both of them were baptized as Lutheran in keeping with the trend toward assimilation among liberal Jewish families, and both studied music and languages in addition to their rigorous Gymnasium course work.

Dr. Strauss remembers in the interview the elder Adlers and Otto Bauer, the uncle who was to become first foreign secretary of the Austrian Republic in 1918 and who was to influence Kurt Adler so significantly. He also recollects the pre-war climate in Vienna and the economic ups and downs both families experienced.

In the late 1930s, under the threat of Nazism, both men left for the United States. Dr. Strauss, a cardiologist, settled in New York but always remained in touch with the Adler family, and took care of Ida Bauer Adler until her death in 1945.

In 1981, Mr. Adler's final season as general director of San Francisco Opera, Dr. Strauss and his wife retired to Walnut Creek, and the two friends were able to see more of each other, meeting regularly for lunch.

The following interview took place in the Strauss apartment at the Montego Heights Lodge in Walnut Creek, in a sunny living room filled with paintings of Alpine landscapes. After the transcripts were reviewed, we met again for several hours to edit them together.

Caroline Crawford  
Interviewer/Editor

March 1988  
Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library  
University of California, Berkeley



BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please print or write clearly)

Your full name WALTER F STRAUSS

Date of birth Sept 19 02 Place of birth Vienna Austria

Father's full name Richard STRAUSS

Birthplace Hořice CSA

Occupation Textile Industry, Manufacturer

Mother's full name Stefanie Strauss

Birthplace Vienna Austria

Occupation Housewife

Where did you grow up? Vienna Austria

Present community Walnut Creek CA

Education 8 years high school / after 5 years primary school - 5 years medical school

Occupation(s) physician - internist

Special interests or activities Science, music, sport travel.





The Vienna Years: A Longstanding Friendship

[Date of Interview: July 29, 1988]##

Crawford: Let me begin, Dr. Strauss, by asking you about your own background.

Strauss: I was born in Vienna, September 19, 1902, and went to primary school in Vienna and then I went to high school, Gymnasium, in Vienna, the same as Kurt Adler. I graduated in 1921, Abitur, and I started medical school in Vienna, 1921, and studied there the whole medical school but for one half years, which I spent in Zurich.

Then I graduated from medical school in 1927, and worked in various hospitals in Vienna; for one year, from October, 1927, to summer of 1928, I worked in a scientific institute in Basel, Switzerland. Then I came back to Vienna and was an intern in various hospitals, partly in university hospitals and partly in other hospitals, and I started also some private practice in, I would say, 1933, 1934--something like that.

I left Vienna in 1938 and came to the United States in 1939. I have been practicing in New York and was a member of the faculty of the New York Medical College from the early '40s until 1982, when I retired and moved to California. That is it in a nutshell.

Crawford: Good. I believe your acquaintance with Mr. Adler goes way back.

Strauss: Oh, way back to when I was about six and he was about three. Something like that. His mother was the best friend of my mother's. How they got together I don't know. They were also somehow distantly related, but that is immaterial. Second, third, or fourth cousins, I don't know.

Anyhow, being related was not essential, it was the friendship.

Crawford: Was your father a doctor as well?

Strauss: Yes, he had a law degree.

Crawford: You knew the parents of Mr. Adler well. Who do you think influenced him more?

Strauss: The mother. There is no doubt about it. She influenced him and she kind of pushed him all the time. She was very dominant and stimulated him a lot, in every respect. In school he was always the best pupil in the class. He was the primus of the class from the first to the eighth year in high school; in Gymnasium, as it's called. As you know, he already attended the Music Academy while he was in the Gymnasium, so he did a double job of finishing both.

Crawford: Was that very unusual?

Strauss: Probably, yes. It was rather unusual that somebody does extensive studies and work besides the Gymnasium. The Gymnasium was fairly difficult--it was more difficult in the early years, and then when you got to the higher classes, from the fifth grade on--that means from the age of about fourteen or fifteen on, it eased up, because you got used to it and then it was not so difficult anymore. For most of the pupils.

Crawford: How would it compare with an education here today--a private education, let's say?

Strauss: The whole setup it completely different here, as you know, because you have eight years primary school and then you have four years high school. There you had four or five years of primary; then you could go to a Buergerschule which was a lower grade [of schooling] and was required by law until the age of fourteen.

Or you had to go to a Gymnasium where you had to take an entrance examination, and where you stayed for eight years. After graduation from the classical, humanistic Gymnasium (the other institution was called Realgymnasium for people who wanted to study engineering and other technical disciplines), there was no question of not being accepted at the university when you had passed your final examination after the eight years of Gymnasium or seven years of Realgymnasium.

Crawford: Did Mr. Adler want a musical education all this time?

Strauss: I really don't know when the trend toward musical education started. That I don't know.

Crawford: He began piano lessons at five.

Strauss: That was the normal thing to do. I hardly know anybody who did not.

Crawford: Did you?

Strauss: Oh, yes, sure. I wasn't in a school for piano; I had a private teacher. I had to cut it because I had an injury to my arm just when I was trying to practice intensively. That was it, but I never intended to be a professional.

Crawford: What do you remember of Ida Adler, Mr. Adler's mother?

Strauss: I remember her very well. She was a lively person; she was an intensive personality, pretty strong-willed, and I'm sure she had great influence on Kurt and on his development. There is no doubt in my mind about that.

Also, as far as his studies went and how he used his time, I know that.

#### Ida and Ernst Adler

Crawford: Let us talk about Ernst Adler, his father.

Strauss: Ernst Adler was rather an easygoing person, and he also liked music to some extent. He was in industry, and he had studied some kind of engineering, but I don't know how much; I really don't know that. He was a partner in the company of his mother's father, but they were not successful and they went broke--it was textiles--and after that he did various jobs; I couldn't describe them in detail.

As you know, he died in 1929 of a heart attack.

Crawford: Mr. Adler said he thought his father was a little reluctant about going into the Bauer family business--that he would rather have done something else.

Strauss: I really wouldn't know that.

Crawford: Apparently he had a degree in engineering.

Strauss: Yes, as I said, he had some kind of degree, but I don't know what type. That is correct.

Crawford: He was also quite a composer, an amateur composer.

Strauss: Yes, I know that. He did, I suppose, some waltzes and things like that, but I couldn't remember having played his music or heard it. Probably I did, but I just don't remember that. He also published some of his works, and he hired an orchestra to perform them.

Crawford: Mr. Adler mentioned that briefly. Wasn't it somewhat unusual to hire an orchestra?

Strauss: Perhaps it was a small band hired to play his waltzes. That I really don't know. If I heard about it, I forgot it--I have no recollection about that.

Crawford: He fought in the war.

Strauss: Yes, he was in the war, but not too long, I guess. He had an ear injury, and I don't know if that was related to his early death or not, do you?

Crawford: No.

Strauss: I don't remember but I think that was some inflammatory thing; I wouldn't know, for sure.

Crawford: Mr. Adler said his father died at Christmastime; he thought it might have been because there was no heart specialist available.

Strauss: Well, that is difficult to say. I was a physician already, in fact I was an internist at the heart institute at that time, but I was away for Christmas vacation. I wasn't in Vienna the day of his death. I came back for the funeral.

Crawford: How was the family affected by his death?

Strauss: That is very difficult to say. I think there was no radical change in their way of life; I don't think so.

Otto Bauer: Foreign Secretary of the First Austrian Republic

Crawford: Mr. Adler's uncle, Otto Bauer, was important. Let's talk about him.

Strauss: Yes. About Otto Bauer you can read more than I can tell you. The only thing I know is that he was the leader of the Second

International Social Democratic Party. You know that he was the first foreign secretary of the Republic of Austria; you know that he was hated by the Communists on the left and disliked by the more conservative Social Democrats, because he was a little bit radical.

He was a highly intelligent person as far as I know; also very strong-willed, and I think he had a great influence on the development of the Austrian Republic at the beginning, so he was really a strong personality--liked and disliked.

He went to Czechoslovakia and then to France and he died in Paris, if I remember correctly. I met him not too often; I mean he was not one for social gatherings, but nevertheless I do remember that I have met him on several occasions and he was an impressive personality.

Crawford: Was he like Ida Bauer, his sister?

Strauss: That's difficult to say, but probably they were of the same human type: strong-willed, knowing what they wanted, etc.

Crawford: Otto Bauer was apparently a friend of the Socialist Premier Léon Blum. It was Blum who persuaded Ida Adler to come to Paris.

Strauss: Yes, I think so. But Blum was murdered as I remember. No, it wasn't Blum. It was Jaurès.

Crawford: Jaurès, right.

Strauss: Mrs. Adler went to Paris, and then from there she went to Casablanca; I don't know whether she went voluntarily to Casablanca. She was twice in Casablanca, because she had to go somewhere when the Nazis occupied Paris. When she was on board a ship, leaving, she had an intestinal hemorrhage--that I remember--and was taken back to Casablanca.

And then she recovered and came [to the U.S.] from Casablanca--I don't know when that was, but it was already in wartime. I don't know whether the United States was in the war at that time. Probably that was before Pearl Harbor, but I'm not quite sure. And then she came here, and she stayed with her son at times and in various places. Often we went out together on Sundays in Manhattan, and she was my patient. I arranged most everything for her when she was sick, and we corresponded about it.



She died in 1945: I know it was two days before Christmas. Kurt and his wife and I and my wife were at the crematorium in Jersey, and that was on December 23rd, I guess.

### Life in Vienna

Crawford: Let us talk about Vienna--what you did as small children, what the routine was like, the general climate?

Strauss: All the fairly well-off families had their financial situation changing at times--going up and going down--and I know there were times when the Adlers were all the way up and then a little down, and of my family that they were high up and not so high up.

There were all these crises of inflation and difficulties in industry, and my family was also in textiles so we had to some extent a similar destiny as the Adlers, but it varied.

Crawford: So the economy was not the most healthy.

Strauss: The economy was at times splendid, but not healthy. You know what I mean. The general life, when you read about the bourgeoisie, many were intellectually very interested in art and music and to some extent in politics, and leading a satisfactory life.

Crawford: What was the life of Mrs. Adler like?

Strauss: I remember Ida Adler had a Bridgestube, that is, she rented a room where people came to play bridge and paid something for it. In this way she made some extra money.

Kurt all his life led an intense, hard life--hard work--and that was all the time. I know that I am not aware of the whole course of his development; I know only of certain points. For example, I had completely forgotten that he was conducting at the Volksoper in Vienna. Other facts I did remember.

I do remember his first marriage; I knew his first wife quite well. During the time in the United States we have been in much more steady contact than we were in Europe. We never lost contact in Europe; either we often got together on vacation or we met here or there. He was present when I got married and I was present when he got married, but there are certain areas where the continuity is not quite clear to me.

I remember one year my mother rented a house in the Alps, Alt-Aussee, where we spent the summer with Kurt and his mother. Hiking, swimming, bicycling. The father were not along; it was wartime. We spent several summers together in alpine hotels doing much the same.

Here in the United States since 1938 we were separated by distance quite often, but we were in constant touch. He used to stay quite often in New York for the winter, up until the time he started to stay in San Francisco.

In New York we always saw each other, visited each other, and we first visited him in California in 1947 or 1948. At that time he was chorus director in San Francisco and he spent the summer here and the winter in New York with his coaching, as I recall.

Crawford: What do you remember of the Adler home in Vienna?

Strauss: It was for that time a modern, three-story or four-story building, a very comfortable apartment in a suburban community, but suburban wasn't very distant; it was from the center of town three miles, and you could get into the center of town in thirty minutes or so, walking.

I remember this area in detail because we lived about five blocks from each other.

Crawford: What was the name of the district?

Strauss: Döbling. The nineteenth district, a very famous area from the musical point of view, because it was the area where Beethoven used to be--in Heiligenstadt. Grinzing, the wine country, was also the nineteenth district.

Where we lived was an area of private villas or small apartment houses with two or three apartments (each apartment one floor and probably five rooms, six rooms).

Crawford: Rather luxurious.

Strauss: Oh, sure. I remember in my parents house we were two children, my sister and I, and we had four bedrooms and one bath, and a big living room, a big dining room and a small library, and a maid's room and kitchen.

- Crawford: Mr. Adler was born at home, he said, in an apartment downtown, and he said a home birth like that was typical of affluent families.
- Strauss: Yes, there were predominantly home deliveries; I do not remember anyone of my acquaintance who was born in a hospital.
- Crawford: Mr. Adler was two months premature, which was a lot then, wasn't it?
- Strauss: Yes. Two months is okay--a seven-month child is nothing to worry about; they usually develop normally.
- Crawford: Were the Adlers a social family?
- Strauss: If you mean they had a social life; having dinner with friends, meeting friends, inviting friends for dinner, yes. But a big social life, no.
- Crawford: Theater--opera?
- Strauss: Yes--oh, yes, I meant big gatherings; to that I said no. But of course they went to concerts and to theater.
- Crawford: Was the house open to artists?
- Strauss: That I don't remember.
- Crawford: He mentioned that Arthur Schnitzler lived in the neighborhood.
- Strauss: Arthur Schnitzler lived in the area, his son went to the same school Kurt and I did. He was stage director of a very good theater in Vienna after the war. Many artists did--there were the children of Hofmannsthal and the Rosé children--Alma and Alfred. They were my sister's and my closest friends, so I was in the Rosé-Mahler house sometimes twice a week or so. But Kurt was not so close with them.
- Crawford: What was the Mahler connection?
- Strauss: Mrs. Rosé was the sister of [Gustav] Mahler. Mahler was dead at that time; he must have died around 1912, I'm not quite sure. I never met him.
- Crawford: I wanted to ask you more about Ernst Adler. You know that he was an orphan and grew up with the Austrian actor Adolph von Sonnenthal.

Strauss: Orphan? Yes, I had forgotten it but when you mention it now I remember.

Crawford: And he lived with Sonnenthal, the actor?

Strauss: Sonnenthal was somewhat related, I think. Budapest-born.

Crawford: Yes, and Mr. Adler said he remembered seeing pictures of his father dressed as Sonnenthal dressed; apparently he liked the theatrical aspect.

Strauss: That I don't remember, but I remember hearing that the Adlers were related to Sonnenthal, but I'm not sure how and at what distance.

Crawford: Mr. Adler talked of life in Vienna as being very pleasurable; of going to the Prater on Sundays.

Strauss: That was a matter of taste. Some people did go to the Prater on Sundays; some people didn't. The Prater was on the opposite side of the city, so we didn't. We, my parents and I, and also Mr. Adler, I guess, rather went to the other side to the Vienna Woods than the Prater, which was just as enjoyable.

I don't think Kurt went very much hiking; he was not very sportive. He did play a little tennis--I remember playing with him, and he also went occasionally skiing, although very rarely. I remember once I went skiing with him, and then he went to Switzerland from the U.S. once in later years. But he had trouble here with an accident in Chicago, where he broke a leg or both legs. I remember I played tennis with him in Palm Springs in 1959.

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Crawford: He remembered the Sunday band concerts in the Prater with his mother and grandfather, where they would go in a carriage. Would that have been a rented carriage?

Strauss: Probably, yes. I don't remember anything about any of our close friends having a carriage, no. I never participated in things like that, so I can't tell you anything about that.

Crawford: What else did you do as boys together?

Strauss: You see, that is also difficult, because there were times when we were very close and we spent a lot of time together and then there were times when we saw each other only occasionally and not so often.

There is a definite continuous relationship between him and me, though, up to the last day. I don't know whether one should say this--it doesn't fit in here and now--but my wife had a stroke in February and Kurt called me up and said he wanted to come see me and spend some time with me because he realized I had problems.

I said, "I'm busy in the hospital with my wife; this is not a good day, but maybe we can do it tomorrow." You know he had a driver lately because his vision was not so good, and he said, "I have a lecture at the university, and after the lecture, I'm going to come out." So I said, "Not today, but I appreciate it."

Then, when I came home from the hospital, about 8, 8:30, I wanted to call him up and tell him I was very sorry, and how could we meet again, and as I entered the room the phone was ringing and Kris, his daughter, was on the phone and told me he didn't drive out here but he drove home and died. That was a fantastic shock--an unbelievable shock.

Crawford: I had been with him the day before, and he was concerned about your wife. He mentioned her and there was another friend who was ill.

Strauss: Was it Martin Wagner?

Crawford: Martin Wagner had called that day while we were working there, but, no, it was Jean-Pierre Ponnelle.

Strauss: You know, the tragic thing is that when he called on this day, I said, "It is so much strain for you to come out," and he said, "No, don't worry--it is the first day in a long time that I feel really well."

Crawford: He had been to New York that weekend.

Strauss: Yes, he told me that coming back he did not feel well. He told me that for the first time flying was a little bit of a problem for him, but that was two or three years prior to his death.

On this day when he called, he said, "It's the first day in a long time I feel well and I'm glad about what I heard concerning the situation at the opera." And he said with unbelievable optimism, "Maybe I can take over for the interim before they have somebody else." You know that?

Crawford: Yes. We were working on the oral history when he learned about Mr. McEwen's resignation. He was talking about the people he thought might take over the directorship, so that was very much on his mind.

A Schism in the Family: Capitalist vs. Social Democrat

Crawford: I wanted to mention some of the things he said about his very young years, and get your reaction. For instance, he said his father had one of the first private cars in Vienna, but that he kept it at the factory because he didn't want his son to have the use of an automobile.

Strauss: I think it was even before I knew him, but I'm not sure. As long as I was connected with the Adlers, they didn't have a private car. Well, about the car, I really don't know. The only thing I know in the first years I have known the Adlers is that they were living very comfortably, that I remember.

Crawford: He talked about a schism in his family, his father being a capitalist, as he said, and his uncle a socialist. It was a friendly opposition, but still he was always aware of those two ideologies.

Strauss: It did not lead to serious controversy. Disagreements, yes.

Crawford: How did you get about? Did you walk a great deal?

Strauss: You mean hike?

Crawford: No, I mean you had to go to school, and so on.

Strauss: Oh, you mean walking in every day's life. That I can tell you. You talk about school years. I lived six minutes from school and Kurt lived three minutes from school. It was so close.

Crawford: So you stayed in your neighborhood.

Strauss: Yes, yes. We were living a few blocks apart. I was married earlier than Kurt, but even then we were living pretty close; pretty much in the neighborhood.

Crawford: So if you dined in a cafe, you would stay in the neighborhood, or if you went out in the evening.



- Strauss: For parties and so on? No, we rarely went to the same parties, but if one went to parties in the so-called city, the distances were such that you had to take the trolley or a cab or something like that.
- Crawford: How was it after the war, with the shortages? Food and coal for the tramcars? He apparently walked to the opera house often.
- Strauss: That happened, yes. I do remember that I walked to the opera house, about forty minutes' walk. To see Meistersinger, as I remember, and then walked forty minutes back.
- Crawford: So you loved opera too.
- Strauss: Oh, yes. As long as I was studying in medical school, and even in high school, I would say I went to either a concert or the opera two or three times a week.
- Crawford: Where is the opera house?
- Strauss: On the Ring--the so-called Opernring. It is the same house which has been rebuilt. It was destroyed in 1945--it was bombed out, and then it was rebuilt and reopened in 1955.

#### Being Baptised Lutheran

- Crawford: We haven't talked about religion. Mr. Adler said his mother was Jewish, but that he was baptized Lutheran.
- Strauss: Correct.
- Crawford: Did the Adler family consider themselves a Jewish family?
- Strauss: Of Jewish origin.
- Crawford: And that's why Mrs. Adler left Austria when she did. And also why Otto Bauer left?
- Strauss: Sure, yes, yes, sure.
- Crawford: Was that unusual that he was baptised Lutheran?
- Strauss: No, that was not unusual. As a matter of fact, I was baptised Lutheran also.
- Crawford: Were you practicing Lutherans?

Strauss: No...I was thinking about it just now...As long as you were in school, you had to go to religious courses, it was obligatory in Austria, but strictly practicing, I would say no.

Crawford: Did you have a choice?

Strauss: Austria was a Catholic country--90 percent Catholic--but Catholicism was much stricter at that time, with all the divorce laws, while Lutheranism was a rather liberal group.

Crawford: Erich Leinsdorf said in his book, Cadenza, that if one wanted a profession in music in Vienna, during this period from the 1900s, it was best to be a Catholic.

Strauss: Because that was the state religion and the governing political party was clerical Catholic.

Crawford: So it was by virtue of having the same religion.

Strauss: Not only the same religion but the same political outlook, also.

Crawford: Why did your mothers choose Lutheranism for you? They didn't think of raising you Jewish?

Strauss: No. There was a trend of assimilation in the liberal Jewish intelligentsia which did not stick very much to the old Jewish traditions, etc., and did believe, as I said, in assimilation.

So for instance, [in] my family, my father's brother married a gentile; my father's cousin married a gentile; I married a gentile. So there was a definite trend of mixture. That was not universal, because for instance Schnitzler refused to associate with people who converted, because he believed the Jewish people should stick to their religion. The Rosés, and the Mahlers, were also converted. So there was this trend of assimilation among the intelligentsia and the bourgeoisie. But there was quite a percentage absolutely sticking to old, strict, religious Jewish life.

Crawford: Was there anti-Semitism in your early years?

Strauss: Oh, sure. Yes, there were fights at the university when I was there. It goes way back.

Volkschule: The Learning and Study of Languages

Crawford: I wanted to talk about your schooling. Mr. Adler went through the Volkschule in four years instead of five.

Strauss: I will tell you something. You could go for four years or you could go for five. He went for four. I went for five because I was sick in the fourth. Quite a few friends went for four and a few went for five, so that was not much of a problem. I took a year longer.

Crawford: He took the several languages at home: French, Italian, and English.

Strauss: In the humanistic Gymnasium you had to take Latin from the first to the eighth [year], six days a week, and in the first two years you had eight hours of Latin a week. Then you had four or five of Greek from the third grade on to the eighth.

At the Realgymnasium, you had to take French or English. Most of them were French--a couple of schools were English, and they did not require Latin, but when you went to such a school and then wanted to study law or medicine or theology then you had to take a Latin course.

In living languages in the school, one didn't learn much. Just as it is here. I know that my son went to Spanish and my grandson went to Russian and then to French and he learned nothing.

That's why most people who could afford it learned languages at home, and so did Kurt, and so did I and so did most of the people I knew.

Crawford: Did you have a tutor at home?

Strauss: In French, we had kind of a governess, who was French. In English, I went to a tutor at his home and in Czech I had a tutor at home. So there were five-six languages at the time.

Crawford: Do you know them today?

Strauss: In French I forgot much of the vocabulary. I am still probably correct in grammar, although I don't use it, but I remember sometimes.

Czech I forgot almost completely.

Crawford: Was your mother Czechoslovakian?

Strauss: No, my father was Czechoslovakian and my mother was born in Vienna, but he was Czechoslovakian with German as his mother tongue.

Crawford: So you had six languages.

Strauss: Yes, but probably not at the same time. French did not go at the same time as Czechoslovakian. No, I was still in high school so I had Greek and Latin and English and Czech.

Crawford: Why were languages considered so important?

Strauss: That is a difficult question to answer because it is such an absolutely normal thing for the intelligentsia to know languages in Europe. It is beyond any question that English-speaking countries are the only industrialized ones that do not cultivate languages, maybe the French to some extent, also, but as soon as you go to the smaller countries, they of course learn languages because they have to, like Scandinavia or Belgium and Holland, but also Germany. You will notice how well German diplomats speak English.

Crawford: I got the impression that his mother spoke all those languages. He didn't mention a tutor, but he did say that for certain periods of time they would speak only Italian at home, and then French.

Strauss: That I don't know. With whom?

Crawford: He didn't say; I assumed with his mother. He said his mother insisted.

Strauss: We spoke always German at home. We were supposed to speak French at home with the girl, but she rather learned German than I learned French.

Crawford: And your sister too?

Strauss: My sister? Sure, the same thing. But she didn't go to a humanistic school, she went to a six-year girls' school.

Crawford: And no university.

Strauss: No. You could not go to a university from such a six-year school. You had to take certain courses and take exams to go to a university.

Alexander Wunderer and the Rosé Family

- Crawford: Then Mr. Adler began to take lessons with Alexander Wunderer. Did you know him?
- Strauss: Oh, yes, I did know him. Not very well, but I knew him. There was a family who knew him very well, I don't know if Kurt mentioned them--the Pessls.
- Crawford: Yes.
- Strauss: Mr. Wunderer was a close friend of the Pessls, and Kurt met him apparently in the Pessls' house, and I met him also, but he met him more often than I. I met him at parties once or twice.
- Crawford: The Pessls must have been very close, because he talked about them a lot.
- Strauss: They were rather close friends, yes. I knew them very well but I was not a close friend. I went to the Pessls often, but not as often as Kurt did.
- Crawford: Were they a musical family?
- Strauss: I do not remember how much they were interested in music. I know they were very close to the Wunderers and the Wunderers were very interested in music, but how close I don't know.
- Crawford: What was Alexander Wunderer like?
- Strauss: I did not know him well enough to say.
- Crawford: Speaking of the Rosé family, the daughter, apparently, was a very talented musician--both of the children were.
- Strauss: Alma was a violinist and she played concerts by herself and also with her father. And then she was married to this Czech violinist, Pirhoda, and I lost track of her. Personally, I mean. Later she was again professionally involved in these terrible things in the concentration camps. She was engaged to play music while these horrors took place, and so on, and finally she got killed or killed herself. [Alma Rosé was the subject of a play by Arthur Miller, Playing for Time.]
- Crawford: She was imprisoned then?

Strauss: She was in a concentration camp. Her brother came to Canada. Her father came to London and he lived in London and then died at a good old age.

Alfie, who was my best friend in school, went to Canada and was professor of music. He died a few years ago.

Crawford: He was a conductor, wasn't he?

Strauss: He was a conductor, but he was not extremely successful. He was a music teacher in London, Ontario.

Crawford: I remember Mr. Adler saying that he had taken advantage of "protection."

Strauss: Well, sure. His father was the prime violinist of the Vienna Philharmonic until he left Vienna and had the famous Rosé Quartet, and so on. So they had a good family background.

Crawford: Mr. Adler said he was offered a coaching position through Franz Schalk, and he felt he wasn't ready to do it, and he turned it down. He didn't want to push forward until he was ready.

Strauss: In Vienna? That I wouldn't know.

#### The Music Academy and the University##

Crawford: Well, let me ask you something more about Adler's schooling-- his studies at the Academy.

Strauss: He was already studying there while he was at the Gymnasium...that is why I mentioned before that it was a very tough life, because he was busy with the Gymnasium and at the same time he went to the Music Academy.

Crawford: Was the Music Academy the best school?

Strauss: In Vienna, yes. Probably, yes.

Crawford: It was difficult to get in?

Strauss: I don't know. I don't know. There were different departments. There was a composer's school, that I know, and there was an orchestra school, and all this. I don't know exactly what parts he participated in. I think he went also for some



instruments--flute or clarinet, I'm not quite sure, but it was one of the woodwinds.

Then he played piano, of course, and I don't know if he ever did violin or not, I don't think so. The Conservatory is about the same thing--I think it's the same organization, but has nothing to do with the University.

Crawford: He said he knew he wanted to get a musical education, but his parents wanted him to get a university degree.

Strauss: Yes, this was mentioned once, but I don't think he did a lot about it, did he?

Crawford: He must have gotten up to the point of his thesis, because he mentioned the subject of his thesis. But you don't know why he didn't finish?

Strauss: No. Well, probably it would have been too much with all his other obligations.

But there were music studies at the University, too. For instance, I do remember that way back at the end of the last century Bruckner was a teacher of music at the University.

At the University there are not many faculties. There is a department of medicine, of law, of theology and philosophy. Philosophy comprises plain philosophy and even chemistry, as I remember, and definitely music.

So you have to go into detail: what part, what sub-department. Music belongs to the philosophy department.

#### Kurt Adler: Reliable Friend and Energetic Fighter

Crawford: What was Kurt Adler like? We have talked about the fact that he was a hard worker, certainly. What would you say about his personality?

Strauss: The one thing which is outstanding for me is that he was a good friend, a reliable person who always kept close contact--almost always--but definitely when it was essential. He was always ready to be of help if I needed him. Now. Personality, socially. I think he was very talented mostly in handling people. Mostly this. I know the problems and there was so much written about how tough a boss he was and how he drove his

people and he thought everybody had to be as ambitious as he was, but I have not personal experiences of this. I only know what I have read or what other people have been telling me.

I know that when friends or acquaintances of mine, relatives, were visiting in San Francisco, everybody said how nice he was, how pleasant he was, how he accepted them. In normal social circumstances he was also a very friendly person.

So you have three facets now: you have a reliable friend, you have a friendly person with people who come to him as strangers, just for social contact, and then you have a strict boss and extremely energetic fighter for his ends.

Crawford: What were his dreams as a boy? Did he plan a career in Austria?

Strauss: I don't think so. Because remember he already left Austria. Long before the Hitler time he was in Germany. Where was the place he conducted?

Crawford: Kaiserslauten.

Strauss: Kaiserslauten, Rheinpfalz. Yes, I was correct. Hitler was not there at the time. Not even in Germany yet. Otherwise he could not have gone to Kaiserslauten.

Crawford: Does that mean that he was thinking of a career elsewhere?

Strauss: Let me tell you something. Austria was such a limited area for musicians, and Germany offered so many possibilities. There were so many operas, so many orchestras, so many many positions.

And then when Germany became unpleasant, and Austria also, he went to Czechoslovakia, and he was conductor at Reichenberg there. He stayed there until 1938, in the summer, because when I left Austria, he had left Reichenberg and was staying with my parents in Czechoslovakia. So the last month or two he was in Europe he spent with me and my parents.

Crawford: How was the unpleasantness felt?

Strauss: Everything from small demonstrations to murder.

Crawford: Was he forced to leave?

Strauss: Under Nazism there was no chance for anyone with a Jewish background.

Leaving Europe for America

Crawford: What were those last months like?

Strauss: When I left Austria and went to my parents in Czechoslovakia, he was already there with my parents, so he must have gotten there in the middle of the summer of 1938. Everything was already worked out for him, and a few weeks later he left. There was somebody in Chicago who helped him.

Crawford: What were his feelings, his thoughts? Was he sad to leave?

Strauss: No, he was looking forward to it, I think.

Crawford: And you left when?

Strauss: I left about a half a year later.

Crawford: And your parents?

Strauss: My parents? My parents perished in concentration camps.

Crawford: So they made the choice not to leave. Why was that?

Strauss: First, they didn't want to leave, and then it was too late.

Adler's Marriages

Crawford: We haven't talked about Mr. Adler's marriages. I know he stayed in touch with "Trudi," his first wife.

Strauss: I have known Trudi well, but it is such a long time ago, and it is now almost fifty years since I have seen her the last time.

She was a very intelligent, very lively person and I really knew her only socially, and she was very pleasant. She was a singer.

I do remember the first time I saw Kurt conduct. There was a popular place in Vienna called the Urania, and there they produced Hansel and Gretel, and he was conducting and his wife was singing Hansel.

Crawford: They were married then?

Strauss: They either were married or about to get married. That must have been in his twenties. And then when he left Europe she didn't go along. Maybe he didn't want her to go along--that he never told me. [Mr. Adler and Trudi Moellnitz were married from 1932 to 1938.]

Crawford: What about the next Mrs. Adler?

Strauss: Diantha? Diantha we met when he came to us with her, when they were just about to be married, and I must say we liked Diantha from the first moment on. Even after they were divorced we kept in touch with Diantha and wrote at Christmas and wrote letters occasionally.

Before the divorce, when they came to New York, they visited us and we visited them when Diantha was here, in 1947. In 1959 I once came over when Kurt invited me, and I stayed with them and it was very pleasant. I don't know if there were any difficulties at that time. I don't think so.

Crawford: What was she like?

Strauss: I really knew her better in the 40s--and that is a long time ago. At that time she was a lively, intelligent, pleasant person and at the time I didn't see many problems.

Crawford: I understand she wrote some books.

Strauss: Yes, and she even sold some books, I think. I read one once but I was not very interested. It was a boy scout story or something, I'm not quite sure. She was successful in this, I understand.

Crawford: Did they stay in touch after the divorce?

Strauss: No, they remained in touch, but I wouldn't say they remained friends. While with his first wife I would say he visited her when he went to Europe.

Crawford: And then Nancy Adler, of course, you know. What effect would you say she had on his life?

Strauss: That is very difficult to say, and it probably was different in different periods. So one cannot really easily evaluate it. The one thing I know is that when they were traveling a lot, and that was up to a short while ago, she was an extremely efficient helper, that's no doubt. She could be quite charming most of the time.

I think at the beginning especially she was very interested in his professional life; whether that eased afterward it is hard for me to say. In the beginning she was definitely interested in everything connected with the opera, and very well informed and a big help, there is no doubt about it.

Crawford: Have you seen a great deal of them since you moved to California?

Strauss: Whom, the Adlers? Kurt was on such a busy schedule. We used to meet once a month or so for lunch and then a few times they were with us and a few times we were in their house also, but not too often. But we did meet every few weeks for lunch.

#### Important Influences in Adler's Life

Crawford: Who do you think were the most important people in his life?

Strauss: Definitely, his mother, I would think. It is always difficult to say how much comes out of the person himself, and how much has to be stimulated. But I would say there is no doubt that the stimulation he received from his mother was maximal. Whether he would have achieved less if he would not have had this push in his earlier years is difficult to say. Perhaps he would have developed this push in himself, but as I remember, from childhood on she was always very ambitious as far as he was concerned and tried to push him very intensively. And requested from him the maximal effort.

He probably said something similar also, yes?

Crawford: Yes. He thought she wanted him to be like Otto Bauer.

Strauss: To be prominent. I don't think she wanted him to be a politician, but to be a prominent person, yes.

Crawford: Who else was pivotal in his career?

Strauss: Who influenced his career? That, I really don't know. I could imagine that the former president of the San Francisco Opera, with whom he closely worked, Robert Watt Miller, must have had some influence on him.

He told me that Mr. Miller made various suggestions, but did not go into details.



Crawford: What about the people he worked with? Toscanini, etc. Do you know very much about that?

Strauss: Don't forget that when he was coach, or assistant, in Salzburg, there were four very prominent men there at the same time. I think one was Szell, one was Solti, I don't know who else was there, but we didn't have so much contact, so I didn't hear much about this time. I was reading in the paper the fact that he was there at the same time they were, but how much stimulation that was, I don't know. Probably it was a lot. But I don't know it from him.

Crawford: I believe the four were Solti, Leinsdorf, Adler, and Lászlo Halász. So when you talked he didn't bring up the past so much. He was really a man of the present, wasn't he?

Strauss: He really didn't bring this up as an extremely important point. He didn't go onto detail about that time. I don't even know what year this was--I think it was the early 1930s.

Crawford: Yes, the summer of 1936.

What frustrated him in his career?

#### A Summing Up

Strauss: I think that is not difficult to say. Because like any perfectionist he always feels a little frustrated that he cannot achieve everything, and he was definitely a perfectionist in his aims and ideas. Then he felt very frustrated, that is definitely so, that the idea of how to run the opera and how to achieve perfection in San Francisco Opera was being let down by McEwen. That was probably the most important frustration. He spoke frequently about this with me.

Crawford: How about the conducting?

Strauss: He was in love with conducting, and he liked nothing better than this. Once I asked him--I think he was to conduct a Tristan--and I said, "Why do you undergo this tremendous effort?"

He said, "Look, since I was a young musician it was always my dream to conduct Tristan, and that's why I insisted on doing it."



We rarely spoke about conducting because I have no means of evaluating it. I don't know enough about it. Now conducting may have been a little point of frustration because for a long period he was not supposed to conduct here in San Francisco. I think that was also Miller's doing. Miller had the idea the general director should not be a conductor too and be exposed to criticism.

Crawford: Did he ever talk to you about fund-raising? The fact that he had to do so much fund-raising?

Strauss: No. As to administrative obligations, one thing I had the impression he was really proud of was his handling of the unions. He was really able to handle unions well, and he considered that this was one of his assets in the administrative sphere.

Crawford: If you were to sum up his life and career, what would you say about it?

Strauss: I had the impression that he was well aware that in most aspects he had reached his aims, but as I said, he was afraid that when he left what he had achieved was going down the drain. That is to sum it up in one sentence.

Crawford: Did he ever mention leaving San Francisco?

Strauss: If so, not seriously. I don't know if it came up once in a conversation, but definitely not seriously.

Crawford: You know that Karajan asked him to Vienna in the early 1960s?

Strauss: Sure, I know it. You know, it's interesting. When we go into details, it's amazing how many important things he did talk to me about, and then there are periods that seem to be a little empty, when I don't know all the connections.

But I think he was absolutely right, knowing the conditions of the bureaucracy in Vienna, etc. He was well advised not to go.

Crawford: He talked about the several thousand "opera directors" in Vienna--the audience. Would that have bothered him?

Strauss: Probably that is the same in most operas.

##

Crawford: Summing up now, what was Mr. Adler's greatest gift, in your estimation? How did he view his retirement from the opera and have you any last thoughts about your relationship?

Strauss: His greatest gift was the tremendous energy he put in to achieve his aim to make the San Francisco Opera one of the leading operas of the world, and last but not least being a musician with love and devotion to music.

As for retirement, he did not like retirement at all, and would have reversed it if that had been possible.

We have been good friends for life. Whenever the need arose we tried to be helpful to each other. There never was a severe disagreement between us. Kurt's death is a very severe loss for me. I miss him very, very much.

Transcriber: Caroline Crawford  
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Berkeley, California

Kurt Herbert Adler and the San Francisco Opera

Martin Magner

LIFELONG FRIEND AND COLLEAGUE

An Interview Conducted by  
Caroline Crawford  
in 1989



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## INTERVIEW HISTORY--Martin Magner

The life and career of Martin Magner parallel the life and career of Kurt Herbert Adler in substantial ways. Born and raised in pre-World War I Europe, they shared an era far more distant from the late 20th century than the six decades that separate it from our time. Both became involved with the German theater at an early age, both developed a similar vision and autocratic styles, and both fled Nazi Germany in the late 1930s. Both men dedicated themselves to long and intense careers in the theater, to which they applied unequivocal perfectionist standards. Of Adler, Magner says: "Music was more than love. It was an obsession."

Magner, who is recuperating from two recent surgeries for brain hematomas, was born in 1900 in Stettin, Germany. "If I had known then what I know now," he said before the interview began, smiling through heavily accented English, "I would have taken my pipe and gone the other way." It is clear as he talks, though, that while he has yet to regain some of his energy, he has lost none of his zest for the theater or to put it in his context, his life.

As a Jew who spoke out in the theater against the Nazis, he was targeted for arrest in the late 1930s. It was Adler who arranged for him to emigrate to America and found employment for him at the Chicago studio where he was coaching young singers.

Magner claims that Adler and he were colleagues rather than friends until sometime after they came to this country, and that in the nearly fifty years since, they have become like brothers. During those fifty years, Magner has had a varied career as theater director in Chicago, New York, Dayton, Ohio, and Los Angeles, where he is director of the New Theater, Inc.

The following interview took place in his small Los Angeles home, a Mexican-style stucco cottage surrounded on the street side with tall, spiky cactus plants. The sounds of rock music from next door obliterated Mr. Magner's answers on occasion and so he was asked to repeat these on tape. His transcript was edited very lightly for the history.

Mr. Magner's new play opens in March, 1988.

Caroline Crawford  
Interviewer/Editor

October 1987  
Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library  
University of California, Berkeley



BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name MARTIN MAGNER

Date of birth 3-5-1900 Birthplace STETTIN, GERMANY

Father's full name MAX MAGNER

Occupation MERCHANT Birthplace DANEMARK

Mother's full name ZERLINA SILBERSTEIN

Occupation PIANIST Birthplace POZNAN

Your spouse MARION PALFI

Your children —

Where did you grow up? GERMANY

Present community CHICAGO - NEW YORK - LOS ANGELES

Education HUMANISTIC GYMNASIUM

Occupation(s) PRODUCER-DIRECTOR OF STAGE-TELEVISION-RADIO

Areas of expertise LEGITIMATE THEATRE - OPERA - TV DRAMA  
RADIO DRAMA

Other interests or activities \_\_\_\_\_

Organizations in which you are active DIRECTORS GUILD OF AMERICA



Martin Magner: A Life in the Theater

[Date of Interview: September 11, 1987]##

Crawford: Mr. Magner, I'd like to begin with your telling me something about your life as a man of the theater.

Magner: Very simple. I was stage director for legitimate plays. I did everything from Sophocles to Shaw--from Oedipus to St. Joan. I began at the Kammerspiele in Hamburg. The Chamber Theater. I was very lucky because I was 18 years old and I was hired as an actor by a very marvelous man, Erich Ziegel, who had the literary theater in Germany at that time. We had all the plays by Wedekind and by Hasenklever--the whole expressionistic era. And we had a wonderful ensemble: we had Gustav Gruendkin and people of that caliber. I was lucky to fall into this at an early age. I never had any formal schooling.

Even so they took me in and at first I played very small parts and then bigger ones. I was really an actor. I didn't know there were directors when I started out. I thought they were traffic cops: "you go there, and you go there, and don't bump into each other."

Suddenly I saw good directors at work, and before very long, I wanted to do the whole play, not just to act a part, through the medium of others. And I think I was as autocratic as Kurt was, but we both were not autocrats for the sake of autocracy, it's more that you have a vision of whatever it is, and you have the image clear in your mind, and want to transfer it to others and see it executed. By doing this--you might be overpowering others. But if they are good, they will take from you what they can use, without becoming puppets.

It's not the fault of the director if the actor becomes a puppet.

Crawford: So you are looking for strong people to direct.

Magner: Exactly, so that you can communicate--trying to set your vision into theirs. When I say autocrat, it isn't quite the right word--it's leadership.



Crawford: It isn't democracy, in any case.

Magner: No! It won't work. It won't work in the theater.

Reichenberg in the 1930s and the Development of a Friendship

Crawford: Where did you first meet Mr. Adler?

Magner: We met in the apartment of the general director, who hired him and hired me.

Crawford: At the theater in Reichenberg.

Magner: Yes, that's right. I was known to the producer because I was the successor to Max Ophuls. Ophuls left the theater in Breslau and I took over. I told the general director that I would like to go to Reichenberg only if I could direct opera, which I had never done. "It would interest me, so let me do it." That was a small theater. We rehearsed Meistersinger in the morning and the Prinz von Hamburg by Kleist at night. I did everything there, even operettas.

Crawford: You came from the bigger theater in Breslau to take that post in 1937?

Magner: Yes. Breslau had one of the finest residential theaters in Germany. I had a contract there for the following year which did not come about on account of the Nazis.

But let's talk about Kurt. He had a great impact on my life and why I was successful here. Three months after I came to this country, I started a theater in Evanston, Illinois; I was for a short time stage director at the Chicago Opera. Kurt arranged it. I was dreadful there, because I couldn't do anything with two or three rehearsals--I was used to rehearse an opera like you rehearse a play. Over there we had at least two weeks for opera. Here you have four days! This is stagione.

Miraculously I was quite successful--but I turned away to go back to what I knew better. You see, I'm not a musician like Kurt. I'm only a man who loves music and has a good ear and a good memory but no musical training. I know exactly how long eight bars last so that I can get the chorus offstage--I know those things! [chuckles] In Reichenberg we did everything in

German, you see, and even if I didn't know the partitura, the score, I had always the words to go by.

Crawford: That must have been very difficult, and I want to ask you about it when we get to the Chicago years. But let's back up and I'll ask what you knew of Kurt Adler's background?

Magner: I knew his wife, Gertrude--a lovely woman. Kurt and I were then colleagues: we knew each other and respected each other's works, and we were friends, but it was not what you would call a close friendship. That developed much later, and a thing he might have never mentioned was that when he left to go to the United States--the Nazis were just on the fringe of Czechoslovakia. And I think I saw him the night before he left for New York and he said: "What are you going to do? Is there anybody in America that you know?" I said, "I have an uncle--my mother's brother, who was the black sheep in the family, and they shipped him off to America. But the last thing I heard about him was that he had a factory in New Jersey. I do know his name."

Now this is maybe a story that is more than just a story. Kurt was two or three days in New York--and this shows him the way most people don't know him--at the house of Jella Pessl, and he took the time to go through the phone books, and he found the name of this uncle of mine. He called up there, a difficult thing for someone in this country for one or two days, but this is his motivation. He does only things which really motivate him. There is no shame about him--no horse manure--this man is for real.

He found the phone number, and called up. A woman's voice answered, and said that my uncle had died a few days ago. And she don't want to have anything, but anything, to do with refugees. And he said, "But this man is going to die in Prague." My future was going to be in a concentration camp, (the Nazis were now looking for me and about to march into Czechoslovakia) because I had left Breslau by night and went to Vienna. I couldn't stand the whole setup even then, although the Jewish question was then not so ardent, I just couldn't stand the system. I went to Vienna, and the first thing I did was to start a highly political cabaret. That was in 1933, March 21st.

Crawford: That was the year you first felt the menace?

Magner: Absolutely. If they are going to tell me what to do, I cannot do it. So I was known for my political thinking. When Kurt got this answer from the lady on the phone, he was sitting there

very depressed, and Jella Pessl came in and asked what was wrong. He told her that there was this man with no way out and she said she would help. Kurt couldn't get me an affidavit, but he acted like a character reference--saying I was on the level and wouldn't be a burden, you know. So I got a wire in Prague that an affidavit from a cousin was on its way.

This was Kurt, and it was not done for a friend as close as we are now. He simply had the feeling, "I cannot let things like this happen." He was on his way to Chicago, but the first thing he did in America was that.

Crawford: The Adler family was Lutheran--at least his mother was--although the Bauers had Jewish ancestry the Jewish question was not at issue as much?

Magner: No, I think Kurt was baptised.

Crawford: Did you know his parents?

Magner: I knew his mother very well. His mother was an especially bright woman. Almost in danger to be brilliant. She had a mind which picked things up with unbelievable quickness. A fascinating woman. I cannot tell how much warmth she had--how much heart--but her brain was among the sharpest I have ever seen in my life. And amusing, a great sense of humor.

The whole family--his uncle Otto Bauer was a labor leader of great caliber, a man of great vision. Some things Kurt might have inherited from him; I don't know--genes--I'm not sure of the whole setup. In my family everybody died young of cancer and TB. My father was forty years old when he died and my mother was fifty-two, and one of my sisters was thirty-two when she died, so I must have unusually good blood or something.

Crawford: Passions, don't you think?

Magner: Yes, because I have come through the most unbelievable things anybody could have died of. I've just had a hematoma near the brain, and I know only one other man--Karl Menninger--who had a similar operation, and he had it too when he was almost ninety or so. The man who operated on me when he saw the CAT scan said to my doctor: "How old is this man?" He said, "Eighty-seven." And the surgeon said, "You want me to do this surgery on a man who is eighty-seven?" And he said, "But it is Martin Magner." "The director? I've seen his stuff. Well, let's try it. The picture is terrible."

Well, I still have some hangups, and I have postponed my new play until March. While I was in the hospital I made the new rehearsal plan.

Crawford: You mentioned Otto Bauer. What do you think Kurt Adler might have taken from him?

Magner: I think the dynamics, the man of action--entirely a man of action. It's not vanity. He just wanted to do things which were good. He is a perfectionist. And those people are a pain in the neck sometimes.

Crawford: Did you know anything about Ernst Adler?

Magner: No. Only what Kurt told me. You see, we grew up with very different backgrounds. Kurt came from a very well-to-do family. Very well-to-do, and there was always a certain elegance around him. In people, in women; it's rather that he knows what is good, at least as far as appearance is concerned.

I am from a rather poor family, but very proud. There was not much on the table, but there was always a great independence. This I got very much from my mother, who was a pianist, and a good one, even though she let my two very beautiful sisters (they didn't take after me!) take piano lessons. They had to do that, even if there were sacrifices. I was an artistic soul from the moment I was born, and my mother knew that, but I didn't get the lessons. And when I was in Chicago and struggling with the opera, I thought, "My God, if only I could play the piano!" But Kurt had excellent taste. So has Nancy. Their house in San Francisco shows it.

##

I liked his second wife too, very much, and I knew her when she was a little girl. Billie had been something of a Judy Garland. It was kind of tragic, because they were two very fine specimens, and she just couldn't keep up with his development. He grew and grew and grew and then he had to represent the company as the general director of the opera. I don't have to tell you; you worked for him there and you have seen how much Nancy contributed.

#### Reflections About Vienna

Crawford: What about the house in Vienna--the apartment?

Magner: Oh, it was elegant and simple.

Crawford: It was full of artistic people, according to Mr. Adler.

Magner: Oh, yes. He worked for Max Reinhardt, you know.

Crawford: What do you know of his work in the Reinhardt theaters?

Magner: Reinhardt used music in his plays very judiciously, whatever really fit, so whatever he put in came from Kurt and was very good. He wrote and orchestrated it.

Crawford: He has said that with the exception of the Burgtheater he had a monopoly on music for the Vienna theater.

Magner: I would say so.

Crawford: What was the climate like in Vienna then?

Magner: Actually, I hated it; I hated Vienna. This is why I started the cabaret. I wanted to wake up those people. They had no idea what was happening in Germany, next door. They were so...easy-go-lucky; no balls, you know? No instinct of what the world was up against, which to me was so clear.

Crawford: They couldn't see?--or they wouldn't see?

Magner: They wouldn't see.

Crawford: What about music and theater?

Magner: In the theater those things never show. Later on I became director of the Kammerspiele in Vienna--the Chamber Theater. Vienna struck me as superficial. You know, it's baroque. Prague, that's renaissance--I loved the city of the renaissance. But there is a certain sweetness about Vienna; sometimes you wish this person would not smile. When he or she says this sentence. It's too much--it is beautiful, but it is not a beauty which comes out of a certain strength. The Czechs, Czechoslovakia--this is a different genre--guts. I have the feeling that in this way Kurt is not typical of Vienna at all.

Crawford: Yet most of the great musicians chose to work in Vienna.

Magner: Yes--but Beethoven was still born in Bonn.



Crawford: And he found what you are talking about in Vienna.

Magner: Exactly. I didn't think of making a career in Vienna, but I would have liked to stay in Breslau, because life in the theater there was different.

Crawford: Did Mr. Adler ever think of staying in Vienna to make his career there at the State Opera and the Volksoper?

Magner: Well, the opera in Vienna was always very good. I don't know if he would have stayed in Vienna--he started at Kaiserslauten in Germany--but he might have been successful in Vienna, just as he would have been in Berlin, or Hamburg, or any large city.

Crawford: You know that von Karajan asked him to Vienna to be his administrator at the Vienna State Opera.

Magner: Yes. He said no, because Kurt is much more than a good administrator and, I wonder--do you know George Cukor?

Well, he invited me a few years ago. He called me and said he would like me to work with him on a film--I think it was his last film. "It's a difficult film," he said, "with many minor parts that are very important, and I don't think I have the time or energy to take care of this all too--would you like to help me?"

I said, "I'm terribly sorry"--this was in 1965--"I'm terribly honored that you think of me, but I'm a rotten second man."

Crawford: So, you've had the same experience, once again.

Magner: Yes.

Crawford: Let me ask you a question about Max Reinhardt. Was he very influential in Adler's life?

Magner: I'm sure that anybody who worked so closely with Max Reinhardt must have gotten a lot of deep impressions, because he was a very great artist. I must be the only one in America who never worked with Reinhardt! But I admired him very much; only it never happened.

Crawford: Erich Leinsdorf wrote in his book that in order to have a career in Vienna, or a career in Vienna was made easier if one was a Catholic. Is that true?



Magner: No. Although I think Kurt became a Catholic. I don't know what he was. I know what he is.

Crawford: His mother was a Lutheran.

Magner: My father was Lutheran. My mother was Jewish. And I always felt Jewish. Even when I had still the chance to stay there, and they wanted me to stay, and I didn't.

Crawford: How about in Reichenberg--were there Nazis in the management?

Magner: No, the intendant was Jewish; Paul Barney. I'm sure there were a few Nazis and we didn't know they were Nazis. But the Sudeten Germans--our audience--these were the people who rooted for Hitler.

Crawford: Would you have stayed if Adler had not encouraged you to leave?

Magner: I couldn't get out. I didn't know where to go. After Reichenberg I was in Prague, because I had a contract from the theater in there, but it never came about because soon the Nazis were there. And the season didn't open any more. So I was practically without an engagement. I remember when the Nazis marched in and I slept every night at the house of different people--they were looking for me.

#### Arrivals in America

Crawford: So you came to this country then in 1938.

Magner: 1939. Kurt came in 1938. And it was wonderful. Kurt immediately got me into the studio where he worked, because there were young opera singers who didn't know anything about acting at all. Now for this I was very good. There was little money, and we roomed together in the Wilmar Hotel in Chicago, which was on State and Division Street. All the whores of Chicago marched by, you know? [chuckles] But I remember we had a room--it was Kurt's room--and he simply took me in. All he permitted me to do was to make breakfast in the morning; he didn't want me to pay anything. He had a Murphy's bed, which came out of the wall, and I had a couch, and it was pitch dark in this apartment, and I think there was a fire escape very near. But we had a very good time there, and of course nobody ever suspected these two were gays--because he was too active and I was too active. That was nine months together. He was

chorus director at Chicago Opera and of course in Reichenberg and later in Chicago he conducted, and very well.

I remember once he conducted a performance of Die Meistersinger, very well, and I think Rigoletto, quite a few things, in Reichenberg. I don't remember what he did in Chicago, because the Chicago Opera is a blur--I wasn't happy there.

Crawford: So you really adjusted to the United States together.

Magner: Yes, but he had a tremendous advantage because he knew English, but I was brought up in an "humanistic Gymnasium," which means I learned Greek and Italian. And then some French, but no English.

Crawford: Mr. Adler learned several languages at home. Was that unusual?

Magner: Yes. Several languages is rich. One other language, maybe.

Crawford: Why did the Adlers, particularly Ida Adler, insist on the languages?

Magner: Well, she read in so many different languages, and she probably thought her son should be a very well educated man.

You see, this was different in Vienna. The Austrians knew more languages than we in Germany. In Germany everything was done in German, so they obviously felt that Germany was the world. They knew very little that there was a vast world around them. Berlin was of course an exception.

Crawford: Mr. Adler was married in 1940 and his first child, Kristin, is your goddaughter, I understand. Born in 1943.

Magner: My relationship with her has always been very close. I remember one time I picked up Kristin and her mother up from the airfield in New York, I think she was very young, and she had a high fever. And it looked like meningitis, but she pulled through.

Crawford: Was Mr. Adler working with the chorus then?

Magner: Yes, and he loved his work and was a wonderful teacher.

Crawford: You had then moved from Chicago.

Magner: Yes, I had a job at NBC, and NBC transferred me to New York, because there was a show they didn't have a man for. I don't know if you know of Arthur Hopkins? One of the finest American

producers and a grand man of the American theater. He had a one-house show on NBC that was very prestigious. All of his previous successes had been done on the radio with original casts--like Helen Hayes and all the stars. Geraldine Fitzgerald. NBC didn't have a director for that and Hopkins insisted they get a director who knows the stage, not only radio, so I came to New York.

Mr. Adler had an apartment in New York, because he was half of the year in New York, and half of the year in San Francisco.

Crawford: Were those difficult times financially for the Adlers?

Magner: No. They were of modest means, but not wanting.

Crawford: How much did you see of Mr. Adler in San Francisco?

Magner: A lot. I came every year or ever second year. I saw his Meistersinger and I saw his Tristan, which I thought was wonderful. You see, among conductors, there is Toscanini and Furtwängler and those few outstanding--and there's a large group of excellent conductors like Leinsdorf and I'm sure Kurt comes into this. When you hear names like Karajan, it's like stars and superstars. There are a lot of stars, but just a few superstars. I wonder if Karajan will really stand out for the future. Like those old masters.

Crawford: Do you think Adler ever wanted to return to Europe--to Vienna or Berlin?

Magner: I don't think so. He served over thirty years in San Francisco--it's a long time.

#### Adler as Impresario

Crawford: How would you describe him as an impresario?

Magner: Ideal. I think he has a definite instinct for people and talent. He is meticulous. No detail escapes him. He hates mediocrity, and I think what he did with the San Francisco Opera, which was a conventional company when Kurt was chorus director there--nothing against Merola--but there is no comparison. Kurt could never be provincial.

##

Crawford: How would you describe his personality?

Magner: I would say that whatever weaknesses Kurt might have, which is common to all of us, they become completely unimportant in the light of his thoughts and actions. There is an innate sense of what is right and what is wrong, and whenever he can, he will do the right and avoid the wrong.

Crawford: In what sense?

Magner: The pitfalls we all fall into at times. We do things against our better judgement. In the moments we make mistakes we do them, but we try in most cases to avoid those situations.

Crawford: Was he adventuresome theatrically? You are able to judge.

Magner: Adventure? Very much. You see in his productions of King Lear, the Carmelites and many more. You can see it in men like Jean-Pierre Ponnelle. I'm sure it is not easy to work with a man like that. But he did--he brought him in, and people like that.

Crawford: Mr. Ponnelle has himself said that Mr. Adler was somewhat conservative in terms of what he would put onstage, compared with what was going on in Europe.

Magner: Well, I don't know what is going on in opera in Europe so much, but in theater,....no, I shouldn't touch this. I don't know.

Crawford: Let me ask you about his retirement. Did it surprise you?

Magner: Nothing that Kurt does surprises me. Last year he conducted seven Meistersingers within two and a half weeks or something. Everybody threw up his hands and said, "You're killing yourself; you are doing this against your family and you'll die doing it," and I was quite against it, until I suddenly saw it from another viewpoint and thought, "No--this is life for this man, this is what he wants." It doesn't matter how long we live. It only matters if you live according to the qualities you have. And so, I respect whatever decision he might make or might have made--it's his decision, I think.

[Interference from music next door on tape]

Crawford: Did you hear any of those Meistersinger performances?

Magner: I didn't, because I was in rehearsal myself.

Crawford: Let us end the session here. Is there anything you want to add?

Magner: Yes. A highly successful conductor and general director of one of the finest opera companies in our land would be superhuman in trying to arouse the affection of everybody around him. As a friend of over fifty years Kurt Herbert Adler is unsurpassed.

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