

Home Runs in the Opera House — Gordon Hawkins

by Susan Dormady

After winning the Pavarotti Competition in 1992, Gordon Hawkins faced a difficult decision: break his contract at the Met to work with Pavarotti in two operas, or stay at the Met, where he was on his way to becoming a contract singer. Looking back, Mr. Hawkins has no regrets about the decision he made, which led to a successful international career. Find out how singing in Europe helped shape him as an artist. Discover his process for delving into the character of an opera, and read how having a big voice was both a blessing and a curse.

Gordon Hawkins as George in Houston Grand Opera's production of *Of Mice and Men*.



photo by George Hixson



“Music and baseball were my two passions. But when I went to Maryland at 17, I tore my rotator cuff, and though I recovered enough to play—I could even still pitch—the day after a game I could hardly lift my arm. Eventually, I stopped playing.”

It was part of the fabric of my childhood. I didn’t see it as unusual that there were seven people in the house, with musical sounds

and said, “Have a wonderful life!” Then I walked up to the top of the hill to the Music Department. [Laughs.] Even though I quit my formal study of math, what makes me good as a singer has to do with my mathematical aptitude, combined with my athletic aptitude.

For two decades, since winning the Met Auditions in 1986, American baritone Gordon Hawkins has won accolades for his performances at Seattle Opera, Dallas Opera, Houston Grand Opera, Washington National Opera, and other U.S. companies. In Europe, Mr. Hawkins has appeared with the Royal Opera at Covent Garden, Deutsche Oper Berlin, Deutsche Oper am Rhein, Dusseldorf Opera, Bregenzer Festspiele, and Palermo’s Teatro Massimo.

Hailed as one of the finest singing actors of his generation, Mr. Hawkins loves to probe the psychological terrain of his roles—from George in Carlisle Floyd’s *Of Mice and Men* to the 20 complex men he portrays in the Verdi repertoire. Before starting rehearsals for *Das Rheingold*—the first production in the “American Ring,” opening this month at Washington National Opera—Mr. Hawkins spoke with *CS* about the rewards of managing his vibrant international career.

You’re the son of a Clinton, Maryland, minister and the youngest of seven children. How important was music when you were growing up?

coming from all of us. We sang in church, and we played our instruments there as well. I played clarinet, and my four brothers and two sisters played everything from the French horn to the flute. But I wasn’t aware of having a special vocal gift back then. I could sing, and sing very prettily. I knew that people enjoyed hearing me. It didn’t register, however, that I was destined for a career.

You went to the University of Maryland on a baseball scholarship. How did you wind up studying voice?

Music and baseball were my two passions. But when I went to Maryland at 17, I tore my rotator cuff, and though I recovered enough to play—I could even still pitch—the day after a game I could hardly lift my arm. Eventually, I stopped playing.

My older brother, the dentist, wanted me to go into pre-med, so I majored in math. I got through the first year fairly easily, but on the first day of my sophomore year they had an exam—and that was when the weeding out process began. It was sobering. At the end of class I handed my empty paper to the professor

That’s interesting. Can you elaborate?

When you read music, you’re basically deciphering variables that operate in a time context. Almost anyone can do that by singing the notes. But if you can move from measure 1 to measure 76 and make those measures into another language with time, with breath, and with some sort of emotion, then you’re making music. You’re making something magical!

Did you have any epiphanies about technique as you began to sing professionally?

When I got to Wolf Trap Opera in the early 1980s, I met a lot of kids my age who were *really* good, and I thought, “OK, you’ve got to swim a little faster here.” [Laughs.] All my colleagues went on to major careers: Eugene Perry, Herbert Perry, Phyllis Treigle, Victoria Livengood, Richard Croft, and Dawn Upshaw.

Now, Dawn Upshaw’s technique was almost immaculate. That’s what you worship when you first come on the scene: technique. Dawn had it in spades, though she never talked about her technique. But at one point I was listening while she was practicing, and she

“Since my opportunity in Philadelphia was too good to pass up, especially since Pavarotti was directing ‘Bohème’ and singing in ‘Favorita,’ I took the contract, and my relationship with the Met ended.”

sang a beautiful phrase. Then she stopped and said to herself, “No, no, dummy, you don’t sing it with your throat! You sing it with your body!”

I was startled, but I thought, “You don’t sing it with your throat. You sing it with your *body*.” Well, it took me until the age of 37 before I knew what Dawn was talking about. The cords make the vibrations and the sound, but you support that sound with your whole body. Dawn’s comment was the first time one of my peers had articulated this concept in a way I could viscerally understand.

After several years of playing supporting roles at the Met, you made an unscheduled Texaco-broadcast debut on Feb. 23, 1991, singing Marcello to Plácido Domingo’s Rodolfo. How did you cope with such a high-stakes moment?

Considering the circumstances, I think I handled it remarkably well. When I got the call saying: “You’re on!” everything went into warp speed.

I remember waiting in the wings before the third act with Dwayne Croft, who was singing Schaubard. We were pups in our early 30s,

and Dwayne said, “You know, we might never sing a ‘Bohème’ with a cast like this for the rest of our lives!” And I thought, “If I got in a train wreck the next day, that would be fine. I would’ve at least have gotten *this*.”

I loved the whole thing.

Two years later, you launched your career in Europe. How did it happen?

I made the decision to leave New York a short while after “Bohème.” The catalyst was Luciano Pavarotti. I met him at the Met when he was singing the Duke in *Rigoletto* and I was singing Marullo. Leo Nucci was *Rigoletto*. And every time I would sing, Luciano would lean over to Leo and say something. The prompter, Joan Dornemann, eventually told me Luciano was commenting on the beauty of my voice. Well, one day I got up the nerve to speak to him, and he was very warm. When I mentioned I was going to Milan to work with a coach, he invited me to his home in Pesaro. So I went there for about three weeks and studied with him.

Around that time, Luciano was sponsoring the Pavarotti Competition in Philadelphia. I entered in 1992 and was one of 12 winners, and we were invited to perform *La bohème* and *La favorita*. I was cast as the baritone lead in both! The problem was, there was a conflict with my performance schedule at the Met. Luciano even spoke with the Met on my behalf, but for whatever reason, the Met wouldn’t release me.

Since my opportunity in Philadelphia was too good to pass up,



Gordon Hawkins as Porgy with Angela Simpson as Serena in Washington National Opera’s production of *Porgy and Bess*.

photo by Karin Cooper

especially since Pavarotti was directing “Bohème” and singing in “Favorita,” I took the contract, and my relationship with the Met ended. I have no regrets about it, and I don’t blame anyone. I was moving toward being a contract singer with the Met, but I needed to grow as an artist.

I was getting a lot of calls to sing “Porgy,” and I’d say “no” most of the time because I felt that doing “Porgy” would narrow my options in the long run. So I went to Europe and spent half of each year there, but I also kept a connection in the States with companies like Dallas, Seattle, and Austin.

Were there advantages to singing in Germany?

I needed a company where I could do 30 performances of “Trovatore” a year, so I could learn and develop. Also, I was so busy working in German regional houses, I didn’t have the time to worry about what I was going to do on stage. Tonight was “Trovatore” in Düsseldorf, tomorrow was “Lucia” in Berlin. I had to stay very focused, and this was good discipline.

Critics often praise the complexity of your acting. How do you get inside the skin of characters?

I use the same process for all characters. This is a strategy I learned in acting classes. You write down on a paper everything that defines who a character is—let’s say Marcello—pages and pages, or whatever you like. And then you write down honestly who you are. Then you try to find cross references, and that’s where you build your character.

When I first worked on Marcello, I found that everything in Marcello was in me. On the other hand, when I first sang Scarpia, I didn’t find many cross references. Yet all you need are two or three general similarities and you can create a convincing character. The fact is, everybody knows that Scarpia is powerful and evil. All I have to do is walk out there and be still, be quiet, be focused, be clear.

I don’t have to run around and do histrionics. I don’t have to shove people. I’m 6’2” and 260 pounds. All I have to do is look at someone and make them move, and the audience will use their minds to fill in the colors of what evil is.

Do you ever take your characters home?

There have been productions, such as Houston Grand Opera’s *Of Mice and Men*, that have hit so close to home it took me a couple of months to shed the character. The good feeling, in retrospect, is that I was honest. What I drew on from myself and put into the character of George was really me—there were real experiences and real emotions, and it was rewarding that I would take that risk and invest the essence of myself into a role.

Francesca Zambello directed that 2002 *Of Mice and Men* in Houston, and she will direct you again this month as you rehearse Washington National Opera’s *Das Rheingold*. What’s the value of your ongoing relationship with her?

I have a very fertile imagination, and I like being able to use that as a singing actor. I like having the freedom to explore. I trust Francesca, or any director, to choose which colors they want to use while painting their production.

My job is to provide as broad a palette as possible, and I always have an idea of where

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the arc of my character is going to go. But the director has to let me know where *they're* going with the production, and I like the kind of dialogue I have with "Cesca." I appreciate the vocabulary we've developed over the years and the room she always gives me.

What happens when you don't see eye-to-eye with a director?

It is the director's production, and my job is to help the director realize his or her vision. It's not my job to be a critic or to judge their process. Would I necessarily choose their route? Not always, and I've had a lot of experiences when I didn't agree with the director's approach; dozens and dozens, in fact.

I'll give you a good example. I was in New Zealand doing *Simon Boccanegra* with Nuccia Focile and Paul Charles Clarke, two good friends of mine. The stage director was Stephen Lawless, a wonderful English director; an extraordinary visionary. Well, I was never physically comfortable during the entire process. Never. I could give Stephen Lawless what he wanted as a singer and actor, but I could never grab hold of that emotional thread that connects you from A to B to C—all the way up to the end. It just never came, and it frustrated the hell out of me. Yet, ironically, when my voice teacher came to see my performance, he told me it was the best thing he'd ever seen me do! And that taught me that sometimes it's great for me to be outside my comfort zone.

You perform 20 Verdi roles, including the title role in *Macbeth*, which you'll sing this May at Seattle Opera. Was your voice a big Verdi baritone from the start?

Yes, it was. In fact, that was my curse. I had to manage my voice, because early on it was a bull in a china shop. I never had to worry about the size of my instrument. What I had to worry about was that each note didn't have to be an opera. [Laughs.] I had to tell myself: "Sing the phrase. Sing what's on the page. Sing it as honestly and as truthfully as you can. Sing the words and sing the emotion."

Do you have a favorite Verdi role?

Rigoletto, for the pure musicality of it; for the beauty of it. There are phrases in *Rigoletto* you can never tire of wanting to sing, and feelings you can never tire of wanting to show your soul through. But from age 35, when I first performed the role on stage, until, hopefully,



photo by Michael Meicer

“When the composer marks forte or pianissimo, you have to come up with a specific emotion to support that phrase. For me, what I finally understood was that it didn’t have to be a shout and it didn’t have to be a whisper. It had to be the truth.”

when I’m in my 60s, my understanding of the man will continue to grow. His is a Greek tragedy, after all. The opera’s about someone who tries to take fate into his own hands. Once Rigoletto starts controlling fate—just as he’s controlled his daughter, Gilda, for all those years—everything unravels. But when I finish singing Rigoletto, I feel both drained and exhilarated.

By the way, do you still study?

Yes, with David Harper who teaches in London and Sweden. I don’t go for more than a year without getting my “60,000 mile” vocal tune-up. It can take two days or it can take a week.

How do you evoke emotion through your singing?

The technical requirement for me is always to sing the notes and the rhythms that are on the page. When the composer marks *forte* or *pianissimo*, you have to come up with a specific emotion to support that phrase. For me, what I finally understood was that it didn’t have to be a shout and it didn’t have to be a whisper. It had to be the truth.

Is there a role you’re dying to do?

Lord, yes! There are two roles I’m dying to do because I like the people. One is Barak, the dyer, in *Die Frau Ohne Schatten*. I love his humanity. And I’d like to sing Amfortas in *Parsifal*. I like flawed characters whose sense

of power really costs them. I’d also love to sing Sweeney Todd!

How do you find a balance, so you can nurture your non-singing self?

That’s an important question. Sometimes I have to get away and recharge. That’s why I couldn’t live in New York City, because there’s always pressure to be doing something for your career. So I live in Scottsdale, Ariz. This past December, when my Palm Beach *Aida* ended, I had six weeks off, and I didn’t sing at all. I played a lot of golf. I saw my sister and my nieces and nephews. I cooked with friends and did some hiking. I spent time at the gym.

You’re preparing to sing Alberich. What are your vocal challenges?

Wagner, even though it’s written in German, is not typical. Wagner wrote his own libretto, so you won’t find the same syntax and tenses in Mozart or Strauss. Some of the words Wagner uses are old German, and with the character of Alberich in particular you’ll find these alliterations. Alberich is doing wordplay

Gordon Hawkins as George in Houston Grand Opera's production of *Of Mice and Men*.



photo by George Hixson

in a very musical way, and he wants to show you how clever he is. So more than the notes, you have to be able to articulate the lyricism of the text, and it's a completely different poetry from other composers.

Francesca Zambello recently said that Wagner's "Ring" "is always contemporary and speaks to us today." Do you share her view that opera has social value?

I honestly think the most significant thing it offers is the ability to illuminate the soul. What we need more than anything else is the collective understanding that the issues we're wrestling with now are nothing new.

On a personal note, I need an audience to see that a black man from southern Maryland has the same emotional palette as a white man from Pisa or an Asian man from Hong Kong. There's nothing stronger than that real live moment in the theater where someone interacts with someone else on stage and your mind says, "I can believe that!" Of course, some minds say, "I'm not willing to believe that!" And that's the fight for all artists, because if an audience is not willing to suspend disbelief and take that journey, I don't think there's much hope for us as a people.

Can you share some career advice with our readers?

I'm now 46, but I can remember in my 20s and early 30s when it seemed that everyone I met knew more than I did. The coaches knew more, conductors knew more, critics knew more, etc. At some point

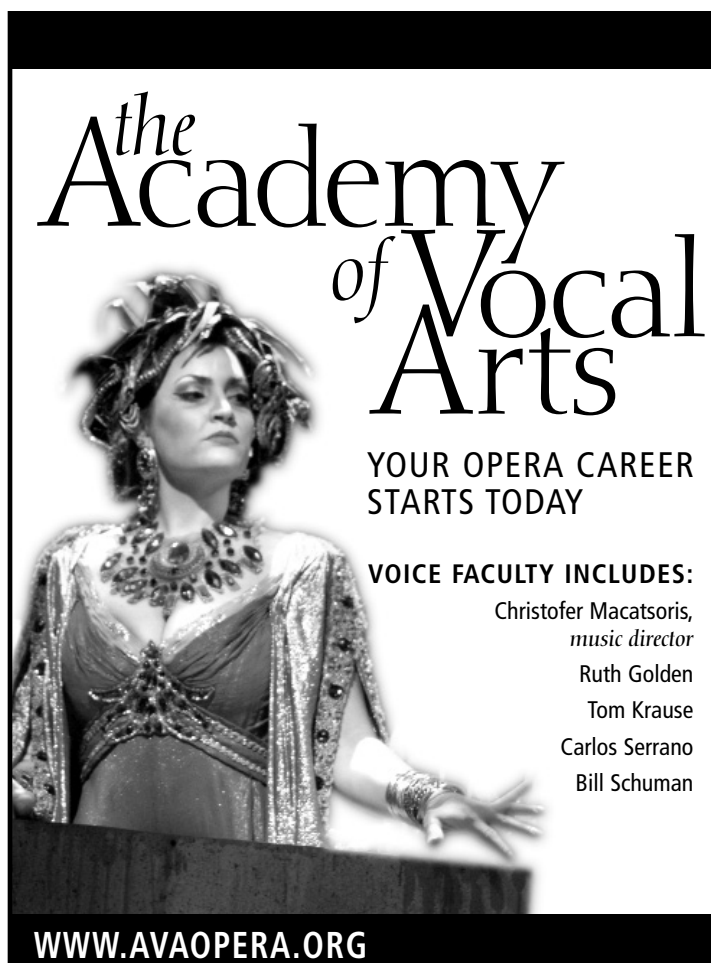
you have to reach the understanding that regardless of how much other people know (or how much you think you don't know), you're going to be the person who goes up there on stage and performs the role. And that's as valid as all that other knowledge. So don't beat yourself up about what you don't know, and don't sell yourself short. *You* know enough to perform your role as honestly as you can.

What we don't give people permission to do is to fail better. Go out there. Fail. That's fine! Then next time, *fail better!* You're not supposed to be perfect. People drive themselves insane trying to make the perfect sound. That doesn't mean you go on stage shabby. Be professional. Do your work. But you are allowed to "fail better" as a performer, and to grow from your mistakes.

Suppose you hadn't injured your shoulder in college. Do you think you would've been happy as a baseball player?

I would've loved it! Our country isn't very old, and the beauty of baseball is that it references our brief sense of antiquity. It's timeless. But then again ... so is opera.

Trained as a classical mezzo, Susan Dormady has been a Maryland-based free-lance writer since 1981. She has recently completed her first novel, The Voice I Just Heard, about a grieving soprano who sings to restore a dried-up waterfall and winds up saving her soul. Please e-mail her at SusanDormady@aol.com.

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