

Roderick Hunt Sings the Praises of Editing

Roderick Hunt has devoted many years to studying, researching, and educating others about ecology. And he has devoted at least as many years to opera singing. Hunt is a professor, an editor, and an opera singer who resides in Lypstone, England, a place he describes as “a pretty village not far from Exeter in the County of Devon”. Born in the coastal town of Poole, Dorset County, on the south coast of England in 1945, Hunt says he was encouraged to be an instrumentalist when he was growing up. He had formal training in playing orchestral instruments, including the tuba and trombone, when he was in school but switched to singing when he was in his teens. It was a lot easier than carrying those heavy instruments around, he says.

During the 1960s, Hunt attended Sheffield University in England, where he was later awarded a PhD and a DSc. The latter degree, awarded in 2001, is a whole-career award in recognition of an international reputation as a specialist in a particular discipline, he says. In recognition of his accomplishments, he has been named a Chartered Biologist and Fellow in the Institute of Biology (the UK professional society for biologists), titles that are given in recognition of senior status and academic accomplishments in the discipline. Hunt has held various research and teaching positions at universities. He is now a visiting professor in biosciences at the University of Exeter.

Hunt has been involved in editing for 20 years, serving as an editor (1985–1990) and then chief editor (1990–1996) of *Annals of Botany*. The journal is the oldest of its kind worldwide, dating back to 1887, he notes, and had as one of its original creators Francis Darwin, the son of Charles Darwin. Since 1997, Hunt has served as secretary and treasurer for the *Annals*. It is an honor to be involved with this particular journal, he says.

Hunt is a council member of the European Association of Science Editors and served as the association’s vice president from 2000 to 2003. He also belongs to the British Ecological Society and CSE. One of Hunt’s professional pursuits

involves research in plant-growth analysis. His research and insights have led him and his colleagues to construct virtual models of plant “functional types”, which he describes as “stylized abstractions of real plants that avoid the huge dimensionality of the real plant world and allow for much easier predictions of such things as plant growth and biodiversity”. Several presentations on this topic can be viewed at www.ex.ac.uk/~rh203.

Editing gives Hunt “a chance to have a say in how science is represented”. In doing so, he states that it is important to look at the information with an eye to how can it be improved and then guide and steer it through the process. The process is similar to that of his other passion, opera singing.

Hunt’s first performance in an opera was in 1964 in a student production of Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Trial by Jury*. At that point, he thought “how great it was to combine drama and music”. It was a synergy that allowed him to break away from the “less demonstrative” activity of playing an instrument.

Stage fright has never caused him problems, Hunt says. “When you are a performer, you look forward to the beginning of the event” for that is when the audience starts to respond. More recently, he has been a producer of some operas, a position that has given him the new perspective that, “when you are a producer, you look forward to the end” of the event, for at that point nothing else can go wrong.

Hunt sings opera principally in Yorkshire and the North Midlands, but also ventures to Exeter and the UK’s Southwest to perform. These semiprofessional performances draw both local and regional audiences. He has performed in about 90 operas over the past 30 years, averaging about three performances per year. That works out to about 30 nights of performing in a year’s time. His wife is proud of his operatic achievements but does not care too much for his being away during the many evenings when he is rehearsing a show, he says, but she has managed to catch all the performances so far. Among Hunt’s wife and three children, none has followed his musical path.



Roderick Hunt as Don Pizarro (left) and Robert Spooner as Rocco in South Yorkshire Opera performance of Beethoven's *Fidelio*, 1977.

What is the process from conception to reality in staging an opera? First, Hunt says, an opera is announced by a company. Performers can find out about this by word of mouth or by following local community Web sites, he says. Then, auditions are held, the show is cast, and rehearsals begin. Music rehearsals precede stage rehearsals—the conductor rehearses the cast and, once done, hands the cast to the producer. The producer is involved in the “visual” and decides what the audience will see. Finally, there is the floor production during which the singers are shown where to stand and where to move, Hunt explains. Once those pieces are in place, there are usually only two full stage rehearsals until the first live performance. The entire cycle from announcement of an opera until the first show is performed is usually about 1 year, he says.

Hunt aspires to “those roles by the Italian operatic composer Giuseppe Verdi, particularly the role of Philip II, King of Spain, in his grand opera *Don Carlos*”. “My voice is bass” and thus is “particularly suited for kings and priests in the Italian repertoire”. In addition, Hunt “aspires” to the role of Wotan in the German repertoire and that of Boris Godunov in the Russian repertoire.

Although Hunt has personal preferences when it comes to working with other performers on stage, he advised that it is not a good idea to express such preferences, because it could be perceived in an unflattering way and possibly lead to being labeled as a “difficult” performer. “To be professional, you should be prepared to work with anyone.”

Hunt says that his opera voice is currently at its peak. In opera, those with low voices—those who sing bass, like him—mature late, he says. He has a voice coach to keep his singing voice at its best. When asked whether he does anything to protect his voice before a performance, he says with a laugh, “it’s helpful not to speak, eat, or drink too much beforehand”. However, he admits that he tends to use his “singing vocal production” when deliv-

ering lectures, and this most likely helps to preserve its quality. The British have a “dull, muffled speaking sound” when conversing, unlike the brighter, more forward American or Italian way of speaking, for example, Hunt says. If the British style of speaking is used to deliver a lecture, the voice will tend to tire more quickly.

His voice-training efforts have apparently paid off. In 2003, Hunt was nominated for best male voice for his role as Sir Roderic in the production of *Ruddigore* performed at the Buxton Opera House’s annual summer festival (details of the competition can be accessed at www.gs-festival.co.uk/GSFestival/PreviousWinners.aspx?Year=2003). His other career highlights include a performance in *Tosca* before the England’s Prince of Wales. Almost all his performances have been in England, but he traveled to Seattle in 2002 to perform at the Bagley Wright Theatre on the World’s Fair campus.

As a career, science is more interesting and more stable than singing, Hunt notes. Unless you are one of the premier-league singers, it is hard to make a living solely by singing, he says, and even then it is not wise to turn down any work. (Hunt says that he turns down more than he accepts, a luxury not granted to full-time professionals.) Nevertheless, he sees parallels between life in opera and life in editing. “As an editor, you can interpret other people’s material. The same is true with opera: you are delivering a performance, an interpretation.” In both, the process is one of enabling and facilitating a process so that the final product is one of quality, he says.

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