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THOROUGHLY IMPRESSED

*MARIA NOCKIN talks to baritone Alan Opie,
who is about to sing Germont at San Diego Opera*

On the Tuesday after Easter, I spoke by phone with British baritone Alan Opie who was enjoying the warm temperatures and blue skies of San Diego. He was in town to sing the part of the elder Germont in the San Diego Opera production of *La traviata*. Since he had only recently arrived, he had only been to one rehearsal.

Maria Nockin: Where did you grow up?

Alan Opie: I grew up in Cornwall, in the southwest of England. When I was a child, I sang a good bit at church and in local concerts. I did not want to sing in the Cathedral boys choir, although there was one nearby. I sang quite often, however, and I took piano lessons. The local churchorganist took me under his wing, so to speak, and encouraged me to sing.

Eventually, I went to Cambridge University as a choral scholar, so I sang six services a week in the chapel of one of the colleges, Gonville and Caius. We did our studies after that. At that time the choirs were purely male. They were made up of altos, tenors and basses. A few years ago, I went back there to sing and it was very different. Now, all the colleges and the choirs have women as well as men. Seeing how young the students look these days makes me feel old!



Alan Opie. Photo © Michael Cooper

I can still remember how it used to be when a student came home after midnight! You had to climb over a high metal spiked fence to get back in. It was really quite dangerous. If you came back after eleven at night, you had to go through the porter's lodge so that he could record the time of your return. Now, everything has changed.

MN: I understand you were nominated for the Olivier Award for Opera.

AO: Yes, they are basically theatre awards, but there are two for opera. Somehow, opera awards and even theatre awards don't seem to get the publicity and TV time that cinema prizes get. The group that presents the Olivier Award originally called their presentation The Society for West End Theatre Management Award, but when Sir Lawrence Olivier died they named it after him. Their judges attend every new production during the year. They then nominate three or four contenders and finally give the prize to a single winner. Unfortunately, I was not in the country when the awards were given out, but my wife and daughter attended the presentation.

MN: How do you like San Diego?

AO: Right now I'm sitting in my apartment looking out at the sea. We are staying in the Coronado area. Both my wife, Kathleen, and I are enjoying it immensely. She feels she is on holiday here. It's a treat for us to be here when the weather is so bad in England. It has been exceptionally cold and snowy this winter. As a matter of fact they had snow this past week, but they did not have an earthquake!

That is what we experienced on Easter Sunday here! Kathleen and I were outside our beachfront building sitting on some rocks that form a breakwater. All of a sudden the rocks started moving! One of them seemed to be balancing on its point rocking to and fro. When we stood up, the beach was rolling and it was hard to walk. It went on for quite a while, too. Later, we heard that the earthquake was a seven point two. When we got back to the apartment the pictures were all wonky and a lamp had fallen over.

MN: How do you like working with conductor Renato Palumbo in therehearsals for the San Diego Opera presentation of *La traviata*?

AO: Maestro Palumbo knows the Verdi score backwards and forwards. He does not need to have it in front of him because he has long since memorized it. I think this opera is in his blood. I'm sure he had vast experience conducting Italian opera. Although I have not worked with him very much yet, I'm thoroughly impressed with his knowledge. I will do my big scene with him this afternoon.

MN: What is your interpretation of Germont?

AO: Germont starts off thinking that Violetta is a common whore who is living on his son's money. His impression gradually changes when he meets her and finds out what she is really like. He eventually realizes that she is paying for Alfredo and that she is very ill. By the end of the opera, he is asking for her forgiveness.

MN: Have you sung in California before?

AO: Yes, I sang Sharpless in the Robert Wilson version of *Madama Butterfly* at Los Angeles Opera. It wasn't at all conventional, but a great many people liked it. For me, the most interesting *Butterfly* was one I did in Japan with a Japanese director. In that production, the westerners were played by westerners and the Japanese by Asians. The choristers were Chinese and it worked very well.

The strongest, most dramatic *Butterfly* in which I have sung was the Graham Vick production at English National Opera a few years ago. He did not make it beautiful. He built on the

darkness of the story. In Act II, Cio-Cio San wore western clothing and you could see that she had been completely ostracized by her family and friends. Her son looked Japanese, not western, and when she spoke of his having golden hair she was looking for an occasional light hair on his head. Vick made the weather rainy and there were puddles outside the house. It was not pretty and I know that many opera goers want to see something pleasant, but this production was stronger because it was so dark. Now, ENO does the Minghella production, which is also at the Met.

MN: What is your family like?

AO: Kathleen and I have been married for almost forty years. We will celebrate our anniversary on the day after the first night of *La traviata*. She is also a singer. Although she is a capable soloist, she sang in the Covent Garden Chorus for many years so that she could be home with our son and daughter when they were growing up. Now our son is a violist with the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra in Manchester. Our daughter wanted to go down a different path entirely and she has nothing to do with music. However, I think she could be a musician if she tried. Our son sang some small parts in opera as a boy but now he prefers orchestral music. He is a really good musician, too.

While the kids were growing up, I spent most of the year at English National Opera. I only started to freelance after the children left home. Then I was away so much that Kathleen finally took a sabbatical from Covent Garden so that we could have some time together. Now she only does the 'Extra Chorus'. Usually, she comes to wherever I am at the end of the rehearsal period and stays for the performances. She has come for the whole of the San Diego trip, however.

MN: Where do you go after San Diego?

AO: We go back to London where I will sing Golaud in *Pelléas et Mélisande*. From there I go to Sydney for *Rigoletto* and then to Buenos Aires for *Falstaff*. When I go to Australia, Kathleen will come after the first three weeks.

MN: Do you have a Grammy?

AO: I have two Grammy Awards, one for Beckmesser on the Decca recording of *Die Meistersinger* conducted by Georg Solti and the other for Balstrode on the Chandos *Peter Grimes* conducted by Richard Hickox.

MN: I notice you have a great many recordings out. What will be coming out in the near future?

AO: I recorded the world première of the new opera called *For*

You. It has a libretto by Ian McEwen and music by Michael Berkeley. It should be out in June on Signum Records. I have a large part in that and I really enjoyed doing it.

Copyright © 15 April 2010 **Maria Nockin**,
Arizona USA

Performances of San Diego Opera's *La traviata* featuring Alan Opie as Germont take place on Saturday 17, Tuesday 20, Friday 23 and Sunday 25 April 2010. Elizabeth Futral sings Violetta, Marius Brenciu is Alfredo, Joseph Hu is Gaston, Scott Sikon sings the Marquis d'Obigny, Nicolai Janitzky is Douphol and Kristopher Irmiter is Dr Grenvil. Andrew Sinclair directs, choreography is by Kristina Cobarrubia and the conductor is Renato Palumbo. There's further information from www.sdopera.com or +1 619 533 7000.

Alan Opie has recorded for CBS, EMI, Hyperion, Chandos, and Decca. Releases include *Alan Opie Sings Bel Canto Arias* as well as Britten's *Gloriana*, *Albert Herring*, *Death in Venice*, *The Rape of Lucretia* and *Peter Grimes*. He also sings the title role in Dallapiccola's *Ulisse*; Tonio in *Pagliacci*; Enrico in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Smirnov in Walton's *The Bear*, the title role in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and Beckmesser in *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg*.

Recordings for Chandos:

Britten: *Owen Wingrave*
Britten: *Death in Venice*
Britten: *The Rape of Lucretia*
Britten: *Peter Grimes*
Britten: *Billy Budd*
Britten: *Albert Herring*

Donizetti: *Lucia of Lammermoor*
Donizetti: *Mary Stuart*

Holst: *The Wandering Scholar*

Leoncavallo: *Pagliacci*

Mascagni: *Cavalleria rusticana*

Menotti: *Martin's Lie*

Prokofiev: *War And Peace*

Puccini: arias

Puccini: *La bohème*

Rossini: *The Italian Girl in Algiers* (highlights)

Rossini: *The Barber Of Seville*

Verdi: *Nabucco*

Verdi: *Rigoletto*

Verdi: *Il Trovatore*

Verdi: *Ernani*

Walton: *The Bear*

Walton: *Troilus And Cressida*

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