



Photographed onstage at The Met by James Salzano

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nearly forty-two years now, having powered his way to this office and this desk through a variety of menial and not-so-menial jobs in a rise that is the stuff of opera legend.

Volpe retells the story as if hearing it himself for the first time. "My grandfather made men's clothing back in Italy. My father did too, on Fourteenth Street here in New York. My education - college, masters and doctorate - was all at the Met. How did I start? I was just a Long Island kid working as a Broadway stagehand. Someone told me that the carpenters' union was going to open up the list for apprentices - it was usually handed down father to son - but you had to take a test. I wound up scoring number one out of the whole city. Herman Krawitz, Bing's assistant manager,

Joseph Volpe answers his own question with characteristic certitude. "Why now?" he asks. "Because the time has come."

Sixteen years after becoming the Metropolitan Opera's tenth general manager, Volpe, now sixty-five, will end his own reign with a retirement effective August 2006. The decision took many by surprise.

"I think I've done what I can here," he maintains, evincing an in-your-face serenity from behind his capacious desk, a maze of hallways removed from the Met auditorium, in an executive office first occupied by Rudolf Bing. "I felt very early on if I was the general manager for fifteen years that would be just about enough - because the way I do this job, it is too much the focus of my life."

He has, in fact, been at the Met for

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With Ben Heppner after the dress rehearsal of Lohengrin, 1998

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With Ben Heppner after the dress rehearsal of Lohengrin, 1998

heard about this and said, "We want *him*."



Volpe onstage with Plácido Domingo at a 1999 rehearsal of *Simon Boccanegra*
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Volpe joined the Met, backstage, in August 1964. By 1966, he was the company's master carpenter. In 1978, Anthony Bliss appointed him technical director. Volpe was then made assistant manager in 1981, a post he held for almost ten years, learning every aspect of opera management, including negotiating the company's labor agreements.

"When did I know I actually wanted to run the whole show?" Volpe asks now. "Back when Mr. Bing first announced his retirement

in 1970 or so. I said to myself, "That's the job for me."

It was quite an ambition for a thirty-year-old carpenter. Volpe realized it in 1990 with the somewhat scaled-back title of "general director," as one-third of a management triumvirate alongside artistic director James Levine and chief fundraiser Marilyn Shapiro. By 1993, though, he was in charge with the full rank he had sought: general manager.

His tenure has been predictably activist. He increased the season length. He added to the variety of subscriber ticket packages, expanded the Met's international touring schedule, and oversaw a remarkable period of relative labor peace. Even his waning months have been rife with action. Not only did Volpe successfully conclude labor agreements with two Met unions (orchestra; and singers, dancers and stage staff) almost a year ahead of schedule, but the new pact has freed the Met to pursue an unprecedented commercial gambit: offering a less expensive ninety-minute mini-version of Julie Taymor's wildly popular *Zauberflöte* as a limited Christmas-season attraction in 2006-07.



Recently, to top things off, Volpe even lined up an eleventh-hour corporate savior for the orphaned Saturday radio broadcasts, the hitherto less than operationally inclined Toll Brothers, a construction company self-branded "America's Luxury Home Builder™."

Still, Volpe himself believes the most radical act of the Volpe era remains his instituting (and helping to design) a seatback titling system that has been grudgingly appreciated even by purist opponents.

Volpe, second from right, reviews a set model" My signature accomplishments? Met Titles in for *Antony and Cleopatra* at the Met in 1966 1995. That was a very big step. And the Metropolitan Opera Archives number of premieres I've presented - twenty-six Met premieres, four world premieres: *Ghosts of Versailles*, *The Voyage*, *The Great Gatsby* and *An American Tragedy*. Rudolph Bing in twenty-two years had twelve Met premieres and three world. We each commissioned about the same number of works, but I feel that I've really helped expand the repertory. Twenty-six premieres is the financial limit here, I think, for a fifteen-to-sixteen-year career."

In fact, if there has been one persistent criticism of Volpe it is that he has fostered a creative climate at the Met dominated more by fiscal than by artistic priorities, priorities further constrained by a micromanagement style some perceive to be meddlesome. Throughout his tenure, while avowedly deferring to James Levine in the initial aesthetic shaping of the Met's seasonal plans, Volpe has insinuated himself into every aspect of the execution of those plans with muscular energy and a penurious eye.

Many murmur that Volpe's vigorous pursuit of budgetary restraint, combined with his own emphatically personal design tastes, have often straitjacketed Met design teams. A now-notorious 1997 British television documentary entitled *The Boss* captured Volpe at a budget meeting for a new Giancarlo del Monaco production of *La Forza del Destino*, economizing on del Monaco's elaborate proposed design by borrowing costumes from other Met operas and boulders from the Met's *Die Walküre* set.



In the Met board room during contract negotiations, 2005

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Volpe laughs. "Look, I've been a hands-on G.M. It depends on the way you choose to do the job. There are a lot of decisions that I'm not involved with. It's a question of what *kind* of decisions. If I became involved in all the details, I couldn't do my job. I rely on my staff. If a new production

director decides he or she wants to have one intermission instead of two, of course I'm involved in that. If a stage director wants the soprano's costume to be changed, I'm not necessarily involved in that. However, once the costume is on the stage, I will get involved if I don't like what they've chosen."

Volpe is not a man given to retrospective rue. Still, are there any decisions he regrets? "There have been plenty of situations where, had I known then what I know today, I would have handled things differently," he admits. "There was a production in 2000 of *Trovatore*, with Neil Shicoff. Neil is really not the ideal tenor for that role, so the production had to be designed to work for him. The first designs were by a great designer, Maria Bjørnson, but were rejected. By then we were really out of time, so a new design [by Paul Brown] was quickly put together that seemed to make sense - it placed most of the action way downstage, which worked for Neil. What I now know is that sometimes with a new production, if you have a few initial missteps you wind up racing the clock and never do your best work. I should have canceled that new *Trovatore* and used our old production. You have to just say, 'No, we're not going to get this right.' Which is painful."

Volpe grows silent. He seems about to speak, hesitates, then begins again. "I'm sure there have been many other regrets. The biggest? That I was unable to resolve the Kathy Battle situation in a way that would have allowed her to continue to perform."

The episode is more than well-known. In February of 1994, Volpe fired soprano Kathleen Battle during rehearsals of Donizetti's *La Fille du Régiment* for "unprofessional actions that were profoundly detrimental to artistic collaborations between cast members." To date, Battle has never appeared since on any opera stage. "It really got to the point where it was the end of the line for her and there wasn't anything I could do," he insists. "She consistently came in late, harrassed her colleagues, said things to them like 'Don't look at me when I'm singing,' 'Don't touch me.' Complained about virtually everything. We adjusted the rehearsal schedule so it would work for her, and she came in late anyway. She created a situation where the production would not have been ready to open. So there was no choice.

"Yet." Volpe pauses. "I find myself thinking maybe there was something I could have done. Maybe I could have prevented it. But I wasn't able to. In one way, let's say that I failed to keep it together."

He pauses again, then smiles. "In another way, though, it really said to the world that Joe Volpe was running the Met. As a matter of fact, from all over the world I received telegrams

congratulating me. Well, that's a heck of a thing to be congratulated for."



With James Levine and Valery Gergiev at a 1997 press conference

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Clearly, Volpe decided early on how tough a general manager he wanted to be. He readily admits to admiring toughness in his opera singers - at least a certain kind of toughness. "The toughest person I've had to deal with by far, still, is Mirella Freni," he proclaims. "Not the most difficult but the most straightforward. Mirella knows exactly what she wants, she knows exactly what she's going to do, and you're not going to convince her otherwise. Mirella Freni could bring a CEO to tears. I love her for that."

"Teresa Stratas was another. So bright, so smart. Two or three steps ahead of you all of the time. A real stage animal. We have a system that humidifies the stage area from above, on the first lighting bridge. 'You think this is a good system?' Teresa once said to me. 'Yes,' I said, 'I think it's great.' 'Well,' she said, 'I have to walk from the artist's dressing room a long, long way to get here. It's dry, it's dusty. I probably lose my voice en route.'

"The next year, when she came back, I had expanded that system all the way to the artists' dressing rooms. Every singer said, 'Wow. Only at the Met.' Well, that was because of Teresa Stratas. Did I listen to her all the time? No. But she was somebody to learn from."

Volpe shakes his head wonderingly. "I don't know how Teresa's career ended. The last memory I have of her here is playing the Composer in *Ariadne*. Teresa came off at the end, the curtain came down, and she said to me, 'Joe, I can't go out for a curtain call. They're going to boo me. I know it.' 'Get out there,' I said. And she did, and they went wild. *That* was Teresa. She just tortured herself. I adored her."

Certainly many famously tough singers from the Volpe period at the Met retain warm feelings for him too. "I've always admired Joe," says Kiri Te Kanawa. "I'm sure there are those who feel otherwise, but I won't have anything said against Joe. When I started at the Met, there were all sorts of things going on, discontent lurking everywhere. Opera houses can be very destructive places for singers, and I always felt, once Joe arrived on the scene, that he thought the singers should come first. He drives a very, very big ship, and to do so as he has for so long without any major problems tells you what kind of job he's done."

Volpe beams with affectionate amusement at the mention of Te Kanawa. "I had a situation once when Kiri was singing. I was out front in a box, and the stage manager came to me and said, 'Kiri wants you backstage.' When I got there, she exited and just started screaming, 'There's someone out there filming me!' Kiri could see the little light going on and off in the dark. She was just wild. I had to send security out to find the camera. Which they did. They escorted the woman out, and we took her camera away. Kiri said, 'I want that tape.' It was like *The Godfather*, you know, 'Get the film!'"

The close of the Volpe era leads inevitably to ruminations about musical director James Levine's future at the Met. The Levine-Volpe good cop-bad cop act has had quite a run at the house, with Levine's pure music-making earnestness counter-balanced by Volpe's cut-to-the-chase bottom-line brashness.

"Jimmy and I have had a conversation that goes back ten years," acknowledges Volpe. "I used to say to Jimmy that some day he no doubt would cease being the artistic director here and would become the music director. And this came to pass, of course, with his appointment in Boston as music director of the Symphony. Then, I said, at some point you will give up being music director and become principal conductor emeritus, or whatever Jimmy chooses to call his position. And finally, some day, maybe you will just be a Met guest conductor.

"'But I will leave before you,' I told Jim. When I informed him I actually was leaving, Jimmy sat right there and said, 'Well, what should I do?'

"'What do you mean?' I answered. 'You should just make music.'"

Volpe concludes, "Jimmy's contract runs through 2011, and I am content to leave the future to my successor."

In 2004, fifty-two-year-old Peter Gelb, then the president of Sony Classical records, was named to succeed Volpe after a one-year transition. In terms of background, no more polar Volpe opposite could seemingly have been chosen. Where Volpe is a working-class insider at the Met, Gelb - the son of Arthur Gelb, former managing editor of *The New York Times*, and the writer Barbara Gelb - is anything but.

"Before I arrived," interjects Volpe when this difference in background is raised, "the Met administration viewed everyone here as hired help, including me, no matter what position I was holding. My background with the company helped me to change that."

Gelb's reputation in the record business has been made as a kind of crossover artist of the executive suite. He signed up decidedly non-classical music for his classical label - including James Horner's *Titanic* film score, which soon went to number one on the pop album charts - while once publicly pressing the estimable composer Tan Dun (whose opera, *First Emperor*, will be performed at the Met in 2006-07) to write music that was more "accessible."

Volpe seems to have this particular facet of Gelb's professional persona in mind when he answers the question "Will your job be more difficult for your successor?" "Yes," he begins. "But everyone focuses on how to raise box-office revenues in the future. I have grave concerns about what sort of compromises that can entail. Pop singers are definitely not the answer. Pop singers brought in for one act of an opera to attract an audience detracts from the aesthetic you're presenting. What we do here at the Met is produce the best grand opera we can. If you attempt to change that, the Met will no longer be the Met."

Was there ever anything at the Met that he thought he perhaps could not do?

"I never had doubts. Some nervousness maybe. But everything at the Met came naturally to me."

And now?

"Now I'd like to do some special projects, and my hope is that they will not be opera projects. I'm not going to retire. I'd like to work two or three days a week, six months a year. I'd like to spend more time with my family. I've not really spent very much time with my family. And I'd like to sail. I own a sailboat, and I expect to spend a lot of time on it, sailing with my wife."

Volpe practically chortles at the thought. "Is my wife relieved? Yes. Recently I went shopping with her. She tried something on, and I came running over and said, 'No, that's not right for you.' The saleslady watched this happen a few more times and finally said quietly, 'Boy, my husband never goes shopping with me.' Then I noticed the music playing in the store. I asked the saleslady, 'Do you have your own CD player - is that music yours?' 'Yes,' she says. I said, 'I want to see what it is you're playing. I love it.' The music turned out to be a fusion CD, Nueva Latina. 'Is the owner of the store here?' I asked her. 'He just stepped out,' she says. 'Well, find him,' I said, 'I want to buy this CD.' 'It's his personal CD,' she says. 'I want to see him,' I said. 'Well, he just bought it himself from a shop across the street,' she says. 'I don't have time to go across the street,' I said."

"So, she went to find the owner, and we sat down.

"Later, when we got to the car, my wife said to me, 'We're going to have a lot of fun when you retire.'"

Volpe grins. "By the way, I got the CD." □

BARRY SINGER *is the author of* *Ever After: The Last Years of Musical Theater and Beyond* (*Applause Books*).

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