

# Sherrill Milnes

## Baritone Extraordinaire Talks About Vocal Jazz

Interviewed by **Gene Aitken**



Photo: Chicago Lyric Opera

*"Placido Domingo may receive the star billing in the (Chicago) Lyric Opera's current production of 'Otello,' but there is little doubt who among the principal singers commands the most thrilling, high-powered Verdi voice.*

*That singer is Sherrill Milnes, the ex-farm boy from Downers Grove who went on to become the leading Verdi baritone of his generation."*

*— John von Rhein, Music Critic*

*Chicago Tribune  
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**S**herrill Milnes has been with the New York Metropolitan Opera for approximately 25 years. The son of a Methodist minister, he studied violin and played string bass in the Downers Grove (Illinois) High School Jazz Band. After receiving his undergraduate and graduate degrees in choral music education from Drake University (Iowa), he attended Northwestern University for postgraduate work. It was in Chicago that his career as a singer began to develop. In addition to initially hiring himself out as a "ringer" in church choirs and as a commercial singer, he performed with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Chorus (1958) and toured with Boris Goldovsky's Grand Opera Theater beginning in 1959. At Goldovsky's encouragement, Milnes pursued an opera singing career and eventually made his successful debut with the Met.

Today, Milnes is the most recorded American opera star in history. In addition to recording classical literature, he records pop and gospel albums as well. Add to that the many commercial ventures plus a PBS special now and then and we see why Milnes is called the "singer's singer."

### **What was your background in music education?**

"In high school, I grew up under the old school of choir conducting. The conductor had a pitch pipe, gave us the pitch and that was it. No piano. You were expected to know and sing your parts. I also studied violin and played string bass in the high school jazz band. After graduation, I attended Drake University where I received a Bachelor's and Master's degree in choral music education. I was planning to and wanted to become a high school choral director . . . I had not given much thought to singing professionally. My voice teacher at Drake, Andrew White (now at University of Cincinnati), encouraged me to continue to explore a career of singing."

### **What kind of singing did you do at Drake University?**

"The usual . . . singing in concert choir and taking voice lessons. But to earn my way through college, I sang in a Four Freshman style vocal jazz group. We rehearsed one hour a day, and on weekends we sang shows and played dance jobs. In addition to having a great time performing, singing in that kind of group proved to be quite valuable at a later date."

### **After you left Drake University, what did you do?**

"I moved to Chicago and studied with Hermanes Baer (retired) at Northwestern University. I also began performing with church choirs as a "ringer" on their concerts . . . for pay of course. The experience I had gained in the Four

Freshman style group definitely was an important factor. As a result, I began to gain a good reputation as a sight-reader and started working a lot. All of a sudden I began to receive calls to do voice-overs and commercials such as the Marlboro and Schlitz ads ("You've got a lot to like with a Marlboro" and "When you're out of Schlitz, you're out of beer"). In 1958 I joined the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Chorus and then in 1959, Goldovsky's Grand Opera Theater. A few years later I auditioned for the Met and made my debut as Valentin in Gounod's 'Faust'."

### **What kind of practice schedule do you maintain today?**

"My daily routine consists of two hours of hard singing and emotion . . . that is enough. The day after a concert I will not sing unless, of course, there is another concert. However, I try to hold that kind of a schedule to a minimum. When I do have several days off, I will spend a lot of time vocalizing."

### **Have you listened to any recordings or live performances of vocal jazz groups today, and could you comment on what you have heard?**

"Yes. I've listened to recordings of vocal jazz groups but find it very difficult to make comments on those recordings because of all the signal processing that has taken place. I prefer to hear the vocal groups in person. I heard the Swingle Singers perform a concert in Europe. Extraordinaire! Their sounds are small but accurate and flexible. But

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with their use of microphones, it really makes no difference. Individually, there is not a call for a voice like that . . . but as a group . . . absolutely marvelous."

### Do you have any general comments about vocal jazz groups?

"Yes. A majority of the vocal jazz instructors today seem to be instrumentalists and many of them do not understand the voice. On the other hand, I've given clinics and workshops at various universities throughout the United States and it is interesting to note that in many cases the classical voice teachers and their students don't attend. Obviously we're dealing with tremendous egos. Thus I'm not sure which is worse, the teacher who does not have the knowledge but is trying to learn, or the teacher who knows it all and has stopped learning. But that aside, the vocal jazz director who does not have the vocal background, could learn a great deal from the classical voice instructor. The student would definitely benefit."

### Do you believe it is a good idea for voice majors to participate in their college vocal jazz group?

"Students in college need to explore. It is hard to meld jazz and classical (legit) music. But if the proper balance is attained between the two, it shouldn't

present a problem. If you spend 3 hours on concert music, 1 hour on your private voice material and 2-3 hours on vocal jazz music, that's a problem. A majority of your effort should go into the private lesson material, say 2-3 hours a day . . . and that doesn't have to be 100% singing. Then spending an hour or so a day in a vocal jazz ensemble or concert choir will not be a problem. But, and I emphasize, the majority of the time must be spent in the private voice area, otherwise it is just a clean wipe-out . . . you don't do jazz or classical well. The foundation is important."

### When a solo classical singer sings in concert choir or jazz choir, is there a voice adjustment that must be made?

"Yes. When a solo singer participates in concert choir, there are slight vibrato and volume adjustments that must be made. Concert choir is important as this is where the student hopefully learns some of the standard repertoire. In vocal jazz singing, the sound is constricted by use of non-vibrato . . . similar to the singing of madrigal music and much contemporary music. Not that this is wrong but it is a different style in which one must specialize. A professional singer cannot sing serious

contemporary music one day and then expect to sing Verdi or Brahms the next. Again, I must emphasize that as long as the student maintains a proper balance of singing between legit and pop, performing vocal jazz music in college will not be a problem."

### Can vocal jazz be of value to the voice major?

"Definitely! It is valuable for pitch development, articulation, diction, singing complex harmonies, developing sight-reading skills and working on breath support. Some of the same things you benefit from by singing in concert choir, and some not. Without a doubt, singing in a good vocal jazz group develops the ability to deal with complex musical harmonies and the ability to sight-read."

### What does the future hold for voice majors who are now attending a university?

"Of the students in college, about 1% of the vocal students will do something professionally such as what I am doing. The rest will sing in community groups, teach high school or junior high or sing in the church choir . . . all of which are valuable to the art form. Given these varied opportunities in which a future musician can go, it is important for the student to obtain a broad number of musical experiences during their college education. They will not all become opera stars."

### Now as you look back on your college education, what advice do you have for the aspiring college singer?

"My best advice is to sing as much as you can, and in every ensemble as it will become the total of your experience. There is no reason why the two styles, pop and legit, can't co-exist at their young age."

Sherrill Milnes on Chicago's Michigan Ave.



Photo: Chicago Tribune

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