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# OPERA NEWS

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GRABBING  
THE GOLD:

Eric  
Owens

Breakout Star  
of the Met's New *Ring*

BY ADAM WASSERMAN

Reinventing  
New York City Opera

*Porgy and Bess*  
Returns to Broadway

Houston Grand Opera's  
New *Lucretia*

Prize Performance:  
Riccardo Muti  
in Stockholm



A portrait of Eric Owens, a Black man with short hair, smiling and looking towards the camera. He is wearing a dark, textured sweater. The background is dark and out of focus.

# A Lesson

**Eric Owens** has become one of the most compelling singing actors in opera by paying attention to what the music has to say.

By Adam Wasserman

A photograph of Eric Owens in character as Alberich from Wagner's *Das Rheingold*. He is wearing a dark, textured, hooded costume with a glowing orange and yellow light source in the center of his chest. He has a fierce, intense expression with his mouth open as if singing or shouting. The background is dark and textured.

# in Listening

**I**n the spring of 2006, on the cusp of his thirty-sixth birthday, Eric Owens scored what would become the first monster hit of his career. As the title character in *Grendel* — Julie Taymor and composer Elliot Goldenthal's long-simmering opera adaptation of John Gardner's *Beowulf*-inspired novella — the relatively unknown Owens might have fallen prey to any number of occupational hazards. Goldenthal's thorny writing pushed at the extremes of Owens's expansive bass-baritone range for the entire evening, and Taymor's production required him to dash up and down George Tsypin's hulking, malfunction-prone set while clad in a bulky shell of a costume. Dramatically, the singer found himself charged with finding a way to humanize a misanthropic, mythological villain without veering into cartoon territory. Owens took the high-profile performances at Los Angeles Opera and later the Lincoln Center Festival and racked up a success that made new-music aficionados, opera audiences and industry folk alike take note that a major singing actor had arrived. "Because of the repertoire I had been doing up to that point, people were shocked," Owens recalls when we meet for dinner on the Upper West Side of Manhattan in late September. "They were like, 'Oh my God, look what he's doing.' Well, you just assumed I couldn't do it because I hadn't really done it before."

Four years later, on the opening night of the Metropolitan Opera's 2010–11 season, a few of *Grendel*'s pitfalls might have seemed curiously familiar. Assuming the role of Alberich in Robert Lepage's tech-centric staging of *Das Rheingold*, Owens managed a rare feat in just his first outing in a Wagner opera — he became a *Gesamtkunstwerk* unto himself. His Alberich, alert to every nuance of the music and text, was a study in dramatic truth on the opera stage

As Alberich in *Das Rheingold* at the Met, 2010

PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHED IN NEW YORK BY MARTY UMANS  
Grooming by Chuck Jensen for Mark Edward, Inc.



— both sympathetic and majestic, intense and subtle. Tricky lines such as “Garstig glatter glitschriger Glimmer” tripped off his tongue in rhythmically precise German, and his renunciation of love was hurled with the kind of salt-in-the-wound sneer a furious toddler uses to inform his parents he really, truly will hate them forever for not letting him stay up past bedtime. Owens’s voice has the forward placement of a low horn coupled with the visceral growl and attack of a violently bowed double bass. So when he delivered Alberich’s curse, it somehow came across as equal parts existential howl and seamless legato line. It was a masterful performance that stole the show. Nobody was more surprised by the thunderous reception that greeted him at the curtain calls than Owens himself.

“I totally had no expectations of [my portrayal] having any sort of the impact that it had,” Owens recounts. “You take it where you can get it. But I had no clue how it was coming across on that stage. People will say, ‘Yeah, we like what you do,’ but you get to that opening night and, because we’re all humans and we’re in a human body that’s not a machine, something could go wrong. You could rehearse your ass off, and be knocking it out of the park, but then game day comes and something’s wrong. Hell, I had no clue that people were going to cheer for me when I came out to bow. I thought, ‘Well, damn, that’s really nice — they’re not booing me!’”

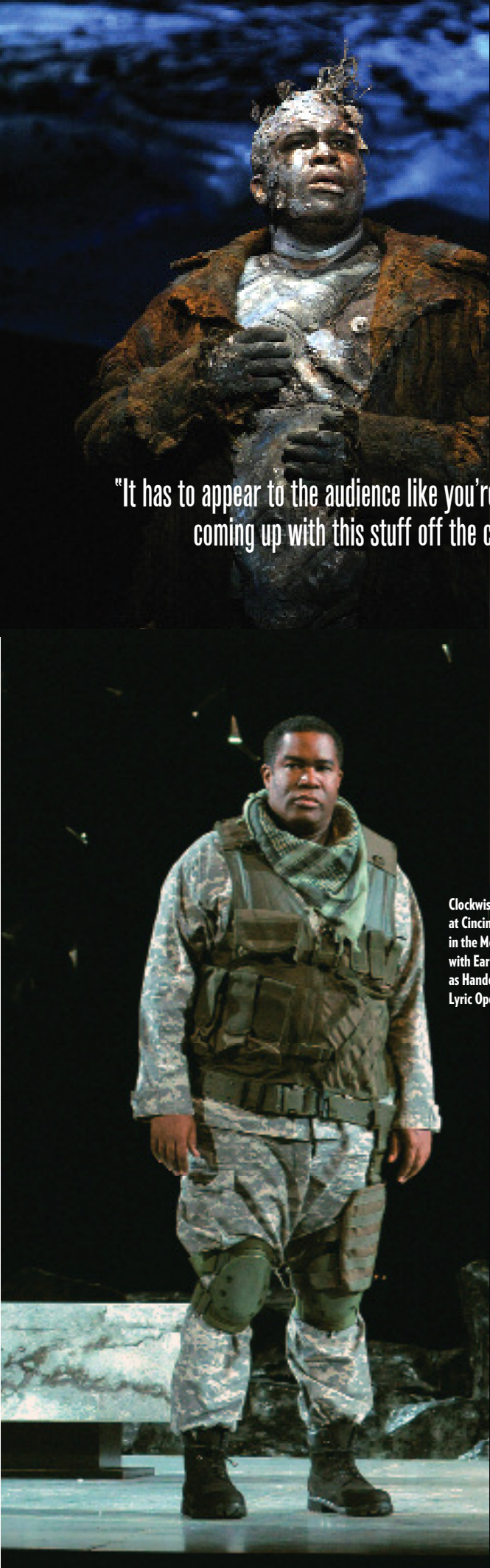
After a hectic spring–summer schedule, which took him to Chicago, New York, Boston, the Netherlands, Cincinnati and Santa Fe for music ranging from Mozart, Verdi and Elgar to John Adams and Berg, Owens has arrived back in New York for rehearsals of Lepage’s new stagings of *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*. More notably, Owens, now in the second decade of his professional singing career, has arrived as one of the most compelling and versatile singers of his generation. In person, the forty-one-year-old bears little resemblance to the looming, bellicose characters that he often portrays onstage. Dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, Owens is slightly stooped, unassuming and amiable. He’s still single, he says, because with the constant travel demands of his career, “It immediately becomes a long-distance relationship.” Perhaps what’s most telling about Owens, though, is that he comes across as most truly himself when talking about music — speak with Owens for any extended amount of time and it becomes abundantly clear that music occupies the absolute center of his life.

If Owens’s career is currently running full-throttle, it’s probably because he’s taken deliberate steps to prevent it from stalling out. The bass-baritone’s repertoire is wildly diverse; among his contemporaries, probably only mezzo Stephanie Blythe matches him for the sheer variety of music he can sing at a consistently high level. Yet after a string of world premieres a few seasons back, Owens grew concerned that he risked being pigeonholed as a “Joe New Music.” So he and his management made sure that his 2008 Met debut as General Leslie Groves in John Adams’s *Doctor Atomic* was immediately followed by five performances of Sarastro in the company’s *Zauberflöte*. Likewise, a month after his May 2010 performances as Nekrotzar in *Le Grand Macabre* with the New York Philharmonic, he made a point of returning for performances of Beethoven’s *Missa Solemnis* with the orchestra. Owens notes that he spent years turning down offers to sing the role of Porgy — which he performed for the first time at San Francisco Opera in 2009 — until he “became known for standard stuff, for doing a variety of things.” Along with his efforts to diversify his career,

Owens’s enthusiasms have made him a frequent and compelling presence on recital and concert stages. Following *Götterdämmerung* performances in February, he embarks on a two-week-long recital tour that will find him singing works by Wolf, Schubert, Schumann, Debussy and Duparc, and participates in four performances of the *Missa Solemnis* with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Kurt Masur.

Perhaps it’s Owens’s shrewd professionalism that makes him reluctant to linger too long on the dramatic parallels between Grendel and Alberich, or the challenges of creating a character in Lepage’s *Ring*. Other *Ring* principals, as well as some critics, have perceived Lepage’s direction as a series of technical effects delivered at the expense of actual onstage drama. When asked about his work with the director, Owens says he’s gotten “quite a bit” from his time spent with Lepage. “If other singers feel under-directed,” he reflects, “maybe because it’s the first time I’m doing the role, I’m not bringing any baggage. Maybe that’s why I’m so amenable, but ... I don’t know. Maybe I’m a pushover,” he laughs. Remarking on the massive set of motorized planks that are serving as the backdrop for all four operas, Owens doesn’t acknowledge feeling dwarfed by the machine but rather notes the acoustic value of performing in front of a large, solid surface. “No matter what the production is, it’s the stage of the Metropolitan, so it’s huge,” he adds. “As performers, we have to bring enough drama to our performances to reach to the top of the Family Circle. Have you seen *Turandot*? I mean, Jesus. The Emperor’s down on the West Side Highway!”

One gets the overriding impression that Owens’s sheer enthusiasm for the music he sings allows him to arrive via instinct at his dramatic characterizations. “Concerts are sort of like coming home, because I spent most of my teen years as a professional oboe player,” he says. “But I enjoy the process of being a character — and actually that aspect of it came much later, in my late twenties. That’s when I started trying to be the best actor I could be onstage and started trying to figure out what that meant. It’s being a *really* good listener. It has to appear to the audience like you’re coming up with this stuff off the cuff. You need to see the wheels turning — you need to see their process of having the thought and then saying the word, and then a reaction to what has just taken place.” Moreover, Owens’s conception of an opera score and the resultant dramatic creation aren’t limited merely by the role he happens to be singing. He spent the summer of 2010 studying conducting at Aspen Music Festival’s American Academy of Conducting and has taken private baton lessons with Robert Spano; it’s clear that when Owens looks at a piece of music, he does so from every possible angle. While both audiences and casting departments may struggle with the opera, Owens expresses a particular affinity for *Siegfried*. “Especially with the *Vorspiel* to Act II — Alberich’s music is so infused, and while it’s pretty much retelling the curse of *Rheingold*, it’s fleshed out a bit,” he notes. “Even though the role is much shorter than *Rheingold*, I’m finding this a little more satisfying. It’s just that the confrontation is almost more on an even playing field, dramatically. The two of them — they’re older, and I think Wotan is a little more weary. In a way, they’re two sides of the same coin. I’m trying to figure out in the rehearsal process how I am going to vocally bring that passage of time.”



“It has to appear to the audience like you’re coming up with this stuff off the cuff.”



Clockwise from top left: in the title role of Elliot Goldenthal’s *Grendel* in Los Angeles, 2006; at Cincinnati Opera, as the Storyteller in *A Flowering Tree*, 2011; as General Leslie Groves in the Metropolitan Opera’s *Doctor Atomic*, 2008, with Earle Patriarco (Frank Hubbard); as Handel’s Hercules at Lyric Opera of Chicago, 2011



While Owens has the physical endurance to thrive in dramatic, marathon parts, the keen economy of his musical and dramatic gestures has made his work in briefer onstage appearances equally compelling. When Owens made his Met debut in *Doctor Atomic*, many in the audience were baffled by what seemed to be a dramatic nadir in Peter Sellars's libretto. In the tense hours leading up to the first test of the atomic bomb, Owens's character demands a

promising weather report from an army meteorologist before pulling out his diary and — in a meandering mid-tempo aria — recounting to Robert Oppenheimer the caloric content of the desserts he's gobbled while on various weight-loss regimens. In reality, Owens's performance as Groves proved to be so pitch-perfect, so naturalistic and carefully modulated in its intensity that people probably failed to perceive the moment as one of intentional bathos, delivered by a character utterly incapable of discerning the gravity of the circumstances. In the 2006 world-premiere production of Adams's *A Flowering Tree*, which first played at Vienna's New Crowned Hope festival and is preserved on a dazzling Nonesuch recording, Owens stood at the narrative center of Sellars's staging as the opera's lyrical Storyteller and managed an entirely different effect. "At the first rehearsal, there was a point where the other characters were singing and I was silent, and [Sellars] actually wanted me to sit. Then at another point he was going to have me go away, and I said to him, 'Peter, if I go away the story ends, and if I sit down it becomes casual.' Then as we were getting into it, I thought, 'How stupid am I? Now I can't sit down!'" he roars. "It was my own fault. But I think it was the right thing — and ultimately he thought it was the right thing. The way he staged it, I was actually in the midst of the other characters as well as the dancers. I sometimes mirrored their joy, their pain, their movements. It was almost film-like, in that someone can tell a story and you can start seeing the characters as this person relays it. This is a story that this person has told so many times, and so relishes the idea of telling it each and every time, that he maybe even wants to act out some of it."

Owens was born and raised in Philadelphia, which, considering the details of his musical life, seems not so much happenstance as predestination. As a child he embraced the arts voraciously, and music appears to have been one of the more consistent elements of his young life. He began piano lessons at Philadelphia's renowned Settlement Music School at the age of six. Three years later, Owens's parents divorced, and his father became a sporadic presence in his life, he says. It seems that

music afforded him some measure of solace from an adult world, and Owens speaks intensely about memories of wearing out his 78rpm recording of Nathan Milstein playing Bruch's Violin Concerto with the New York Philharmonic. In junior high, when he began to concentrate his efforts on the oboe, Owens's band teacher plied the budding operaphile with recordings of *Der Freischütz* and *Don Giovanni*. He recalls practically "levitating out my chair" on first hearing the *St. Matthew Passion* in a live performance by the Philadelphia Orchestra, with Erich Leinsdorf on the podium. Owens eventually joined the Philadelphia Youth Orchestra and spent his summers at the Eastern Music Festival. Through the Settlement Music School, Owens went on to study with Philadelphia Orchestra English-horn player Louis Rosenblatt, whom he calls "the most incredible man ever," and later with Laura Ahlbeck, a second oboe in the Met orchestra, who provided him with standing-room seats to see performances at the house, including *Tosca*, *Rosenkavalier* and Otto Schenk's *Ring*.

During his senior year in high school, Owens's affinity for opera, combined with a scholarship offer, impelled him to enter the pre-college program at Temple University, where he began taking voice lessons with George Massey. In 1993, he completed his undergraduate degree in voice at Temple; he went on to earn his master's from the Curtis Institute, where he studied with Armen Boyajian, who remains his voice teacher to this day. "Armen and I started working on building the

technique, and we didn't do any type of repertoire for maybe almost a year and a half, maybe two years," he says. "We were just doing vocalises." Owens went on to the Houston Opera Studio, where he credits Stephen Smith with helping him free up his sound and "keep the voice spinning all the time."

Owens's early professional career with regional companies and symphony orchestras in both the U.S. and Europe provided him with steady work, though perhaps not the notices or stability of his current career trajectory. What his early instrumental and vocal experience did instill in him, though, was an unerring and absolute sense of the importance of musical connection. "My favorite time onstage is in ensembles — in duets or trios or quartets where you're bouncing off of these other characters," Owens says. "The two highest priorities I have as a musician on the stage are intonation and ensemble. You need to have that big chamber-music mentality of things. Whenever I do a recital, I never bow before the pianist bows. If the applause starts, I reach for the hand of the pianist if they're still sitting on the bench, and we bow together, every single time, because it wasn't my recital — it was *our* recital. With instrumental works, people will call it the 'Beethoven Violin Sonata,' but it's actually the 'Sonata for Piano and Violin.' I'm a firm believer in that sense of collaboration, and not, 'Here I am, and this is somebody too.' I'm not Gladys Knight with the piano player as the Pips, going, 'Doo-wop, doo-wop.' That's bullshit."

Owens is nearly as avid an operagoer as he is a singer, and when he's not onstage, most nights he can be found in the audience of the company or local orchestra he's performing with. He remarks that the older he gets, the more he finds himself frustrated by both the dramatic formulations of bel canto operas and the way directors present them onstage. He's currently more amenable, he says, to the likes of Mozart, Janáček, Strauss, Wagner and Verdi. There appears to be a healthy dose of the latter composers in his future. This summer, as the Glimmerglass Festival's artist in residence, Owens will sing his first Amonasro (as well as Stephen Kumalo in Kurt Weill and Maxwell Anderson's 1949 musical *Lost in the Stars*). "The last few concerts I've done, I've been singing 'Ella giammai m'amò,' and I'm going to keep singing it until somebody hires me, dammit," he guffaws. "I would love to sing Filippo in *Don Carlo* so bad." He cites Cesare Siepi, Nicolai Ghiaurov and José van Dam as the vocal exponents of the role he most enjoys hearing. In a few seasons, he'll also take on Macbeth — a role to which he seems particularly well suited — though he also wants a shot at Count Walter in *Luisa Miller* and Germont in *Traviata*. "I know it sounds like I'm swinging back and forth, but I'm a *bass-baritone*," he says. "Some baritone stuff, some bass stuff. It's not unprecedented to sort of do a *Zwischenfach*-y kind of thing."

Despite the breadth and depth of his current repertoire, Owens's musical aspirations and enthusiasms come across as exceedingly humble. Raised a Christian, he says he has a "tug-of-war with faith now and then." But he adds that any opportunity he gets to sing Bach is "a religious experience. One day, I want to get to Leipzig, to the St. Thomaskirche — not necessarily to perform. I don't think I'd be able to hold it together as a performer. Maybe just to go see *St. Matthew* in performance. Before they would even start, I'd be a wreck." Music has clearly been more than a refuge in Owens's life. "It's been a friend, of sorts — something that's been there," he says. "When you think about the words to 'An die Musik,' how music can change one's mood and



As Porgy to Laquita Mitchell's Bess at San Francisco Opera, 2009, above left; as Alberich in *Siegfried* at the Met, right



"I would love to sing Filippo in *Don Carlo* so bad."

pull one out of sadness — it's amazing how it taps into your very spirit and all of your emotions so instantaneously, how you hear a piece of music from your childhood and it takes you right back there. Whenever I hear 'An die Musik,' or 'Music for a While,' which I sing as an encore a lot, or in *Ariadne auf Naxos*, when the Composer, in the prologue, is talking about what *musik* means, what a holy art it is, I'm just sitting there going, 'Yeah! That's right! — Tell 'em! Tell 'em!'" □