

Oral History Center
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Frederica von Stade

Frederica von Stade: American Star Mezzo-Soprano

Interviews conducted by
Caroline Crawford
in 2011, 2012, 2014, 2015

Since 1954 the Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library, formerly the Regional Oral History Office, has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

All uses of this manuscript are covered by a legal agreement between The Regents of the University of California and Frederica von Stade dated February 2, 2012. The manuscript is thereby made available for research purposes. All literary rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley. Excerpts up to 1,000 words from this interview may be quoted for publication without seeking permission as long as the use is non-commercial and properly cited.

Requests for permission to quote for publication should be addressed to The Bancroft Library, Head of Public Services, Mail Code 6000, University of California, Berkeley, 94720-6000, and should follow instructions available online at <http://ucblib.link/OHC-rights>.

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

Frederica von Stade, "Frederica von Stade: American Star Mezzo-Soprano" conducted by Caroline Crawford from 2011 to 2015, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2020.



Frederica von Stade
Photo by Robert Millard (2005)
Courtesy of the San Francisco Opera

Abstract

Frederica von Stade was born in 1945, grew up in New Jersey, and dreamed of a singing career on Broadway before being auditioned by Sir Rudolf Bing and assigned to several small roles at the Metropolitan Opera in 1970. Paris Opera Director Rolf Lieberman heard an early performance and encouraged her to perform Mozart's Cherubino in Paris. Cherubino became her signature role, in addition to performing a great range of lyric mezzo roles in opera houses all over the world. Several composers wrote for her; her greatest collaborator has been Jake Heggie. She has lived for many years in Alameda, California, where she enjoys sailing with Mike Gorman, her husband. She retired from the opera stage in 2012 and continues teaching and performing. In this interview, von Stade discusses *bel canto*, Rossini's *coloratura* heroines in *La Cenerentola* and *Barber of Seville*, and her love for French operas by Massenet, Thomas, Berlioz, Debussy, and Poulenc.

Table of Contents

Interview History by Caroline Cooley Crawford	vii
---	-----

Interview 1: November 11, 2011

Audio File 1	1
--------------	---

The von Stade family: Far Hills, New Jersey, 1945–1953 — Father’s service in the Ruhr Valley during World War II — Music about the family: Elegies by Richard Danielpour, 1994, and Winter Roses, 2004, by Jake Heggie — Growing up in Washington, D.C.: Convent of the Sacred Heart in Bethesda — Latin Mass and a love of theater — Working for Robert Kennedy’s family — Performing at the White House for Presidents Nixon, Reagan, Carter, Bush — Music programs in the schools — Mother’s life and friends: the “guardian angels” — Moving to New Jersey in the late 1950s — Nanki-poo in a school Mikado — A love of Broadway shows: remembering Ethel Merman, Julie Andrews, Vivian Leigh — Boarding school in Stamford, Connecticut — A role in Arsenic and Old Lace — Grandfather’s gift of a year in Paris — Friendship with Annie Haviland and an Ecole Polytechnique ball — Back to New York, working at Tiffany’s and studying at Mannes School with Sebastian Engleberg — Auditioning for Sir Rudolf Bing at the Metropolitan Opera, 1970 — Meeting Rolf Liebermann and a contract to sing Cherubino in Paris, 1974

Interview 2: February 3, 2012

Audio File 2	22
--------------	----

Performing Cherubino at Versailles and in Paris, 1974 — About trouser role — On Cherubino, Peter Hall, and nudity — Remembering directors Jean-Pierre Ponnelle and Giorgio Strehler: *pieno di fuoco* — Von Stade’s lyric mezzo soprano and Verdi singers — Some favorite conductors: George Solti, von Karajan and John Pritchard — Learning *bel canto*: “married to the Italian language” — Callas: “A burning power and focused light — Cherubino’s arias: *non so piu* and *voi che sapete* — San Francisco debut, 1971: A Sextus with Spring Opera Theater — Kurt Herbert Adler and Calvin Simmons

Audio File 3	38
--------------	----

Singing with Kiri te Kanawa: The Countess and Cherubino at Glyndebourne and Munich — A Paris wedding, 1973, and five years in Paris — Matthew Epstein, manager, and some French repertoire: *Cendrillon*, *Cherubin*, and *La Perichole* at Carnegie Hall, and *Pelleas and Melisande* — The character of Cherubin and more about Massenet: “everything is written like a GPS” — The birth of Jenny Rebecca — Apartment on East Seventy-Second Street in New York

Interview 3: May 12, 2014

Audio File 4

44

The births of daughters Jenny Rebecca and Lisa; The Young Musicians Program and Daisy Newman — Rossini roles — Working on *Cenerentola* in Rome: “Taking the coloratura apart”: *Nacqui, nacqui* — Rosina — Inventing Melisande — Working with Claudio Abbado on *Cenerentola* — Directors with innate rhythm: Lenny Bernstein, Leonard Foglia, John Cox — The Met as a Rossini house — Joyce DiDonato and Marilyn Horne — Another pants role: Idamante — Some “natural actors” with a certain generosity of spirit: Pavarotti, Domingo, Marilyn Horne, Susan Graham, Steven Costello — More about Domingo: *Merry Widow* at the Met, 2000 — James Levine: “everything that is great in the American musician” — Debussy and *Pelleas and Melisande*: Abbado in Vienna and at La Scala — The role of Octavian in *Der Rosenkavalier* and Jani Strasser

Audio File 5

62

Meeting Jake Heggie, “the creative energy that he had, and all the music” — Paper Wings, a song cycle by Heggie for Lisa, 1997, lyrics by Flicka — Childhood years in Greece and an au pair named Signorina — Working with Jake Heggie on *Winter Roses* — Heggie’s *Dead Man Walking* and the roles of Sister Helen Prejean and Mrs. De Rocher, 2000 — Thoughts about the prison system — Reportraying the mother in *Dead Man Walking* — Three Decembers — Thoughts about children and family — A Coffin in Egypt and drawing young operagoers — Jake Heggie’s work about Rodin’s mistress Camille Claudel for Joyce DiDonato and other new works

Interview 4: July 1, 2015

Audio File 6

74

A conversation with Flicka and Jake Heggie; their collaborations — Lotfi Mansouri, Director of San Francisco Opera, and his commissioning Jake Heggie and Terrence McNally to write *Dead Man Walking* — Remembering David Littlejohn — Roles for Flicka in *Dead Man Walking*, *Three Decembers* and *Great Scott* — Jake’s circle of “friendly ears” — Special opera pals — A French honor and French taxes — *Winter Roses*: “a little Winterreise”

Interview History

Caroline Cooley Crawford
Berkeley, California
September 2018

When Sir Rudolf Bing auditioned Frederica von Stade at the Metropolitan Opera in 1970, he heard an arresting voice that had potential for the great stages of the world. The voice came with a dramatic presence that caused him to think she could inhabit so-called trouser roles, mezzos as young boys, with superlative energy and conviction. He was right. He hired Flicka, the nickname von Stade goes by, for small roles the next season. In one of those performances, Paris Opera Director Rolf Liebermann was in the audience and engaged von Stade immediately after the performance to sing Mozart's Cherubino.

Among the many roles Flicka sang in her forty-year career on the great opera stages of the world, she became the Cherubino to dream on. Her voice has been described as cheeky, shy, smug, erotically combustible, and self-amused all at the same time; close to a job description for the role of the lovesick page boy who falls for the Countess in *The Marriage of Figaro* and brings down all sorts of trouble in the royal bedrooms of Count di Luna's mansion. According to Flicka, she sang the role "millions of times."

Few mezzo-sopranos achieve stardom. They are usually cast as maids or confidantes such as Suzuki in Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* or Adalgisa in Bellini's *Norma*, or Violetta's maid Flora in *La Traviata*, all roles she sang in early years at the Met. One mezzo famously lamented: "All I get is witches and britches" — the britches being trouser roles such as Cherubino. At least twelve of Flicka's more than forty-five roles have been performed in knickers.

Von Stade says of her voice, "Quite honestly, I've never liked my voice. I love what it's given me and what it's done for me. I'm on my knees to my voice, but to actually listen to it, I don't like it... I really love the tenor voice, but of mezzos, I love a much more creamy voice than I have. Of all the over seventy recordings I've made, there are really two that I'm really proud of: A, the Mahler Fourth with [Claudio] Abbado because I love the piece so much, it's a child's version of heaven, and B, a recording I made with my daughter of a little song called "Across Your Dreams." Audiences loved the graceful, silvery, sometimes darkly colored voice, a voice that hinted of a life touched with both sorrow and deep spirituality. Because of her interest in rarely performed operas, von Stade is credited with expanding the lyric mezzo repertoire.

In addition to trouser roles, von Stade warmed to Rossini's *coloratura* heroines: the title roles in *La Cenerentola* and Rosina in *Barber of Seville*. She sang more Mozart: Dorabella in *Così fan tutte* and trouser roles in *Idomeneo* and *La Clemenza di Tito* and leading roles in French operas by Debussy, Massenet, Offenbach, Thomas, Berlioz and Poulenc. She has always loved France and is loved back. Paris was her home base for years; she planned her first wedding there and arrived late because she was busy engaging musicians in the subway for the ceremony.

In the oral history, von Stade talks of her early years in New Jersey and her love for Broadway, where she thought she would make her career. She discusses her roles at the Metropolitan Opera and in the grand houses of Europe in some detail, extraordinary directors and conductors, the

study of *bel canto*, singers she has most admired, and performances that were both memorable and less than perfect. She also talks about her husband, Mike Gorman, her adored daughters Jenny and Lisa, and her granddaughters.

Von Stade is a rare artist who is universally loved not only for her stage work but for her offstage friendships. Following in the footsteps of great mezzo Marilyn Horne, she acknowledged when she turned fifty that trouser roles were in the past and handled the mantle to Joyce DiDonato, whom she numbers among her best friends.

When von Stade announced her retirement from the stage in 2012, the world wasn't ready to let her go. She continues with opera and Broadway appearances; she works endlessly with a music program she started at Saint Martin de Porres School in Oakland and with conservatory students; she sings recitals, brings opera to the homeless; she visits grandchildren; and she occasionally dances across the stage with Placido Domingo, as she did at Gordon Getty's 80th birthday celebration.

Von Stade's closest collaborator has been composer Jake Heggie, and because she wanted Heggie to be part of the oral history, the final chapter in the history is a conversation between them — reflections on a dear and deep friendship. Von Stade reviewed the transcripts and made few editing changes. The interviews were held at her home in Alameda, California.

Interview 1: November 11, 2011

Audio File 1

1-00:00:03

Crawford: This is an oral history of American mezzo soprano Frederica von Stade. I'm with Flicka in her home in Alameda, California, and let's start at the beginning, with your birth in New Jersey. Tell me what you know about your family going back to earliest memories.

1-00:00:20

von Stade: Well, my grandfather was kind of a self-made man. He got into the banking business and lived in this beautiful rural part of New Jersey called Far Hills. Great hunting country. My father died in April, 1945, and I was born in June. I was meant to be born in August, so I was very little. I was born in a little hospital in Somerville because after he died, my mom went to live with her parents. I already had an older brother. So that's why I was born in New Jersey. I think I weighed three pounds, three-something. I was very premature. My mom said I had masses of black hair, and really was pretty horrible-looking. That's where I must have spent my early years, at my grandmother's house in Far Hills. I still go back there in my dreams. We spent every summer there. My mom worked for the government in Washington, but she'd send us up there. There is a longing and there's an ache, but it's not as brutal as it was for my mother. Getting married without her husband there, having a baby without your husband there, I mean, can you think of anything more difficult or hard to recover from?

So all I thought of my father was how hard it was for all of us, and I never thought of him otherwise. He was this hysterically funny man. The closest in character to him is my Uncle Freddie, who is the funniest man on God's earth, with an amazing, amazing musical ability. He plays the piano like a god, and he is the dearest human in the world. I think my dad was a lot like him. He had a wicked sense of humor. He was probably fairly spoiled—they came from a very good family that had plenty of money.

Then there's another side of him that I've only realized in the last twenty years of collecting things about him; he was reconnaissance. He was a first lieutenant in the army, and he was reconnaissance. He was the guy that went out and looked at what was going on, where the German troops were coming from. That demands a heck of a lot of courage.

1-00:03:23

Crawford: Where was he?

1-00:03:25

von Stade: He was in the Ruhr Valley. Among the people I've met that knew him was a soldier who went over on the boat with him, who I met later, because of this work. I was singing in Florida, and because of the publicity, this gentleman

said, “Oh, that must be Charlie’s daughter.” They went over on a banana boat. The U.S. was taking all kinds of boats over to get the troops over to Europe, and in fact, one funny experience was that they left New York harbor and they went to pick up more troops somewhere in North Carolina, and they stopped back in New York before going overseas. They were welcomed back as heroes, and they’d only been to North Carolina! This guy’s name was Vic Malloy. He’s since passed away. Vic said he remembered my dad and he were up on the deck of the ship—we’re talking January, going overseas—because they were so frightened of the submarines. Submarines were fifty miles off the coast of New York, or a hundred miles. So they got to France and then they were separated. He was a private and my dad was first lieutenant.

Then the war was over where my father was, and Vic—get this, as a miracle—was in a troop truck leaving wherever they were leaving, and my dad had a jeep and he had his own driver, and he had decorated his jeep. He had something on the front of his jeep; I think it might have been horns. They decorated all the jeeps. There was something on it, so he recognized it, and Vic saw my dad. Shortly thereafter, there was an explosion, and that’s when my dad’s jeep hit a mine. His driver was not killed, but he was killed. He was thrown out of the car. Vic jumped out of the troop truck and went back to see what had happened, and he said my dad was killed instantly. But isn’t that amazing? Vic just died about six or seven years ago. I saw him a lot. He had throat cancer, so he was pretty miserable, but every time I went to Florida, I went to see him.

1-00:06:11

Crawford: He found you. That’s a miracle.

1-00:06:12

von Stade: He found me, and I went to his house in Florida and brought him and his wife, if I had performances anywhere in Florida, and just had a great time with him. I would ask him things about my father, but I couldn’t ask about the war. It’s too hard for those guys to talk about the war. It was just too hard. That’s every bit of information I picked up, was from Vic, you know? That’s how I kind of guessed that my dad was a lot like my Uncle Freddie.

1-00:06:55

Crawford: You also have letters written by your parents during the war. *Elegies* by Richard Danielpour is the work we were talking about [based on those letters], right?

1-00:06:59

von Stade: Yes. Originally, when I was a kid and I used to read them all the time, there were sixty or seventy letters. Now there are maybe twenty-five in different versions of decay. Originally the librettist was meant to be that wonderful playwright whose name I can’t remember. He’s married to a girl I went to school with. John Guare.

1-00:07:00

Crawford: What has been the performance history of that work?

1-00:07:02

von Stade: Not that much. I did just those two, and it was recorded, and then it hasn't been done since. The only thing I did on a concert, I think I was in Jacksonville, Florida, and I asked if I could do the last movement--the last words of the whole movement are, "And I will sing to you in paradise." It's a very beautiful movement, and so I asked if I could sing that. They pulled it out and we did it again. I'm a big fan of Richard Danielpour. I don't know why it wasn't done again. I think just a lot of things are timing.

1-00:07:41

Crawford: It's been recorded by the London Philharmonic [featuring von Stade and Thomas Hampson].

1-00:07:47

von Stade: It is not a piece that would work with piano—it needs full orchestra because Richard writes in a very Lennie way, very Bernstein, lots of textures and lots of rhythm. It was an amazing experience to do it. I felt like it was this extraordinary gift to me, of knowledge of my dad, and being able to really understand him from the point of view of what it is to be—he was like a Rupert Brooke poem, in a "corner of a foreign field," and he's buried in Holland. He's buried in Margraten, Holland, in what looks like Long Island. You know how Holland is flat, flat, flat, but in the southeastern corner, it's very hilly, near Aachen. Across the border from Germany.

1-00:08:36

Crawford: You've been many times.

1-00:08:36

von Stade: Many times. I've had hysterical times going to visit his grave. I took the bus, took my husband, Mike [Gorman], to meet him. They do a beautiful job when you go to visit an American cemetery, if you're family. Even if you're not family, first of all, it could take you all day to find the grave if you don't know where it is. They're beautifully done in Italian marble, Star of David or crosses. When they take you out to walk you to see it, they take sand from the Normandy Beach and rub it in the lettering because otherwise it won't show up if you take a picture, because the lettering is carved in this light marble. It's really beautifully done, and they're beautifully maintained and very welcoming, always. So it's a wonderful experience to go and see it.

1-00:09:37

Crawford: Did your grandmother talk much about him when he was growing up?

1-00:09:40

von Stade: I don't think I ever heard my grandmother even say his name.

1-00:09:42

Crawford: You said it was so hard for her.

1-00:09:47

von Stade: Well, she had a lot of trouble speaking, too. She could only speak on an exhale, so you had to learn to understand her, too, because of the MS. She could only talk like that, so we did most of the talking when we visited her.

1-00:10:06

Crawford: As long as you knew her?

1-00:10:07

von Stade: Yes.

1-00:10:08

Crawford: What about *Winter Roses*?

1-00:10:10

von Stade: Well, *Winter Roses* was Jake [Heggie], then, who wrote an incredible song about my dad, a very powerful song. So, there again, it was just a great, great blessing to be able to explore this.

1-00:10:25

Crawford: You wrote the words?

1-00:10:32

von Stade: No, not for *Winter Roses*. That's Charlene Baldridge. I contributed to it—I wrote two songs for it.

1-00:10:40

Crawford: Jake said, "Flicka is a real poet."

1-00:10:44

von Stade: I wrote the text for the song cycle about Lisa [*Paper Wings*], but it's not poetic by any means. It is just ridiculous.

1-00:10:53

Crawford: I loved it.

1-00:10:58

von Stade: He made it work.

1-00:11:03

Crawford: Your mother took you to Greece to live, and we will explore that time later and the song cycle Jake wrote about that time. But after Greece, you moved to Washington and really grew up there. Were you in school in Washington?

1-00:11:10

von Stade: Yes, I went first to Convent of the Sacred Heart in Bethesda, Maryland. We lived in Georgetown. Really, in my heart, I think that's when my musical career began because we sang everything. We had rogation days, when you blessed the trees, we had laying of lilies at the foot of Our Lady, in May. We were in Mass constantly.

My First Communion, it was like a wedding, it was just beautiful. We had uniforms, nothing but uniforms, but we wore veils, we prepared for six months. We had beautiful candles and flowers and incense. Really, I think that's where I got my theater, was as a child, always thinking I saw statues move, and if a pigeon flew in the window of the church, I was sure it was the Holy Ghost, and all this music. This constant singing, and the mystery. Mass was in Latin, then, so I think that's where the whole theater thing started, my love of that part of the world. A kind of a different Catholicism than now. There was lots about guilt and confession and being good and fish on Fridays, no meat on Fridays. Some of that, but quite honestly, we were the beloved children. I remember signing letters to some of the nuns that took care of us, and it was, "Your beloved child," always. It was strict as all get-out, but we were beloved. It was an incredible beginning to an education.

1-00:13:25

Crawford: Was it a girl's school?

1-00:13:27

von Stade: It was girls, it was all girls. I think it still is all girls.

1-00:13:30

Crawford: What's the name of the school?

1-00:13:32

von Stade: Convent of the Sacred Heart at Stone Ridge. They're all over, and I went to Convent of the Sacred Heart in New Britain, Connecticut, as a teenager. My mom had some financial trouble, so then I went to parochial school in Georgetown after Stone Ridge because she couldn't do it. I remember that so well, that was in Georgetown, on N Street, and it was Holy Trinity. We used to see Mrs. Kennedy, Ethel, at Mass every morning. I had a funny, funny thing happen. There was a little corner store where we'd go for candy or ice cream afterwards, after school, and I invited my friends. I said, "I'll treat you to a sundae," you know? I didn't have enough money, and Mrs. Kennedy was there, and she said, "Well, I'll pay for it if you come and work for me," and they lived a couple of doors down, and I was the assistant to her nanny for, I don't know, after school, for a year.

1-00:14:50

Crawford: Oh, what a story!

1-00:14:51

von Stade: She had Joe and Kathleen, and Bobby was a baby. So I would go to the park, and got to know the family just a little bit. In fact, I was there a day when both her parents were killed in a plane accident, and I can remember being in the house, and just so upset for her. I don't know how that resolved, in the end. I think they moved, I don't know when they moved to Virginia.

1-00:15:25

Crawford: You worked for them in Georgetown.

1-00:15:27

von Stade: Yes. I don't know when that all took place.

1-00:15:30

Crawford: They had three children when you lived there?

1-00:15:33

von Stade: Yes, but I remember little Bobby was in a crib, and Joe and Kathleen, I was probably seven or eight, then.

1-00:15:49

Crawford: That's a lovely story that she took you into her home.

1-00:15:54

von Stade: It was just a sweet thing for her to do, to be witnessing this and not just pay for it, make me work for it.

1-00:16:04

Crawford: You were how old when you worked there?

1-00:16:07

von Stade: I must have been in third grade, so how old are you in third grade? You're six in first grade, seven, eight. I must have been eight.

1-00:16:17

Crawford: What did you do for her, for the family?

1-00:16:22

von Stade: I just was with her nanny, and if the nanny needed—"Could you hand me the bottle?"—I assisted her nanny. I met Teddy many, many times, and I was asked to sing at his birthday the year before he passed away. He had a big birthday at the Kennedy Center, and at that point I was involved with Saint Martin de Porres, the school where I volunteer, and I started a choir there.

I said, "Would it be all right if I brought some of my choir?" They're lower school, they're grammar school, they're third, fourth, and fifth graders. I got the approval from the people putting on the concert, and Sister Barbara Dawson, who is a Sacred Heart nun who took over this school and sort of saved it because the urban schools were closing, the diocese has been closing them in Oakland, she saved the school.

The pair of us took five girls to Washington, we stayed out at Catholic University, we took them around, we took them to Congress, we took them to all the statues, and we sang "I've Told Every Little Star," which was a song written the year of Teddy's birth by Jerome Kern.

We sang at the Kennedy Center for Kennedy. For the very last happy birthday, President Obama came out, and the first hands he shook were the little kids' because they were on the end of the line. They were just over the

moon, and they really, really did a heck of a job. They were so good, and so that was kind of my wrap with the Kennedy family.

1-00:18:24

Crawford: Have you stayed in touch with her?

1-00:18:26

von Stade: No, I haven't, I haven't. I did, I think, once or twice write to Teddy to ask him if we could get a tour of the White House or something with my kids, and he would help organize that. I've seen them a couple of times, I've sung at the White House a lot, and sometimes they've been there.

1-00:18:52

Crawford: All kinds of different administrations?

1-00:18:54

von Stade: I've been through four or five.

1-00:18:55

Crawford: Was Kennedy the first?

1-00:18:59

von Stade: No, Nixon. You know who I sang for? Ceaușescu. We did *The Barber of Seville* for Ceaușescu and we did it in Italian because that was closer to Romanian. I can remember, we were using White House furniture, and we did a scene from *The Barber of Seville*.

1-00:19:33

Crawford: In the White House?

1-00:19:34

von Stade: Yes, and all the Daughters of the Revolution, the DAR, were worried to death were we going to break a chair or break a bowl. It was quite funny.

Then I sang quite a few times for the Reagans, Jimmy Carter, I don't think I sang for the Clintons, but I went to a number of events there, the Bushes, Bush senior. Yes, for Bush senior, a lot, and then went for a couple of times to the White House, for visits. A dear friend of mine, Christine Todd Whitman, was the head of the EPA, so I went to the White House for her swearing-in. A wonderful lady, amazing.

1-00:20:37

Crawford: Yes. Well, we should go back to when you were eight because that's where we left you!

1-00:20:42

von Stade: Eight was great. We were given so much music at the Convent, and then when I went to parochial school, we always put on plays, we always sang Christmas carols. You're always singing in church. It was very much a part of the curriculum. It was very hard not to do something musical, which is what

breaks my heart about the world today. Our older granddaughters, I went to their school a couple of times and did a lot for the Alameda Education Foundation because I realized none of the kids in the school knew any Christmas carols—any!

Then we did a show for the Alameda Education Foundation, and most of the years we used little kids because that is very seductive for the public, and one year I said, “We’ve got to use the teenagers. Really, they’re so gifted, and we’ve got to show them off, too.” We put on a show and did a Christmas carol, and we were not allowed to use “Christmas.” We couldn’t use that word because “Christ” was in it. We sang one of the songs, I’ll never forget, it was, “Have yourself a merry little holiday.” That was the thing, no religion!

1-00:22:17

Crawford: Is that still the case?

1-00:22:19

von Stade: I think it is. I thought, we’re going to get sued by the Berlin Foundation, you know? Anyway, that’s why I’m trying to do it in this school.

1-00:22:34

Crawford: For these young musicians.

1-00:22:37

von Stade: Yes. I started some music programs [at Saint Martin de Porres in Oakland]. I’m not much of an administrator, so it’s very hard. I just hear somebody who’s a piano teacher and I say, “Please come,” and they give piano lessons at the school. We did have a choir for a while, and then our choir teacher went back to school, and we’re now just about to start up again with this amazing lady who does a lot of the programs for the San Francisco Opera Guild.

1-00:23:02

Crawford: Oh, who is she?

1-00:23:04

von Stade: Her name is Caroline Altman. Amazing. She’s doing this with the middle school right now, it’s a program, as one of the guild officers calls it, “Social Justice through Shakespeare,” and it’s amazing. It’s very pertinent to these kids. [One] said, “Are we going to have to sing,” and she said, “Oh, you’re going to love singing.” “No, I have a terrible voice.” “How do you know you have a terrible voice?” Kids just assume they have a terrible voice because they haven’t tried it. We have a wonderful teacher who goes in and does a half-an-hour of music with every class. She plays a guitar and has them sing, and she teaches them to read. We do have that at public school.

1-00:23:59

Crawford: Nobody sings at home anymore, like our generation.

1-00:24:02

von Stade: They don't know Christmas carols, people don't sing Christmas carols anymore. It's one of the most fun things in the world.

1-00:24:09

Crawford: Well, in this period, when you were living in Georgetown, your mother was working then for the government?

1-00:24:15

von Stade: Yes.

1-00:24:15

Crawford: You said that she didn't know shorthand, but she had friends who [helped].

1-00:24:20

von Stade: She got this job. To go to work at, what would she have been, then, probably thirty-three, first job ever, working for the government? She had an amazing, amazing group of friends in the government. In fact, one of them, a woman named Nancy Fogarty, became like my mother after my mom died, and was like my mother all through, and was like a mother to my mother. Just this extraordinary lady that had done two tours in Vietnam. She worked for the government, too.

She left me everything in her house, and after her sister died, made me remainderman in her will. It's how my husband and I were able to buy a house. She'd always told me she was leaving it to my girls, but then when her sister died, I didn't even think of it, you know? In fact, when she did die, I had to go through everything in her house and make decisions about it and sell the house and be sure that everything went to her sister. I can remember being in her basement, and she hid all her family's silver, one piece in a different box. I remember being in her basement once with two children at home, doing an opera, commuting between Long Island and Washington, D.C., where she lived, and sitting in the basement, saying, "Fogey, how could you do this to me?"

But I have lots of her things. I kept things for the girls, and one of the amazing things was all her newspapers, the *Stars and Stripes* of the Vietnam years, when she was in Saigon—what was then Saigon.

1-00:26:26

Crawford: She was with the State Department as a foreign service officer?

1-00:26:34

von Stade: She was with the Agency, the CIA.

1-00:26:39

Crawford: Oh, she was a "spook"?

1-00:26:40

von Stade:

Yes! Then other great friends, Mama had this friend named Ida Brumfeld, Idabelle, and Idabelle was from Jackson, Mississippi. She used to say, "When I shoots, I shoots to kill." She was funny, and you know, when I lived in Europe, I went there when I was eighteen, I would go and see Idabelle and stay two weeks in Belgium with her. I knew a lot of them very, very well.

1-00:27:16

Crawford:

You had a very warm circle.

1-00:27:17

von Stade:

Oh, my God, I had all these guardian angels in my life. I mean, my mother's friends all adopted my brother and me after she died, and then she lived in Ireland, so all her Irish friends adopted us. Very, very lucky—very, very lucky.

1-00:27:35

Crawford:

How long did you stay in Georgetown?

1-00:27:39

von Stade:

We moved up to New Jersey, what would have been my eighth grade. So, eighth grade, how old are you?

1-00:27:49

Crawford:

Thirteen?

1-00:27:50

von Stade:

Thirteen, yes. I went to the Far Hills Country Day School there, and that was a little school—now, it's huge—that was from that area. I was in a class of four because there weren't many kids, just didn't happen to be, and there, we had this amazing woman named Betty Noling, who used to put on an extravaganza every year of Gilbert & Sullivan, and that was my first pants role. I was Nanki-Poo in *The Mikado*. I can remember it, "A wand'ring minstrel, I/A man of thralls and passions/la-da, da-da." [they laugh] She did everything, so we were always putting on music then, yes. That was my first pants role.

1-00:28:41

Crawford:

You were singled out very early.

1-00:28:44

von Stade:

I was in everything, and sang at all the street fairs, and there again, I had this group of guardian angels. When we moved to New Jersey, all my mom's friends, and then the parents of my friends became, I called them all "aunts." None of them were related—Aunt Jo, Aunt Mayer, Aunt Clover—they were this unbelievable community. One of the first, they could have been the Mary McCarthy group, they're the first women that really were educated. They all painted beautifully, they read beautifully, they all loved the opera, the symphony, plays. They were an incredible group of women.

1-00:29:31

Crawford: Did you get taken to opera very early on?

1-00:29:35

von Stade: I wasn't taken so much. I used to go in [to Manhattan], the world was so safe then, you know, with my best friend, Tim Lovejoy, a great artist, now an amazing artist, and we would go in at twelve, thirteen, take the train in and go to a matinee and an evening performance, but it was all Broadway. That was my love.

1-00:29:59

Crawford: You loved Broadway.

1-00:30:00

von Stade: Loved Broadway, yes.

1-00:30:01

Crawford: Do you remember your first Broadway musical?

1-00:30:03

von Stade: I don't remember the first one, but I know I saw Ethel Merman in *Annie Get Your Gun*. I saw Julie Andrews in *Camelot*. I saw Vivien Leigh in the most beautiful little show that was called *Tovarich*, where she played a maid. It must have been just before she died.

1-00:30:28

Crawford: I know you love Ethel Merman. Is it true that when she was trying out for *Anything Goes*, Cole Porter told her she had no technique and a terrible voice—don't change a thing?

1-00:30:41

von Stade: I don't know. There are marvelous stories about she was a stand-and-sing person, and there was some actor that was really looking at her and emoting. They said, "What are you doing?" He said, "Well, I'm acting," and they said, "Well, stop it." [laughter]

1-00:31:02

Crawford: Did you want to be a Broadway singer?

1-00:31:04

von Stade: Yes. Oh, my God, that was the total thrust of everything. That's why I know so many songs and shows, and I knew *Damn Yankees* cover-to-cover, *Sound of Music* cover-to-cover, *West Side Story* cover-to-cover, I knew all these shows, you know? That was my passion.

1-00:31:26

Crawford: And you did that a lot, you would get on the train?

1-00:31:29

von Stade: Go in, Tim and I would go. Then, if Mom took us—my mom took us very often—we would go to hear great jazz. There was a place called the

Metropole, with Gene Krupa and Dizzy Gillespie, and we would go. We couldn't go in because it was a bar, but we'd sort of stand where you could see it and hear it on the way in. It was amazing.

1-00:31:59

Crawford:

It was an amazing time. I interviewed John Handy, who was very much a part of that New York scene. I don't know if you know him, but he's an Oakland resident as well.

1-00:32:12

von Stade:

It was an amazing time. I often think, how is it that I know what a Gauguin looks like, and what a Cézanne, and what a Matisse, and Monet, Manet look like. How do I know these things? I don't remember so much studying them in school; I just remember going with my mom all the time. Because we lived in Washington, we'd go to the National Gallery. There's so much in Washington, and then in New York. I'm not sure that my girls really would be able to go around a room and know what was seventeenth century or eighteenth, and I know it. It's part of my life.

1-00:33:00

Crawford:

So then what happened? You went through high school. You were not in a Catholic school, I think?

1-00:33:09

von Stade:

No, then I went for two years, eighth and ninth grade, to Far Hills Country Day School, and then I went to New Britain, Convent of the Sacred Heart in New Britain, because Far Hills Country Day School only went to eighth grade. The commute to a high school from where we lived was really long. It was a really brutal commute. So my mom started looking into boarding schools, and in fact, she took me on a tour of one. I won't say which one it is. I know which one, but I won't say it. Someone came in and said, "Mrs. von Stade, who do you know that you think I might know?" My mother got her dander up and said, "I can't think of a soul," and walked out. She hated all that highfalutin' stuff.

So the last visit was to Convent of the Sacred Heart in New Britain, Connecticut, and that's where I went for three years. It was in a beautiful old estate, the Stokes Estate, that was down at the end of a peninsula. It was on a peninsula, looking out at the sound, on the Connecticut side, and near Stamford, Connecticut. There I had nuns, nuns, and more nuns, and again, an amazing nun who did the theater program. It was all girls, so one of the first shows I did was, what's that show with these two old ladies who keep killing people?

1-00:34:53

Crawford:

Arsenic and Old Lace?

1-00:34:54

von Stade:

Yes, *Arsenic and Old Lace*. [laughter]

1-00:34:57

Crawford: I haven't seen that for a long time.

1-00:34:59

von Stade: I was one of the men because it was all girls.

1-00:35:03

Crawford: One of the villains.

1-00:35:04

von Stade: I was one of the villains. Every morning, we sang the Mass, the Gregorian chant, the *Liber Usualis*. We sang the Mass, a different Mass every morning. So, how much music is that? I studied, I worked my voice with a marvelous woman named Mrs. Moresbach, and started getting interested in singing. I went there for three years.

1-00:35:33

Crawford: Was that boarding?

1-00:35:35

von Stade: It was boarding school. Then, after that, I filled out all those applications for university, but I didn't really want to go. I had this opportunity, my grandfather said, when I graduated, "I'm going to give you a sum of money," and it was like, an amazing amount in that day, "but you may not buy anything with it. You cannot buy a car, clothes, jewelry. You have to do something with it."

And I bought—it was my mom's idea, which was so courageous—a round-trip ticket to Europe, and I was on the Queen Mary, and went over steerage, and arrived in Brussels and stayed with Idabelle for two weeks. Then I took the train down. She came with me to Paris, to help me find a place to live. I lived with a friend-of-a-friend for two weeks, she helped me get settled there, and then I found a room to rent in the *seizième*. I was eighteen at the time.

1-00:36:42

Crawford: The sixteenth? *Très chic!*

1-00:36:43

von Stade: The *seizième*, with this crazy lady, Madame de Goulin. I just had a little room, and the first thing I did, living—

1-00:36:53

Crawford: What street, do you remember?

1-00:36:54

von Stade: Boulevard Émile Augier, right near the Parc de la Muette, was the station. Could only have a bath once a week, had a little sink, and I leaned on the sink, the first thing I did, and pulled it out of the wall. So, my first exercise in French was to call Monsieur S-O-S, the *plombier*, the plumber, to get him to fix the sink.

We had a great French teacher at the Convent. I don't remember her name, I'm ashamed to say, but she gave us at least eighty pages to read a night, in French. She said, "I do not care if you understand it; just read it." By the time you have that much information going by your eyes, you start to make sense of it, even if you can only understand five words in a sentence. You start threading it. Then we did plays. We did *Le Petit Prince*, I was the flower, I remember saying, "Oh, oh! *Je suis toute décoiffée!*" She never spoke English to us, so I was brilliantly prepared for living in France.

1-00:38:09

Crawford: You're ready for your Debussy and Massenet and all the rest of it.

1-00:38:12

von Stade: Yes, so then I lived in Paris for a year.

1-00:38:14

Crawford: By yourself?

1-00:38:15

von Stade: Yes, and, quote-unquote, "went to school." I remember going to class, it was at the Institut Catholique. I went to the Sorbonne for one lecture and didn't understand a word, so I thought, this is not going to work. In those days, you didn't need points going towards a degree. I wasn't that interested in a degree.

1-00:38:39

Crawford: Was this part of a school? No? It was just you?

1-00:38:43

von Stade: Just me, and talking to people and getting ideas. Extreme poverty—I mean, there were days when I would go into, there's a place called the Wimpy Bar, Wimpys were sort of like McDonalds, and I would literally eat the catsup. I would just sit and get little things and fill it with catsup. My refrigerator was outside my window, and I would put my yogurt out so it would stay cold. Lived on *yaourt*.

1-00:39:19

Crawford: Oh, Madame didn't feed you?

1-00:39:22

von Stade: No, no, she had nothing to do with that. The person who did feed me was this marvelous woman named Annie Haviland, and Annie was part of the Haviland family, Haviland china, and had come from Limoges, and again, a musical connection. I went down to visit Annie because she was there during the war, in Limoges, and I went to stay with friends named Tausig. Who comes over but Janos Starker, to play the cello? I mean, unbelievable.

1-00:40:01

Crawford: At the house?

1-00:40:02

von Stade: At their house, because he was one of their best friends. I had a boyfriend whose name was Dominic Tauzig, and he went to the École Polytechnique.

1-00:40:17

Crawford: *A grande école.*

1-00:40:18

von Stade: *Grande école.* So, I went to a ball of the Polytechnique at the opera. That was my first visit to the opera. They were in their Napoleon attire with capes and swords.

1-00:40:33

Crawford: What did you wear?

1-00:40:35

von Stade: My mom, she had a little lady that made dresses, and I'll never forget it, it literally looked like I had just stepped out of the Convent. My mom was quite chaste. It was a pink, sleeveless, long dress, with a black lace over the pink. I can remember Dominic, he was more devoted to me than I was to him. I adored him as a friend, but even back then, I knew that. He wrote me a letter about, "Oh! *Flicka, tu as des bras si jolis*," he said, "You have beautiful arms," and I thought, arms? Arms? It's great to have arms, you know? He's since, like, a big, head honcho in the technical world.

1-00:41:31

Crawford: He is now?

1-00:41:33

von Stade: He is now, and I met him and his wife and children. They came for Christmas one year, when I had my babies, in Paris.

1-00:41:41

Crawford: French friends stay very close, don't they?

1-00:41:43

von Stade: Oh, yes, very. Yes.

1-00:41:45

Crawford: So, that must have been in the Garnier?

1-00:41:48

von Stade: That was in the Garnier. That was the first time I went. But in that year, because I was a student, I could get in for a franc, two francs, three francs, to anything. I went with a friend to hear [Elisabeth] Schwarzkopf at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, and we were in the top of the theater. I'll never forget her coming out—I didn't understand a word she sang all night, it was all in German. She had a hoop skirt on, I'm not kidding you, and she was the most beautiful vision I have ever seen.

1-00:42:21

Crawford: Was that Strauss?

1-00:42:23

von Stade: She sang all Schubert and Strauss and Mahler, and I don't know what she sang, but I knew I didn't understand it, but I was just falling out of the seat, I was so excited.

1-00:42:38

Crawford: What year was that?

1-00:42:40

von Stade: Sixty-three. The reason I know is because that was the year Kennedy died, and I was in Paris when he was shot. All the neighbors where I went, who knew me, when I'd come in to buy an apple, all would take me aside and say, "Oh, *je suis désolé*," "I'm so sorry to hear about your president." It was the most amazing reaction that I had, you know?

1-00:43:10

Crawford: No one ever forgot where they were. So, well, let's finish your year.

1-00:43:18

von Stade: Then, I knew I was going back to New York, and I remember having a big affectation, was instead of saying *non* or no, I said, "Nah..." I would say, "Nah," that was my only affectation of French. I did start translating from French to English a lot. Like, you know you say, "*Je monte au train*," I would say, "I get on the car, I'm going to get on the car."

1-00:43:46

Crawford: Those prepositions!

1-00:43:49

von Stade: Really, at the end, I was speaking French all day long, every day.

1-00:43:51

Crawford: You were probably dreaming in French.

1-00:42:53

von Stade: My friends were French and I was using it a lot, and I was a nanny, and I worked in a shop. So I had to have French. I had to count in French. Anyway, so then I came back to New York, and I still didn't go to college. I worked in New York, I shared an apartment with a dear friend of mine on Seventy-Third Street, between Third and Lexington—well, Second and Third—and I was a secretary. I went to secretarial school and to live while I was going to school at night, I worked as a salesgirl at Tiffany's. You can be a total idiot and work as a salesgirl at Tiffany's, and I did not sell diamonds, dripping through my fingers.

I sold stationary. I kept getting everything wrong. The thing I was in charge of was monogrammed playing cards, and I would send things to, like,

Phoenix, New Mexico. I would always mix up my capitals and states, and so I was not extremely popular, but they thought I was funny. I can remember sitting there one day, and I heard this incredible voice, and I looked up and it was Audrey Hepburn, seeing if her stationary had come in. She was Mrs. Mel Ferrer, then, and I was “um-um[stuttering].”

So I worked there and I did have a great friend who used to come and gather up all these idiot girls who had stupid jobs like that, and take us to lunch at Trader Vic's. We'd have a Mai Tai and then go back to work. It was fun, though. I lived in New York. We never went to a restaurant, never went to a bar, could not afford it. We were always having cocktail parties, and those are the days when someone left their drink, you poured it back in the bottle. Endless cocktail parties, and everyone went home at night. It wasn't the big sleepover-type world, my world, and I was a Convent girl. So I was insulted if I was ever taken home before four o'clock in the morning. It was that world. I was offered a part in a little off-Broadway thing, as far as off-Broadway as New Haven, Connecticut. I thought, “Oh, this is fun,” and I did it.

1-00:46:41

Crawford:

You auditioned for it?

1-00:46:43

von Stade:

I auditioned for it, and it was like a little show that we did in the Hofbräuhaus in New Haven. I had a lot of friends in the theater. I had a great friend named Milan Stitt who did the press for a theater also in New Haven called the Long Wharf Theatre. He was always encouraging me to sing more. I got annoyed because I couldn't read music, so I was having to learn everything by ear.

Around the corner from me was this little music school called the Mannes College of Music, so I went in one day and said, “Hi, I'd love to learn to read music.” So in the process of learning to read music, they said, “Well, you're going to have to do something musical to show us that you're interested,” and so I learned an aria, which was “*Connais-tu le pays?*” I got accepted there to be a full-time student, and that's when I started really getting serious about singing. It was mortifying because I hadn't really heard, in spite of my upbringing in New Jersey, I'd maybe heard of Mozart, but I didn't know things well. I had never heard of Strauss, I hadn't heard of Beethoven, I didn't know what the Beethoven Fifth was. So I was really a total ignoramus, and very embarrassed by it in the beginning.

Then, I thought, “Oh, well, you know, I've got a lot to learn.” Worked first with a woman who felt my voice was coming apart, it was so bad, and I saw this man, always in the hallways, named Sebastian Engelberg, and I got up my nerve to see if I could study with him. He expected me to get back to him, and I expected him to get back to me, so we sort of smiled at each other for about three months, and then finally, I said, “Mr. Engelberg, would you accept me as a student?” He said, “Yes, I was waiting for you to come and schedule your

first lesson,” and then the magic happened for me. In the first lesson, I had always thought my voice very low. I sang a high note and I nearly passed out because the vibrations went up in my brain.

I just adored him. He was like a father. He lost his whole family in the war, he was from outside of Vienna, a town called—well, quite far outside of Vienna—Eisenstadt. He had just escaped the war because he worked in Switzerland, and he got off the train at the right time, and then he was able to move to Israel for the beginning of the war, and then he came to the United States.

He had a beautiful voice, but he was asked to sing all the German roles, and he just couldn’t do it. He couldn’t bring himself to do it, so he started teaching. I just adored him. Now I don’t remember what he told me, technical things. The one thing he would say, “The higher you go, the lower you go, the lower you go, the higher you go.”

1-00:50:08

Crawford: Talking about your range?

1-00:50:10

von Stade: Talking about the connection all the time. He said, “You know, you can’t go up there without being connected, and it has to be a low connection.” What he taught me about breathing, I don’t remember. He used to say, “Sing as though it comes from the bottom of your heart,” and he had a thick Austrian accent, you know? “Comes from the bottom of your heart.” The other thing he would say, “Singing teachers are really like shrinks, they not only teach you to sing, but they put up with all your mind stuff,” and singers have a lot of that. I would come in and say, “Oh, Mr. Engelberg, I couldn’t do that, I just couldn’t get it.” He said, “So, for you, it should always be easy?” You know? But no more than that. Not, “You’re so special,” you’re just—“So, for you, it should be easy?”

1-00:51:12

Crawford: He didn’t say, “You’re going to have a great career in opera?”

1-00:51:16

von Stade: No, because he believed in me the way he believed in all of his students. None of us were different. He was a man who, in his later years, couldn’t sleep so he decided to write the entire history of Israel. He was very well read and he lost his wife, and he was very, very torn apart by that. Anyway, I just learned the love of singing through him, and then I went and entered the Met auditions.

1-00:51:53

Crawford: That was on a dare?

1-00:51:54

von Stade:

It was a dare. Someone said, "I bet you could do it," and I said, "Oh, please." It wasn't totally my interest. We did the opera workshops and I absolutely loved them, but I was still leaning towards Broadway. He started working harder with me, and in those days, you had to keep going through one audition, then another. It was like twelve auditions, even to get to the semifinals.

Every time I got called back, my investment became stronger. At first I thought, "I don't expect to win, so it's no big deal." Then as it got closer to the end, I got more and more of an investment in it. But I still had no expectation of winning it or succeeding in it, so I was surprised. I really couldn't quite fathom that I belonged there, and that made my career much easier because I always judge myself to be less than worthy of it, sort of a self-protection of not being disappointed.

I don't know, but it made it easier. It made it like every single step was like this magic gift. Then it did get more serious and I moved to a different part of New York. I moved to the West Side, I needed to. My roommate got married and I moved to the West Side and had my own apartment there. It was above these crazy people. I was singing a lot then, and they both drank a lot, and he'd call me up and say, "Honey, I get bad, but I never get that bad," you know, because I'd be singing high notes. Mr. Lifschitz, I can remember Mr. Lifschitz. I had one room with a teeny little bedroom.

1-00:54:09

Crawford:

This is when you were singing *comprimario* roles?

1-00:54:11

von Stade:

I had just started at the Met, yes.

1-00:54:14

Crawford:

What did you prepare for Rudolf Bing?

1-00:54:20

von Stade:

For the auditions, I sang Charlotte's aria [from *Werther*], "*Va! Laisse couler mes larmes*," and I got a prize in the auditions with that. In those days, you got a prize in the semifinals, and then you went away for three months, you got some money, and studied and came back for the finals. It isn't that way anymore. I used my money, because I'd met this man, to go to Australia to visit him. His name was Jack Meder, and he was a lawyer.

I went out there, but there was always singing, and they had something called the Sun Competition. I remember going to the Sun Competition and still wanting to sing, but I thought, "I want to move to Australia and have blond babies," but the pull was too great to go back to New York and my family. I just couldn't see being away from my family.

So I went back and then we broke up shortly after that. So then I got in the auditions, got a part, then because there was a lockout at the Met, the Met lost a lot of their contract singers, their *comprimario* singers. That's really why I got a contract. They had lost people who were worried about supporting their families and took jobs outside of the Met because they didn't know if everybody was going to go back to work. I got called to sing for Sir Rudolf and some other people, and they gave me a *comprimario* contract then.

1-00:56:09

Crawford: For how many roles?

1-00:56:11

von Stade: It would come up at different times. They'd just hand you a list. A lot of them were, "Ah!" one night, "E-e," the next night. Every small role you could ever think of. Lots of maids, lots of young boys, pages. I was an Indian maid for Tebaldi. I was Wowkle in *Fanciulla del West*.

1-00:56:35

Crawford: I remember you said that the Met was so strict, and no knitting.[laughter]

1-00:56:39

von Stade: Oh, and very, very, very serious. There was a man named Frank Paola, who was the head of the rehearsal department, and Arge Keller was his assistant. Oh, my gosh, it was strict, strict, strict. You came on time. You wanted to, you were sitting in the room with Birgit Nilsson, and you hear everything. Yet, it was, again, very loving. Most of the conductors, Otto Guth, Walter Taussig, Frank Rich, they were all from Vienna. They'd all escaped the war, and they had seen everybody come and go. They weren't that old, but they had seen all the great artists of Europe come and go, so they were steeped in music. Alberta Maisiello, the most amazing Italian coach in the world.

1-00:57:44

Crawford: You worked with all of them?

1-00:57:46

von Stade: Every day. You showed up at ten o'clock, you'd have a private coaching—you were expected to learn it on your own—to really polish it, the language, the notes, to be sure of everything. For every role you had, we worked from 10:00 till 6:00, and then if you had a performance at night, you'd have the afternoon off and come back at night. I mean, it's the best training in the world, and if you weren't in the rehearsal, you were down in the theater, watching the staging in case you had to go in.

We had up to four covers, meaning four understudies, so sometimes you were the fourth understudy, but you still had to know it. I went on, one of the most magic times in my career, I was number four and everybody else canceled. They had said, "Go ahead and take this job in Connecticut." So I was in Connecticut and they said, "You better get back here." I went on and Rolf Liebermann happened to be there the night that I went on. I went and sang for

him the next day, and he gave me Cherubino at the Paris Opera. So, tell me that there isn't a lot of luck involved in these careers.

1-00:59:09

Crawford: Were you singing Cherubino at that time? [She had sung the role in Santa Fe in 1971, San Francisco in 1972, and at the Met in 1973]

1-00:59:11

von Stade: No. I sang Cherubino for him, that was my audition for him. That was one of my first breaks.

1-00:59:19

Crawford: A big break! We're at an hour right now. Would you like to go on for another hour?

1-00:59:28

von Stade: Why don't I wait until just when the kids are coming back? I might be able to be helpful to them, to go to the doctor.

1-00:59:34

Crawford: Well, I think we have a good start.

Interview 2: February 3, 2012

Audio File 2

2-00:00:00

Crawford: Third of February, 2012, interview number two with Frederica von Stade for the Oral History Office. We got you through Paris last time, and we didn't talk about every single thing you did before you got to Paris, but I'd like to start and find out how it was. You were going this time as a full-fledged opera singer, not a student.

2-00:00:28

von Stade: Oh, when I went back to Paris? Oh, it was terrific. We found, at a cocktail party, like two weeks before we were to go, a wonderful lady who was renting her house. It was a very sad circumstance for her because her husband had been killed. She was an older lady, and so, because I was an opera singer, she rented the house to me. If you've ever known the book of *Madeline*, you know, nine little girls in a row? This was this house. It looked exactly like it. They had been doing some renovations, so it was a little cut up, but we had the time of our lives in this house.

My Jenny was born in the States but was a baby there. Both children were babies there. It was four stories and the kitchen was in the basement, and it was a mess. I did it all up myself—not decorated—in blue and white checks because if you ever remember the movie *Daddy Longlegs*, when he found Leslie Caron and she worked at an orphanage, everything was blue and white checks. So the whole kitchen was blue and white checks. We lived in Paris, that was our home, and the first thing I did was, I think, *The Marriage of Figaro*. No, we didn't live there quite yet.

2-00:02:04

Crawford: You had just auditioned at the Met; and met Liebermann?

2-00:02:13

von Stade: That's right, no, I hadn't done that yet. We didn't even have the house yet, then. I'm sorry.

2-00:02:21

Crawford: This must have been your first performance in Paris, was it? Your first Cherubino?

2-00:02:26

von Stade: Yes, it was, and it was in Versailles. It was in Versailles—it moved into l'Opéra, but it was first in Versailles, in the Gabriel Theatre at Versailles, all pale blue and white.

2-00:02:40

Crawford: In the chateau?

2-00:02:42

von Stade: In the chateau, in original costumes from the *Opéra Comique*. If things were falling apart, they were mounted on other material, so I had a vest that was from the seventeenth century. Colors were different, then, they were very pale and very beautiful. It was mounted on something else.

2-00:03:13

Crawford: Everybody was in real period costumes?

2-00:03:16

von Stade: Real period costumes. They were either built or the front was included. It was amazing.

2-00:03:23

Crawford: This was eventually in the Garnier?

2-00:03:27

von Stade: We moved into the Garnier, but at first, we did, I think, the first five performances in the Gabriel Theatre at Versailles. It was pretty amazing.

2-00:03:37

Crawford: What an entrance to opera in Paris you had.

2-00:03:40

von Stade: We went out for lunch in the gardens of Versailles, so it was amazing. Strehler was a genius.

2-00:03:46

Crawford: Tell me about him. I never saw any of his work.

2-00:03:50

von Stade: He was very, very good-looking, with thick, white hair, gray-white hair, quite wiry, and not tall. Just dynamic, and very often, the way he would direct would be to come and stand next to you. He never wanted too much movement because he said the intention has to be very clear, and he was unbelievably musical. Nothing he did was in the wrong rhythm. He just had this natural gift

I remember he had beautiful shoes, so anytime he'd stand, I'd look at these shoes and I'd think, "Oh, my God, that's what Italian shoes are about." The other part of him was a little bit mad, a little bit. I remember once, when we moved into the Garnier, there was some kind of a demonstration going on, and there was teargas. My instinct was to retreat from it—he walked right into the middle.

He was just intense, and he spoke mainly to us in French, occasionally in Italian, and we rehearsed very often from 10:00 a.m. till 10:00 p.m., one scene. He had to have everything, the lighting had to be done, everybody had to be there, all the prop people had to be there, because that's more the way they rehearse in the theater, and he was a theater man.

Somewhere I have the letter he wrote me, it was *pieno di fuoco*, which is “full of fire,” and he used to talk about how Cherubino was in that beautiful part of a young man when they’re quite girlish. They haven’t got a beard yet, they’re sort of thirteen, fourteen, if you put a wig on them, they could look like a girl. They’re very wiry. He said, “If you really look around young boys that age, they are always moving something. Their foot, their hand, they never are completely still.” Not in a distracting way, but he was just—I adored him, just adored him. So that was a great experience.

2-00:06:25

Crawford: Was that a very hospitable house, Versailles?

2-00:06:28

von Stade: Well, it was kind of a special deal, so it wasn’t a house that had been used very often. It was maybe used for concerts occasionally, so it was mainly the troupe, the people that were the machinists, that do the stage, were from the Palais Garnier, and it was very hospitable. It was the years that Rolf Liebermann took over the opera, and he brought all his expertise from Hamburg. He had an amazing woman who was one of the general directors, Joan Ingpen, just brilliant and funny. It was sort of like being dropped into Disneyland, you know, with these great singers. In those days, nobody spoke English, so that when we would have lunch, it would be a combination of Italian and German, but not that much English.

2-00:07:38

Crawford: You were the one American singer, I’m sure, who could do that.

2-00:07:41

von Stade: We really, really learned that way. I learned Italian. I think I really learned Italian from that time because if someone’s screaming at you, “*Girate, girate!*” you better figure out what they’re saying. My Italian isn’t very good, but I can watch television in Italian. So it was a very magic time.

2-00:08:06

Crawford: Cherubino—could you describe the character for me?

2-00:08:10

von Stade: I think of Cherubino as being that age, thirteen, fourteen, when if they run too much, their face is all flushed. I’m much older than all my younger cousins and they were mainly boys, so I got to see them in action, and I used them when I was thinking of moving. They would come and visit me in New York and leave to make the train to go home to Long Island as late as they could, to give themselves the challenge of getting down to Penn Station. This is when they were maybe sixteen, seventeen. I think Cherubino is—not because I did the part—I think it’s Mozart. I think it’s my impression of what Mozart was, who he was, and the only thing I have to go on is his letters to his mother, and all those marvelous letters. He was so exuberant. I know there was incredible tragedy as well, but I think tragedy was much more a part of everyone’s life in

that era because health was precarious, travel was, everything had so many dangers about it.

2-00:09:32

Crawford: Was he irreverent, do you think, Mozart?

2-00:09:34

von Stade: Oh, yes! Oh, all his letters to his cousin, it's all full of dirty words, and yes, I think he was very irreverent. The closest I've seen of a character in the movies would be, there's a marvelous movie called *Benjamin*, a French movie made years ago, and everybody is in love with this young boy. He's being beckoned by every young girl in the place, and it's a bit of an actor, like an actor who loves to hear himself speak, likes to watch himself, like, "I'll try this—no, that doesn't work—I'll try this," you know? So, it's performer, impatient, funny, great sense of humor, very, very ebullient. They're moody, too, very moody-like. Change of mood, quick change of mood.

2-00:10:51

Crawford: Did you look at anyone else, like Mary Martin, to capture the character?

2-00:11:03

von Stade: I don't remember doing that specifically. I had played boys, believe it or not, a lot in my life. When I was in ninth grade, I was Nanki-Poo. Then in my earlier career, I did Hansel, and I did a lot of these parts. So I kind of was always working on it. You know, I also think that part of the intention of roles like that is the ambiguity between girl and boy. If you're too authentic, it's not as fun as if you are a girl playing a boy. I truly believe that that ambiguity was intentional from all the composers that wrote at the time, by Mozart and later, Richard Strauss. They wanted the voice to be a girl's voice, but I think they also wanted that one minute, feminine, one minute, masculine. Not too defined. If you think of a boy playing Cherubino, it would almost be not nice, there would be something vulgar about it. Like Octavian would be vulgar played by a man.

2-00:12:28

Crawford: Cherubino suffers so much, and he enjoys suffering so much, that seems like more of a female quality.

2-00:12:34

von Stade: Yes, yes.

2-00:12:35

Crawford: I saw the video from Glyndebourne, and your performance was so moving.

2-00:12:47

von Stade: I've had the best directors in the world, really.

2-00:12:50

Crawford: [Jean-Pierre] Ponnelle, you were with for a long time, and Peter Hall. Was that your next performance of Cherubino, did you go right on to those directors?

2-00:13:02

von Stade: I can't remember. I think it was then that I went to Glyndebourne. Peter was just unbelievable. He's just very relaxed, a whole different way of directing, very kind, lots of time for laughter, lots of time for cups of tea, one funny thing that he wanted me to do. At the time, the summer that I did Cherubino, they were doing *Il ritorno d'Ulisse* with the great Janet Baker. I was like, jaw dropped for every rehearsal that I wasn't working myself, I went and watched *Ulisse*.

For the opening scene of *Ulisse*, there's a character called "Human Frailty," *L'umana Fragilità*, and he talked one of the young singers into being naked because that really would be human frailty. Now, she had a very glamorous wig on, so it didn't gather all the stagehands backstage when she was there, and he had to convince her that she could do it and talk her into it, and he walked her around the lake at Glyndebourne.

He wanted me, as Cherubino, in the dressing scene, when Susanna dresses Cherubino, and they dress him up like a girl, he wanted me to be naked to the waist, with my back to the public. I don't know where I had the gall, I said, "Peter, you'd have to walk me around Lake Michigan to talk me into that—I'm not doing it." He laughed, but it was kind of an adorable idea, and a very different style of directing. There again, he's a theater man.

2-00:14:59

Crawford: You think that makes a big difference?

2-00:15:00

von Stade: Oh, yes, because theater people, you haven't even learned all your lines, necessarily. You have an idea of it. But a lot of directors want to actually teach you the reading of the line, or the interpretation. We all come with our homework done, and when you're working on something, you're bound to infuse a lot of things that you've heard or recordings you've listened to, or what people have told you, so that maybe you're not as malleable. Oh, he was just wonderful, and it was such a fun production. It was, again, very raked. I love raked stages because they just push the action into the public. You're never upstaged. They're a little harder to work on, but I think everybody loves them.

2-00:15:57

Crawford: What is so special about Glyndebourne? Everybody loves Glyndebourne.

2-00:16:00

von Stade: Oh, gosh, Glyndebourne was sort of like summer camp for opera singers. We worked all day, but there was this incredible English enjoying of the gardens,

no matter how intense things got. We broke for tea in the morning and the afternoon. There were the most amazing coaches there—language coaches, music coaches, one of the most famous is a man named Ubaldo Gardini, who just passed away this year. Ubaldo was walking music. He had more knowledge of bel canto than any man I've ever met. I think he wanted to be a conductor, but he just, he made you sure of everything, of great rhythm, and everything that you did with him, sometimes you'd sing two lines for an hour-and-a-half, just to get that right.

So he was always pushing for precision and for intention and for musical clarity, and he was amazing. There was Jani Strasser, who was equally gifted. He was Hungarian, and had sort of the same gift in another way, he was more of an Eastern musicality.

He had a funny thing on his piano that was a picture of dogs, poodles, and I said, "Why are those there, Jani?" He said, "My dear, those are my poodles. If you are good to them, they do tricks. If you are not good to them, they bite you." He said, "My poodles are your voice—your voice is your poodles, and you train them tricks, but you're always nice to them." He was a great character. Martin Isepp. There was this coterie of great teachers in this bucolic area. You walked through a beautiful house to get to the next rehearsal. It was very small. You all lived in the area, they found houses or apartments to rent. I just loved it.

2-00:18:38

Crawford: Maybe you'd talk about Cherubino's music and how it fits your voice.

2-00:18:44

von Stade: I think it's that it is written a lot in something we call the *passagio*, which is the upper end of the voice. It demands that you kind of negotiate that, and I've negotiated it sometimes wonderfully well, and sometimes not so well. I think it always wants a lyric voice, which I had. My voice is still lyric, after all these years. Just the range was perfect, and I'm in love with the role. The wonderful thing for me was that it's not the main role. You can make a nice impression, but you're not carrying the weight of the opera. So that was a great way to make a lot of debuts, and I did make my debut in almost every house as Cherubino. Not in La Scala, but in Vienna, I think, and Houston, San Francisco, Santa Fe, Paris.

2-00:19:50

Crawford: Salzburg?

2-00:19:52

von Stade: Salzburg, yup. So I think that's why it suited me to a T, because I wasn't ready to take the weight of anything.

2-00:20:04

Crawford: That's interesting. Well, let's talk about Jean-Pierre Ponnelle. You performed many times with him, and he's such an interesting character.

2-00:20:23

von Stade:

Ponnelle is, again, a genius. I think all three men were geniuses. Ponnelle was an incredible technician. Because he designed his own sets as well, his eye was extraordinary, and his eye, in my opinion, from everything I did with him, sort of required a certain balance—a balance of movement, a balance of where people were placed. I always thought that he saw the whole thing.

He had very clear wishes for how he wanted things played, and it was very different from what I even believed about Cherubino. He believed Cherubino to be much whinier and much poutier. From trying to give him what he wanted, I learned a lot more than saying, “Well, I just don’t agree with you.”

Again, he was a man that everyone wanted to please. He knew exactly how to manage a chorus. He knew exactly how to manage stagehands. He knew exactly how to manage all of us. He had appropriate impatience. He’d get very angry, but it always got everybody better. When he was not in the theater, it was like the theater was empty.

2-00:22:04

Crawford:

I’ve heard it said that you just couldn’t restage something without him.

2-00:22:06

von Stade:

You could not, you know? He took with him an extraordinary energy that was very infectious, and really, it was like being—we can’t do this if he’s not there, you know? Very funny, great sense of humor.

2-00:22:31

Crawford:

He was very musical, wasn’t he?

2-00:22:33

von Stade:

Very musical, and when I say he was, there was an expertise there. He’d really thought about every single note of the opera. So did Strehler, but I think Strehler’s was kind of unconscious. He was so musical by nature. Jean-Pierre was musical by nature, but followed it up with knowing exactly what he was doing and why he was doing it and why the rhythm was there and what the rhythm was about. There always seemed to be a visual concept as well. That was my impression of it—he saw everything.

2-00:23:20

Crawford:

His productions in San Francisco were so memorable.

2-00:23:25

von Stade:

His production of *Cenerentola*, it’s one of the classics of all time. He always had ways of solving problems, like in *Cenerentola*, one disappears, one reappears, how funny to have one backing out one door and one character coming in through another door, you know? Just great, great, great sense of humor and precision, because Rossini is all about that—every phrase repeats sometimes twenty times. He would, in some ways, stage all twenty of them.

He had a way of making sense of repeats, making sense of crescendos, making sense of decrescendos.

2-00:24:15

Crawford: Would something like that rain curtain in *Cenerentola* affect your performance of it?

2-00:24:23

von Stade: I think it would just augment it. It would make it clear because he was so precise, and Rossini is all about crescendos. That's the excitement of it. He would mirror that onstage in some way. He would present it without obscuring it.

2-00:24:50

Crawford: I'm interested that he had a different concept of Cherubino, of your character. Did the directors have different feelings about *Marriage of Figaro*, that some thought it was revolutionary, for example, and others not so much?

2-00:25:02

von Stade: Yes, slightly different. There was a part that he did between the Count and the Countess in *Marriage of Figaro* where he draws his hand back to hit her. That's brutal.

2-00:25:21

Crawford: At what point?

2-00:25:23

von Stade: I think it was in the trio in the second act, when Susanna comes out of the closet and she's saying, "Don't go in there, don't go in there," and he's suspicious. It was either there, or it might have even been at the very, very end of the opera.

2-00:25:39

Crawford: Oh!

2-00:25:47

von Stade: It was a clue that there was an edge to the Count. He didn't like being made a fool of. I remember thinking, "Whoa, that's really brutal," but there was a sense to it. In *Cenerentola*, even in the film, I think, there's this long recitative at the end where Cenerentola essentially forgives her family for being so awful to her. In *Cenerentola*, to the Count, she says, "Oh, I'm too shy to go there," and he says, "You go there." I think that was a little, "You do as you're told." I think that was a little Jean-Pierre, men rule. That's how I like to think of it. It makes sense. There was a certain revolutionary edge to it, and to Strehler, as well. The *droit du seigneur* was an awful, awful thing, really. That was part and parcel of the play.

2-00:27:16

Crawford: It was telling the Count, “You can’t do that?” [bedding brides before the wedding] Da Ponte must have sort of softened it a little bit, but you felt that spirit of it.

2-00:27:29

von Stade: Yes, a little bit, yes. Less with Peter, as I remember. I think with Peter, it was more jovial. The fun thing of doing *Cherubino* is that every time I did it—and it was a lot, and a lot of redoing the same production, because it was never exactly the same cast of characters—it was always different because the relationships were always different.

In my thinking, the characters in *The Marriage of Figaro* are everywhere. I mean, they are so current, they are not of a period, they are very, very real. They are real people, the Countess is a real woman, I know people like the Countess, I know people like Susanna, I know someone like Figaro. I know them so well, and they were so carefully designed by Mozart and Da Ponte and in the music that they sing, there is always a definition of who that person was. They’re very real people that have transcended the ages.

2-00:28:44

Crawford: If you got a new Countess, that affected your performance?

2-00:28:48

von Stade: It would be someone who was just different or looked differently, or you might treat someone with a little bit more respect or care or seduction or whatever it was.

2-00:29:04

Crawford: You made some really good friends in those early productions, didn’t you?

2-00:29:06

von Stade: Great friends. Great, great buddies, yes.

2-00:29:08

Crawford: I’m thinking of Thomas Allen and Sam Ramey.

2-00:29:12

von Stade: Oh, yes, we had fun. By the time you’ve done it for ten years, you’re really going to have fun.

2-00:29:18

Crawford: You don’t have to worry about much.

2-00:29:20

von Stade: No, you are going to entertain yourself in every possible way.

2-00:29:25

Crawford: Are there any of those performances of *Marriage of Figaro* that stand out for you?

2-00:29:32

von Stade:

The most outstanding for me were the ones at the Gabriel Theatre because the way Strehler lit it, when he was there, you know, everybody tries to recreate it by putting down the same formula, but he got the recipe right. It was like perfection. He had that early morning light that you only see in Italy, and then in the first act, really, really early light. Then the second act was sort of closer to lunchtime, then the third act was late afternoon, and the fourth act is night. The way he lit, oh, my gosh, I would have killed myself if I was a lighting designer or a technician. He would sometimes have things flashing off, you know, not standard. He'd say, "That needs to be softened," like a photographer, so it would be reflected in a panel not of a mirror, but a panel of something shiny. The second act, you could feel the heat.

2-00:30:52

Crawford:

Just by lighting?

2-00:30:54

von Stade:

Just by lighting.

2-00:30:56

Crawford:

Wonderful. You talked before about the lyric voice; maybe you could talk about your voice, here. About your voice, and bel canto.

2-00:31:05

von Stade:

Me talk about my voice?

2-00:31:08

Crawford:

Describe your voice.

2-00:31:09

von Stade:

Well, quite honestly, I've never liked my voice. I love what it's given me and what it's done for me. I'm on my knees to my voice, but to actually listen to it, I don't like it. I cringe. It's not the type of voice that I really love. I really love the tenor voice, but of mezzos, I love a much creamier voice than I have. I have a very bright voice, and I know that, and that's served me in that it serves me for diction and it serves me for carrying, but I've always thought it was a little "eh" and a little brittle sometimes. [laughter]

I just don't hear it, and I don't know if other people feel that way about their voices. There are things I'm really pleased with, an accomplishment of voice, but of all the over seventy recordings I've made, there are really two that I'm really proud of. That's weird, that's pretty weird. The one I'm really proud of is the Mahler Fourth with Abbado because A, I love the piece so much, it's a child's version of heaven, sort of, and B, a recording I made with my daughter of a little song called "Across Your Dreams." That's probably because I did it with my daughter when she was seventeen. I like the sound of my voice in those.

2-00:33:04

Crawford:

Not the *Chants d'Auvergne*?

2-00:33:10

von Stade: Can't stand my version. Well, I'm addicted to Victoria de Los Angeles, you know, and her version. My favorite mezzo voices in the world would be Janet Baker, Suzy Graham—I'm talking about the younger ones—Joyce DiDonato, I just love.

2-00:33:38

Crawford: She's often compared to you.

2-00:33:40

von Stade: I love her voice so much. This girl has set a new standard for singing, really, of how she sings, what she sings, how she puts herself into every role. It comes straight from the heart, straight from her heart. She has a brilliant mind, but that's never been obscured by anything. Oh, I loved [Christa] Ludwig's voice. I'm forgetting a lot of great colleagues right now. I loved TT's voice, Tatiana Troyanos. That was a wonderful voice. A wonderful girl named Kristine Jepson, who is a buddy of mine, and really has had her career kind of cut short because of her health.

2-00:34:36

Crawford: Was she in *Doctor Atomic*?

2-00:34:39

von Stade: I think she was. She was Kitty here, when they did it, she was. One of the most glorious voices I have ever, ever heard. She did Sister Helen [*Dead Man Walking*]. I did Sister Helen with her a couple of times.

2-00:34:52

Crawford: Here?

2-00:34:53

von Stade: No, here was Suzy [Susan Graham]. We did it, I think, in San Diego, I did it with Kris. Yes.

2-00:35:08

Crawford: You never would have sung the Verdi heroines?

2-00:35:13

von Stade: No.

2-00:35:14

Crawford: Might your voice have darkened?

2-00:35:15

von Stade: No. I never had the weight in it, and from all that I've heard of Verdi—and I heard a lot when I was first at the Met because there was Fiorenza Cossotto, who was this amazing, big-voiced singer. There was always Verdi in the season. There was Sherrill Milnes. The impression I got, and I could be wrong, is that a Verdi voice is born. It's not created. It's just born, and you may not sing Verdi for twenty years, but it's always there. The possibility is always there before the voice matures.

Anyone who has violated that, to a certain extent, from what I see, has lost some of the quality in their voice because it's boom-y, and they're big orchestras. For the mezzos, it's right in the middle. It's that middle voice, and if you don't negotiate that properly, you lose it. I just always had the impression that it was like Dolora's [Zajick] voice, you know? It's just born.

2-00:36:29

Crawford: She had it from a very young age, didn't she?

2-00:36:36

von Stade: But Stephanie [Blythe] can pull her voice down to that. She is one of the most beautiful singers I've ever heard, and she can do pretty much anything. The quality was always there. That heft, I guess. For baritones, too, certainly for tenors, and for sopranos. I just think it's natural to the voice.

2-00:37:03

Crawford: Pavarotti didn't sing the heavyweights, at least until later.

2-00:37:08

von Stade: Yes, I wouldn't think he would. He was very careful about his voice.

2-00:37:23

Crawford: I have the Solti and von Karajan recordings of *Marriage of Figaro*. What would you say about those two conductors?

2-00:37:36

von Stade: To me, they're two of the greatest conductors in the world. Karajan was kind of hard to follow, actually, because you weren't sure what he was doing. He had such command that it was almost as though he willed you, he willed the whole orchestra to do things rather than hand it to them. His ear was so acute that I used to sit there in awe of what he heard, and I couldn't hear what he was hearing.

I remember he had a slightly jarring voice, and everybody was frightened of him. He was so kind to his singers. It was like he loved us. He was so sweet to us, always. I did Cherubino with him in Salzburg, with Elizabeth Harwood. He adored Elizabeth. He was affectionate and he was really amazing. I was lucky enough to do *Pelléas* with him, a recording, and oh, my gosh, the technicians were jumping up and down, the producers.

He used up one whole session to get four measures of music right. I mean, he got through it, but he wanted—"On a brisé la glace avec un fer rougi," which means, "You have broken the glass with a hot iron." The strings go up into a high sort of [screeching] up there, and he wanted this sound, and he got it. Solti was, again, much more like, in my view, like Strehler. He was just pure energy, incredible energy, and precision, but just this fire. Every time I worked with him, he was on fire.

2-00:39:57

Crawford: You worked with him a lot?

2-00:39:59

von Stade: Not that much. I did a recording. He did the first *Figaro* in Versailles, and I did, I think, *Damnation de Faust*, of Berlioz, with him. He was just always on fire. He'd step up there and all of a sudden, *whango*, it was like eight people were on the podium.

2-00:40:27

Crawford: You worked with Pritchard as well. He was at San Francisco.

2-00:40:32

von Stade: Unbelievable. One of the most gracious, funniest, dearest humans in the world. When someone is that gracious and funny, you think they can't be that talented, too, but unbelievable. Unbelievable, just this softness about the way he accomplished things, and great humor, as well.

2-00:41:03

Crawford: Well, let's talk about bel canto, not necessarily by specifically addressing your roles, but talk about it in your career, and how you learned it.

2-00:41:15

von Stade: The person I learned the most from would have been Ubaldo. I can't really say I learned it. Bel canto is one of the most precise executions of music that exists. Every note has an importance; every rhythm has an importance. It's so much about rhythm and language. For me, it is the perfect combination of voice and orchestra, song. It is perfect. I always felt that it was something you had to learn at birth—very hard to be taught it because bel canto, to a certain extent, I think is married to the Italian language. If you don't speak Italian from birth, it's very, very hard.

Our mouths are already distorted from English. The vowels in Italian are completely pure. There's no diphthong, and it's very hard for an American to do it with great success. Probably someone like Callas, who grew up with Italian part of her life and Greek to start, one of the romance languages, it was easier for her. Certainly, she mastered it, but she also mastered it with the great conductors, de Sabata. The way to learn a role, I always felt, in bel canto, was to go someplace by the sea for three months and sing four or five hours a day, every day, until everything had its own perfect rhythm, its own weight, its own meaning, its own pronunciation, its own sound.

I loved trying—I sure love trying. One of the most favorite things I ever did was to do *Sonnambula*. I also realized in *Sonnambula* that I could probably never achieve it, but I put everything I had into achieving it. The second time I did it in Dallas, I did it with two great, great bel canto teachers. One was Nicky Rossino, who was a conductor, and the other, I'm ashamed I don't remember his name, but he was the head of the chorus in Dallas.

There weren't that many conductors who really knew bel canto in my time. I would say that Claudio was not really, I mean, he could do anything, but that wasn't his thing. Eduardo Müller and Nicky Rossino. When you look at the work of Scotto and Callas and Marilyn and Sutherland, it's not just the beautiful voice you're hearing. You're hearing a type of precision that makes things pop off the page. Otherwise, they can be really boring. I think bel canto demands the most of technique. It demands being able to pull your voice to a pianissimo that goes a million miles. It demands that you can do a crescendo and decrescendo. You obviously have to sing high/low, you have to be able to sing fast. It's every skill that is part of singing, and that hasn't always been easy for me, so I've thrown my whole person into it. But if I had to say I had achieved it, I would say no.

2-00:45:50

Crawford:

You said something in that interview about Callas that I'd like to ask you about. I think this was the interview with Sally Billinghamurst that you did a few years ago in San Francisco. You said, "Callas did nothing, but she did everything." What was it?

2-00:46:07

von Stade:

You know, the only time I saw her in person was when she did the master classes. She was just this quite humble presence, great presence, but she didn't play to the audience or anything. She had her back to the audience. She was marvelous-looking, marvelous, this mass of hair and these features of hers, and hands or fingers, that I would say they're that long. Everything she did with her hands was just extraordinary.

When I saw films of her doing *Tosca*, which are the only ones I saw, or of her performing, she had certain gestures that were hers, but it wasn't what she did when she did it. It just emerged from the energy of what was going on in the play, the big scene with Scarpia, and she sometimes was horsy. Sometimes, she walked across the stage like a football player. There was no one thing about it; it just was plop, perfect. To a great extent, I feel it's natural. It's very natural. It came from her pure intention, and that's what I love about her singing. It's the most concentrated, it's like having full power Clorox, you know? It's burning power of focused light. Focused light, and all coming from her intention, and her intention came from what was going on, in the words and the music.

2-00:48:05

Crawford:

Were there other sopranos you felt that way about?

2-00:48:08

von Stade:

Actually, there are people today that I feel that way about. I feel very much that way about Joyce, and a couple of young tenors that I've seen—a boy named Steven Costello. I feel that a lot about Suzy. Suzy is a total natural on stage, both in humor and the way she executes things is just, to me, it's clicking, it's just right. Joyce, certainly. Nobody's coming to mind now

because I'm not performing as much. Callas, Callas, Callas. That's why people are still talking about her today, really. Sometimes, it is all plopped in one body.

2-00:49:12

Crawford:

That's a good way to say it. Well, let's go back and talk about "Non so più" and "Voi che sapete," Cherubino's arias. George Bernard Shaw said that if "Non so più" was done well, it could turn Wagner into syrup, which is a very strong statement!

2-00:49:45

von Stade:

The thing I think of, when I think of "Non so più" is it is a burst of energy. It's musical energy, it's psychic energy, and it's physical energy. If I'm ever asked to help a young singer with it now, I usually ask them to run around the room six times before they start singing it, because that's very often what is required. That's a big element of it. It's so well written that really, you just have to follow the rules that Mozart set down. Just be sure that the ends are doubled and have a specific thought for every phrase in the piece, because it repeats.

So one time, it's "*non so più, cosa son, cosa faccio/Or di foco, ora sono, di ghiaccio*." It's the way kids are. I just came from assisting in a violin class. They're kindergarteners, but you say, "Nadjia, sit down," and the face goes like this. Then you say, "If you don't behave, you won't get the treat," and all of a sudden, it's like [snaps fingers] split-second timing of reaction to things, and if you have an idea for each phrase, at least fifty percent of your intention will come through. If you're just singing it, nothing will come through, it'll just be a lot of notes. It has ravishing moments, but it's not as ravishing as "Voi che sapete," which is such a melody and it's just so engaging. So I think it's an aria of intention, almost demanding a subtext, complete subtext in your own words.

2-00:52:00

Crawford:

That's how you made it so compelling.

2-00:52:07

von Stade:

Oh, thank you. Well, I loved doing it, for sure. I had a ball.

2-00:52:16

Crawford:

Well then, let's go back to what you did and were doing in 1971 when you sang here for the first time with San Francisco—with Spring Opera Theater. It was Sextus [*La Clemenza di Tito*].

2-00:52:29

von Stade:

That was funny. Yes.

2-00:52:31

Crawford:

I know there's a story attached to this.

2-00:52:33

von Stade:

Oh, well, I didn't know what I was doing anywhere, but Mr. Adler hired me. We were all sent off, the women wore dresses, but those of us who were playing boys were sent to a, like a tux rental shop for our costumes. It was just funny to get dressed up in a tuxedo. Mr. Adler was one of those amazing general managers that noticed everything. Nothing slipped by him. I remember him saying, "I don't like the cufflinks"—cufflinks!—that I had in the role. I remember it was challenging because the orchestra was behind the singers--it was a pushed-out stage, so that the only contact we had was by television.

2-00:53:32

Crawford:

That must have been at the Curran Theatre.

2-00:53:33

von Stade:

It was at the Curran, and that was hard, that was hard to coordinate, yes. I don't remember much about the production. I think it was a little bit semi-staged, you know? What I do remember is staying in a little place right across the street, in a hotel that is now quite glamorous, but wasn't then. If I had a good performance, I'd try and recreate exactly what I did that day and what I ate for the next performance. If I was pleased with something, then I tried to reconstruct the day to make it twins, so I'd have that performance again, and it doesn't work.

2-00:54:20

Crawford:

Well, you got rave reviews in Arthur Bloomfield's opera book. I have Carol Vaness' recording of it. It would have to be transposed?

2-00:54:33

von Stade:

Not really, no, because it's high and she has one of those voices that can do a lot of things.

2-00:54:42

Crawford:

Mr. Adler considered you his discovery, and a sort of daughter, he said.

2-00:54:48

von Stade:

Everyone felt that way about him, really. He was grumpy and everything at times, but you always felt looked after and cared for. I always describe opera singers a little bit like third-graders, where we really have fun doing it. Singing is a lot of fun. It's very serious and everybody takes it very seriously, but it's really a lot of fun. Using your voice, when it's doing what you want, feels good. Running around feels good. Laughing with your colleagues feels good. Working with directors. There's a very big element of fun in it, the way a sport is fun.

So, he, I think, understood that about singers. The house was very, very, much stricter. I describe it more like a convent than it is now. If you didn't get your list in for backstage guests, there was no way they were getting backstage. He had a lot of rules, but like the convent, you can play within the parameters.

You knew what your parameters were. I really loved him. I just loved him, and another person that was very much a part of my life, then, was Cal Simmons. He did consider Cal his son, and Cal, there was one of those people that God just said, "Okay, make a little more space in you because I'm pouring more talent in." He was so talented. It came out of every part of him, you know?

2-00:56:42

Crawford: Yes, he could tell Mr. Adler, "It's not right, what you said. It's right what I'm doing."

2-00:56:50

von Stade: He made us all laugh so much, he was just adorable.

2-00:56:56

Crawford: Did you work with him a lot?

2-00:56:58

von Stade: With Cal? Cal played for all our rehearsals, for a lot of things. For *Così*, and he was always inventing things. He could do anything on the piano, anything, and that sense of humor. He always played it just right—he never went too far. He had that great sense of timing about him.

2-00:57:23

Crawford: We're just at one hour right now. Do you want to go on?

2-00:57:26

von Stade: I can go on a little bit.

Begin Audio File 3

3-00:00:51

Crawford: We're talking about 1971. I think you did a Cherubino that year with Kiri te Kanawa. Was that in Santa Fe?

3-00:01:05

von Stade: 1971, yes. I don't even remember who directed that, but it was a fabulous production, I do remember that. Santa Fe was all open in those days, and so all the entrances were from miles back, so [the fourth act] really looked like a garden. Kiri was so much fun. That's where I got to be a really good friend of Kiri's. I'll never forget the first day she sang. Everybody just went, "Oh!"

3-00:01:43

Crawford: She has such an elegant voice.

3-00:01:44

von Stade: This voice is, oh, one of the greatest voices I've ever heard. She was just funny and dear, and we had a ball.

3-00:01:57

Crawford: You were kind of the pair, the Countess-Cherubino pair for a while.

3-00:02:00

von Stade: Yes, we did that in Glyndebourne, and then I think we did it once in Munich, directed actually by Kurt Adler's son, was the director.

3-00:02:15

Crawford: That's Ronnie Adler? Well, you also got married that year, do you want to say something about that?

3-00:02:25

von Stade: Seventy-three, I got married. Well, Peter [Elkus] and I got married in Paris because I was working there, and that seemed logical, and it was really fun. We were married at Saint Gervais, this beautiful church near the Fourth Arrondissement, near the Île Saint-Louis. Then we had a reception in a place that was out in the country, and we rented a bus to take everybody out. There had been a fire the week before, I remember that, and this woman was so clever. She had just hung sheets all over the place where she had the reception, and we had a ball. We thought we'd have twenty people; we ended up with a hundred. My family came from the United States, my mother lived in Ireland, then, brought all her friends from Ireland. Peter's parents came from California. Oh, it was fantastic, we were really lucky. It was a lot of fun.

3-00:03:28

Crawford: Saint Gervais, is that the church where Saint Saens was organist?

3-00:03:31

von Stade: No. I think Saint Saens was--I thought that was more near where the market used to be.

3-00:03:48

Crawford: I know that church. [She is right. It was Saint Merri. St. Gervais was Couperin's church]

3-00:03:50

von Stade: We were just in the chapel behind it and I found the music in the metro, in the subway. I wanted a flute, and these kids were playing the flute and guitar. They happened to be American. I said, "Would you like to play at a wedding?" Sure enough, they came and they were great. I was really late because I was getting my hair done, and all of a sudden, I looked around, and everybody had left. I had no way to get to the church. I started walking, it was about a ten-minute walk, but that's why I was late.

3-00:04:36

Crawford: That little chapel, does it have a nunnery across from it?

3-00:04:41

von Stade: It's kind of a funny church in that it's part of an order, and now it looks more eastern in that little chapel. I went when I was there three years ago. It was fun, though, it was really great.

3-00:05:00

Crawford: So then, where did you set up house together?

3-00:05:06

von Stade: Where did we? I can't remember. No, we didn't have the house in Paris then because I think I had to get right back to the States. Yes. Our first apartment was near the Met, and Paris came later. I was working—when did I work? I'm all mixed up, sorry, time-wise.

3-00:05:38

Crawford: Did you have management by that time?

3-00:05:43

von Stade: Yes. I was very lucky. A friend of Peter's actually became my manager, Matthew Epstein, who is one of the greatest in the world. At that time, he worked for Harold Shaw, so all my first contracts were Harold Shaw. I really think if it hadn't been for Matthew, I wouldn't have had the career I had. He just rammed me down people's throats, really. He said, "I'll give you Marilyn Horne," when he had access to her, "if you take this one." He really believed in me. I was one of his chickens and Richard Stilwell was one of his chickens, and he just believed in us probably way more than he should have. I know for a fact I wouldn't have had the career I've had.

3-00:06:29

Crawford: What houses do you think you wouldn't have performed in?

3-00:06:32

von Stade: I just think he had the ideas, some of the most interesting recordings I made were *Cendrillon* and *Chérubin* of Massenet. He found those. It was his idea to present me in three French operas at Carnegie Hall: *La Péricole*, *Chérubin*, and *Cendrillon*. He put those things together with Henry Lewis, with Jackie, Marilyn [Horne]. He knew just what I should sing, where, what I should record. He pushed *Pelléas*. *Mélisande* is very rarely done by a mezzo. He was the one who said, "You're a *Mélisande*, you should do it."

3-00:07:18

Crawford: He was with you for a long time, then.

3-00:07:20

von Stade: Oh, yes. He then had too many people, so he turned me over to Joyce Habib, who was my manager for years and years and years, and she had the same sensibility. Probably not as much musical knowledge, and she would be the first to say it. Matthew lived and breathed opera and music, and still does. He did so much for me for this farewell concert that I wanted to give him a nice present, and I gave him an iPad. Everything on that iPad is opera. He just downloaded all his people he loves, all his chickens. We used to call him "Nanny Epstein."

Really, I don't think I would have had the career except for Matthew. He still cares about us now. He came out and put that whole thing together [retirement

concert in San Francisco] with such love. He's the first person to call me and say—Evelyn Lear is a dear friend of ours: "I don't think Evvy's doing too well today." He keeps up with everybody. It's his heart and soul.

3-00:08:28

Crawford: He was talked about as a potential head of a company, wasn't he?

3-00:08:32

von Stade: Yes, he did, he was the head of Chicago for a while [1999-2005]. I don't know because I wasn't in Chicago that much then. So much of being a general manager is fundraising and all those things, and I'm not sure that that was that interesting to him. You know, he loved all the artistic part, but there has to be the other part of it, too, and I'm not sure he enjoyed that part of it.

3-00:09:05

Crawford: Would you talk about the Massenet *Chérubin*?

3-00:09:07

von Stade: The Massenet *Chérubin*, I always thought, was a little bit [younger]. In other words, Cherubino was older, he was a little savvier. In the opera. It is absolutely adorable. Chérubin bursts into the scene with a great aria, saying, "I'm drunk, I'm drunk with life." It's an opera, too, that is like *Cendrillon*, very heavily dependent on its smaller characters, and there are many of them in *Cendrillon* and in *Chérubin*. The counts and countesses are represented in *Chérubin*, and there are these marvelous ensembles, and they're very, very important to the whole thing. In *Chérubin*, Chérubin is in love with this great actress-dancer, named l'Ensoleillad, but he befriends a young character named Nina, who is kind of a Susanna character, more of a Mimi/ Susanna character.

She loves him dearly and he isn't particularly nice to her because he's so smitten with this big character who's not a very nice person. In it is the character called the Philosophe, and the Philosophe is a bass, it was always Sam [Ramey], and he's sort of like a mentor to Chérubin. Chérubin tells him his secrets and tells him how he feels. There's kind of an equivalent of "Non so più" in the piece. The joy of singing Massenet is that everything is written. It's like having a GPS. "You will turn left at the next, take your next right," you know, "re-routing, re-routing. Don't linger, don't sing too slow, stop." He always wanted action, he wanted things to move on, not stop and start in his pieces. It was just delicious.

3-00:11:30

Crawford: Why is it not done more often?

3-00:11:32

von Stade: It's *très cher*, very expensive. It has a big chorus and it really is very dependent on its dances. Lots of dancing. It's a big production, *Cendrillon* is, too. Because of that, it's very, very expensive to do.

3-00:11:53

Crawford: Adler did quite a bit of Massenet. I'm surprised he didn't do *Cendrillon*.

3-00:11:56

von Stade: I remember seeing he did *Esclarmonde*, I think. I did a very simple production of *Cendrillon* in Belgium, in the Monnaie. Very, very low key, and it worked. The dances were done by this combination of sort of fictitious characters, one of who was a little person, and it was done almost like *Pierrot*, *Pierrot/Pierrette*, it was done with that sort of sense of fancy, and it worked very, very well, but most times, it's a "ka-ching" production.

3-00:12:39

Crawford: Did Matthew Epstein deter you? Did he say, "No, not yet, you're not ready for that yet."

3-00:12:45

von Stade: Oh, yes. Oh, gosh, when I was first at the Met, I was offered Adalgisa, and I did Adalgisa at the Met, in fact, but it was at the time when Marilyn [Horne] was doing it, and there's just no way to compete with a force like Marilyn. There again, God poured all this talent into this one person. He said, "Don't do it, don't do it." I did do it later, and I probably shouldn't have.

3-00:13:19

Crawford: Who was your Norma?

3-00:13:22

von Stade: A very large lady from, I don't remember, South Africa. Oh, I can't remember, isn't that awful?

3-00:13:35

Crawford: Well, this was in the early seventies, and after you got married, did you kind of lay off for a while?

3-00:13:40

von Stade: No, I was gung-ho. I went right on, you know? I think a lot was in New York because I remember, first we lived at my husband's apartment, and then we got an apartment right near the Met.

3-00:13:59

Crawford: I thought I remember that in 1976, you announced that you were going to stop singing and have children. Everybody in San Francisco took that personally. "She can't do that!"

3-00:14:09

von Stade: You know, in fact, I don't think I did, I wanted to, but I had been told I couldn't have children. I know I was in Paris when I knew that my Jenny was on her way, and I thought I had an ulcer. I was just sick all the time. So I never thought of doing a blood test for pregnancy. It was through a blood test for something else, they thought then maybe I had something else wrong, that I found out I was pregnant.

3-00:14:42

Crawford: Oh, so you hadn't decided to stop.

3-00:14:45

von Stade: No, what we were deciding--we were considering adopting. That takes a lot of time and effort, and then, you know, Jenny came. First miracle, and then second miracle, a little afterwards.

3-00:15:06

Crawford: So you took a little time off after that.

3-00:15:09

von Stade: I took time off, oh, yes, the year Jenny was born. I think I did recordings because I knew I wouldn't have to rehearse. It was not as much of a time commitment.

3-00:15:27

Crawford: Where did you deliver Jenny?

3-00:15:29

von Stade: I delivered in New York, but I was supposed to deliver in Paris. The reason it was New York is because I got sick, and I really couldn't leave New York City. I had to be near the hospital. So that's why. I felt fine, but it was just a condition I had that was dangerous for me and for the baby, and she was early. So thank God I was right there.

3-00:15:58

Crawford: Then did you set up housekeeping--

3-00:16:01

von Stade: In New York. We sublet an apartment on East Seventy-Second Street, and I can remember the night, sewing. She had to be in the hospital for quite a while, and so when I was home at all, I was sewing material for her bassinet—it had strawberries on it and it was very bright—it would be fun for her to look at.

3-00:16:28

Crawford: Well, that's a good place to end. Today we talked a lot about Cherubino, and that's what I wanted to do. Thank you so much.

3-00:16:40

von Stade: Thanks, Caroline. You've listened to so many people's stories now, you must want to!

3-00:16:44

Crawford: I have. This is an especially wonderful one.

Interview 3: May 12, 2014

Audio File 4

4-00:00:00

Crawford: We are talking about teaching music at Saint Martin de Porres.

4-00:00:00

von Stade: You need to be taught to teach, and that's very much a part. David Anday is 100 percent behind it. I don't know if he'll get to it, he's got so many balls in the air, right away, but that is part of it. David and I, the teacher that we have, is just gung-ho, and I remember speaking to him, like, a year ago. I said, "David, are you going to get involved in this program and then get an offer from the Vienna Philharmonic and take off? If so, I need to train somebody, you need to have your own replacement." He doesn't play the piano, he taught himself that little bit of piano just to accompany the kids, and he wants to do everything now. He's just gung-ho. Mike and I went to a concert of all the youth orchestras and you'll see maybe in six orchestras six or seven African American kids, and a handful of Latino kids. Of course, they're mainly Asian because the Asian population, they're so sensibly into excellence of education.

4-00:01:17

Crawford: I've seen that.

4-00:01:25

von Stade: They have the moms who will sit by the kids and make sure they practice, but there's no lack of ability. The kids have this incredible ability and talent, and so even if they don't become musicians, it gives them one other venue for something that interests them.

4-00:01:47

Crawford: To learn how to appear on a stage. That's a huge thing, I think.

4-00:01:50

von Stade: They love it. Daisy [Newman, Young Musicians Program director] just accepted a young girl who is amazing. Her name is Simona, and I don't know if you want to know about it, but there was a thing at Cal of Gordon Getty's, it's kind of a children's storybook and was punctuated by music. We did it at Cal, in Hertz Hall. *Angel Heart*.

4-00:02:26

Crawford: I know about it.

4-00:02:27

von Stade: Well, our kids were in it. It was staged and they had the kids perform in it, and it's kind of the story of this girl that has a sad life and she, all of a sudden, is inspired and finds a new meaning in life. It's by Cornelia Funke, who is quite a famous German storyteller, children's book author. So there was the older Luna, who was about ten, and then there was a young one, who was six.

This little girl played the young one. All she had to do was stand up and run in a circle and run off stage, and you couldn't take your eyes off her. She had this glow, and Daisy just accepted her in the program. She has a beautiful singing voice, and she will just thrive. She's only ten, she's just ten, and she was having a big birthday party on Saturday. Yet she got herself to come and perform for Daisy.

Daisy needs the cooperation of the parents as well. They have to help. They have to be willing to cooperate because they have to get their kids places when they're still little. So it kind of helps the parents as well.

4-00:03:51

Crawford: I remember one little boy, he must have been a second grader—I don't know what age they start in the Young Musicians Program—anyway, he was young, and he put an extra-large suit on from the rack, and he sang "Where'er You Walk." I'll never forget it; he sang it perfectly.

4-00:04:07

von Stade: Yes. There's an excellence, too, so it's fantastic.

4-00:04:10

Crawford: Anyway, let me go to my notes and we can start. By the way, did you see the piece on Sally Billingham yesterday?

4-00:04:16

von Stade: Oh, no. Was it in the *Chronicle*?

4-00:04:18

Crawford: There was a big tribute in the *New York Times* to her, now that she's retiring.

4-00:04:21

von Stade: Oh, I think I might have. I haven't totally finished it. Lovely, wonderful, amazing Sally.

4-00:04:28

Crawford: We talked about your Mozart roles, so today I thought we'd go to Rossini and talk about Cinderella and Rosina. Could you talk about your fit with each of these roles, how you approached them and how you feel about them?

4-00:04:45

von Stade: *Cenerentola*, I remember, I have a very clear memory of working on it. I was in Italy. I had gone to Italy one summer to work with this amazing teacher, I think his name was Ricci, and everybody had said, "You've got to go study with him." So I actually had a job in Italy, but I took a week at the end of my job and went to Rome and got an appointment with him. It was like a twenty-minute lesson, and it had taken me three days to get there, and that was it. So I thought, well, I'm here now in a hostel for a couple of days, so I will work.

I was working on *Cenerentola*, and I went and worked in this little room that was near the *Trinita*, the big church with the steps that goes down, and a little upright piano. Every day, I would go, “*Naqui, naqui*,” trying to get it even, and oh, I was so frustrated. It was just awful. It just didn’t sound right at all, but I kept working on it. Maybe three or four months.

That’s the biggest clue for me of singing coloratura, is that you take it apart and do it very slowly, and that goes not well for me. Then I guess you train your muscles, slowly, slowly, slowly, and then, you never know when you’re going to get the reward. The reward came not immediately after the work, but several months later. That’s what it took for me, was really taking it apart, making sure that every note was there. It wasn’t a natural gift for me, so I really had to slog through it.

4-00:06:51

Crawford:

Can it be a natural gift?

4-00:06:53

von Stade:

It can. I think some people’s technique is such. Mine wasn’t, for whatever reason, for whatever lack of understanding I had of certain vocal techniques. It was always a struggle for me, and I was rarely satisfied with it. Then the Rossini roles are a show-off. That’s what they’re about, is to show that you have the skill and you can do this and you can sing quickly and still make meaning of it. So you have to do it to be able to be part of it. It has to be easy, and then it’s the fun. For me, all the Rossini, everything is about rhythm. It’s all rhythm and crescendo. It’s that being able to say, “I’m starting really soft, then I’m going a little louder, louder, louder, then I’m coming away, then it’s all of the above.” It’s a very specific skill, and then it’s using the words in an expressive way as well. So it was a lot of work for me.

Rosina I never felt I had a handle on it because it was kind of a type of personality that was just a little far for me. It was a real soubrette, and it wasn’t quite my thing. So I was always looking for the tender moments in it. There are wonderful tender moments, but they’re overshadowed by the more bravura. *Cenerentola* was a lot closer because it’s a sympathetic character. As I said, I studied with this amazing man named Ubaldo Gardini. He just died a couple of years ago.

It was at Glyndebourne, and I worked on Cherubino with him, every day. He knew more about bel canto than anybody in the world, and worked very, very carefully. He had this beautiful, beautiful understanding of *La Cenerentola* because instead of it being the slipper that we’re used to in *Cinderella*, it’s a bracelet. For him, the bracelet is the symbol of a ring of union. “Then,” he said, “you have the bracelet union and the whole opera begins when she’s sitting by a fire, and fire is the warmth of womanhood.” He had this really almost spiritual overtone to it, which is very much a part of the piece, and how she speaks of it, and at the end, how it’s the full cycle of forgiving her

stepfather and her stepsisters. The first production I ever did of it was very much like that, it was all Jean-Pierre Ponnelle.

4-00:10:17

Crawford: You were my first Cenerentola with Jean-Pierre Ponnelle.

4-00:10:20

von Stade: That is one of the most brilliant productions that ever was. It just came back some place, too. They've just done it.

4-00:10:27

Crawford: Really?

4-00:10:29

von Stade: Not here. Not here, but somewhere, I saw it and I recognized it right away because it was so distinctive. The one coming in the door and the other one going out, when they first meet the prince, and the rain, and then the brilliance of the stepfather and the wonderful cast.

4-00:10:55

Crawford: Montarsolo and Capecchi, goodness.

4-00:11:00

von Stade: These were two of the most brilliant singing actors that ever, ever, ever, ever were, yes.

4-00:11:06

Crawford: They must have been fun to work with.

4-00:11:08

von Stade: Oh, and I did many productions with them, and all with Jean-Pierre's productions. I don't think I ever did another production—oh, I did one other one, yes.

4-00:11:21

Crawford: You made it sound so effortless. "Non più mesta" must be a voice-breaker.

4-00:11:27

von Stade: Actually, when it's right—which it wasn't all the time with me, by any means—it's sort of like a massage to the throat. It feels good. It really feels good because you can't do it without air and an economic use of air, and it's sort of fun. If you're worried about it, it's a struggle. I'd say of the maybe fifty performances, I was able to not worry about it for five. So those five were sort of the nice big chocolates that you get for all the other ones, where you're thinking, "Oh, Lord, that isn't right, uh-oh, uh-oh," you know, what's going through your mind.

4-00:12:15

Crawford: You had a kind of a vulnerability that is rare. Cecilia Bartoli singing those arias sounds great, but there isn't innocence. When you prepare a new role, do you look at that? Do you look at who has sung it before and study that?

4-00:12:31

von Stade:

I did, I certainly did. I mean, I don't now because I don't sing that much. I did, I always listened to Berganza, I listened to Supervía. Conchita Supervía was one of my staples because she had a very unusual voice. It was amazing, rapid-fire, but it also had a bleat in it, and I just admired it so. I listened to Simionato, who had a very big voice. I'd say Teresa was my staple because Teresa had so many things that I admire so much. She always looked like a million bucks. You'd see her walking down the street and she was tiny, and her hair was always perfect and long and coiffed, and she had this marvelous sense of humor and this incredible dignity. So she was one of my inspirations.

4-00:13:42

Crawford:

She played a more mature Cinderella, I think. You seemed to come right out of the wrapping.

4-00:13:47

von Stade:

She really had an edge on the whole delivery, the whole kind of coloratura, and I mean, I loved the vulnerability of it, too, in it. I think that whole first aria is about that, you know? Also, I had had the chance to do *Cendrillon* around the same time, and that's another take on the whole story. You really see the vulnerability all the way through in *Cendrillon*.

4-00:14:15

Crawford:

We never get to hear *Cendrillon*. You said that was because of cost?

4-00:14:19

von Stade:

Totally cost. It's, like all of Massenet—not all of it, but most of it—it's a big coloratura part for the fairy, the Fairy Godmother, big chorus, ballet, it's a big production, always.

4-00:14:38

Crawford:

You did a lot of French opera, didn't you? Didn't you receive the *Arts et Lettres*?

4-00:14:39

von Stade:

Yes, I did. Oh, it is, in France, that's right, *Arts et Lettres*. I don't think it's the highest, but it's one of them. That's thanks to my first manager, Matthew Epstein, that I did all that French opera. He said, "This is who you are, this is what you should do." He introduced me to *Cendrillon*. Nobody'd ever heard of it. He introduced me to Cherubin—nobody had ever heard of it—to *La Périchole*, to *Grande Duchesse*, to all those wonderful Offenbachs.

4-00:15:25

Crawford:

And, you said, Mélisande?

4-00:15:27

von Stade:

Mélisande, he said, "You should definitely do Mélisande."

4-00:15:28

Crawford:

I thought it might be James Levine who said you should do it.

4-00:15:32

von Stade:

No, it was Matthew, because I did it first out in Santa Fe, the first production I did. Then, Paris, then I kind of did it all over. It's not a big sing—all she says is "*Oui*" and "*Non, je ne suis pas heureuse.*" [laughter]

4-00:15:48

Crawford:

I know you love it.

4-00:15:52

von Stade:

Yes, I loved it, but it's like big discussions, especially if you ever perform it in France, of "who was she, and was she really evil," and da-da-da.

4-00:16:00

Crawford:

That's that symbolist thing.

4-00:16:02

von Stade:

Symbolists. I said, "No, I don't think so." You can invent whomever you would like her to be. She was a girl with long hair, basically.

4-00:16:08

Crawford:

Well, that's something, isn't it? We were in France a couple of years ago and we heard Joyce DiDonato sing at the Theatre des Champs-Élysées, give a recital. Afterwards, she spoke in French—she doesn't have much French, it seemed—but I couldn't help thinking about you. The audiences must have torn the hall down when you performed in French.

4-00:16:32

von Stade:

Well, but you know the French—if you're American, as much as you practice it or understand it, they'll find imperfections in your pronunciation, or really, it's very—I mean, that was enormously helpful and I loved it. That's why I sang so much French music, is because I knew what "*gris*" meant, and it's not just "gray." It's that you understand the idiom, and the French idiom is magic, it has color and rhythm and it's just an extraordinary language. It's a very, very polite language, too. You're always "Monsieur," "Madame."

4-00:17:26

Crawford:

Civilized...

4-00:17:27

von Stade:

Very civilized, and it's very dignified-like.

4-00:17:34

Crawford:

Correct, maybe?

4-00:17:35

von Stade:

Correct, very dignified. It's probably changed a lot now, probably it's much more idiomatic now, and maybe a little more vulgar—I don't know. I haven't lived in France in a long time. I always remember being on a plane, and if you watch something like one of those Care Bear movies, or a child's movie about little kids playing baseball or something, a Disney movie, if you watched it and put on the French subtext, listened to it being dubbed, it was amazing.

When a kid would be saying, “get out of here!” or “get lost!” in French, it would be, “*Allez-vous en*,” “Please go away.” You’d just be in hysterics, or, “*Va-t-en*.” It was twenty times more polite, and the whole way that you shopped, and the whole way that you did things, at any level, there was a correctness.

I remember buying fruit, you bought fruit and vegetables in one market and cheese in another, and there were very few supermarkets. There was one, but it didn’t have the best things. If you bought the strawberries on Monday, you really were expected to go back and say, “You know, they didn’t have much flavor,” and you would discuss it with the shopkeeper and say, “*Non, ils étaient assez bien, mais pas beaucoup de gout*,” you know. It was all that way.

4-00:19:19

Crawford: We are asked: “Have you had your white asparagus this year yet?”

4-00:19:21

von Stade: Right. “*Oh, madame*, I’ll give you some more, try this one.” There was always a discussion about it, and I loved that.

4-00:19:32

Crawford: You could really live there, couldn’t you?

4-00:19:33

von Stade: I could really live there, and my girls were little, they were babies there, and I loved that. I loved that they played in the park, and they played in a park called Parc du Grand Lac, and there’s all that beauty around. I think that gets into your psyche, when things are very beautiful around you, and we lived in a house—you know the series *Madeline*? Our first house looked just like that.

4-00:20:01

Crawford: Blue and white.

4-00:20:03

von Stade: Yes, it looked exactly like that.

4-00:20:07

Crawford: I was just looking at the film of the 1982 Scala performance, and that was Abbado’s fourth *Cenerentola*. How does it happen that he would be the chosen one to do so many?

4-00:20:22

von Stade: He was the boss, and he loved it. For him to love Rossini is amazing because he was such a superstar that you’d think he’d do Wagner and Berlioz, but he did the definitive Rossini because he knew how exciting the crescendo/decrescendo was, and how much rhythm was part of it. That was very much part of his thing. I loved him so much. I see pictures of him now, and I think, “Boy, was I lucky to work with him.”

4-00:21:05

Crawford: Something struck me in the first-act duet in that performance, how very intimately it was staged. Do you remember?

4-00:21:19

von Stade: Yes.

4-00:21:20

Crawford: Was that uncomfortable?

4-00:21:24

von Stade: No, no, and Jean-Pierre, he was a brilliant director, for one thing because he did the scenery as well, and the costumes, he always was very visual. I find that almost all of his productions had a terrific, what do you call it, symmetry and balance. So, the stage picture was very much a part of it, of his understanding of a piece. When he did *Marriage of Figaro*, it was very symmetrical, everything balanced. He always went for the stage picture.

4-00:22:11

Crawford: Wasn't he rare in being so musical, the fact that he really knew and could read music?

4-00:22:15

von Stade: Really knew everything. He was a taskmaster. If you were a split-second off, he knew. He had that innate rhythm. The greatest directors I've ever worked with had that, have that.

4-00:22:32

Crawford: Name some?

4-00:22:33

von Stade: Well, Giorgio Strehler was the first one, who was probably one of the greatest directors of all time. He was a theater director, and had natural rhythm. Today, this Lenny Foglia has it. Lenny, who staged the piece we just did [*A Coffin in Egypt*] and staged *Moby Dick*. It's like he'll stop if it's wrong, he just knows. It's probably more of an instinct with him, and has come as a surprise because he's mainly a theater director. The young ones, I don't know so well, now. John Cox was always that way—always that way. Now I'm forgetting them because it's been a long time.

4-00:23:22

Crawford: You don't have to answer this, but I have to ask it: who was your favorite prince?

4-00:23:29

von Stade: Oh, my gosh. Probably Francisco Araiza. I loved Araiza.

4-00:23:35

Crawford: He was on the recording. Today we have a Peruvian, Juan Diego Florez. They gave him his aria twice at the Met, didn't they?

4-00:23:48

von Stade: Yes, and then there was a new kid that came in, did you hear him? He's Mexican. Juan Diego was sick, and he's like, the newest sensation. He got something like a five-minute ovation when he ran off stage.

4-00:24:01

Crawford: Oh, no, I didn't hear. What's his name?

4-00:24:02

von Stade: I can't remember. [Javier Camarena]

4-00:24:04

Crawford: That wasn't on the broadcast, was it?

4-00:24:05

von Stade: No. Juan Diego came back [for that]. He's Mexican, that's all I know, and he's like the newest sensation.

4-00:24:14

Crawford: All right, well, let's leave that. You had said the Met was not a big Rossini house.

4-00:24:27

von Stade: I think it became so because of Marilyn, but there were more vehicles for Marilyn, and now they are vehicles for Joyce. Now I think to a certain extent, if you didn't have a Joyce or a Marilyn, it would be too big a house. Such a big house. Nobody really can imagine that's so large, but because of those superstars, it certainly became a Rossini house.

4-00:25:05

Crawford: Okay, good. Well, let's go now to more of the trouser roles—*Idamante* from *Idomeneo*, for one.

4-00:25:13

von Stade: *Idamante* is a really hard role.

4-00:25:17

Crawford: Joyce DiDonato has said it was the hardest of all her roles.

4-00:25:22

von Stade: Yes. It lies in the cracks, you know what I mean? It lies in the cracks we call the *passagio*. It just sits there and sits there and sits there, and it's very easy to get tired and pooped out. I found it a real challenge, but there again, I was helped by Jean-Pierre because the production I did was one of his. It was very structured, you know? It was very structured, and that was part of the concept of it.

4-00:25:57

Crawford: Terrifying sets, I thought. They were perfect for the *Idomeneo*, and Pavarotti, when he realizes what he is doing [sacrificing his son]; such a look of horror.

4-00:26:12

von Stade:

Luciano was such a natural actor. Really, I mean, yes, you might have lost track of it because of the type of roles he sang and the reception he had because of the greatness of his voice and his largesse, but he was a total natural. Total. Some people just don't make a wrong move onstage.

4-00:26:39

Crawford:

Is that right?

4-00:26:41

von Stade:

Plácido's that way, too. One of the people that just blows me away with it always is Suzy Graham. Suzy cannot put a foot wrong. I'm not taking away from the fact that she studied it or learned it; it's just part of her nature. She is such an open person. The Italians have an expression that I love, "*sano*," a healthy human being, and her heart and soul are open so that it's natural to her.

Joyce is the same, Joyce is very much the same. Joyce, I think, leaves no stone unturned, and that's part of her thing, is she has looked at every corner of every role she's done. So has Suzy, but Joyce in a different way, and she's gone to a different repertoire through that. They're just natural. That part of it is natural, and I think it is part of their character.

When I think of Suzy, Joyce, Plácido, Luciano, Marilyn, they are extremely—it doesn't mean they don't suffer—open people, and they come from a certain generosity of spirit and talent that is right there. There are a lot of young ones now that I see that same quality in—Steven Costello and his wife—and I see it as a quality in many, many of the young talents that I see around.

4-00:28:31

Crawford:

Is that because of the kind of training they're receiving, or are you're saying it just comes naturally to them?

4-00:28:37

von Stade:

I think it's their character. They are all brilliant musicians and sing technically as close to perfect as you can get, but I do think it's part of their soul. I really do. There's almost no one more generous than Marilyn Horne, and her singing was generous. Her singing was, "This is impossible; I'm going there for you." Joyce is the same. I'm leaving out others because I'm not thinking about them, but those are the people that really manifested it to me.

4-00:29:20

Crawford:

We saw *Tancredi* in Venice some years ago with Marilyn Horne, and she was prone on her back for that very long final scene in which she dies. There wasn't an Italian in his seat after that. They just couldn't believe what she could do vocally!

4-00:29:36

von Stade: I only sang a recital there because it was closed for renovations, and then I did, I think, a recital. I never sang a performance. Sam is another person like that.

4-00:29:52

Crawford: Ramey?

4-00:29:53

von Stade: Sam is shy as can be, but Sam is a very healthy person and a very open person and very generous by nature, and he has this brilliant skill that he developed within an inch of its life.

4-00:30:08

Crawford: I'm so glad to hear you document that—you are generous anyway, but you don't hear singers say that so much. Luciano was sometimes criticized for his acting, or people didn't want to believe that he could act because the voice was too much already.

4-00:30:26

von Stade: I'm sure that at times his weight got in the way of [his] being effective, but you know I saw him do—is it Nemorino? It was kind of a light-spirited comic role, and he was graceful, he was funny. Voice was first with him, he's not going to be singing his aria swinging from a chandelier or something, but I thought there was so much passion in his voice that it was acting, it was intention. It was the intention of it.

4-00:31:15

Crawford: *Elixir of Love*.

4-00:31:17

von Stade: *Elixir*, exactly. Thank you.

4-00:31:19

Crawford: He said something so funny. I asked him, "What's the nicest thing anybody ever said to you?" and he said, "Well, somebody once bumped into me in New York and said, 'Sorry, I didn't see you.'" [laughter]

When he was asked what his most embarrassing moment in the theater was, he said he was in his robe when he was to go onstage because nobody had told him the performance started at 7:30 instead of 8:00, so everyone was sitting around waiting for him. What would you say was your most embarrassing moment, if you had one?

4-00:31:54

von Stade: Onstage? Oh, yes, I've had many, but one of them was when I did a Handel opera—"Ombra mai fù." *Xerxes*.

4-00:32:14

von Stade:

I did not prepare it well. I had a good reason—Mike was very sick, and they thought it was serious. It turned out not to be serious. So I was very preoccupied with his health, and I put off everything till the last minute, and I didn't learn it properly, and I was singing this aria. It was in English, and it was, "Angry furies, you come to da-da-da," and I got lost in it. I couldn't get out of it, and fortunately, the conductor went with me. I mean, I kept going back to a repeat, and I thought I was going to be singing there for the rest of my life, trying to get out of this aria, and I couldn't find my way to the ending. So, eventually, the conductor, we ended, you know? I walked offstage, and a friend of mine was there, and I said, "I now can tell you from experience that you actually do not die from shame. You would like to, but you do not perish." It was just mortifying. [laughter]

4-00:33:26

Crawford:

Where was that?

4-00:33:27

von Stade:

Santa Fe. Most of my most mortifying things have been because I didn't know my music well enough, as well as I should. Some of those are excusable through being a mom and being exhausted and that type of thing, but a lot of it was I took my kids to the beach instead of sitting at home and practicing my music.

One of the joys of doing this piece lately, this new piece, has been that I made a very strict schedule for myself. As you can notice, my memory is going, and I thought, "If I do everything I can to get this right—everything—then I can forgive myself for the mistakes I make. But if I don't do everything within my power without neglecting my kids and my husband, I won't be able to forgive myself." I have always had a bad memory, so there are still mistakes, but it's not that I didn't put everything into it. It's very satisfying when you work that hard. I worked that hard on *Mélisande*, and I worked that hard on *Cenerentola*, and they were always pretty rock-solid.

4-00:34:49

Crawford:

You had the reputation of learning so fast—I read that you learned *Octavian* in ten days.

4-00:34:55

von Stade:

But it was always a mess. It was always, "Are there three beats in this or four beats? I can't remember." Really, it never got to the place of being comfortable because I learned it too fast. I had to, and it was a big mistake.

4-00:35:11

Crawford:

A wonderful role for you.

4-00:35:13

von Stade:

Oh, I loved doing it, I loved it, but it was always a struggle. I was always like deer-in-the-headlight, looking at the conductor. [laughter]

4-00:35:26

Crawford: Idamante was originally for *castrato*, is that right?

4-00:35:33

von Stade: Right, yes.

4-00:35:36

Crawford: Was the translation difficult? Did you feel at ease in your range?

4-00:35:42

von Stade: Yes, yes, yes. It was a hard role, very hard role, for that reason. It's like there's another role in *La Clemenza*, not Sextus, but Annio. Annio has two arias, and they're very much the same. They sit in that *passagio*, and that's why you have to have a command of the *passagio* to do it, as I've said. If you're not right on the ball, it's a struggle—for me, you know?

4-00:36:23

Crawford: Does it seem to you that the characters in *Idomeneo* are real people?

4-00:36:30

von Stade: A little bit caricatures of people, right.

4-00:36:33

Crawford: Does that make it harder?

4-00:36:35

von Stade: Because of the music, no, but it's a little bit more like I find *Così* very caricatured. Very hard to find real, actual people in it. They're symbols of people, more. They have tender moments. The realest people, for me, in *Così* are the maid, Despina, and Alfonso.

4-00:36:59

Crawford: Despina, your role.

4-00:37:05

von Stade: I think Mozart intended that. In *Idomeneo*, it's more grand-scale exhibition, when you think of the mad scene for Electra in *Idomeneo*, that's a bit of a caricature, but it's based on real things.

4-00:37:31

Crawford: And yet, the people are all around us, today. How did he do that?

4-00:37:35

von Stade: Exactly, there's no difference.

4-00:37:44

Crawford: We talked about the three tenors, so we might as well talk more about Domingo. The last time I saw you with Domingo, you were dancing on stage [at Davies Hall]. That was such a moment—I don't think there was a dry eye!

4-00:38:19

von Stade: Oh, it was so much fun. He's just adorable. I told you my Domingo story with my father-in-law?

4-00:38:27

Crawford: No.

4-00:38:28

von Stade: After the opening of *Merry Widow* at the Met, there was a big, frou-frou gala dinner. My father-in-law had Parkinson's, and we were sitting at a table with Mike and my father-in-law and his new wife, and Marta and Placido. Bill went to reach for a glass of red wine and he knocked it all over the table, and he was mortified, at this big, fancy table. Placido and Marta reached over and dipped their fingers in the spilled wine and blessed themselves and said, "You have just brought good fortune on the whole table. That's Placido. That's Placido in a nutshell. I never didn't go back to see him, and I was never close to him by any means, but I just adored him. If he knew you were there and you didn't go back to see him, he was hurt. Now, how could the most famous tenor in the world be hurt? But he was. He was.

4-00:39:44

Crawford: They get lonely.

4-00:39:47

von Stade: Well, I think Placido would probably love being lonely, but he usually is leaving the theater to fly someplace else. He's a force of nature. Someone like Placido comes along once in a century.

4-00:40:04

Crawford: Varied career and a long career.

4-00:40:06

von Stade: Career and brilliance and knowledge and great voice, really, and so kind, so kind.

4-00:40:15

Crawford: I remember Ponnelle staging him in his first *Otello*, and he kept saying, "You are a *leone, leone*, don't be a bear, be a lion, Placido!" he said, because he is so soft, and he did become that. In one of your programs he said, "One of my biggest regrets is not overlapping with Flicka, that we didn't sing more together."

4-00:40:42

von Stade: Oh, that's so sweet! That's so sweet. That's why, I mean, I didn't really choose it, it sort of happened, but when I left, thought, I'm probably not coming back to the Met, I thought, "I got to waltz out of there with Plácido—you can't have a better ending than that." I was asked to consider one other sort of new piece after that, and I thought, no, unh-uh.

4-00:41:07

Crawford: No? You want to say what it was?

4-00:41:09

von Stade: I can't remember what it was. It was a new piece. I honestly can't remember. That's been a long time.

4-00:41:23

Crawford: Well, let's talk about the Met and about James Levine.

4-00:41:31

von Stade: Jimmy, for me, personifies everything great about an American musician. That's not to say that he hasn't, he wouldn't conquer in Europe as well, but what I mean by that is he is brilliantly trained from birth. He's a brilliant man, and he has that kind of open, Michael Tilson Thomas mind of curiosity and quiet savvy. He becomes close to all his singers. I mean, he loves them, he really loves them, he loves the voice. He can't love absolutely everybody, and obviously, he never did the actual "I'm not going to use you in this because something didn't work out," but there is something American about him that I really love, and I love that he has achieved that, as he has achieved the greatness of any great European conductor as an American.

I think Michael [Tilson Thomas] has, as well, and they just make me proud. Certainly with Michael, it's exploring all our great American composers—Lenny and Copland—but when I worked with Jimmy, which has been a long time now, it was like everything's okay, he's in charge, and no muss, no fuss. It's just we've got this covered, that's fine, yes, fine. There's this brilliant safety of knowing that the best possible will happen in his hands.

4-00:43:41

Crawford: He never seems nervous or tense.

4-00:43:44

von Stade: No, and then to have that fight with his health seemed just cruel—cruel to us.

4-00:43:53

Crawford: But he's better now, he's back.

4-00:43:54

von Stade: He's better now and he's back, yes.

4-00:44:00

Crawford: I did want to say something more about Mélisande. Debussy is said to have said, "Music in opera is far too predominant."

4-00:44:13

von Stade: What does that mean? Well, when you sing Debussy's songs—and I've sung hundreds of them—the word is everything. The way the French sometimes will set a word not for its meaning but for the way it sounds next to other words, it's "*l'ombre des arbres*," you know, it's the combination of the r's,

and that was very much, I think, the way his music is. What I find amazing about *Pelléas* is why every great conductor has been so drawn to it. Why Karajan was just insane for it. I mean, why Jimmy loved it, why Seiji, why they all want to do *Pelléas*.

4-00:45:21

Crawford: Is that because of what you said, that there's so much interpretation left to the singer?

4-00:45:27

von Stade: I think it's that. I think it's the unbelievable originality of the orchestral textures, what he did with them, what Debussy did with them, how he created. There's a passage where Pelléas says, "*On a brisé la glace avec des fers rougis*," "We broke the ice with hot irons." In the orchestra at that point, the strings are making this screeching sound, and it's incredible. I do remember very well when Claudio rehearsed it, hours and hours, we did it with the Vienna Philharmonic and they were going nuts. They were used to just having Mahler and going right through it, but he just went by every little thing, and so did Karajan.

4-00:46:37

Crawford: A wonderful performance?

4-00:46:42

von Stade: We all got nice applause and everything, but when Claudio walked out—and I'd seen him walk out for other operas, too—the place went insane, and the orchestra were just screaming.

4-00:46:55

Crawford: Really? And they're tough, aren't they?

4-00:46:57

von Stade: They're tough. That's a tough group. They were just screaming for what he did—at La Scala, too. Who would think that *Pelléas* would sell out in Italy? There were people in the aisles. It became like a rock opera, almost.

4-00:47:15

Crawford: Who was in that cast with you?

4-00:47:18

von Stade: That was François Le Roux. It was a very unusual production, really unusual. Very hard to pull off because there was nothing on the stage—nothing.

4-00:47:30

Crawford: What does it need?

4-00:47:31

von Stade: I think one of the best productions I saw was the old [New York] City Opera one that Richard did—Richard Stilwell was the best Pelléas, no one like him.

We did a really hard one in Paris, really hard. For the *fontaine*, it was a big Mylar-tipped oval.

4-00:48:00

Crawford: Whose production?

4-00:48:03

von Stade: Oh, gosh, what was his name? He's Argentinean and I did it in Argentina. I can see him, too. He was a big sensation in Argentina.

4-00:48:16

Crawford: I can understand that, in Colón, in the Teatro Colón?

4-00:48:22

von Stade: Yes, we did it. For the tower, I was standing on a chair, and Pelléas was just walking around the chair. That was hard.

4-00:48:37

Crawford: That must be a very advanced audience.

4-00:48:40

von Stade: I think we had to add a performance.

4-00:48:50

Crawford: Did you go down there often?

4-00:49:09

von Stade: Quite often. I did *Pelléas* there, I did a couple of recitals, and *The Merry Widow*. I can't remember what else.

4-00:49:25

Crawford: Why would they have an audience like that in Argentina? I can't think of another South American country that would have that.

4-00:49:30

von Stade: They just are nuts for it. The Colón is probably the greatest theater I've ever sung in.

4-00:49:34

Crawford: Is that right?

4-00:49:36

von Stade: It's the best acoustic of any theater I've ever known, and it's very pretty, it's like La Scala inside. Backstage, it's a nightmare, but it's all been redone and it's still a nightmare. But it's the public: for them, it's like going to a football game. Everything sells out. It's a very young public. A lot of teenagers and kids, and just brilliant. Jorge Lavelli was the director.

4-00:50:21

Crawford: What else did you do with him?

4-00:50:22

von Stade: Just that.

4-00:50:26

Crawford: Well, we haven't talked much about Octavian, about *Rosenkavalier*, and the presentation of the rose, which somebody said is the best-ever love at first sight.

4-00:50:36

von Stade: Best-ever. Best-ever!

4-00:50:37

Crawford: Talk about that, would you?

4-00:50:39

von Stade: First of all, look at that setup for an entrance—[humming]—the place explodes, and there he is. I mean, really, could it be better? The politeness of it, too. I mentioned this wonderful coach, his name was Jani Strasser, and he was Hungarian, and he was at Glyndebourne, too. I studied with him when we were recording it. By then, I had already performed it a bit. He said, "My darling, why do you think that he hesitates?" Like, it's, "*Mir ist die Ehre widerfahren.*" He doesn't say, "*Mir ist die Ehre widerfahren*"—he hesitates because he's suddenly nervous. He's probably done this a hundred times, but he sees her, and he starts losing his cool, and then he's embarrassed about losing his cool, and she says something so unusual, instead of "Thank you very much for this beautiful rose," and blah, blah, blah, she says, "Oh, thank goodness, it smells a little bit, I smell something." And he says, "Oh, yes!" It's kind of the way kids go, "Yeah, well, you know, they stuck some perfumed oil in there, and that's why," and it's kind of like there's the childish response, and he's just been in a mature situation that's way over his head.

Jani used to say, "There's part of a young man of that age that they're actors," and I had many young cousins, and they watch themselves. If you're a young man, as a teenager, you're kind of—you're fixing on things all the time. You're fixing on being good-looking, or fixing on being cool, you're not quite at the confidence level to just be what you think, so you're playing a role all the time. He's played this role of a mature lover, but really, it's a kind of looking at himself rather than being with her, in the first act. He can't be with her—he just doesn't have it. He's too young, and so, "What does 'you' mean? 'You' means this," and he's watching himself. He's doing it for her, but for himself, and then when she says, "I think you have to go," he has no way to understand that. No way.

Then, this pretty young thing, and all of a sudden, they're kids together. My favorite part is, yes, the end of the "*Mit Ihren Augen voll Tränen*," and this beautiful, beautiful thing that she says, and she says it openly, "This is like a rose from heaven." How dear is that? My favorite is the next scene, when they sit down, and he's sitting and they're sitting far apart, and he says, "*Wie heisst*

du ma cousine,” and they’re trying to be polite, but he sees that even she is younger than he is. It’s so perfectly written. She says, “I’ve heard about you, I’ve heard about what you do.” “Have you, my cousin?” That kind of cinches the deal for them, and then in comes Ochs and he sees what he’s up against. So, it’s a pure, perfect illustration of youth.

4-00:54:37

Crawford: You can do it, but a man never could do it?

4-00:54:40

von Stade: Never. Even when we did *Cendrillon* and Gedda sang the prince. It was written for a mezzo, it didn’t sound right.

4-00:54:54

Crawford: Maybe a little coarse?

4-00:54:57

von Stade: Yes, it just didn’t sound right. It sounded obscene, all of a sudden, because it’s not about that. It’s that ambiguity.

4-00:55:19

Crawford: Then, when the Marschallin is removing herself from the scene. Did you ever cry?

4-00:00:55:25

von Stade: Oh, all the time, and there’s really no confusion. He knows who he wants to pick. He just wants to be kind and you see that this person has matured so much in the course of the opera, in that it’s, I think the whole last scene is enormous gratitude to her for what she has done and what’s taken place and what’s ahead for them. It’s probably not going to be a life of marital bliss we like to think it would be.

4-00:56:11

Crawford: The film with you and Kathleen Battle, so dear. Renee Fleming was the Marschallin in those performances.

4-00:56:20

von Stade: Yes, that’s right. Yes.

Begin Audio File 5

5-00:00:07

Crawford: We’re going to talk about your long association with Jake Heggie. Maybe start with the songs?

5-00:00:15

von Stade: Jake worked at the opera house in the press department, and that’s how I first met him. We’d go to interviews together quite a lot, and then he said, “You know, I’ve written some songs, would you look at them?” They were just arrangements of folk songs, and I nearly fell on the floor. They were out of

this world. There was an element that was like Debussy, they were just so inventive, and the pianistic things were so terrific, and how he set them and changed the rhythms.

So I said, "Jake, you have to show these to people, you just have to." I did a couple of song cycles of his. I did *Winter Roses*, we did *Anna Madrigal* with the Chanticleer. Many, many songs here and there. He did a beautiful cycle, what's it called, now? It's *Songs to the Moon*, and they're about sort of children's songs, there are eight of them. We did those in Chicago a number of years ago. Then, shortly thereafter, he was commissioned to do *Dead Man Walking*.

5-00:01:36

Crawford: You didn't mention *Paper Wings*. I'd like you to go into that in some detail.

5-00:01:41

von Stade: *Paper Wings* came about because I always sang the song "Jenny Rebecca" about my Jenny, and I thought, "Well, I really want to do a cycle about Lisa [Flicka's younger daughter] and who better to ask than Jake?" So, I asked Jake, and I was going to ask a friend of his to write the words, and Jake said, "You should write the words. You know her." So I submitted to him, just started telling stories about her when she was little, and out of that came *Paper Wings*. I said, "If they're terrible, just throw them in the garbage, you're not going to hurt my feelings. Then we'll get somebody else." That was *Paper Wings*, and I performed it last summer, up at Summerfest. It was so much fun to revisit it.

5-00:02:33

Crawford: Those are four songs?

5-00:02:34

von Stade: Four songs, and they're about Lisa when she was little.

5-00:02:38

Crawford: And about you.

5-00:02:39

von Stade: And about me, about when I grew up in Greece, and things like that.

5-00:02:46

Crawford: Would you talk about that? We only just glanced at [your time in Greece]. It's a wonderful story about the paper wings themselves.

5-00:02:55

von Stade: After the war—my father was killed in the war—my mother remarried a man who, it turns out, I found this out like six months ago, was an amazing official in the OSS.

5-00:03:12

Crawford: Office of Secret Service?

5-00:03:15

von Stade: Yes. He did a lot in the Italian part of the war, the Greek and Italian part of the war, at the beginning of the war.

5-00:03:23

Crawford: She met him in Greece?

5-00:03:25

von Stade: No, she met him here. His name was Horace Fuller, and she married him, and he was going to be—they said he worked for the state department—he was going to work in Greece, so we were going to go live in Greece. It took quite a long time, since it was 1947, to get all our papers together to be able to emigrate, essentially. He went ahead to work, and by the time we got to Greece, he had a mistress. My mother was twenty-seven, and she was just heartbroken, and then she was stuck there. She had pulled up all her roots, and they couldn't live together, and it took about two years to finally get away.

But the first place we lived was a little bit in a suburb of Athens, and we had an au pair girl, her name was Signorina, she was Italian. She was just wonderful. She made me some wings out of paper, she glued them all together, and so I would go flapping around the house. I was maybe four—three, four, five. I used to dream at night that I was flying over Athens. I put it together. Anyway, so, that's the reference to Greece. I remember it so well, flying all over. Jake put that in the piece. [The songs are "Bedtime Story," "Paper Wings," (lyrics at end of interview session), "Mitten Smitten," and "A Route to the Sky"]

5-00:05:26

Crawford: Did you keep in touch with her, with Signorina?

5-00:05:29

von Stade: I did for a long time, and then I lost track of her. She ended up teaching at Berlitz in New York, and that was the last time I saw her. That's where I learned my Italian, even though it was a four-year-old, five-year-old-Italian.

5-00:05:45

Crawford: She spoke to you in Italian?

5-00:05:46

von Stade: Only in Italian. So, when I came to opera, I knew a lot of words. I know I never studied, but they were there, somewhere. Not just *bon giorno* and *buona sera*, but *ci vediamo*, *auguri*, lots of things that would have been part of a child's vocabulary. Charlotte is bilingual right now, but she's losing it, I can see.

5-00:06:14

Crawford: Charlotte is? From you?

5-00:06:17

von Stade: No, from going to daycare in Spanish. She's a talker and she is a very sophisticated talker for almost four, so that her Spanish is equally—but she's

losing it. She's at a Montessori, now. This was a daycare. Emmy is eighteen months. Your kids have moved out here, now?

5-00:06:50

Crawford: They are living with us since January, which is so fun. They bought a house in Elmwood, and they've taken everything out of it, so they're going to live with us for a few more months. Are you still going to Washington, D.C.?

5-00:07:09

von Stade: Yes, I'm going on the nineteenth. This is the longest I've never seen them. It's been six weeks. The longest for me that I haven't seen them.

5-00:07:17

Crawford: Maybe they'll move.

5-00:07:18

von Stade: I wish they'd come out here, but they're very happy back there. I would love to be available to, just to, "Mom, can you come over?" and see them, so that I was really part of their life, daily life, you know?

5-00:07:40

Crawford: Yes! *Winter Roses* was another song cycle by Jake Heggie for mezzo-soprano, string quintet, wind quintet and piano, not literally based on your parents' letters, though Jake said he read some of the letters, that premiered in 2004.

5-00:07:53

von Stade: Yes. My dad, during the war, they had this thing called V-Mail. They literally photographed letters. It was a service that the Army provided to be able to communicate. My mom saved all my dad's letters, and they were so interesting.

5-00:08:15

Crawford: Were they? What were they like?

5-00:08:19

von Stade: What was amazing about them is they were so normal. There was very little mention of suffering and war. They were about, at one point, my father went across France and different French families took in troops to stay for a while, and I don't know, they went out one night and had too much to drink. It was how he felt and how sick he was and how nice the families were, and at one point, he talked about meeting some Germans. They were in a bar or something together, and they all, for some reason, they weren't shooting at each other and they all got along, you know? He felt it was so stupid.

He was very against FDR, and so there was a bit of politics, but most of it was like, about my brother was born so he said, "Now, listen," my father was a pianist, "let him sit at the piano and just bang at the piano. Rhythm is the hardest part of music, so let him just"—you know, my brother was going bang, bang, bang, bang. Then she told him that I wanted to wear little shoes that have ankle support because he loved ice hockey; ankles are very

important in skating. So they were practical and they weren't desperate, they weren't sad, they weren't, you know, "I'm scared." I don't think young people think that way anymore. They're so occupied with what they're doing, and it's twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, there's not a moment to reflect on anything. He was reconnaissance, so he was the guy going ahead to see where the Germans were.

5-00:10:29

Crawford: Well, poet Charlene Baldridge wrote most of the lyrics, also Emily Dickinson, and Raymond Carver, and you. You contributed two songs to *Winter Roses*?

5-00:10:35

von Stade: There's one song that means the most to me, I can't think of the title of it, but the essence of it is, "I hope you won't mind too much that I've forgotten you because you're not part of my world," and that was how I felt about my father, is that I missed the idea of you, but I don't miss you because I didn't know you. I didn't know who you were, but I don't want you to be offended, so to speak, by that. I loved doing it. It's a hard cycle, too, it's hard to sing, for me.

5-00:11:38

Crawford: Hard for you to sing? But you just recently did it?

5-00:11:44

von Stade: No, I didn't do it, but they did it again, yes.

5-00:11:45

Crawford: Well, let's move on to *Dead Man Walking*, which opened in San Francisco in 2000. As you say, it happened so soon after *Paper Wings* for Jake.

5-00:11:53

von Stade: There was Jake, our star.

5-00:11:55

Crawford: I think it's been played as much as any contemporary opera.

5-00:11:57

von Stade: Any opera. There's almost never a time in the year where *Dead Man Walking* isn't playing somewhere. Maybe a college production, maybe in Australia, it's just so pertinent to our life of today. It's so important.

5-00:12:17

Crawford: You were offered the role, the main role, of Sister Helen Prejean.

5-00:12:20

von Stade: I was offered Sister Helen, but you know, very quickly it was clear that it wasn't the right way to go. Jake offered it to me and almost immediately, I knew that I didn't want to do it. I was wanting to be at home, I didn't want to commit to it, and I just didn't think I could handle it. It was a huge role, and I just felt it needed a young superstar, and it did. To have the piece work, my

brain went immediately to Suzy, and I said, "This has got to be Suzy Graham." It wasn't largesse on my part; it was practicality, and then Jake said, "Well, we'd like you to play one of the mothers, like you to be in it," and I said, "I'd love to be in it." He said, "Would you be the mother of one of the victims?" I said, "No, I'd really like to be the mother of the--" "I'd really like to be his mother," and then they expanded the role.

It was such an incredible experience to do it because in the work I do with these families, just being with them, I see what poverty does to people. The biggest consequence of poverty is losing control of your life. You cannot control your life anymore. Your car breaks down and you cannot get it fixed, so you have got to figure out some other way to accomplish something.

For this woman, she was left with a child, she had no means, so she marries again to someone that isn't good to her first child, and then the child starts to wander away, and she can't do anything about it. She's married to this man, she has other children with him, and she's stuck. She sees [the son] going down a path that isn't good, and she can't do anything about it. That's the hardest part of motherhood, is even making choices for your children that, when you look at them later, weren't maybe the right choice. That they were either self-serving or you didn't have all the facts together, but you were desperate because of certain situations and you made certain choices that affect your children, that have consequences for your children, and that's a very hard thing to bear. She was a good enough woman and a caring enough woman that she had this relationship with him. It was that lack of power to help him, to do anything for him, essentially even testify for him, to try and find a reason for it.

5-00:16:01

Crawford:

When you sing, "Don't kill my Joe!" all of the focus is right there.

5-00:16:11

von Stade:

Right there, and also, what does it accomplish? You're against killing, so why kill somebody else?

5-00:16:22

Crawford:

Did you and Jake work with Sister Helen a lot?

5-00:16:25

von Stade:

No. Jake worked with Sister Helen. It was Jake, Sister Helen, and Terrence [McNally]. Probably more Terrence and Jake than anything. But they're very true to the book, it's just that there were two brothers, originally. It's very true to the book, and a couple of the most interesting things that happened—and tell me if we've covered this before—was that there was a lot of, there was a very interesting lady who was like an assemblywoman, and her famous case of twenty-five years ago, her son was murdered by a guy who was high on something, crack cocaine, whatever it was, twenty-five years ago, heroin.

When she left the house, he broke in, murdered her son, and set the house on fire, so her son's wife was badly burned, maimed, but is still alive. This man, they caught him, the guy who did it, and he's in prison, and she—she must be gone, now—her name was Elizabeth Crossen. If you look up her name, I think she was an assemblywoman and lived down in the peninsula. She was having to go back every five years to a parole board meeting for him. She was against the death penalty and her husband was for it, so to meet the woman like this who was in this quandary, was brutal.

5-00:18:24

Crawford: Do you think that that moved the argument against [the death penalty]?

5-00:18:30

von Stade: The death penalty is gone in something like eleven states now. That's Sister Helen, too.

5-00:18:38

Crawford: She's an activist.

5-00:18:39

von Stade: Oh, a total activist. She never stops, not for a minute. It is ridiculous, but the whole prison system is ridiculous. Ridiculous, and there's so many people in prison now who should not be there. They're in for possessing marijuana, and the three strikes? Oh, my gosh. It's horrible.

5-00:19:02

Crawford: Often prisoners are released, largely because of the new DNA testing, when they have been found to be innocent, and even after twenty-odd years in prison they don't seem bitter, but they don't have much ahead of them, either.

5-00:19:15

von Stade: They're not trained, they haven't had anything done for them; there's all kinds of controversy, but certainly on the border patrols, all the sheriffs, the more people they arrest, they get points. Their salary is benefited. You can go to jail for not paying a parking ticket now, and once you're in the system, then you can't get a job. At Saint Martin de Porres, last year, the kindergarten had two children whose parents were incarcerated. For nonviolent crime, not theft, nothing like that.

5-00:19:54

Crawford: So, who takes them, then?

5-00:19:55

von Stade: Usually the grandmothers.

5-00:19:57

Crawford: The grandmother raises them. The parents were all there [at the performance I heard], weren't they? Every last single parent, supporting the children. When *Dead Man Walking* is done again, will you sing the mother?

5-00:20:13

von Stade:

I was asked to do it, they're doing a production this year at, I think, Opera Parallèle, you know, that wonderful company, but I'm not doing it. I felt that because of this piece, I had been away from my life. I've been away now, I was away a month in the spring and I'm away a month now. It was too hard on Mike, and even though I'd be here, I'd be in rehearsal all day, then I would be compromised on the days I could go back to see the kids. It's such a well-written role; it belongs to everybody that's done it. It's such a fantastic role.

And who is here? I mean, they have Cathy Cook, there's Susanne Mentzer lives here now, there are so many great artists that would just rip your heart out with it, you know? It is almost perfectly written, perfectly.

5-00:21:27

Crawford:

Jake's *Three Decembers* had a strong role for you. I have to tell you, I didn't like the kids very much, but I loved you. [laughter]

5-00:21:41

von Stade:

Oh, I had a ball doing that, too.

5-00:21:42

Crawford:

You were just in your element: Broadway.

5-00:21:45

von Stade:

I just loved it, and you know, through every one of these roles, I've gotten to look at my life, at what did I do to my kids because of my career?

5-00:21:56

Crawford:

Do you wonder? You're so close with your girls.

5-00:21:58

von Stade:

I am. They tell me now. The worst part was being away, which I minimized. I was away a lot less than I could have been, but still, you're away, and I think they've pretty much told me everything they feel about it, and it doesn't tear us apart anymore. I'm glad to know it. There's nothing I can do about it except apologize for anything that cost them. They're also very grateful, and now, I think they were annoyed by my career for a number of years, but now they're proud of it. They realize some of the things that we got to do that we wouldn't have.

5-00:22:56

Crawford:

They were with you in Paris for a while.

5-00:23:00

von Stade:

I took them everywhere, and then I went back to the Met so that I could be home. But I still had to be away for different periods, you know? Rarely more than three weeks, but three weeks is a long time in a kid's life. Intellectually, they can see what happened and that I had to go then. This was their support, whatever. Emotions get into your body, and when you're seven and you want your mommy and she's not there, it's hard.

5-00:23:38

Crawford:

I remember hearing Kiri talk about that with Mr. Adler. We were having a meeting, and she was saying the very same thing, that she couldn't come to the West Coast anymore because it was too complicated and difficult for the family. So every one of you has that [concern].

5-00:23:56

von Stade:

That's going to be showbiz for actresses, actors, anybody. That's going to be. Most parents have to work now, anyway. I mean, my daughter has to work, and so that takes her away.

5-00:24:14

Crawford:

So she understands more about that.

5-00:24:16

von Stade:

She understands more, and that's their livelihood. They can't afford to live on one person's salary, so it's hard. I had the guilt, but it wasn't the guilt as much as the deep sorrow of not being with them. I really missed being part of—I missed every minute of that time. Otherwise, it works out pretty well because by the time they're in school, I would be rehearsing all day, so we were all gone. You only performed two nights a week, so the other nights I was home, once we got into being at the Met, it was not that hard. I didn't have to be away.

5-00:25:02

Crawford:

And all the glamour that they got to see—that's pretty good!

5-00:25:07

von Stade:

The person they loved the most was Luciano because if he ever saw them, he would take them down to the cafeteria and buy them whatever they wanted.

5-00:25:16

Crawford:

That's a pretty good memory to have.

5-00:25:20

von Stade:

Then they'd go in the dressing room and the dressers would bring them in costumes and hats to try on, and they loved that.

5-00:25:33

Crawford:

Will you do *A Coffin in Egypt* again? [a new chamber opera by Ricky Ian Gordon, based on a play by Horton Foote]

5-00:25:36

von Stade:

Yes, I'm doing it in Philadelphia. I leave next week, well, I go for a week to see the kids, and I have five performances there. Now, they're talking Chicago, the small theater there, not the Lyric.

5-00:25:51

Crawford:

That's been a big success. It's gotten only good reviews.

5-00:25:53

von Stade:

It had great reviews. In L.A., opening night was sold out, but it wasn't well attended. I thought, Gee, if I had the choice of going to the beach or going to see [an opera] about a bitter old woman, I'm not sure that I'd pick going to see the bitter old woman. But it has to be in places where they know their public and they know what they can sell. You can't worry about that part of it—I think it's a fantastic piece, and I think the way Ricky has written it is marvelous. It's not that long—it's only ninety minutes.

5-00:26:41

Crawford:

It draws young audiences, I understand.

5-00:26:44

von Stade:

I don't know.

5-00:26:46

Crawford:

I read that in one of the reviews, which is a good thing because even the Met films draw older people. I've seen that in the theater.

5-00:26:58

von Stade:

One of the best things they've started doing in Chicago is organizing these kind of teenage groups of clubs, opera clubs, to come to the opera. I saw a wonderful interview that Joyce did, going all around to talk to the kids, and they're thinking of starting that in Houston. Making a club and having these kids come to different operas and have special events in their honor, and that type of thing. They have it here for young marrieds, a very successful one.

5-00:27:39

Crawford:

You might say something more about Jake, and of course, there have been others who have written operas for you, and that should be a separate session.

5-00:27:51

von Stade:

He's had this triumph with *Moby Dick*, and he's writing a new opera for Joyce [DiDonato] that's happening, it's called *Great Scott*. It's with Jake and Terrence McNally, in 2015.

5-00:28:01

Crawford:

I don't know about it.

5-00:28:07

von Stade:

They're writing it, they're creating it.

5-00:28:09

Crawford:

They do well, and *Moby Dick*, you're right. I don't think *Moby Dick* was quite as often done as *Dead Man Walking*, but it probably will be.

5-00:28:16

von Stade:

No, but it's a huge production, too.

5-00:28:21

Crawford:

Jake said in an interview, "But Flicka's not in it. It's just not right."

5-00:28:25

von Stade: I wanted to play the whale. [laughter]

5-00:28:28

Crawford: The whale was there!

5-00:28:29

von Stade: The whale was there. It was thrilling.

5-00:28:31

Crawford: That's been a great collaboration for you.

5-00:28:33

von Stade: Thrilling, thrilling. His collaborations with Gene Scheer, there's a recording of his out now that is, I think it's called *Beginnings*. It is to die. He wrote the song cycle for Joyce about Camille Claudel—Claudel was the mistress of Rodin, and she was really, at one point, she was eccentric her whole life and she was put away in an insane asylum in the South of France, just parked there by her family. So it's her writings about "the only children I had were children of stone."

It's four songs. It's unbelievable, and she sings it like it will never be sung again in the world, but it's so moving. He's going to a new place, if it could get any better, even a better place.

5-00:29:33

Crawford: You're really kind of responsible for this whole thing. You gave him his first hearing.

5-00:29:37

von Stade: Lotfi had this vision—I don't know what inspired Lotfi because Lotfi is not that kind of a guy, that he would just throw a bone. He wasn't that kind of a guy, but he did. It was just meant to happen. I think that Jake's talent was sort of like when you fill a balloon with a lot of water or air and it eventually pops. It was filling up and filling up and filling up, and it just popped right when it did. The energy, the creative energy that he had, and all the music that he had in him and in his brain just kind of went *whango* and that's why *Dead Man Walking* was so extraordinary.

When you think of it, even when I think of Jake and when I think of, it's not just writing tunes, it's writing orchestra and balance and instruments and rhythm and who's singing and how many people, should this be a duet? It's like building the new bridge. I don't see how people could conceive of that. It's so miraculous and it's based on such a fundamental structure of science, in the case, obviously, of the bridge, but of brilliance and psychic energy.

5-00:31:11

Crawford: The basic architecture seems to just spill out of these people.

5-00:31:16

von Stade: Yes, and that's where he is, that's what he does.

5-00:31:19

Crawford: Well, I hope there's another one just for you.

5-00:31:21

von Stade: No, I think he has his list, he has a stable full of young singers now. That's part of what makes it work, though, are the young singers. They're so willing. Because of the decreased budgets of everything, it's not the big superstars coming in, demanding millions of dollars. Granted, they're superstars already—Steven Costello—but they're not all superstars right away, and they're so good that he can write for these kids, and it's so effective.

[“Paper Wings” lyrics by Frederica von Stade

When I was young, I lived in Greece with my mother/That's right, Greece

We lived in a house, a house with a great big balcony/And Signorina was my nanny

One day, Signorina made me wings out of paper/That's right, paper wings

And for days and days, I pretended to fly/Over the rooftops of Athens]

Interview 4: July 1, 2015

Audio File 6

06-00:00:00

Crawford: This is July 1, 2015, and Flicka, Jake Heggie and I are at Chez Panisse in Berkeley to have a conversation about Flicka's life and career as part of her oral history.

06-00:01:02

Crawford: Hi, Jake. Hi, Flicka. I want to begin with your collaborations, because you are unusually close collaborators--you've done so much together. For Jake, what is unique about your collaboration with Flicka?

06-00:01:13

Heggie: Oh, everything. It's, I think, probably the most important collaborative creative relationship that I have. And I knew it from the moment I first met her, which was 1989 or '90, something like that, in Los Angeles when I was running a private series in Beverly Hills and you were there to do a concert at the [Hollywood] Bowl or something.

06-00:01:39

von Stade: That's right. Yes.

06-00:01:40

Heggie: And so she stayed at the hotel and I was trying to get her on the series, but I had heard her in *Cenerentola* before that and as Cherubino and then you came back and you did Figaro [Rosina in *Barber of Seville*] and you did Cherubino and I was so entranced by her artistry and personality and her generosity of spirit and everything. And so I was drawn in well before I met her. And then when I met her I just knew I wanted to work with her someday. Our paths just kept crossing after that.

06-00:02:12

von Stade: I know.

06-00:02:13

Crawford: Meant to be.

06-00:02:13

von Stade: Yes! I think I'm the lucky one who was one of the first people to hear Jake's songs. With that much talent it was just a question of when it would burst out. You know what I mean? There would be no way to contain that amount of gifts for long.

06-00:02:41

Heggie: I don't know that that's necessarily true because I was writing okay stuff through my twenties. It wasn't just your performance and your voice and your artistry on stage that inspired me. It was your generosity of spirit. Everyone

was included in this. There was never enough that you could give or do for other people. It was so impressive.

After the L.A. thing there was a gap of two years and then I got the job at the [San Francisco] Opera in the PR marketing department and one of the first projects was *Dangerous Liaisons*. This was 1994, and Flicka was around the opera house.

06-00:03:22

Crawford: You got to play a bad girl.

06-00:03:23

Heggie: Right.

06-00:03:25

von Stade: Yes. Yee-haw! [laughter]

06-00:03:26

Heggie: And so I was working in the PR marketing department and she remembered me. We just hit it off again. I still didn't know I was a composer or anything and she invited me to go on the boat with the family. It was just so amazingly inclusive and kind and thoughtful and she's the one who inspired me to want to write music again. I hadn't written music for almost five years, and because of her I was really inspired to write and so I made these arrangements of folk songs because I thought that would be the least terrifying thing that I could present to her. And that's what I gave her after a performance.

06-00:04:02

von Stade: They are so fantastic. You just can't believe—

06-00:04:05

Heggie: You still do them. [laughter]

06-00:04:07

von Stade: I still can't remember where to sing. The combination of colors. It sort of evoked so many things and was so true.

06-00:04:22

Crawford: So it was a big talent even though Jake says he didn't think so at the time.

06-00:04:23

von Stade: True, yes.

06-00:04:24

Crawford: But what a story! Coming from the PR department with a full-blown opera ready to go.

06-00:04:29

von Stade: That part is really amazing—

06-00:04:22

Heggie: It was the ideal apprentice training ground for a budding composer.

06-00:04:37

von Stade: [phone rings] Sorry. That's my new phone.

06-00:04:43

Heggie: You're so funny.

06-00:04:46

von Stade: Sorry.

06-00:04:46

Crawford: It's okay.

06-00:04:46

Heggie: It was the ideal apprentice training ground for a budding opera composer, even though I didn't know that's what I was. But having her as my inspiration and guide through the whole thing. Because you lived in the Bay Area by then. And so she was around quite a bit. She came in early before the next performance of *Dangerous Liaisons* to read through those folk song arrangements with me and the first thing she said was, "Jakey, these are so beautiful. You want to give a concert together sometime?"

06-00:05:15

Crawford: Whoa, that sounds like you.

06-00:05:17

Heggie: And I was like, "Um, okay. Yeah, I think I could make time for that." And then she started telling Marilyn Horne and Martin Katz and Renee [Fleming] and all these people about my songs. And before I knew it other people were asking me about music. But primarily Flicka said, "I'm going to ask you to do some songs about my daughter Lisa and then I want you to do some other things."

06-00:05:37

Crawford: You've written about Flicka's daughter Lisa in a song cycle called *Paper Wings*. The songs are "Bedtime Story," "Paper Wings," "Mitten Smitten" and "A Route to the Sky." How did that happen?

06-00:05:43

von Stade: I know. It's the best ever. The best ever.

06-00:05:47

Heggie: Well, you had the song "Jenny Rebecca" for Jenny.

06-00:05:49

von Stade: Yes. And so I always wanted to do it and I asked Jake.

- 06-00:05:52
Crawford: *Paper Wings* was about your time in Greece with your mother and brother and Signorina, who took care of you. She made the paper wings for you so you could fly over Athens.
- 06-00:05:56
von Stade: Jake has this wonderful friend John Hall and I thought that would be great if he did the songs. And Jake said, "Well, why don't you write them? You know Lisa." And that's logical. I'd never done anything like that and so I said, "Okay."
- 06-00:06:12
Crawford: You told me that you said to Jake after you wrote them, "Just throw them in the garbage if they are really awful."
- 06-00:06:16
Heggie: You know where to put them.
- 06-00:06:17
von Stade: Yeah, yeah.
- 06-00:06:17
Crawford: Why is she like that?
- 06-00:06:20
Heggie: Because she's so generous and selfless.
- 06-00:06:22
von Stade: Given the opportunity to do that, to put together something that reflects everything, like you've done for Kiri [te Kanawa]. When you've sung other peoples' songs your whole life, to get to sing a song that is everything you love about a song, is such a privilege. And it's pretty rare that a composer has two singers at Carnegie Hall debuting a new song cycle. I don't think that's happened a lot.
- 06-00:07:05
Heggie: Oh, sure.
- 06-00:07:05
von Stade: No, it hasn't.
- 06-00:07:07
Heggie: I'm not that special.
- 06-00:07:07
von Stade: No, it hasn't. It hasn't. It hasn't. A, that the artist chooses them and chooses their recital: "This is the best I can do at Carnegie Hall," which is what you try and do. But, B, the respect for his music. You're pretty unusual, Jakey, in what's going on today.

06-00:07:36

Heggie: Stop. Oh, go on. [laughter]

06-00:07:38

Crawford: Okay, now, this is not meant to be a valentine!

Let's jump right into *Dead Man Walking*, which is said to be the most often performed contemporary American opera.

06-00:07:40i

Heggie: I think *Paper Wings* is the direct line to *Dead Man Walking* because the songs that I wrote for Flicka, the folk songs, she then recorded those with me on just a little tape recorder because I wanted to enter the G. Schirmer song competition. So she did that for me. We went to the chorus room and recorded these and I sent in my tape and I won that song competition.

So my songs were published by G. Schirmer and I got to show all this to Lotfi [Lotfi Mansouri, General Director of San Francisco Opera at the time] as I was working for him nonstop, day and night. And he said, "Well, you know what this means?" I said, "What?" He goes, "I have to take you seriously."

I loved him. He was impossible but I loved him. And then *Paper Wings* happened and you started doing that, and the more he started seeing my stuff go around the world with great singers like Flicka first and foremost, but then Renee did some stuff and Tom Hampson and Bryn Terfel and Sylvia McNair. And I think it gave him confidence to approach me about doing an opera.

The fact that singers liked doing the music and that they believed in inhabiting the theater of the music and that they found something that they could connect with and enjoyed it. I think that gave him the confidence to approach me about doing *Dead Man Walking*.

06-00:09:01

von Stade: And that he liked the music. That he loved the music.

06-00:09:04

Heggie: Because that was a huge, huge risk on his part.

06-00:09:07

Crawford: It was, wasn't it?

06-00:09:07

Heggie: Taking a composer out of the PR marketing department when he could have invited any composer, established composer from around the world. Anyone!

06-00:09:16

Crawford: He was like that, though, wasn't he?

- 06-00:09:18
von Stade: He was like throwing a stone in a lake and it goes plunk and then everything goes out from there. He was amazing in that way. As Jake said, he was not easy. But he's very undersung. It surprises me how undersung he is and I have a feeling it's because of one of his books.
- 06-00:09:42
Crawford: Adler liked him and had supported him as a director.
- 06-00:09:45
Heggie: Yes. But so many people got a start because of Lotfi, because he would take chances on new people. That's why Anna Netrebko gave her American debut at the San Francisco Opera. Valery Gergiev gave his American debut here.
- 06-00:10:01
von Stade: And then moving the whole company into that space when it had to be renovated. What a risk.
- 06-00:10:30
Crawford: Yes, when the Opera House was closed for renovations and he had to stage everything outside the War Memorial.
- 06-00:10:08
von Stade: This horrible big space.
- 06-00:10:12
Heggie: But he was willing to take chances that very few people are. He was a real impresario. When he saw possibility and when he saw untapped talent he was ready to go for it. He had instincts about those things. And the thing was he was brilliant at raising money and getting people to go along with his vision. He was a real captain.
- 06-00:10:32
von Stade: He was a real captain.
- 06-00:10:34
Crawford: He struck it rich with you for sure.
- 06-00:10:36
von Stade: Yes. And *Dead Man Walking*.
- 06-00:10:39
Crawford: Flicka, you were offered the part of Sister Helen Prejean.
- 06-00:10:39
Heggie: Yes. Well, we talked on the phone. Before I even knew what the piece was I called her and I said, "Flicka, Lotfi's asked me to do a new opera and I don't know what you're doing in the fall of 2000 but you have to cancel it because you need to be in this opera."

06-00:10:53

Crawford: When was this exactly?

06-00:10:54

Heggie: That was '96 that he asked me about doing an opera. He first mentioned it in '95 and then he got serious in '96. And then Terrence McNally came up with the idea for *Dead Man Walking* in '97.

06-00:11:10

Crawford: Lotfi put you in touch with McNally.

06-00:11:12

Heggie: Yes. He sent me to New York to meet with Terrence. He said, "I have to have a known quantity, someone that people aren't terrified about." He said, "Jake, people don't know who you are." He goes, "I believe in you but they're all going to question my choice." Anyway, and so Flicka said, "Okay, Jakey, I'll look at it." And then when *Dead Man Walking* became a real thing, first of all, you thought that was such a great idea.

06-00:11:38

von Stade: Oh, so brilliant.

06-00:11:37

Heggie: I asked her about being Sister Helen and she said, "No, why don't you get one of those young exciting mezzos coming up."

06-00:11:43

Crawford: We've discussed this briefly—explain why.

06-00:11:44

von Stade: I'm a huge, huge fan of Suzy Graham.

06-00:11:49

Crawford: I know.

06-00:11:50

von Stade: I have done a lot in the Bay area. I've been around a long time and I just felt it needed—plus I knew how long it was. In my terms I knew that it was maybe just outside of what I felt I could do well. And the role that Jake gave me, oh, yes, so you asked me to do one of the parents.

06-00:12:26

Heggie: But I asked, yes, do you want to be one of the parents, the mother of the murdered child or the [mother of the murderer] and she stopped for a second, she goes, "I want to be his mom."

06-00:12:37

Crawford: You made a big role of it. How did you do that? Not that it isn't very important, but it's brief.

06-00:12:42

Heggie: It's about twenty minutes of music but it's the pivotal role and everything changes the moment Mrs. De Rocher enters.

06-00:12:48

Crawford: "Don't kill my Joe!" Anybody who ever heard that would never forget it.

06-00:12:51

Heggie: Everything changes the moment she enters because suddenly there's another family involved. Because I knew her and was always inspired by her it made the role blossom in a way. I have to know who I'm writing for. And I think because both Terrence and I knew you we were able to write that role in a very special way.

06-00:13:11

von Stade: I have to say, it's perfect. It's perfect. The notes are perfect, the text is perfect, the music is perfect, the length is perfect. It's a perfect creation. I think *Dead Man Walking* is a perfect creation.

06-00:13:30

Crawford: I read the review in the *Guardian*, *London Guardian*, and they never review too positively if they can help it, but they said that this opera dealt with issues in a way that they had never seen. It proved that opera could go deeply into meaningful issues.

06-00:13:47

von Stade: Yes.

06-00:13:48

Crawford: I thought that was high praise.

06-00:13:49

Heggie: But if you write an opera about an issue, that's boring. You have to write about people who are caught in the middle and what they want, and that the issue is part of the problem getting in the way of what they want. And that's why if you think about *Tosca*, that's not really a piece about a police state or oppression yet it deals with it constantly because that's the threat that's behind it.

06-00:14:19

von Stade: It's about a man and a woman, two men and *Tosca*--

06-00:14:21

Heggie: Yes, and *Butterfly*. It's not about an issue, it's about the people caught in the middle of it. And the *Marriage of Figaro*. It's about class stuff but it's the people caught in the middle of this.

06-00:14:36

Crawford: In *Dead Man Walking*, I want to ask you both about what Sister Helen is quoted as saying: "Opera is an invitation to a deeper reflection on something," which is really what we're talking about. By invitation what does she mean?

06-00:15:05

Heggie: It means it's a possibility to invite you into something and open your heart.

06-00:15:12

von Stade: And accept the invitation. That's what the public does. That's what their job is to a certain extent, is to be invited in a very magnificent way, through music, and through the human voice and the human voice unaltered, which is amazing in itself. No mikes or anything. And to accept that invitation, to go there with it.

The music is beautiful, too. You hear a couple of notes of "*que gelida manina*" or something or when Trouble runs away from Butterfly. It just goes to your tear ducts. It goes to that place in your heart. That opera makes that available in such a big way really because of the words and the music.

06-00:16:12

Crawford: Flicka, as we mentioned, you didn't sing the role in the Opera Parallèle production of *Dead Man Walking*.

06-00:16:17

von Stade: Wasn't that great!

06-00:16:19

Heggie: She covered the role there.

06-00:16:21

von Stade: I covered it.

06-00:16:24

Heggie: She was Cathy Cook's cover. [laughter]

06-00:16:25

von Stade: Yes. I loved that production. I was sitting there thinking, "Oh, I wish I had done this." Mike wasn't doing too well. He's fine but he had a couple of health issues around that time so I didn't dare commit to it.

06-00:16:43

Heggie: But now she's got a great big new role in *Great Scott*

06-00:16:45

von Stade: And when you think of the things that we've just been saying about people, it's the people there again.

06-00:16:56

Crawford: [tape interruption] We have to order now, so I'm going to turn the camera off for a while. [resuming conversation] During this few minutes we have been talking about David Littlejohn [music critic for *The Wall Street Journal*].

06-00:17:19

von Stade: Something he would say was, "Nobody here is focused. You must focus." [laughter]

06-00:17:27

Heggie: Yes. You didn't know David had died?

06-00:17:34

Crawford: No.

06-00:17:35

Heggie: Oh, we had so many lunches down here with him.

06-00:17:36

Crawford: The last lunch I had with him here was about you, Flicka. He knew everything about you.

06-00:17:43

Heggie: Remarkable man.

06-00:17:45

von Stade: Oh, remarkable.

06-00:17:45

Crawford: I didn't know.

06-00:17:56

Heggie: I had a sweet lunch with David and Sheila about a month before she died because her death was very sudden and the lunch was here. And I just remember after the lunch—Kurt and I were with them--and Sheila and David were outside. He was in his wheelchair and she was looking after him. And I just remember turning around and taking one last look at them together and just thinking, "God, they're such an amazing couple." They loved each other so much. And then she was gone a month later. So sad.

06-00:18:37

Crawford: He was often in the opera press room after her death with her family. I think her family took care of him, adopted him. Really nice.

Well, let's talk about *Three Decembers* [libretto by Gene Scheer]. The lead role was written for you, Flicka, another sort of bad girl!

06-00:18:54

von Stade: So much fun. Again, the contours of a diva and what makes someone be who they are and how they are, how they evolve rather than they just are plopped there. It's a woman who was terribly spoiled, spoiled by her gift, spoiled by the world's reaction to her. And yet worth it all. That's what was amazing about it. It's that she was worth it. She was carrying an incredible secret that she perhaps told in a terrible way. But I know somebody like her; a great singer named Evelyn Lear, who's gone, too. But Evy was this person and she was impossible.

06-00:20:01

Crawford: A little imperious.

06-00:20:02

von Stade: Imperious.

06-00:20:05

Heggie: And brilliant!

06-00:20:06

von Stade: Brilliant, funny, and gifted, and everybody loved her. She'd mistreat almost everybody. "I'm sorry, you don't have that iced tea anymore? Well, that's ridiculous. I came here to have that iced tea." She'd do that. Going to a restaurant with her was sort of like a nightmare. But nobody resented her. They loved it because there was something genuine about her, and that's who Madeline was. I kind of felt that I never quite got where I wanted with Madeline, with that character.

06-00:20:45

Heggie: Oh, you were so brilliant with her. It was a complicated thing because each character in that—the clearest one is the son, Charlie. The daughter is difficult and the mother is difficult because they're very similar.

But what I loved about that story was that it's full of human messiness. It's very true that way. Life is very messy. And we sometimes get an idea in the theater world or in other worlds, like Madeline could have been a great scientist or a great doctor or a great lawyer, something that she had devoted herself completely to. Sacrificed everything, pushed everything aside, and been brilliant and people had admired and loved her.

But real life is messy and that's what I loved about it. It was sort of unflinching that way. As much as we try to keep up the façade of the choices we've made and the course that we've taken in life, there are messy things that we leave behind that are unresolved sometimes.

06-00:21:45

Crawford: You've said that was the most heartfelt work you had ever composed.

06-00:21:48

Heggie: I wouldn't say it's the most heartfelt. They're all heartfelt. It was the closest to my own life that I've ever written.

06-00:21:56

von Stade: It's close to my life, too, and that's what's been so incredible about doing Jake's ladies, is that they bring up something really important in my life. With *Dead Man Walking* it was the realization that as a mother you do things that have consequences for your children. You don't mean to and you maybe don't see them that way when you're doing them. And there are situations that are out of your control that hurt your children. You add poverty to it and it's almost a given that a mother can't protect children from the world. But it made me look at things, choices I made for my girls that caused them a lot of pain.

06-00:22:57

Crawford: You've resolved that in your life?

06-00:23:59

von Stade: I think I've accepted it more than resolved it. It's always there. It's always there. It's always part of their life and who they are and maybe it would have been different.

So I accept it now and I think they do, too. In that regard there is a resolution. With Madeline, Madeline is really close to my mother. And my mother was impossible but terribly funny. I never really felt close to her. I adored her and I loved being with her, but she was so difficult that I always had to keep her at arm's length. And Madeline is that way. To survive her as a child you've got to put her out of your life. Even though she loves you passionately and intensely and honestly. You can't take her. You can't take her.

06-00:24:07

Crawford: You never said that directly about your mother in our interviews, but you said she had a wonderful group of friends and they really were like mothers to you. So the implication was there, although you didn't mention what you just told me now. Interesting.

06-00:24:24

von Stade: Yes, and I even feel badly, even now, because I feel like I slam my mom way too much because she was wonderful and she had so much to deal with in her life. Losing her husband so young, when I wasn't even born yet, and then being rejected by another man. Just so many hard, hard things to deal with.

She actually dealt with them very well and God, she was funny. The best time in the world was the night after she had had a lot. And she'd sit in her little den and smoke cigarettes all day. You had to be around her. She was just hysterical, and I don't know what she said. I can't tell you one thing. I admired her brain and her courage, but she was impossible.

06-00:25:30

Crawford: She should have been onstage.

06-00:25:33

von Stade: Oh, and she would—

06-00:25:33

Heggie: Did she want to be onstage? Did she ever have that dream?

06-00:25:33

von Stade: No, I don't think so. One of the funniest times was I doing *Rosenkavalier* in a [small German city]. Do you want these stories?

06-00:25:46

Crawford: Oh, sure.

- 06-00:25:46
von Stade: Or is this too long?
- 06-00:25:50
Heggie: Where the hell is that?
- 06-00:25:51
von Stade: I'm not even sure but it is south of Amsterdam. We had a car pick up Eve and me and the soloist and we went down to do one of the performances of *Rosenkavalier* and mom came back at the end of the show and said, "Oh, Flicka, you were just fantastic tonight!" And I said, "You have not been anywhere near this theater tonight." [laughter] And what she had done—
- 06-00:26:20
Heggie: It was a lie. [laughter]
- 06-00:26:22
von Stade: What she had done was taken the car, our chauffeur, and literally went barhopping because she had been taken there as a little girl; her father took her there. And so she tried to remember all the bars she had been to with him. She was impossible. She had been out on a toot for like four hours, all the time *Rosenkavalier* was running. It is funny.
- 06-00:26:53
Crawford: Great story.
- 06-00:26:52
Heggie: Yes, once you get past the horror of it. You're just like "that was really kind of funny."
- 06-00:26:59
von Stade: I remember sitting next to her at a party that I was giving for a friend of mine who was getting married. I was sitting next to somebody terribly British, something like that, and Mummy was on the other side of him. And I was talking to him and she was going, "Oh, oh." She was making faces. And I thought, "Oh, my God, I'm going to kill her. I'm going to absolutely rip her limb from limb." But she was beloved. Beloved, beloved.
- 06-00:27:24
Heggie: Yes. I know Kiri talks about your mom with great affection.
- 06-00:27:28
von Stade: She'd wake up Kiri at two o'clock in the morning and Kiri would say, "I could hear the clink, clink, clink. I did adore her but the best way was from a distance.
- 06-00:27:44
Heggie: From a distance.
- 06-00:27:43
Crawford: Yes. So that role in *Three Decembers* was perfect for you.

06-00:27:43
von Stade: Yes!

06-00:27:45
Crawford: Well, here's to you and *Great Scott*. Let's talk about *Great Scott* coming up.

06-00:27:50
Heggie: Thank you.

06-00:27:50
von Stade: Here's to you and here's to *Great Scott*. Oh, I can't wait. It's so honest and real and funny.

06-00:27:56
Heggie: And truly funny. Like genuinely funny. Benign humor. It's a love letter to opera and to the art form.

06-00:28:07
Crawford: Let's talk about the new opera.

06-00:28:09
Heggie: Okay. After *Moby Dick* opened I got asked to write my next opera for Dallas and Terrence had been wanting to write an opera and Joyce had been talking about doing something. And so I thought, "Well, this is the ideal opportunity to do that."

I went to Terrence and his first idea was the most depressing story you could possibly imagine. I just kind of wanted to die. I thought, "I cannot spend three years of my life there." It was about Susan Smith, the woman who killed her children in the car, and he wanted it to be a modern-day Medea story. I was like, A, I don't want to do it. B, there is no board in the world that is going to want to support something like that. And an audience doesn't want to go see that either. I said, "Can we do something comic?"

06-00:29:29
Crawford: He had already written the story?

06-00:29:30
Heggie: No, no, no, no. It was just a thought.

06-00:29:31
Crawford: But he wanted to write it.

06-00:29:33
Heggie: He had been thinking about it. And I said, "What about something comic and fun? Sort of like in the vein of *Noises Off* and *Ariadne auf Naxos* and the *Marriage of Figaro* and something really fun and of our time. And his eyes kind of lit up, and then he started sending ideas and thoughts about roles and I realized there was a great role for Flicka in there.

And as we developed it, things became clearer and then I remember calling Flicka on the phone and saying, “Let me tell you about this new project we’re doing.” You were just laughing through the whole thing. And I said, “And then there’s the woman who owns the opera company and that’s the role that we would like you to do.” And there was this, “Huh? What?” and this scream on the other end of the phone, and I took it as a yes. [laughter]

But it’s the story of a famous opera singer named Arden Scott who comes home for the first time since becoming internationally celebrated. And she comes home to help her struggling opera company at home. She’s brought with her not a famous opera but a never-before-performed-200-year-old-opera that she discovered called *Rosa Dolorosa, Giglia di Pompeii*, daughter of Pompeii. [laughter]

06-00:30:56

von Stade:

I just say that to people and they are on the floor.

06-00:30:57

Heggie:

But it just happens that the night that they’re going to premiere *Rosa Dolorosa* is the same night that the local football team is in the Super Bowl across town.

06-00:31:05

Crawford:

Something for everybody, right?

06-00:31:08

Heggie:

Right. Well, and it’s very real. This is what we deal with all the time. What’s cracked me up is recently at the opera house, if there’s a big game going on, they put the score on the supertitle screen at intermissions, which Terrence had thought of before that.

Arden Scott is Joyce DiDonato and the woman who gave her her start and got her started in music and supported her career and who runs the struggling opera company is Winnie Flato and that’s Flicka. Flicka is also married to the man who owns the football team. And so everything is riding on this—because the company is in a precarious position and this new opera that they’re doing has pushed them to the brink financially and the brink of their capabilities. And if the football team doesn’t win there’s a good chance that the opera won’t be funded and it really could collapse. What I love is that he’s called the opera company American Opera. So American Opera is at risk. The future of American Opera is at stake.

06-00:32:14

Crawford:

Very good. [laughter]

06-00:32:15

Heggie:

It’s a wonderful cast of characters. There’s the Eastern European soprano Tatyana Bakst, who wants to be as famous as Arden Scott and will do anything to get there and winds up singing the national anthem at the Super Bowl.

06-00:32:28

Crawford: And there's a lover from the past, right?

06-00:32:32

Heggie: Yes, Sid, the guy from the past, the old flame who shows up again. Again, what I love about it is here she is at the pinnacle of her career and life is still messy for her. She thinks she's got it all figured out and she's sacrificed everything for this career and this life, but it's not enough. She talks about going home alone and what does it really matter. Great art demands great sacrifice but it doesn't necessarily mean that the rewards are there that you expect.

06-00:33:07

von Stade: Yes. It's wanting to matter. What I love, I mean, I love every inch of it, is that nobody right now in the opera business could matter more than Joyce DiDonato because of her extraordinary talent. Those come every once in a while. But also because of who she is. As powerful as her gift is, it's her heart and her persona.

06-00:33:45

Heggie: Sound familiar?

06-00:33:45

Crawford: It sounds like your own story.

06-00:33:49

Heggie: It is.

06-00:33:49

Crawford: You are always saying, "God plopped," I think is your word, "so much talent into certain people, like Calvin Simmons, Joyce, Suzy, Jake. And you never think that about yourself.

06-00:34:03

Heggie: We say that about her, though.

06-00:34:04

Crawford: Is this the "un-diva" part of Flicka?

06-00:34:09

Heggie: So generous. But you don't think that way!

06-00:34:13

von Stade: You get to a time in your life, too, that you don't remember. I don't remember what it was like to be at Joyce's stage of a career, of just going here, there, and everywhere. I don't remember it. And when you don't remember it, it's almost like it didn't happen. So it becomes unreal a little bit. That's why to have the chance to go back and be part of something like *Great Scott* is just, it's almost like making my debut.

06-00:34:57

Crawford: Really?

06-00:34:57

von Stade: It is starting over. Not that I feel I have to prove anything. Not that kind of hairy part of it. But it's like being able to start it again a little bit. And I feel all that excitement and I love being around the young singers and seeing where they are in their careers and the passion and all that. It's a little bit like watching your grandchildren, too. It is.

06-00:35:29

Crawford: You have an October 30th opening in Dallas. Talk about the process between now and then. You're still writing?

06-00:35:35

Heggie: I'm still orchestrating. The actual vocal score is done.

06-00:35:39

von Stade: I have it in my hands. It's extremely heavy. [laughter]

06-00:35:44

Heggie: [laughter] It's big, it's big.

06-00:35:45

Crawford: How long are we talking?

06-00:35:46

Heggie: It's over 5,000 measures of music but it's—

06-00:35:50

von Stade: Four pounds, I'd say. [laughter]

06-00:35:53

Heggie: "How long is your opera?" "Oh, about four pounds." No, I think the first act is about an hour and fifteen, and the second act is just over an hour, hour and five, hour and ten. But it goes by super-fast.

06-00:36:05

von Stade: Each thing just jumps into the next.

06-00:36:07

Heggie: It's very fleet. The thing that was hard about it is a comedy is much harder than drama, because it's all pacing and timing. Comedy has to be true, it has to be grounded in something very real and Terrence is really into that. But it's one of the wordier librettos that I've ever set, so it was difficult figuring out how to deal with all that text. And then orchestrating it, is how to keep it super light so that it can be fleet and every word can be crystal clear. So I'm doing a smaller orchestra. Very much like a *Figaro*-size orchestra.

06-00:36:49

von Stade: Also, the chorus is hysterically funny.

06-00:36:57
Heggie: We have a good chorus. We have a good everything.

06-00:36:58
Crawford: Who is the conductor, and the choral director?

06-00:37:01
Heggie: The choral director there is Alexander Rom, R-O-M. Patrick Summers will lead the production here. He's done every one of my world premieres, including *Dead Man Walking* and *Three Decembers*, and *Moby Dick* and now this one.

06-00:37:20
Crawford: So when do you go into full-scale rehearsal?

06-00:37:23
Heggie: Rehearsals start September 28th.

06-00:37:26
Crawford: A good long rehearsal period.

06-00:37:28
Heggie: About five weeks. But final dress is three days before opening, which is a little nerve-wracking that it's that far away.

06-00:37:34
von Stade: Oh, I didn't know that. Oh.

06-00:37:23
Heggie: Yes, it's on October 27th and the opening is October 30th. But that's a little nerve-wracking.

06-00:37:40
Crawford: Jake, you've said that when you write a new opera you have friends who will tell you the truth.

06-00:37:49
Heggie: Oh, yes. Friendly ears.

06-00:37:49
Crawford: Do they tell you negative things if they feel that there are negative things?

06-00:37:58
Heggie: Mm-hmm. We've had three workshops for *Great Scott*, which I've never done for a new piece. But because it's an original story, not based on anything, you have to have workshops to figure out who these people are and what their journeys are and then Terrence rewrites and then I rewrite. I've never done so many rewrites in my life.

The final one was in early April, April 10th in San Francisco, and Flicka did her role and it was at the conservatory and we had an invited audience for the read through. I've done this for every opera I've had.

You can get a sense of if people are engaged and they're getting it, even though there might be things they won't get because staging makes such a difference. But are they getting the overall gist? Are they laughing? Are they understanding when it's serious? There was a lot of laughter and there were tears, which is exactly what we wanted. And then the friendly ears told me, "I didn't understand this. This character seems weak. This character seems too polite. This relationship seems too polite." But that's great.

06-00:39:06

Crawford: Who are these people that will do that for you?

06-00:39:09

Heggie: Oh, they're close friends. Like Kurt, my husband, will do that for me.

06-00:39:14

Crawford: No hard feelings?

06-00:39:15

Heggie: No, absolutely not. No, this is the stuff you have to know.

06-00:39:18

von Stade: Yes, and Kurt is a magic man.

06-00:39:22

Crawford: He's a man of the theater, right?

06-00:39:23

von Stade: Yes. Totally.

06-00:39:25

Heggie: But like Lise Lindstrom, the dramatic soprano was there, and she was very honest with me. Terrence McNally and Jack O'Brien, of course. But also my friend David Stein, who I've known for twenty-some years. And some other people from the opera. And I just tell them, "Please, tell me the places that you didn't get. Don't just tell me the good news. I need to know where it needs work." Because once we get into rehearsals in Dallas there's no time to change things.

06-00:39:49

von Stade: Yes. You don't get a run out.

06-00:39:53

Heggie: These are really great friends. These are really great friends that'll tell you where the problems are, so that I can fix it, because as I say, you've got to fix it well in advance.

06-00:40:02

Crawford: A reviewer wrote about the new opera that was just premiered here recently, *Two Women*, "How can an opera go so far and have no emotional core?" That's kind of haunting, isn't it?

06-00:40:17

Heggie:

Well, and that's what you don't want at a premiere. You want people to tell you that at the workshop. What I have learned is that there's a big difference between an abstract symphonic composer and a theater composer, and a real composer of the theater wants all that information. They're collaborative. They know things have to change. What I find with more symphonic composers who are writing an opera, they write the score and it's done.

06-00:340249

von Stade:

That's it.

06-00:40:50

Heggie:

They're not going to change it. They're not changing a note. Even once they see it up on the stage and it works, if people don't get it, well, that's their fault. It's perfect. I can't imagine that. I'm ready to work, whatever needs to be done to make it better.

06-00:41:08

von Stade:

I heard a little bit of it, only what was on the website and it was just like what? It meanders. There was no thrust to it. And that was like four minutes.

06-00:41:30

Heggie:

I wanted to leave after the first act. I was there with Kurt. The orchestra was so loud and so heavy and so thick. It was like an assault through the whole first act. I couldn't even hear the singers most of the time. It was so loud, and the orchestration was way too big. And I said to Kurt, "Kurt, I need to go home. I don't want to stay." And he said, "You know what? I really want to stay. I want to see the second act." And I went, [sigh].

06-00:41:55

von Stade:

Bye.

06-00:41:56

Heggie:

He said, "Really, I do," and I said, "Okay, let's stay." And I was really glad I did because I thought the second act was much stronger. The orchestration had thinned out, and the story came to life more. But I did find it, overall, I wondered why I needed to be in the opera house to hear this story. Did it cry out to be an opera? It didn't to me. There wasn't a moment when I was so moved that I wanted to erupt into tears. And with a story like that, which is heartbreaking, it never took me quite there. I thought some of the singing was wonderful. Two people in particular really stood out for me. But I did think it was overwritten and I didn't understand in the first place why it needed to be an opera.

06-00:24:42

Crawford:

David Gockley [San Francisco Opera General Director] has commissioned more works than anyone, and he's not had great luck with opera directors elsewhere.

- 06-00:42:53
von Stade: Right, that's right.
- 06-00:42:54
Heggie: Not here. It's been tough.
- 06-00:42:56
Crawford: Well, any more about *Great Scott*?
- 06-00:42:59
Heggie: So right now the designers are all working. Our designer is Bob Crowley, who is doing sets and costumes. He just won a Tony Award for *Skylight* on Broadway; he's won like seven or eight Tony Awards and Olivier Awards and he's Irish. He lives in London.
- 06-00:43:17
von Stade: Oh, glory be to God, it's going to be great.
- 06-00:43:18
Heggie: And Jack O'Brien, of course, has like four or five Tonys. *Hairspray* and *The Full Monty* and all these other things. And Terrence McNally has four or five from musicals and plays. So we're in good hands on that front. The cast is just sensational and they've all got their music. So it's really exciting, and it's such a great group of characters.
- 06-00:43:40
Crawford: Flicka, how are you approaching this role?
- 06-00:43:42
von Stade: Oh, well, I just have to learn the right rhythms. Learning stuff has always been a struggle for me. And my memory. So the more I do it the better. And we have a fantastic man coaching. I'm like in his back pocket, and I know that. the chance to work with Jake and Terrence and Jack. It's just—
- 06-00:44:23
Heggie: But I think this character also resonates very truthfully with Flicka because she is sort of the nurturing mother figure to all of these people in this company and certainly to Arden Scott, to Joyce. There's a beautiful scene between the two of them—
- 06-00:44:39
von Stade: Oh, a beautiful little duet.
- 06-00:44:40
Heggie: —where they play an old duet at the piano.
- 06-00:44:41
Crawford: You and Joyce are personally very close, aren't you?

06-00:44:46

von Stade:

When you really admire another artist, you really love them, because you know what they're doing. I love what they're doing and I love them for doing it so beautifully and caring so much.

I don't feel that way about every artist, and it's not just mezzos. It's mainly mezzos. [laughter] It's a really unusual thing that we have to be in this business and to play characters and to sing and to protect the voice and the mind and the whatever and try and fit it in your life. So I respect it enormously. And since Joyce is, oh, maybe thirty years, twenty years younger, thirty years younger—

06-00:45:45

Heggie:

She's forty-six, I think, Joyce is.

06-00:45:46

von Stade:

I know a little bit what's ahead for her, just a little bit. The mom in me wants to protect that, too, even though I'm not on those terms with her. Don't forget about yourself and—

06-00:46:04

Heggie:

She kind of thinks that you're on that level with her, and I think Joyce thinks that way about you.

06-00:46:07

von Stade:

I just adore her.

06-00:46:10

Heggie:

Oh, she loves you so much. I think this moment of the two of them at the piano together playing this duet and talking about singers that meant so much to them when they were growing up and listening to the opera broadcasts together, they mention Eleanor Steber and Leontyne Price and Beverly Sills.

It's very touching and it's sort of like a passing of the mantle and the information and recognizing the connection that flows between them and also because Flicka is so intuitive and in the opera she senses that something isn't right with Arden and she's aching for some reason and that something isn't going well in her core. And Flicka's that way in real life, too. I can't tell you the number of times you've said to me, "Is everything okay?" And I think I'm very good at keeping up the façade but you can always see through it. [laughter]

06-00:47:13

von Stade:

I'm not super close to that many artists. It does happen to—It happens to be that way with Joyce and Suzy.

06-00:47:27

Crawford:

They were all there for your gala, Flicka. Marilyn Horne. Several said they had come from the Met, and Marilyn Horne said she had come from the Mayo Clinic." [laughter]

- 06-00:47:36
von Stade: I remember. I've adored Jackie since birth. A singer I am close friends with is Kiri, who has a different level of fame and everything, and I see something very special about her that a lot of people, she doesn't let see. Extraordinary kindness and extraordinary humor.
- 06-00:48:12
Heggie: Oh, she's so funny. She's one of the funniest people I've ever met. She never lets people see it but she is truly hysterically funny. I have a video I can show you.
- 06-00:48:243
von Stade: Yes, she's just unbelievable. You kind of just want the best for them. Suzy's happy now. Joyce is getting to a happy place it seems in her personal life.
- 06-00:48:40
Heggie: She sure is.
- 06-00:48:42
von Stade: And she's so intelligent that she knows how to pace herself and what she needs for herself to live and all that type of thing.
- 06-00:48:52
Crawford: I heard her at Salle Pleyel in Paris a couple of years ago and her French is minimal, but the French went crazy. They were on their knees to her because she tried to speak French, and I was thinking of you with your impeccable French. People must have been dying with joy.
- 06-00:49:11
von Stade: My remembrance of a French audience is I sang in Bordeaux once with Marty Katz and we did a full recital and it was presented by Telecom. And at the end, we were afterwards standing in the room expecting to greet people, and they rushed at us, and with such power, and then we suddenly realized we were standing in front of the bar. [laughter] It was not our magnificent talent. It was like, you know the French, "I'm getting a drink for free." So we were somewhat humbled by that.
- 06-00:50:21
Crawford: You have a very high French government award.
- 06-00:50:27
Heggie: Your *Legion d'Honneur*?
- 06-00:50:27
Crawford: Isn't that pretty prestigious?
- 06-00:50:28
von Stade: I don't even remember getting that. I think somebody just wrote the name in there. There was no ceremony or anything.

06-00:50:38

Heggie: They just sent you a pen. Did you get a pen in the mail?

06-00:50:41

von Stade: I didn't even get a pen. [laughter] I needn't go into that. When we all worked for Liebermann we were told that we had sort of a leeway with the French government and we weren't going to pay taxes. And then that reversed years later with incredible consequences. Most of my colleagues were still working in France so they paid well over \$100,000 to the French government. So that's my main memory of the French.

06-00:51:30

Crawford: What are you saying?

06-00:51:32

von Stade: Literally, Liebermann said that we'd be excused from taxes.

06-00:51:45

Crawford: Nobody paid taxes in the seventies, did they, in France?

06-00:51:49

von Stade: Maybe not. But then, twenty years later, I got incredible bills from the French government with penalties and everything. Like \$250,000 or something. So I thought, "Well, unless they get me, I'm not going back." And I didn't.

Canada just did it, too. I warn all my friends when they work in Canada. They had a reciprocal agreement with the United States for years but that ended like six years ago and Canada went after a lot of money. It wasn't so bad for me but people who hadn't paid anything for years. Those kinds of things are tricky.

06-00:53:07

Crawford: It's one o'clock. Are you fine with the time? Yes? Well, next I'd like to go to *Winter Roses*.

06-00:53:18

von Stade: Oh, it's beautiful. There's a wonderful poet in San Diego named Charlene Baldridge and she wrote a poem called *Winter Roses* that really moved me. It's about this journey of noticing that things have changed. It starts off, "Winter roses are saddest of all, never knowing a full flowering before frost comes." And it's about things that die before their time. And I thought it was a great way to start this journey of trying to figure out—

06-00:56:04

Heggie: This is amazing, trying to figure out something that passed too soon, and that seemed like the journey Flicka has been on with trying to know her father. I have a little bit of that with my father. I knew him for ten years but you didn't know him at all, your father.

- 06-00:56:23
von Stade: That's almost harder.
- 06-00:56:25
Heggie: But I felt like it was a journey that I thought would be interesting to explore through a song cycle. So it uses different poems and in a way it's a little *Winterreise*. It's about a narrator going through a landscape and noticing different things and how they resonate within them. And so the first song uses a poem by Charlene Baldridge. The second is by Emily Dickinson, called the *Robin*, and there are a couple of poems by Raymond Carver, and then these things that Flicka wrote.
- 06-00:57:09
Crawford: Raymond Carver. Who came up with Raymond Carver?
- 06-00:57:12
Heggie: I did. I love his poetry.
- 06-00:57:14
von Stade: Oh, I do, too.
- 06-00:57:14
Heggie: His poetry is so beautiful. And then Flicka wrote these couple of meditations about her dad and one was about how it's hard to be a hero.
- 06-00:57:30
von Stade: Yes, because it's hard to live with a hero. My mother had to live with a hero and we had to live with a hero and everybody becomes a little bit more perfect when they're gone. When they're actually there they're snoring and eating too much and drinking too much and all that. But when they're gone, especially if they're gone with not a wrinkle on their face in the full bloom of their youth, they achieve an extraordinary perfection.
- I feel it was very hard for my mother to live with that perfection all her life and she never really got over it. She lived from 1949 till the end of her world and it was very hard for her to accept. And we grew up with a hero, someone who looked wonderful in their uniform and was so funny and so terrific. Maybe he would have been a shithead. Oops, I didn't say that. Who knows? I don't think so because all my uncles are so unbelievably funny and adorable.
- 06-00:58:42
Crawford: Uncle Freddy.
- 06-00:58:42
von Stade: Uncle Freddy. Oh, my God, I love Uncle Freddy.
- 06-00:58:50
Heggie: And that sort of led you into the second song that you wrote, which was "I hope you don't mind that I don't miss you."

06-00:58:59

Crawford: So serious and yet your music is cheerful. It's hauntingly cheerful.

06-00:59:06

von Stade: It's sort of resigned. It's like what can you do.

06-00:59:19

Heggie: "I hope you don't mind if I don't miss you." Flicka wrote those words.

06-00:59:23

von Stade: Yes. It's I didn't know you so how can I miss you? I didn't know a father so how can I miss a father? And in some regards that's a benefit to me because I didn't have the emotional connection to you to feel the severing of the ties. There were no ties. So my road was easier than my mother's and also I think it needs to be simple because I think it's something a child would say. My mother tried to get a separation after her second husband left her. And we spent a lot of time in Italy, in Rome, and my brother actually made his first communion in Rome at Saint Peter's, of all the nice places.

06-01:00:22

Heggie: That little place.

06-01:09:253

von Stade: Mom always told me the story that he came home, going home on the train afterwards, he said to her, "Oh, I hope you're not mad." He was like seven, six. "I hope you're not mad that I had a good time." Because her sorrow was so deep that you kind of, as a child you feel you shouldn't have a good time.

06-01:00:51

Crawford: Did she press that on you?

06-01:00:53

von Stade: No, she didn't. I don't believe she did. I just think it was there. It was just there. And kids, they're so courageous. You can have a death in the family and the children are still going to be running around. You don't know exactly what the impact is. You just know that they live so much in the moment that they can't perceive their future, they don't know what it is. And so you wouldn't be deeply sorrowful that they're not there, they're not part of it.

06-01:01:39

Crawford: Jake, how did you put that together? Did you read their letters?

06-01:01:43

Heggie: I read some of the letters and I also talked to Flicka at length about the whole project and the whole process and that it was going to be a journey of figuring this thing out.

06-01:01:54

Crawford: You wrote in the Cal Performances program notes: "We have to find a core of strength to move forward. That's the point of the cycle. Heavy, but with love

we move forward...The fantastic words of Raymond Carver summed it all up.”

06-01:01:56

Heggie:

Raymond Carver. That is the turning point in the cycle where you go through all this struggle and you realize, You know what? I’ll never know. I’ll never know so how can I miss something that I don’t really know or will never know? It happened and here’s where I am today. And I am connected to that person forever and I feel love for that person and I feel sorrow that I didn’t get to know them but what can you do? And then it moves on to this beautiful ending.

06-01:02:32

Crawford:

Thank you both.

[End of Interview]