

Enjoying the best of many worlds

By J. Trout Lowen

PHOTOGRAPHED BY BILL KELLEY

AS A YOUNG TENOR, Dan Dressen thought he would pursue a career as a professional singer, including performances in opera. He saw himself traveling from city to city, from opera company to opera company, performing a handful of classic roles.

But fate intervened before his imagined career really even began. Friend and St. Olaf Music Professor Janis Hardy suggested Dressen inquire about an adjunct position teaching voice at St. Olaf College. At the time he was finishing his doctorate in music arts at the University of Minnesota and had just completed a year-long apprenticeship with the Minnesota Opera Company.

Dressen didn't land the adjunct job. Instead, after what he recalls as "a crucible experience" of interviews and performances, the college offered him a tenure-track position. "I had to think about it, because that was a real change from the way I was thinking about the next few years," Dressen recalls. "Obviously I took it. It was just too good to be true."

Twenty-eight years later, Dressen still feels that way about a career that has included teaching voice and lyric diction at St. Olaf and working as a professional singer in the Twin Cities and across the country. Over the past three decades, Dressen has performed as a soloist with the Minnesota Opera, the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, the Plymouth Music Series, and VocalEssence, to name just a few of his many performance credits.

"I have had, in many ways, the best of many worlds," Dressen says. "I'm very lucky."

And very talented. But Dressen isn't likely to say as much. Despite his current responsibilities as Associate Dean for the Fine Arts, following ten years as chair of the St. Olaf Music Department,



dozens of solo performance credits, editing an anthology of one of his favorite composers (Benjamin Britten), and several appearances on Garrison Keillor's Minnesota Public Radio show *A Prairie Home Companion*, Dressen is modest and humorously self-effacing.

He deflects questions about himself with long answers about the accomplishments of others, such as Pulitzer Prize-winning Minnesota Opera composer Dominick Argento and Philip Brunelle, founder and artist director of VocalEssence, or with digressions about this or that opera, or accolades for the fine arts programs he oversees.

That modesty is typical, says Brunelle, who has worked with Dressen for more than thirty years. "You couldn't ask for someone who is more supportive of his colleagues," Brunelle says.

Dressen is working on a lyric diction guide for singers of Norwegian, and he hopes to develop a translation resource as well. Lyric diction guides already exist for singers in German, French, Italian, and Russian.

A SUPPORTING ROLE

Dressen grew up in a singing family in Pipestone, Minnesota. His mother, who died last year, was an English teacher and the choir director and organist at the First Presbyterian Church in Pipestone for nearly fifty years. His grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins all lived nearby, and the big, close-knit family did much together, including celebrating the holidays, which Dressen remembers as wonderfully raucous affairs. He and his siblings often gathered around the piano to sing, Dressen says, but he is the only one who went on to make a career of it. He sang and acted in school plays and joined the thespian society in high school.

While Pipestone was hardly a hotbed for opera, Dressen says each year its

three elementary schools would combine under the direction of one enthusiastic teacher and mount an operetta. In sixth grade, he claims, he was cast in his first starring role. After high school, Dressen's interest in singing took him east to Westminster College near Pittsburgh, a small liberal arts college with a big music tradition, somewhat like St. Olaf.

While his love of classical music led him to opera, Dressen says it was his voice that determined his career path. "Any serious singer in classical music will be drawn to the opera question," he explains. "And then one just has to wait for one's voice to kind of determine if this is the appropriate place to sing or not."

As a lyric tenor, Dressen has made a career playing supporting rather than lead roles, and that, too, he says, is determined by one's voice. Dressen is often cast to play roles very unlike himself. He has played Basilio, the oily court master in *The Marriage of Figaro*, Valzacchi, a behind-the-scenes manipulator in *Rosenkavalier*, and Sellem, the crazy auctioneer in *Rake's Progress*.

One of the reasons Dressen is so often cast as a shady character, says Brunelle, is that he is a talented singer who can also act. "Certainly, in opera, the difficult thing to cast is not the lead," he says. "The difficult thing is often the supporting role, because they need somebody who can show humor, physical flexibility. Those are hard to find."

Despite his enthusiasm for opera, Dressen doesn't see himself as an "opera singer" but a singer who sings opera, choral music, song recitals, and even some commercials. "I think what happens when one puts one's feet down in a community, one becomes more of a generalist than a specialist," he says.

Specialization may prove to be Dressen's true starring career role. Over the past decade, he has assembled an expansive collection of Nordic art songs at the Halvorson Music Library on campus. The collection has grown into the largest single repository for Nordic art songs in the country. The collection is accessible to anyone. "You just have to go to the St. Olaf Web site and wind your way into the library and find out what's here," he says.

NORDIC ART SONGS

Nordic art songs are written by composers whom we generally recognize as classical composers. The term is a way of differentiating these compositions from folk songs or popular songs. In German they're called *lieder*, in French, *mélodies*, and in Norwegian, *romanser*.

The most well known, and for many Americans the only familiar composer of Norwegian art song is Edvard Grieg, who composed songs for the play *Peer Gynt*. But there are many, many more art song composers throughout Scandinavia whose music is rarely performed, Dressen says. Composers such as Norway's Agathe Backer-Grøndahl, a contemporary of Grieg who wrote 190 songs, and Finland's Yrjö Kilpinen, who was as prolific a composer as Franz Schubert.

Dressen is passionate about changing that and introducing Nordic art songs to a larger audience. He has traveled throughout Scandinavia and met with librarians, singers, and collectors to unearth long-buried scores, many of which are out of print. Because many scores are also in fragile condition, last year he and St. Olaf librarians began digitally scanning the most delicate ones. If it is determined that the compositions are in the public domain, they'll be made available online.

With a grant from the Nygaard Foundation, Dressen is also working on a lyric diction guide for singers of Norwegian, and he hopes to develop a translation resource as well. Lyric diction guides already exist for singers in German, French, Italian, and even Russian. He hopes to have the Norwegian guide available online sometime this fall.

"My goal in having the diction guide online is to get singers to feel as comfortable singing Norwegian as they might be singing French, German, and Italian," Dressen says with a smile. "That means they're at least singing repertoire that they wouldn't have done had they not taken that chance."

And as Dressen knows well, taking a chance can shape a future. 🐉

J. TROUT LOWEN is a freelance writer and editor living in the Twin Cities.