

A Cup of Tea with Dawn Upshaw

Across the street from the Metropolitan Opera
New York City

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Videotaped and transcribed by Amanda MacBlane

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1. Singing in American English vs. Other Languages

FRANK J. OTERI: When your Vernon Duke album came out, I was so excited because I think there's something about your performance that really captures the spirit of both the music and the language in the lyrics. In these songs, there's a consummate marriage of music and text, which is something I feel so-called classical composers and performances can learn a great deal from. Many composers rarely achieve this kind of marriage, and it even more rarely comes across in performances. A lot of vocal music and a lot of singing just isn't English-centric. So, it begs the question: How is English different to sing than French, German, or Italian?

DAWN UPSHAW: Of course, you're speaking to someone whose first language is English—only language really. It's not like I'm fluent in anything else. And I think the way that one spends time on consonants or expresses the connotation of the word through the actual pronunciation of the word becomes much more intense when you're really connected to the language. So I think that what might appear to be an advantage in this situation, being the English language, is actually just an advantage of it being a language that's so close to me. I do think that sometimes in the "classical" music training for singers we don't spend enough time with students making sure that along with sound and clear diction, that the way an m is pronounced or any consonant really, that that can be just as expressive as any interpretive decisions, consciously or unconsciously, you've made. So I do feel that sometimes that gets a little lost in the training and you end up with a more antiseptic kind of diction and pronunciation.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, I always find it strange that there are still some American singers who sing English as if it were Italian, you know, rolling the r's which sounds so strange when you hear English sung that way.

DAWN UPSHAW: I guess there are still teachers that teach that. I think there are instructors that realize that American English doesn't have a rolled r. (laughs) That just comes from the idea, I think, that English from across the waters is the correct English, which I totally disagree with, but I really enjoy the American r. I think that it's gratifying and it's expressive and it can be beautiful.

FRANK J. OTERI: So we're essentially saying in some ways that English English is a different language or at least a different dialect than American English.

DAWN UPSHAW: Sure, sure. Totally different accent. Or they'll say we have the accent.

FRANK J. OTERI: Right. Well, in terms of the music that comes out of this, when you're singing works by British composers versus singing works by American composers or American composers who set British poetry or vice versa, does that come into play at all?

DAWN UPSHAW: I think it should come into play... It gets a little more complicated in a situation like an American composer setting an English text rather than an American text. And I don't think it has to be pronounced in the English way rather than American,

but I think that it's worth considering. So, I think it's just a matter of choice, but I don't think that it should be disregarded nor do I think that there should be some sort of set rule that you always stick by.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, it gets really mixed up in the 20th century, especially with a work like *The Rake's Progress*, which you've done. I think it's an American work, Stravinsky was a naturalized U.S. citizen by the time he wrote it, but English was his third if not fourth language, and the text was by a British poet, Auden. So how do you handle that? Is it an American work? What is it?

DAWN UPSHAW: Well, I think it can be thought of musically as American and still pronounced with an English accent. Well, I've done it different ways, but certainly when I recorded it, that was everyone's wish—to try to have pure English pronunciation.

FRANK J. OTERI: You said that English is your only language. When you're singing things in other languages, how do you get into those heads?

DAWN UPSHAW: When I say it's my only language, I'm just trying to be as realistic as possible. Of course, I spend a lot of time working on trying to get that same connection in other languages. I realize I'll never get there completely. I'll never sing German and feel as comfortable as when I'm singing English. I guess I sing in French more than any other of the foreign languages, and then German and, you know, I've done Polish. I have to find someone with who can help me on both understanding every bit and the sound, trying to be as expressive as possible with the sound.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, do you feel that there are certain techniques that are dictated by the language or are they...how much of it is coming from the language? You've sung Górecki's *Third Symphony* and the Polish language is so different from the English language in so many different ways—you know, you think of these Slavonic languages of having a very different sound, almost a sound of Slavonic singing that's very, very different from Western European singing.

DAWN UPSHAW: Actually, I don't know why but I feel almost more connected, in a sense, to some of those sounds than I do with French. French took me a long time to get a hold of. I feel like I have a good understanding of it now, but there was something about the subtleties. And Polish, I mean, it's all just right there.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's a bunch of consonants, just like English.

DAWN UPSHAW: German, you have to really bite into and go all the way. There's no subtlety, you know, there's nothing that you want to hide behind at all. It's very much right here.

2. Good Vocal Writing for American English

FRANK J. OTERI: So, what is good vocal writing for American English.

DAWN UPSHAW: Well, you know, it's hard. I'll say, "Something that sings," and nobody will really understand what I mean. I suppose, to a great extent, it's a personal choice because, you know, everybody's going to have different reactions. But I do like an expressive line. Not necessarily even a melody or what's thought of as a melody, but something that is truly expressive of the text or something, even if it's not expressive of the text in the way I would interpret the text, something that speaks clearly to me and moves me somehow. I mean, really this is true for any kind of music, but if we're talking about setting the language, I'm not as interested in things that break up the flow so much, unless breaking it up is making a clear point about the interpretation of the text that I understand. So, I am a lover of a good line.

FRANK J. OTERI: Are there things that somebody setting an English text should do differently than if they were setting, say, an Italian text or a French poem?

DAWN UPSHAW: No, I think that if you know these languages well enough you know how we sit in the sound of a given word, the ebb and flow of one word, and I think you need to incorporate that into your piece, keeping that in mind.

FRANK J. OTERI: Half of the burden is the composer's burden to come up with something that works for a text, but half the burden is also the text itself. Are there texts that you just can't sing?

DAWN UPSHAW: I think so. I think that some composers are much more gifted at choosing texts than others and I do think that there are some things that just don't set well.

FRANK J. OTERI: What would be the qualities of something that does set well or the qualities of something that doesn't?

DAWN UPSHAW: Maybe I'm kidding myself, maybe it is a personal choice issue again. Maybe what I mean is more the context and the meaning of the poem. Some things are better left read. (laughs) Sometimes I have trouble with the musical interpretation of poems, you know, with the marriage, that it doesn't work. So, I don't know, maybe with language that's just a personal choice.

FRANK J. OTERI: Could music hurt a text?

DAWN UPSHAW: I certainly think so. (laughs) But, something that I think doesn't work may be life changing to someone else. So I don't think there are any hard and fast rules about this.

FRANK J. OTERI: Can you think of an example of a text that you wouldn't want to see set to music?

DAWN UPSHAW: I hope this won't offend the person who sent it to me...I was sent a piece that set the telephone book. You know, (laughs) part of it, of course, not the whole thing—that would be impossible. But (laughs), but...

FRANK J. OTERI: That could be pretty funny actually.

DAWN UPSHAW: But I didn't look at it to be honest with you, I didn't look at the music because I wasn't interested in singing the telephone book.

FRANK J. OTERI: But there's that old Charles Laughton story that he would recite the telephone book at parties in Hollywood to friends and he made it sound like a great literary monologue.

DAWN UPSHAW: Maybe I should have looked.

FRANK J. OTERI: You still can!

3. The Balancing Act of Interpretation

FRANK J. OTERI: Charles Laughton was a great performer, and his telephone book routine came up in a conversation I had with Michael Tilson Thomas where he was saying that one of the tricks of a great performer is to be able to make anything sound good. You sometimes can make something magical that otherwise might not be.

DAWN UPSHAW: You mean create magic that's not there, so it's kind of like selling the piece. I think there's like this line that I don't want to cross anyway if I can help it. I don't want to feel like I have to sell something. I think hopefully that the piece sends me some place and I can share that or open up that door to the audience. And maybe it's opening a door to a different room than another singer would with this very same piece, but, the times that I've had to do something that I didn't feel strongly about, something I didn't think was a good piece—that's the kind of hard work that I try to stay away from.
(laughs)

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, you said something very interesting in the *Bravo* documentary. When you get into a role, it takes over your entire personality and you lose a sense of who you are, you're no longer yourself. Yet at the same time, later in the documentary, you were talking about how it's important for interpreters to personalize the repertory they're performing and sort of take it over and have it be their personality. A wonderful contradiction! But it's interesting because it's that combination of submission and control that is the great balancing act of interpretation.

DAWN UPSHAW: I think that if something really is working well with me, inside of me, there's an instinctual or subconscious takeover, in a sense, so it all begins with a piece, the best experiences begin with a piece that not only retouches something I already know, but teaches me something new about that or about something else. And so once that happens, I think, yes, with each interpreter there are different ways of adding on a strength, hopefully strengths rather than weaknesses. But there's also something that when it really clicks is subconscious and you know, kind of takes over.

FRANK J. OTERI: So this question of getting into a role, whether it's an operatic role which has the extra layer of drama and acting or a vocal recital, or even an art song, is it harder to recreate a role that you've already heard someone else do, or is it easier to create it out of nothingness, as it were.

DAWN UPSHAW: I don't know that it's really harder. I think I enjoy creating things from a clean slate, probably a little bit more, especially if we're talking about traditional opera, sometimes there's a whole lot to be learned by watching and listening to what's been done for years and years and years and years and years. Other times I feel that that stamp, those decisions and those opinions that have been set for so long end up being a hindrance for repeating it and trying to bring something new to it.

FRANK J. OTERI: That is the quagmire of classical music at the beginning of the 21st century. What can 21st century performers bring to this music that not only itself is old,

in some cases now two or three centuries old, but has a performance history that's been preserved on recordings for over a century. You know, you do the *St. Matthew Passion*—that's what? 1721—but you're not only dealing with 1721, you're dealing with every single recording of it that happened since then. How do you compete against that history? Is the goal to transcend what's been done before? How do you make it new?

DAWN UPSHAW: I can't really think about all of that when I'm working because it just needs to feel true and real to me at the moment. And, of course, all my training comes into the picture and my experiences of hearing those recordings. But ultimately I have to throw that out the window while I'm finding whatever truth there is for me in that moment. I think that that's the only way we can go forward and I think that's why it's so important with new music to really try to appreciate what is unique about any given piece and what the musical language tells us about life and things that we can relate to today.

4. From Folk Music to a Career Emersion in New Music

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, it's interesting, when we were talking to Milton Babbitt across the street at Juilliard a couple of months ago, he was railing about the singers at Juilliard and how they never do new music and how the teachers tell them not to because they can't get work. They're on a career track. It's like training to be an investment banker or a lawyer, there are certain kinds of law you're not going to go into because there's no work in it. But your career refutes that notion. Here you are, a celebrity singer in the classical music world who does mostly new music, and that's what you're known for.

DAWN UPSHAW: This came from wonderful teachers that I happened to have. My primary teacher in college, who happens now to be my father-in-law, was throwing new music at me as often as the traditional repertoire, the older repertoire. And I think it's true that there aren't very many teachers around like David and it's a shame that it's so rare—and then I worked with Jan DeGaetani shortly after that...And not having grown up with classical music in my house, but with folk music and popular music and Broadway, I didn't know what he was doing was so unusual. I grew up in my classical music training with a love and appreciation of all kinds of music and I do think it would do us all a world of good if more voice teachers embraced a wider range of repertoire.

FRANK J. OTERI: What got you excited about music initially? Any specific people or groups that you gravitated toward early on?

DAWN UPSHAW: My parents were quite involved in the neighborhood politics and the civil rights movement so it was Peter, Paul and Mary, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger... That was the music that was not only played a lot in my house on recordings but we also sang as a family when I was very young and sang songs by those groups often.

FRANK J. OTERI: And when you decided to discover music on your own, separate and apart from your parents, what was the first thing you gravitated toward?

DAWN UPSHAW: I went into more popular music, Joni Mitchell who was really important to me and something that just popped in and popped out of my head, a lot of the groups like Blood, Sweat and Tears. And then I also became interested in Broadway music because, partly because of my parents involvement in a community theater group.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, so when you started recording Broadway music, that was almost sort of a homecoming in a way.

DAWN UPSHAW: Robert Hurwitz at Nonesuch knew a little bit about my history, he brought up the idea and I said, "That sounds like fun, why not?"

FRANK J. OTERI: Looking now in the year 2002 at shows like *Showboat* or *Carousel* or *The Most Happy Fellow*—they're classics at this point. They're the past. We're as far away from them as people then were from Dvorak in the 20th century, and the fact that

these shows get revived all the time shows they've become a new standard repertoire in some ways.

DAWN UPSHAW: It's true. Yeah.

FRANK J. OTERI: In the Bravo documentary, you were performing one of the Ives songs with Richard Goode and I thought you brought a Broadway spirit to that music and it came alive in a way that few performances do. The Ives songs are great but a lot of times the delivery just isn't. You made it come alive because of that vernacular background, which I think is in the Ives.

DAWN UPSHAW: There is all sorts of stuff in the Ives, of course, packed in with Americana, but certainly there is some of that.

FRANK J. OTERI: But that is our American tradition. Our American tradition does come out of this other tradition. This is a bit of a leap, but I even heard it in the new Jacob Druckman recording that you're singing on. He was a jazz musician before he became a "concert" composer, whatever that means. And in so-called vernacular music, whether it's Broadway music or folk music, there'd never be a question of does this line sing well with this text? It always does!

DAWN UPSHAW: Yes. (laughs) It starts there maybe. We've strayed a bit I think, maybe that's an important point to try to get back to.

5. Stylistic Plurality and Ambiguity

FRANK J. OTERI: Marketers like to categorize things. But you do so many different kinds of things: classical music, Baroque music, opera... which are different audiences and new music which is a different audience; the Broadway stuff, a different audience, the Bill Crofut album you did, a folk album with yet another audience! Are you different people when you sing these different musics?

DAWN UPSHAW: I don't think so. I hope not. They're all a part of me. They're all a part of so many people and so many performers. I consider myself so fortunate to have done all sorts of different projects and I really have Nonesuch to thank for making a lot of that possible. But I know that it confuses the people that are trying to market the recordings and maybe it confuses the audiences, but that's not a track that I can put myself on or think about, you know, it's not the part of the work that falls in my lap, as a responsibility. Or at least I haven't taken it.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, the interesting thing about Nonesuch is here is a label that you really can't define. What are the recordings they're putting out? And I think that is the goal of the label: to put out each recording as its own unique object.

DAWN UPSHAW: It's very courageous.

FRANK J. OTERI: The fact that they exist inside a large corporate structure is pretty surprising.

DAWN UPSHAW: And a corporate structure, at least with the classical music world, which is kind of crumbling at the moment, but they're still going...

FRANK J. OTERI: But in a way, they're not really a classical label. They're something else.

DAWN UPSHAW: Yeah.

6. Long Term Relationships with Composers

FRANK J. OTERI: The composers that you've been collaborating with closely in the past few years are all "something else" too. John Adams, for example, you know, what is his music? Yeah, certainly we could say he's a classical composer, whatever classical means, but he wrote something that is in essence, music theater with *Ceiling/Sky*, and he did that wacky record *Voodoo Zephyr* which was almost techno. I mean, he's sort of all over the map and you know, his music is so informed by all of the things that your singing is informed by, so it's just this wonderful thing that you've come together in *El Niño*. What is it like working with John?

DAWN UPSHAW: Well, that was really the first time that we had worked on a substantial project together. It was wonderful. First of all, he's a great guy so it was a great pleasure to get to know him and to spend time with him and I was so moved by the piece. It really just blew me away. I was expecting a lot but it really blasted me. (laughs) So it was really an extraordinary experience. I just want to go back for a second because you were talking about how these different composers, at least whom I've been working with recently, also are hard to categorize, and I think that's great. I would love for things to change and for people to stop categorizing. Maybe it's come primarily and continues because of the whole marketing issue, but I think it's so unfortunate in terms of the life of the music. I am so moved by *El Niño*; I don't really care where it came from or what it's pointing to so much or what it means musically in terms of its place in the world musically. All I know is that in a sense it changed my life. And that happens to me every once in a while and, you know, I'm very thankful that music can do that for me and does that for people, but that's what's most important and that's what's so rare.

FRANK J. OTERI: John Harbison is another composer whose music is not easy to describe. *Gatsby* is a wonderful work, one moment it's modernistic, another moment it's a 1920s Gershwin musical, other times it's neoromantic. And sometimes it's sort of all these things at the same time and then some!

DAWN UPSHAW: Yeah, of course, very, very, very different than John Adams. I've worked with John Harbison for a much longer time than at least at this point with John Adams.

FRANK J. OTERI: You did that wonderful *Chorale Cantata*.

DAWN UPSHAW: Oh, yes, with Peggy.

FRANK J. OTERI: A gorgeous, gorgeous piece.

DAWN UPSHAW: Having done so much of John Harbison's music before, it was very interesting and gratifying to see where he was going to take all of this in *The Great Gatsby*.

FRANK J. OTERI: And it's being mounted again.

DAWN UPSHAW: And we're bringing it back, the Met brings it back this spring, in May.

FRANK J. OTERI: There's another composer you've worked a lot with whose music is finally beginning to get attention in this country, Kaija Saariaho. You did this gorgeous, gorgeous piece of hers that is just your voice and electronics, *Lonh*.

DAWN UPSHAW: Her music is a whole other world, a completely different world. In fact, that's what's sort of so intriguing to me. I think with Kaija, I'm sort of more amazed and in awe of something that I don't quite understand yet. In some cases I feel like I understand it completely and having done her opera *L'amour de loin* a couple times now and we'll do it again in the future—this summer in Santa Fe—I feel like I'm getting closer, but all I know is when I first heard her music, it was like, Wow! What is that? That is a totally different voice, very individual sounding, you know. With a very strong kind of identity and that really drew me in. There are different ways that we get drawn in, you know. But hers was like a whole new sound world.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, I find it so interesting that when you get involved with a composer it becomes a long-term relationship. You've done at least three different pieces of Kaija's now that I'm aware of...

DAWN UPSHAW: Yes.

FRANK J. OTERI: And quite a few of Harbison's: the *Mirabai Songs*, the *Chorale Cantata*, the opera and...

DAWN UPSHAW: *Simple Daylight*, the song cycle.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah, and so you have these long-term relationships with composers. So do you feel that having an ongoing role as an interpreter of these composers has shaped the subsequent works that they create? What do you feel your impact is as an interpreter on their work?

DAWN UPSHAW: Well, I would hope it would be of some benefit to them (laughs) to have a relationship where they can see the growth of, not just their music, but maybe how I react vocally to something. If they're trying to learn about writing for singers... I know I certainly benefit from the experience because it's just always more pleasing to, and gratifying to really dig into a subject or dig into the music. For instance, if I'm working on Debussy songs, the more Debussy I can listen to at the time, the better. I learn more and I will have a different kind of understanding about those particular songs. So certainly working with new music, assuming I like the music, the more I can get, the better.

FRANK J. OTERI: And you're working now with Osvaldo Golijov?

DAWN UPSHAW: Yes. Yes.

FRANK J. OTERI: I heard a little snippet of something that you did with Kronos.

DAWN UPSHAW: It was probably *Lúa Descolorida*. Osvaldo Golijov is somebody who is writing music that just goes straight to my gut and my heart. I mean, I feel a connection, maybe like nothing else before. An immediate sort of connection with the energy and the sentiment and I think he's incredible. I'm excited about all of the attention he's getting.

7. Future Projects

FRANK J. OTERI: So, fantasy projects, future projects, composers you'd love to tackle whose music you haven't tackled yet.

DAWN UPSHAW: Well, certainly Osvaldo. We will do several projects in the future. And I would love to do some more John Adams and we will repeat *El Niño* a few times in the next few seasons, but even some new works if he had time and interest. We talked a little about that. And Kaija, I'm excited that many different opera companies seem interested in *L'amour de loin*. I think that that will continue to receive a lot of attention and I'm looking forward to that.

FRANK J. OTERI: Older repertoire that you would love to dig into, American or otherwise?

DAWN UPSHAW: Older repertoire! Um, well, this isn't real old, actually I've been wanting to make room in my schedule to do some Kurtag for quite a while and I do think if I look at my short list of things that I would really like to get to before I stop singing, which is a ways down the road...

FRANK J. OTERI: I hope so!

DAWN UPSHAW: Kurtag is certainly there. And more Debussy. I'm kind of a Debussy nut. There's a small group of composers, Debussy's certainly a part of it, who, you know, I almost feel as though I'm having an affair with the music or something when I'm working on it because I am so intensely moved.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, it was so exciting to hear that new Druckman recording because there's a whole repertory by American composers that needs to be kept alive. It is repertoire. It's been done, it's been premiered and you know, it's been shelved somewhere. It had its performance; it didn't happen again. There's so much of this stuff that needs advocacy. Or even the Ives songs...

DAWN UPSHAW: I would love to do a huge Ives project sometime.

FRANK J. OTERI: I would love for you to do it!

8. Family and Career

FRANK J. OTERI: You're here today with your lovely daughter who's just sitting over there off camera.

DAWN UPSHAW: Yes! Very patiently I might add.

FRANK J. OTERI: How do you balance your family and your musical career?

DAWN UPSHAW: It's a day-by-day venture. Certainly having my husband home full time with the kids is a big answer to the question. And you know, life's complicated. Life's complicated for lots of people, I think, no matter what you do. Perhaps what ends up being a little bit harder on me and on my family is my being away for extended periods of time, but we have family rules about that that we stick to about how long I'll stay away without seeing them and then they'll come and spend time with me. In the end, even though sometimes it's complicated, it is really the focal point of my life. My top priorities begin there and I think that it affects everything that I do in a wonderful way. Having that unit, that love that comes from those relationships that touches on everything that I do. I'm sure that's true no matter what anybody does for a career. But what I enjoy is how I can bring that into music making.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, to turn the question upside down, how does the music making affect you as a parent? Are you constantly a missionary for the cause of music? I suppose we should probably turn the camera around for that one (laughs)...

DAWN UPSHAW: I don't think I'm pushing music so much in the house. I mean, the kids take music lessons. If they didn't want to, we wouldn't have them take music lessons. I've talked a little bit about how the greatest music along with touching me teaches me something. Spiritually sometimes, it teaches me emotionally, it teaches me even maybe how to be more loving and generous. There is something about music making that keeps all of that, the healing aspects of music and of love, alive.

FRANK J. OTERI: And new music?

DAWN UPSHAW: Any kind of music.

FRANK J. OTERI: In the household?

DAWN UPSHAW: New music... Well, we listen to pop radio stations. Right now we're playing the Beatles all the time, the kids are really into the Beatles and so it changes and sometimes we listen to, I still listen a lot to Steely Dan and so they hear all kinds of music in the house. Even just if they come to my rehearsals, of course, they're hearing all kinds of music. I think music adds so much to living whether, you know, whether it is your source of income or not and that's what I hope for my children is that they will have an appreciation and a love music that will allow music to touch their lives the way that I think it can which is a wonderful gift.