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Doctor to Diva , Stagehand and Opera Lover at the Met

AN MONA HARTOCOLLIS APRIL 27, 2015

Forty-five minutes before curtain on a Wednesday night in March, the soprano Diana Damrau was not sure she would be able to go on that night in the title role of Jules Massenet’s “Manon.”

Ms. Damrau had sent a text to the Metropolitan Opera’s doctor on call: “I have no voice.”

For the doctor, Jenny Cho, it was just another night at the opera. Calmly, Dr. Cho cooked up what she called an “inhalation concoction” and headed to the diva’s dressing room.

Would Ms. Damrau be able to perform?

“I’ve known her a long time,” Dr. Cho said. “She’ll sing through anything.”

That old cliché “Is there a doctor in the house?” is not likely to be heard at the Met.

Dr. Cho is one of several physicians who act as the Met’s doctor on call, each serving once a week in exchange for a free night at the opera and the chance to spend time near singers they admire. The doctors’ job is not only to minister to the strained larynxes and occasional fractures of the cast and crew, but also to treat members of the audience, who are most commonly felled by preperformance overindulgence in wine and rich restaurant food.

“It’s strictly volunteer, so you really have to enjoy it,” Dr. Cho said. And she does: “I always say a bad day at the Met is better than a spectacular day

anywhere else.”

The Met does have its bad days. Dr. Cho has treated three opera patrons for heart attacks, using a defibrillator to resuscitate two of them. All three survived, though one, a woman, hit Dr. Cho after regaining consciousness and finding her top had been torn open. (In the most serious cases, ambulances are called.)

Potential hazards lurk on and behind stage as well. During the Met’s most recent performances of Wagner’s “Ring” cycle, some of the singers had to slide down a 45-ton piece of scenery (there were mishaps, but no injuries). Stagehands strain their backs and, occasionally, break bones while moving heavy equipment. Anthony Jahn, another Met doctor, recalled treating the wrenched ankle of the lead in “Tosca” after she landed badly after jumping off a wall in her suicide scene.

This season, the opera has been rather prone to misfortune. Michael Fabiano, who was filling in for an ailing tenor in “Lucia di Lammermoor,” cut his head on a light while running offstage, and Dr. Cho had to patch him up before his final scene. In some recent performances of “Don Carlo,” one tenor or another got sick and had to be replaced.

Dr. Cho, 51, is an ear, nose and throat specialist, so her appreciation for opera singers is something like the appreciation a master mechanic has for fine cars — she understands what is under the chassis and what makes them purr. Many of her private patients, including Ms. Damrau, are opera singers.

Dr. Cho had never seen an opera until she was in medical school, when she decided she should travel to Europe. In Vienna, she and a friend saw “La Bohème,” and Dr. Cho, who had studied piano, was smitten.

At the Met, there are seven regular doctors on call, one for each weeknight performance as well as for the two Saturday shows (Sunday is traditionally a day off), plus substitutes who fill in as needed. Not all are voice doctors. At least one is an internist, and another is an emergency room doctor.

The waiting list to become a Met doctor is long; like justices on the Supreme Court, one must leave before another can join. Dr. Cho, who covers Wednesdays, worked as a substitute for several years before a spot in the

rotation opened up about 12 years ago.

Dr. Jahn, 68, who covers Mondays, began as a substitute 33 years ago and is now the Met's medical director, which is also a volunteer job. Dr. Jahn, an ear, nose and throat specialist and conservatory-trained classical pianist, has seen plenty of operas multiple times, but does not mind the repetition. "You don't get tired of seeing the same painting by Monet," he said.

Over the next four hours on this Wednesday, Dr. Cho flitted back and forth between BB1, the \$165 orchestra seat reserved for the house doctors — on the aisle and far enough back to permit an inconspicuous escape — and the labyrinthine dressing rooms, soothing the nerves and vocal cords of members of the cast.

In her seat, she kept one ear cocked for the sound of standing-room patrons fainting. "I can hear the thud," she said.

But the main concern was Ms. Damrau, who had been fighting off a cold — a hazard, Dr. Cho noted, of being the mother of two young children. (Germs are such a menace to opera singers that Peter Gelb, general manager of the Met, has had hand-sanitizer dispensers installed throughout the house.)

Ms. Damrau's understudy, or "cover," was ready to step in. Just before curtain, Dr. Cho saw Mr. Gelb scooting through the performers' lounge, past a picked-over cake, to check on the singer.

He told Ms. Damrau that **Bill and Hillary Rodham Clinton** were in the audience, with their daughter, Chelsea, and her husband, Marc Mezvinsky. They were there, opera insiders said, because Chelsea Clinton is a friend of the tenor Vittorio Grigolo, who was playing the Chevalier, Manon's true love.

Dr. Cho already knew that the Clintons were there. "I didn't tell her," Dr. Cho said, reasoning that Ms. Damrau did not need any added stress.

Ms. Damrau chose to go on. Even with a cold, her voice, unamplified, reached to the top tier.

Dr. Cho likened her patient to an athlete. "People who aren't singers can't sing even if they want to," she said. "People who are professional singers can sing even if they don't want to."

After the first intermission, Dr. Cho raced through the red-carpeted

passageways backstage, past eerie, full-length portraits of Maria Callas and Mario Del Monaco, past racks of costumes, to Ms. Damrau’s dressing room.

The singer’s coughs could be heard from the hallway. Stripped of her stage finery, Ms. Damrau looked vulnerable in a waffle-weave robe, wig cap and fuchsia high heels, as three women fussed over her, applying wardrobe, wig and makeup.

Dr. Cho massaged Ms. Damrau’s throat and gave her a nebulizer with her specially compounded remedy to inhale. “Now it’s the big scene,” Ms. Damrau said.

As wardrobe took over, Dr. Cho made the rounds. Michael Todd Simpson, who was performing as Lescaut, Manon’s cousin, complained of allergies. “I know what you need; just call me,” Dr. Cho said, soothingly.

Dr. Cho politely reclaimed her seat in the audience from someone who had taken it in her absence. Pulling out her opera glasses, she peered at Ms. Damrau, who was about to play her torrid reunion scene with Mr. Grigolo.

Knowing that Ms. Damrau was sick, Dr. Cho expected she would not kiss her co-star. But she did. While everyone else was thinking, “How romantic,” Dr. Cho said later that she was thinking, “I just hope Grigolo has a strong immune system.”

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