

Go to a Section

Search:

NYTimes.com > New York Region

Beyond High C, High Technology

By WILLIAM H. HONAN

For the love of opera, Stefan Zucker trained to reach the upper limits of the tenor's range.

For the love of opera, Stefan Zucker spent 12 years of Saturday nights as the host of "Opera Fanatic," a radio show on WKCR-FM that featured rare recordings, interviews with performers and call-ins.

And for the love of opera, Stefan Zucker has reinvented himself as a techno geek.

Mr. Zucker, 55, has learned that the computer can be his friend. After Columbia University, the owner of WKCR-FM, dropped Mr. Zucker as the host of "Opera Fanatic" in 1994, he turned his efforts to preserving early opera recordings and films through his nonprofit Bel Canto Society. There, at www.belcantosociety.org, fellow fanatics can hear his old radio programs and purchase his remastered CD's, DVD's and videos.

As a result, Mr. Zucker — a cheerful, shaggy-bearded heavyweight — says that when he is not listening to music, he likes nothing more than to curl up with a current issue of the Journal of the



Vincent Laforet/The New York Times
Stefan Zucker with recording equipment he uses at Corporate Duplication Solutions in Teterboro, N.J.

ARTICLE TOOLS

- [E-Mail This Article](#)
- [Printer-Friendly Format](#)
- [Most E-Mailed Articles](#)
- [Reprints](#)

ARTICLE TOOLS SPONSORED BY **STARBUCKS.COM**

TIMES NEWS TRACKER

- Topics Alerts
- [Opera](#)
 - [Recordings \(Audio\)](#)
 - [Classical Music](#)
 - [New York City](#)
 - [Create Your Own | Manage Alerts](#)

Advertisement

IBM.

Can you see it?

NYT Store

Photo: Metropolitan Opera, 1038

Audio Engineering Society.

"I started as a singer," Mr. Zucker said, "and soon became fascinated by the way in which singing had evolved."

Recently, Mr. Zucker acquired for Bel Canto Society a live recording of a 1939 "Il Trovatore" performance starring Jussi Bjoerling and Gina Cigna. The original was made on a 78 r.p.m. recording marred by fluctuations in speed and audible clicks and pops.

Mr. Zucker said that it could take as much as three hours on a digital audio work station to delete just one of the 900-odd clicks or pops on the original without compromising the music. He also adjusted playback speed in 10th- and 20th-of-a-percent increments, making more than 500 corrections. "If you don't get the speed right," he explained, "not only is the sound off pitch but it is also off in timbre, or sonority." The remastering took five months.

"It took that long," he said, "because you have to isolate the sounds you don't want and then suppress them, and maybe restore some if you think you've gone too far. It's a very delicate process. Bel Canto Society sells the two-disk CD set for \$19.95, so you can see this isn't a get-rich-quick scheme."

He goes to similar lengths for his film restorations. To restore "Carnegie Hall," a 1947 film that includes performances in the hall by Jan Peerce, Fritz Reiner, Risë Stevens, Ezio Pinza, Bruno Walter, Lily Pons and a dozen others, Mr. Zucker struck a deal with a British collector who had a 35-millimeter print and wanted to trade it for a number of videos. Then Mr. Zucker kept searching for additional prints, eventually splicing together bits and pieces from 13 separate prints.

Why go to so much trouble? "Well," Mr. Zucker said, "when people watch and listen to the finished product, I see them leap with joy.

"I'm also motivated by the fact that I'm in a race against time. I'm trying to preserve these films before they disintegrate and before the collectors



Photo: Metropolitan Opera, 1939
Price: \$195. [Learn More.](#)

Real Estate

[Sign up for E-Mail Alerts!](#)

Receive the latest property listings in your inbox...

[Sell or Rent Your Home](#)

Post a property listing on NYTimes.com...

[Find a Mover](#)

Get instant quotes for full-service, self-service and last-minute moves...

[Get Mortgage Quotes](#)

Get instant mortgage quotes and calculate payments...

before they disintegrate and before the collectors die and the films get discarded."

Mr. Zucker started off as a tenor, albeit a controversial one. In 1980, the Guinness Book of World Records called him "the world's highest tenor" for having hit an A above high C and holding it for 3.8 seconds. That was at Town Hall on Sept. 12, 1972.

He was singing the role of Salvini in the world premiere of the fourth and final version (1829) of Bellini's "Adelson e Salvini." It was a world premiere because no one in modern times had dared to sing it as written, he said.

Mr. Zucker's voice shot up to a series of notes well above the usual tenor top of high C, evoking shouts, groans and hisses, as well as poor reviews. The high notes were like "the scratching of a fingernail on a blackboard," the critic Donal Henahan wrote in The New York Times.

But Mr. Zucker had his supporters, too. At one point during the performance, Mr. Zucker said, a woman in the audience hit a man who refused to stop booing. And one critic called Mr. Zucker "a male Joan Sutherland."

His singing may have its detractors, but his years on the radio earned him many fans. Schuyler Chapin, a former general manager of the Metropolitan Opera and former commissioner of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs who was also a guest on "Opera Fanatic," said of Mr. Zucker: "His knowledge and passion about opera are exhilarating. He is the factual definition of an opera fanatic.

"The world today is much too bland," Mr. Chapin continued, "and when you come across someone like Stefan Zucker, who cares so deeply about this art form, you know you have found something extraordinary."

The tenor Franco Corelli, who was also a guest on Mr. Zucker's radio show, agreed. Speaking from his home in Italy, Mr. Corelli said: "Zucker is important to music. He knows everything about opera "

opera.

Since Mr. Zucker spends his days bringing old recordings back to life, it is no surprise that his favorite tenors are long gone. "Among the tenors who ravish my soul," he said, "is Francesco Tamagno, who died in 1905. He had what the Italians call 'fuoco sacro,' which means sacred fire, or depth of feeling."

"Also in contention for the title of 'greatest,' " he said, "is Fernando de Lucia, who died in 1925. He used rubato — the lengthening and shortening of notes — for tremendous effect."

"I also have to include Giovanni Martinelli, who died in 1969," Mr. Zucker said. "Martinelli served the composer."

The final entry in his pantheon of tenors is Tito Schipa, who died in 1965. Mr. Zucker studied with Schipa in the years just before his death. "He had, in a way, the most lyrical sensibility of them all, the most elegiac, sublime and endearing."

But ask about Enrico Caruso and be ready to duck.

"What I deplore is not Caruso's voice, which was sonically opulent," he said, "but that he had relatively little musical nuance and variety of dynamics. In short, Caruso lacked musical imagination."

"We must ask why Caruso was booed when singing 'L'Elisir d'Amore' at Naples in 1901," Mr. Zucker said. "It was because the audience thought he had forsaken nuance and delicacy. And they were right."

Speaking of critics, how did Mr. Zucker bear up under his own poor reviews? "I don't expect to make it to the Met," he said, "but, look, I'm on the Internet."

RELATED ARTICLES

▪ [CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK: Giving Those Callas Bootleg Tapes a Road Test](#) (January 9, 2003) **\$**

TOP NEW YORK REGION ARTICLES

▪ [In Twist, Defendant Admits to Stabbing in '91 Racial Unrest](#)

Advertiser Links

[Spring adventures in Dutchess County](#)

- [MUSIC: An Operatic Gumshoe Is on a New Case](#)
(September 29, 2002) \$
 - [MUSIC: The Rush to Opera on DVD: Let's Not Get Carried Away](#) (September 22, 2002) \$
 - [RECORDINGS: With DVD's, A Box Seat On the Sofa](#)
(July 21, 2002) \$
 - [MUSIC: HIGH NOTES: A Match Made In Heaven \(I.e., Mozart\)](#) (July 21, 2002) \$
- Find more results for [Opera](#) and [Recordings \(Audio\)](#) .



Expect the World every morning with Home Delivery of The New York Times Newspaper.

[Click Here for 50% off](#)

[Copyright 2003 The New York Times Company](#) | [Home](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [Help](#) | [Back to Top](#)