

Pit Stop

Fred Hand shares stories of playing guitar at the Metropolitan Opera.

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Frederic Hand has had one of the most interesting careers a guitarist, performer composer, arranger, or musician could ask for. His versatile performances range from early music to jazz to his own compositions, and he has been a guest artist at the Mostly Mozart Festival, the Marlboro Music Festival, with the New York Philharmonic, the Waverly Consort, and the Orchestra of St. Luke's, among others. As a composer, his scores have been featured in films starring Leonardo Di Caprio and Robert DeNiro (*This Boy's Life*), Dustin Hoffman and Meryl Streep (*Kramer vs Kramer*) and Sean Connery (*The Next Man*), as well as television programs *Sesame Street*, *As the World Turns* and *The Guiding Light*. He has also shared televised camera time with Meg Ryan, Marisa Tomei and Anne Heche.

For 20 years, Fred has been the official guitarist for the Metropolitan Opera in New York City. This esteemed position has given him the opportunity to work with some of the finest musicians in the music world, including international opera superstars Placido Domingo and Luciano Pavarotti as well as conductors James Levine, Julius Rudel, Vladimir Gergiev, Sir Andrew Davis, Marcello Viotti, Carlos Kleiber, and many more. I asked Fred when and how he landed this exciting opportunity.

Fred Hand: Leonid Bolotine, who started the guitar program at Mannes and was my teacher, played both mandolin and guitar with the Metropolitan Opera for many years. After he retired there were a couple of interim guitarists. In the spring of 1986 a new production was scheduled which had a score requiring a lutenist to play on stage. I had been performing regularly with the early music group "Calliope." The founder of that group is also a percussionist with the Met and he recommended me to play that opera. After performing the run of performances in New York, the Met invited me to go on tour with them. Immediately following the tour they created a permanent position for guitar and lute, and appointed me to the chair.

Urban Guitar: *How long do you plan to stay?*

Fred Hand: Why, are you looking for a gig? (Just kidding) Bolotine played well into his late seventies, and the current tympanist and celeste player at the Met are both eighty-two. With twenty years experience, I feel that I do a better job now than ever before. As long as I continue to enjoy it and am able, I'll be at the Met for quite a while.

Urban Guitar: *Do you remember your first opera?*

Fred Hand: The first opera that I played was "Francesca Da Rimini" by Zandonai. Placido Domingo was the tenor and James Levine conducted, which made it a somewhat daunting experience at first. But for some reason, I felt quite comfortable. It was exhilarating to perform in such illustrious company, not to mention the thrill of experiencing the sound of that orchestra.

Urban Guitar: *Do you have any favorite operas to perform in?*

Fred Hand: I guess that my favorite opera is "The Barber of Seville." The first reason being that because it is scheduled so much, there's plenty of work. It also has a lovely guitar part. In one aria I get to accompany the principal clarinetist, then the tenor, and in the orchestral passages, play a kind of "rhythm" guitar that really drives the pulse of the orchestra. The second aria is completely solo (aside from the voice). It's an opportunity to really be very expressive. It's also fun to accompany the various interpretations that singers will have, and to stay right with them. The music is in a style where I feel free to add ornaments, portamenti and revoice chords and arpeggios. The aria is quite a lovely moment in the opera. I also enjoy performing in the stage band for Alban Berg's "Wozzeck." In addition to it being such a great masterpiece, it's quite a challenge.

Urban Guitar: *How do conductors treat the guitar? Is there a respect for it, or is seen as a novelty in operas?*

Fred Hand: Conductors respect the music first and foremost. When the score calls for a guitar, they are just as demanding of the guitarist as they are with any other instrument. Of course, a guitar playing with the orchestra is a novelty, but I've always been treated very respectfully.

There is a lot of good-natured kidding from fellow musicians. Very often the guitar part requires playing in only one or two arias. After that, I discretely leave the pit. As I'm walking past them, usually someone will say "you mean you not staying for the third act?" I usually respond: "There's a third act?"

Urban Guitar: *Who are some of your favorite conductors to work with?*

Fred Hand: I have different favorites for different reasons. I love the Italian conductor Maurizio Benini. In addition to being an excellent musician, he is very appreciative of the orchestra's fine playing and he shows it. He always gives you a little smile after you play a solo. I also very much enjoyed working with Sir Andrew Davis for similar reasons. He has a very relaxed way of handling the orchestra and at the same time, he gets what he

wants from them. He also has a great sense of humor. Carlos Kleiber is an amazing conductor. He uses his entire body to communicate what he wants from the orchestra.

Working with James Levine can be deeply rewarding. You learn so much about music from working with him. But the maestro can be incredibly demanding and sometimes he becomes fixated on a particular passage or part. When his gaze is aimed at your direction, it can feel quite tense. On the other hand, he is such a great musician and I respect him so much. When he's satisfied, I know that I've done my job well.

Urban Guitar: *Have you ever had any bad experiences with conductors or the orchestra?*

Fred Hand: Not really. But once on tour, the sound man mistakenly boosted the lute (I had a wireless remote mic) to the point where it drowned out the entire orchestra and chorus. Levine was really angry, but fortunately, not at me. I heard him screaming at the sound man during intermission: "What do you think this is, a f---ing Jimmy Hendrix concert?"

Urban Guitar: *Are any of the other instrumentalists ever surprised to see a guitarist beside them?*

Fred Hand: Yes, the other musicians are usually surprised to see a guitarist sitting in the pit. The sight of a guitar always seems to produce the same reaction: a smile and a sense of curiosity. The other members of the orchestra are enormously supportive. Everyone seems to love the guitar.

Urban Guitar: *Has playing in the Met helped you become a better musician?*

Fred Hand: Most definitely. First, there is the whole experience of being an orchestral musician. Guitarists are primarily trained to be soloists. After college, when I started playing freelance jobs with orchestras, I had zero experience following a conductor. Just learning to follow and to stay tight with the band was quite an education. Then there is the whole art of accompanying a singer: It's all about listening and reacting. Aside from that, there is a whole new world of music to experience and learn from. As different musical considerations are discussed, your understanding of music grows deeper. There are musical issues that come up (such as very fine points of phrasing and articulation) that would not normally be a big part of a guitarist's training. Then, of course, you're also playing with the best musicians, conductors and singers in the world. How could that not influence your own growth as an artist?

Urban Guitar: *Are there any fond memories or stories you have of your years in the pit?*

Fred Hand: One time, moments before I had to accompany the chorus just off stage, I rested my lute on a chair for a moment (somewhat precariously) so that I could tie my shoelace. Just then, a chorus member walked by and inadvertently knocked the lute off the chair. The chanterelle (the wooden tuning peg for the top string) broke completely off along with the string. Both were dangling from the lute. The backstage conductor looked horrified and asked: "What are you going to do?" I had no idea. Almost immediately after, the piece began and I had to play my part with out the use of the first string. After that I had just enough time to pull off the dangling piece of wood and string before walking out on stage and to play the next piece. The absurdity of the situation hit me. I had to suppress the growing feeling to burst out laughing. Standing there in front of the audience, the orchestra and James Levine, I remember thinking, "Wow, this is going to be interesting." I really don't know what notes I played that night. Certainly, not many were from the written part. Somehow, in a situation like that, you just get through it. Looking back at it, what started out as a nightmare actually turned into a wonderful moment. I think that you can learn so much when things don't go according to plan.

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