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Amanda Holden, opera translator and librettist with 'a blessed ability to write words that are easily singable' – obituary

She would start by making a literal translation, then her rendition would emerge, echoing the original, and always 'to be heard, not read'

By Telegraph Obituaries

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Amanda Holden, who has died aged 73, was a prolific translator and librettist whose work was heard in opera houses around the world; she was also the founder and editor of the Viking Opera Guide, working her way through hundreds of fascinating entries with her co-editors Stephen Walsh and Nicholas Kenyon.

Amanda Holden translated more than 60 operas by composers ranging from Monteverdi to Gruber, and for directors including Graham Vick, Jonathan Miller and Tim Albery. She described translators as being “chameleon-like writers” who must match the inflection, sense, rhyme, clarity and singability of the original text, regardless of its language. They must hear what is on the page and try to ensure that the new words are “written to be sung and heard, not read or said”.

It was largely a solitary occupation, though she was always keen to attend rehearsals, answering the inevitable queries that arose from singers and directors. “Different tenors like different vowels on different high notes,” she said.

Her first task when translating a new work was getting to know the piece. “Recordings run 24/7 at home and away, so a process of osmosis fixes the score in my head,” she explained in Opera magazine in 2015. Meanwhile, she would make a literal translation of the original words. “With a challenge like Rameau, I type out the ancient French text just to try to get the libretto into my head – pedantic, but useful,” she added.

Eventually her translation would begin to emerge, echoing the original libretto as closely as possible while making the vocal lines fit like a glove. “The most important advice I’d give to a wannabe translator is to remember you are writing words to be heard, not read,” she said.

Amanda Holden also wrote the libretti for several new operas, including Mark-Anthony Turnage’s *The Silver Tassie* for English National Opera in 2000, for which she and the composer won an Olivier Award. Her libretto for Brett Dean’s *Bliss* (2010) involved recasting Peter Carey’s darkly comic novel relating the vicissitudes of an advertising executive into a three-act, singable format.

It was premiered in Sydney by Opera Australia in 2010 before coming to the Edinburgh International Festival that summer. “She seemed to understand straight away what I wanted,” Dean observed at the time.

Amanda Juliet Warren was born on January 19 1948, the daughter of Sir Brian Warren, medical officer to the Grenadier Guards and later Sir Edward Heath’s private physician, and his first wife Dame Josephine Barnes, a prominent gynaecologist and the first woman to be president of the British Medical Association.

Her parents were amateur musicians and took their daughter to her first opera, Bizet’s *Carmen*, starring Joan Sutherland, in 1955 on her sister’s 12th birthday. She recalled

wearing short white socks and being mesmerised by the pretty woman in the red frock but totally appalled when she was stabbed at the end.

“I didn’t think she’d done anything wrong,” Amanda Holden said. “So I was completely nonplussed when she reappeared, to uproarious applause, for her curtain call. I turned to my sister and said, ‘I thought she was dead’. The reply was swift: ‘Shut up stupid, that’s the woman who will sing the next performance’”

She was educated at Benenden School and Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, reading Music under Egon Wellesz and Edmund Rubbra. As president of the university opera club she commissioned a translation of Aeschylus’s Agamemnon from her fellow student, Anthony Holden, who she married in 1971.

Amanda Holden continued her studies at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London and taught music in Watford before starting the music therapy department at Charing Cross Hospital. She retained her association with the Guildhall, teaching piano and working as an accompanist.

In 1985 she learnt that ENO, under the musical directorship of Mark Elder, urgently needed a new translation of Mozart’s Don Giovanni because the original translator had been offered work on the musical Les Misérables. Her husband suggested that they do it, “and six weeks later there was a draft translation on Elder’s desk”.

The result was a work of outstanding clarity that was praised by the critic John Higgins, who described the Holden double act as the Edward J Dent of the 1980s, sharing his delight in outrageous rhymes, “the magpie instinct for the clichés of speech that stick in the mind and a blessed ability to write words that are easily singable”.

An early trial by fire came in 1986 when Amanda Holden became lost while trying to find the venue in Leeds where her translation of Puccini’s *La bohème* was being rehearsed by Opera North. She arrived dishevelled and late, slipping into a corner where no one took much notice of her until there was a problem with the words and she was asked what exactly the translation meant.

“The room stood still and focused on me,” she said. In later years she was less daunted, adding that “such moments are an exhilarating challenge and, when the answer comes, the relief is a bit like answering a baffling crossword clue.”

The
VIKING
Opera
GUIDE

Edited by
AMANDA HOLDEN
with
NICHOLAS KENYON
and
STEPHEN WALSH

Preface by SIR COLIN DAVIS

Her Viking Opera Guide was a labour of love, seven years in the making

Over the following decades she also translated lieder, such as Schumann's *Dichterliebe* for the Southern Cathedrals Festival in 2010, and created surtitles for opera houses and subtitles for television, including the aria texts for television transmission during every Cardiff Singer of the World competition since 1989.

In 1994 she wrote the scripts for a series of truncated 27-minute animated operas on television including *Das Rheingold*, *Carmen* and *The Barber of Seville*. "I just hope they won't ask me to do *Götterdämmerung*," she quipped.

The Viking Opera Guide came about because she felt that *Kobbé*, the opera-goers' bible, did not include enough operas and its synopses were too long. It became something of a labour of love, stretching to more than seven years of research.

Her list of contributors seemed as lengthy as her list of composers: [John Tyrrell](#) "cheerfully snapped up all the Czechs"; handwritten articles came from Robin Holloway; and Leslie Howard "took time off from recording Liszt's complete piano works to write on Liszt's only opera". One author refused to complete his assignments, though another called about his VAT during Sunday lunch.

It was followed by the Penguin Guide to Opera and a concise edition. In 2016 came an online version that could be kept constantly up to date with composers and their latest works, such as Gerald Barry (*The Importance of Being Earnest*), George Benjamin (*Written on Skin*) and Jonathan Dove (*The Adventures of Pinocchio*).

Amanda Holden, who enjoyed bird watching, gardening and swimming, was admired for her straight-talking manner. She was adept at pricking pomposity, both in the rehearsal room or in the stalls of the Royal Opera House, and was not afraid to sprinkle vulgarities if the plot merited them, as in her racy translation of Handel's *Partenope* for ENO in 2008, where the smoking, drinking, gambling characters are liable to declare: "Oh shit!"

Her marriage to Holden was dissolved in 1988 and she is survived by their three sons. She once took them to see Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, after which one of them said: "Thanks for taking us to a play about a mother from Hell called Amanda."

She is also survived by her partner, Andrew Clements, the music critic of *The Guardian*.

Amanda Holden, born January 19 1948, died September 7 2021