

Amanda Holden obituary

Prolific translator and librettist who made opera accessible to modern audiences

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Holden working on the Penguin opera guide, 1992

Walking along the outskirts of the Mauerpark in Berlin with her son Joe one evening, Amanda Holden stopped suddenly, entranced by the sound of a nightingale. She insisted on staying until it had finished its song, noting the exact phrasing of its call. That, she said, was how music should sound.

Most opera lovers put the music first and the words second. Holden believed both were integral to a great performance. A limp or plodding translation could undermine an entire production; a deft and witty libretto could lift it to new heights. As a consummate musician herself, she understood the importance of

dialogue that not only conveyed the tone of an opera, but could also be properly sung. She delighted in words that were accessible to a contemporary audience, but would stand the test of time. Her librettos are still the standard text for the more than 60 operas she translated, while modern composers such as Mark-Anthony Turnage, and the Australian Brett Dean turned to her to write original texts for their operas. She is still the only librettist to have won the Olivier award for outstanding achievement in opera.

Fluent in Italian, she took the complex fugue at the end of Verdi's *Falstaff* and turned it into a light-hearted send-off: Life is a burst of laughter/ so ... be happy hereafter/ Your mind is a tempest whirling/ always this way and that./ Everyone mocks you/ whether you're thin or whether you're fat/ But it is best for him/ who has the last laugh of all.

The impresario Raymond Gubbay, who staged a mammoth production of *Madam Butterfly* at the Royal Albert Hall in 1998, attributed much of its success to Holden's new translation. "Her ability to write in a contemporary manner so as to make opera accessible to modern audiences was simply wonderful," he said. "Butterfly was revived many times at the hall, and [her] contribution was always an important and pivotal part of its success."

She was the founder editor of the Penguin and Viking opera guides, the latter co-edited with Stephen Walsh and Nicholas Kenyon, both of them encyclopaedic reference books detailing the lives and works of more than 900 opera composers. They were followed by *The Opera Guide: 100 Popular Composers*. Because she understood opera so well, she was able to convey its characters by creating dialogue that brought them to life on stage as vividly as the arias they sang. She told an Australian interviewer that, absurd as some opera plots might be, the characters always had something to say.

“However mundane or ordinary a person an operatic character is, under the scrutiny of music they are going to become something interesting,” she said. “Ordinariness is, after all, what a lot of us are, but we are also all slightly special.”

Born in 1948, Amanda Warren was the younger daughter of Sir Brian Warren, the personal physician to the prime minister Edward Heath, and the eminent gynaecologist Dame Josephine Barnes, the first female president of the British Medical Association. Her older sister Penny married Martin Neary, organist and choirmaster at Winchester Cathedral, then Westminster Abbey; her younger brother, Antony, was a general practitioner in Cambridge. Her parents divorced in 1964 and her father remarried, giving her two half-brothers, Marcus and Benedict Warren.

She was educated at Benenden (at the same time as Princess Anne) and Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, where she read music.



Holden liked gardening and birdwatching

A gifted pianist from childhood, she loved playing the Steinway grand piano owned by her grandmother, Alice Ibbetson, who had been a presence in her life as a child and was herself a pioneering female musician. The piano would later be a prominent feature in the front window of her home in Highbury, north London,

where for more than 20 years she would play duets with the novelist and critic Adam Mars-Jones.

In 1971 she married the journalist and writer Anthony Holden, whom she had met at Oxford when, as president of the OU Opera Club, she commissioned him to adapt his translation of Aeschylus's Agamemnon into the libretto for an opera by the student composer Richard Morris. They had three sons: Sam, who is a research nurse in the NHS; Joe, a writer who has also worked in film; and Ben, a writer and film producer. They lived in Hertfordshire before north London.

After gaining an MA in music at Oxford, Holden went on to study, then teach, at the Guildhall School of Music, before embarking on the career that would make her name as opera translator and librettist. Some of her earlier translations were done in conjunction with her husband. They included Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, directed by Jonathan Miller at English National Opera; Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* and Puccini's *La bohème*. All received high praise, with the *Guardian* critic commenting of the Barber: "If it were not for the racy, contemporary wit of Amanda and Anthony's textually faithful, rhyming and very funny English text, the evening would pass in stony silence." Typical of the Holden wit was the line in *Don Giovanni* where Leporello is enumerating his master's many conquests: "But the highest common factor/ Is the girl who's still intacta ..."

The series of translations of Handel's librettos that she wrote for English National Opera are still considered among her best work. They included *Partenope*, *Rodelinda*, *Ariodante*, *Alcina* and *Agrippina*. She translated HK Gruber's *Gloria: A Pigtale*, described by the music critic of *The New York Times* as heavy-handed, but "rescued by Amanda Holden's clever English version". Among her many other translations were Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Weber's *Der Freischütz*, and Gluck's *Orpheus and Eurydice*.

She also wrote original librettos for contemporary operas, including *Bliss*, for the Australian composer Brett Dean, which had its premiere at the Sydney Opera House, and has subsequently been performed in Germany and the UK; the music critic of *The Age* in Melbourne was so taken with it that he compared the collaboration between Dean and Holden to the partnership between Mozart and Da Ponte. Holden also wrote the libretto for Mark-Anthony Turnage's *The Silver Tassie*, performed at the ENO in 2000, for which Holden and Turnage jointly received the Laurence Olivier award for outstanding achievement in opera in 2001.

In 1979 she went to America with her husband, who had been appointed US editor of *The Observer*. She gained a further music degree at the American University in Washington, and later won degrees from the Royal Academy of Music in London (LRAM and ARCM). She was an early practitioner in the UK of the Nordoff Robbins system of music therapy, as practised in many hospitals, thus combining her family's professional streaks in music and medicine.

The Holdens were divorced in 1988, but remained friends. Her companion for 26 years was *The Guardian*'s music critic Andrew Clements, with whom she travelled widely, visiting more than 40 countries.

Holden divided her time between London and her cottage in the Norfolk village of Cley, where she was an enthusiastic gardener and birdwatcher. She also listed "motoring" as a hobby, and had a passion for convertible cars, driving a series of open-topped Morris Minors, Saabs and Volkswagens, always with music billowing from the roof. Devoted to her children and grandchildren, she would send them pictures of birds she had spotted during her travels abroad, a feather from the Congo, or photographs of unusual flowers and butterflies, each of which she knew by name; in her last year she had taken an online course on butterflies.

Amanda Holden, musician and librettist, was born on January 19, 1948. She died unexpectedly on September 7, 2021, aged 73