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# Opera & Classical

Bold questions

## F. Murray Abraham

Oscar-winning actor, accidental musicologist and debutant singer. By Olivia Giovetti



Photograph: Lois Greenfield

There's no doubt that F. Murray Abraham has a songster in him. In constructing sentences, he employs a natural crescendo and decrescendo when he speaks of something really exciting—Marlon Brando or Stravinsky, for example. His tessitura is in a basso profundo range, and he's startlingly melodic. That he's also best remembered for his Oscar-winning turn as Antonio Salieri in the 1984 film *Amadeus* doesn't hurt his musical street cred either. At 70, the actor (who hasn't aged a bit since his Salieri days) is making his professional singing debut at Carnegie Hall with the Voice of the City Ensemble in *Elusive Things*, a song cycle by composer Eric Shigelonis employing poetry by Ilene Starger. In a recent interview that was probably more fun than we're supposed to have, we spoke with Abraham about this new twist in his career—and posed one question we've been dying to know the answer to for nearly 26 years: Wolfgang or Antonio?

**When did you first start singing?**

I suppose I started taking lessons, really working at it, about a year before, half a year before I met Eric [Shigelonis, composer]. I guess it was about three years ago. And it's like a whole different discipline. It's interesting, isn't it? I mean as a writer for example. I really worship writers. I really adore good writing. It's so rare. And it's hard. I've tried to write. It's hard. But if you were to ask a short-story writer to write a novel for example, it's another discipline. It's another way of thinking. Some can write books, Tolstoy certainly. Chekhov didn't write novels, though; he only wrote plays and short stories. But to take that plunge and do a different thing even in your own purview, it's like I have to learn how to breathe all over again. And when I do a script, I'm really very rigorous about breathing. The breathing is part of the word, and I actually score—I always use musical words when working on a script. That's what happens, that's how I function. And yet to now consciously apply it to music, it's very different, because there's a meter, there's a rhythm, and I have to adhere to it. I don't establish it as I go along, which is what I do onstage—I do anything I want to. You can't do that: The orchestra's playing, and if you miss something, they're not going to wait for you. They don't know you're going to drop a word or miss a beat. And suddenly, it's like starting all over again, and it's pretty thrilling. And scary. [Laughs]

**What was your first musical memory?**

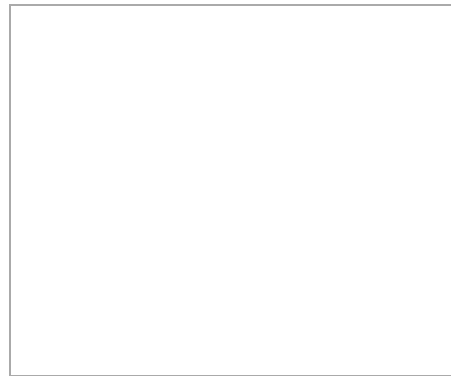
You mean professionally?

**Personally or professionally, whichever stands out more.**

I have the feeling that it is the same memory that almost everyone in the world has. Interesting. I thought about the most famous tune in the world. I travel a lot, literally all over the world I've made films. And can you guess what is the most common tune in the world? It was written in Brooklyn by two sisters.

**"Happy Birthday"?**

Exactly! I've heard it sung in so many different languages all over the world. So I suppose that's my earliest musical memory. But that shared memory is part of the beauty, the magic of music, isn't it? It really does transcend language.... Anyway that's a long answer to your



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**For many people, one of their first musical memories was seeing you play a composer in *Amadeus*.**

It's interesting that you mention the movie. I do a lot of concerts all over the world, narrating, with orchestras. They think, because I did that movie, that I do know something about music. And no matter what—any disclaimers...the memory is so embossed in their minds, in their memories. And I don't deny it, but I tell them, "Listen, I'm an actor." But musicians were struck by that movie. By that character. Struck by him. And I still am approached by musicians that were deeply affected.

**If *All the President's Men* was the film that launched a thousand journalism students, *Amadeus* is the film that launched a thousand music students.**

Oh yeah, that's very romantic. That's true. I bet you're right.

**Come to think of it, you're also in *All the President's Men*, aren't you?**

I am, I am. I did a lot of work on that picture. [Alan J. Pakula] was a nice director. I met the guy that I played, I had the hat he wore. I studied his accent. We did a lot of improvisation. And I was there for two weeks, and I think I'm on camera for about ten seconds. But that's the kind of movie he wanted to make. We shot it in the same space, we shot it at the same time in the morning—sounds silly, but it was a good movie.

**Do you approach singing with the same study?**

Well that's the problem. Bringing what I know as an actor to the singing is harder than I ever expected. But of course, it's what I should do. I keep trying to say, "I'm going to sound like a singer." What does that mean? And melding the two...well, we'll see if it comes together.

**How did you get involved with Eric?**

He did the incidental music for a trio of plays I was doing for Ethan Coen, of the Coen brothers. And he heard me warming up, because I sing to warm up. And he said he didn't know I was a singer; I said I've been studying, and he said he had a commission to write some original music and did I have any poetry I'd like to have him write the music for? And I know a poet that I admire, introduced them and he liked her poetry—Ilene Starger—and a year and a half later he called and said, "I've finished the music, would you like to..." and I said, "Yeah, I'd like to use it to warm up with and learn." It's original music! What's more exciting than something that hasn't been done?...And then he called and said, "I got a spot for us at Carnegie Hall." I said, "Are you kidding?" or something like that. I might have said "Bullshit." He said, "No, I told them about this music and about you doing it, and there's a place called the Weill Hall," and I said, "I know the place." He said, "It's a jewel box, it's one of the best theaters in America. Do you want to do it?" And of course I said "Yes." And then I said, "What have I done?!" My debut as a singer—at Carnegie Hall...anyway, that's how it happened. And he's writing more music as we speak.

**Certainly most singers dream about having works written for them, for their voice.**

**What's that been like?**

I suddenly have this terrible responsibility.... His faith in me, I feel like I have to be good for him. For the sake of the music, for the sake of this tribute to the collaboration between these two artists. I feel this deep responsibility. But then I always do to writers. Composers, that's another level. I think it's a level higher, frankly. Because of the universality of music, the responsibility of conveying those feelings and ideas, musically. It's another thing. I think that music allows you to be transported, enables you, encourages you. Where words, unless they're great words, don't. Words—generally, language—if you're not careful, root you to the earth. Music serves as an anchor. That anchor, once you're solidly attached to that anchor and understand that...you know, at the end of that anchor is a long tether. It doesn't mean that you're stuck with the anchor. You're at the end of the tether. And when you have the courage to just release yourself, to allow whatever inspiration you're capable of to enter, to descend on you, there's something about not the comfort but the security of that anchor that allows you to do things you really can't do as an actor. I try to use as much of my voice as I can when I act, but if you don't have the material, it's silly. You can't use a three-octave range with a soap opera. I mean you could, but it would be absurd. It wouldn't withstand the pressure, it'd be silly. You can't do that even with Tennessee Williams, as beautiful as he is. ...But music does let you do that. It encourages you to. There's something mysterious about it.... There are several recordings of Björling, for example, but sometimes even as great as he was, he exceeds himself. And something else happens to him. Caruso as well. Remarkable, amazing what comes through in those old recordings. And I'm certainly not talking about comparing myself to them. What I'm saying is there are possibilities with it that I'm willing to gamble. I want to see if it happens. With no guarantee. It might be awful, but I'm willing to try. You've heard Callas, there are times when she doesn't quite...but still it's thrilling, isn't it? She was totally unafraid.

**Do you see yourself embarking on a singing career?**

Noooo... This is fun. This is an experiment. It's to stretch the instrument...because at this point in my life, I am a very accomplished actor, and that began to worry me, because I began to feel smug. And I think that's death, that's bullshit. Where's the challenge? Why do it? How boring. You know more than everybody else? Shut up—you don't. But that feeling was creeping in. And when this opportunity knocked, of course I jumped at it. I felt trepidation afterward, but sure you say yes. I really love it.

**What composers do you gravitate towards?**

Oh gosh, I wish I could say I knew much about the modern composers. But I don't think anyone one is [as] thrilling—terrible to say—as Stravinsky. I still worship him. I met him a couple of times. I used to work backstage at Royce Hall in California at UCLA. He had such a wonderful sense of humor in his music. And I've done *L'histoire du Soldat* many times; that music never tires. And his piano stuff—it's fun. I like Gershwin, too. Bernstein's work is great. I like Bernstein a lot.... I heard recently his recording with Stern of Beethoven's violin concerto. I had never heard it before. It was nothing but thrilling.

**Mozart or Salieri?**

That's not fair. Mozart is something else. I mean, what can you say? Vivaldi wrote a lot of music, a lot of music. Bach wrote an enormous amount of music. Beethoven had an output, considerable. But Mozart...his stuff you can listen to for hours, the same thing, and it never

tires. Salieri's not embarrassing, there's some good stuff. I have a couple of tracks of parallel music, side by side. And I've always wanted to propose a concert with pieces by both composers without a program listing and then ask the audience if they can tell the difference. And I bet you 95 percent won't be able to distinguish.

**That could be your next performance at Carnegie.**

I think that's the most difficult thing about this project for me, now at this point—because if I continue doing this kind of thing, it'll get easier and easier—it's maintaining the joy of the work, of the singing. All I'm worried about is singing, whatever that means. The technical aspect is not what we're interested in, we're interested in something else. And that something else is what I'm searching for. I suppose that's what this is—it's another step in this journey for me, this search for whatever it is I'm searching for. Some kind of truth in this world. A kind of beauty. And you gotta make a few mistakes before you find it. And I'm willing to take that chance.

*F. Murray Abraham makes his [Carnegie Hall](#)—and singing—debut Fri 15 with the Voice of the City Ensemble in *Elusive Things*, composed by Eric Shimelonis, with text by Ilene Starger.*

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## Comments

Posted by **Lloyd Targer** on Thu, Jan 14, at 03:03pm

I heard F. Murray Abraham sing Life is Just a Bowl of Cherries -- without a microphone -- at Town Hall in the Broadway by the Year -- 1931 revue last March at Town Hall. Swear to God.

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Posted by **Beth Baglini** on Wed, Jan 13, at 10:23pm

Brava!

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