

# theater

## Deep Throat

Portland Opera welcomes new chorus master  
by Rebecca Ragain

**A**fter majoring in quantum physics at University of Cambridge's St. Catharine's College, studying six languages and training at Metropolitan Opera, Robert Ainsley is not at all bothered by 12-hour days with Portland Opera.

In fact, he loves what he does so much that he insists his job as Portland Opera's principal coach, chorus master and assistant conductor doesn't even feel like work. He says: "It's just what I do. I'm privileged in that. I get tired, but I'm happy to keep going because I love doing it."

When Ainsley graduated from college in 1999 with a degree in mathematics, he wasn't sure how he would make a living. He tells a story of visiting the unemployment office, fresh out of university, to be told that there was a job available plucking chickens at a poultry factory. He was far from thrilled.

His musical background rescued him from subsequent visits to the unemployment office. A recognized pianist, Ainsley had been attending university on an organ scholarship and had directed the chapel choir for several years.

Shortly after graduating, he received a phone call from a music director in Greenwich, Conn., offering him a job, a car, an apartment and "a little bit of money," he recalls. Ainsley accepted the offer and spent almost seven years on the East Coast.

The list of his accomplishments during that time is lengthy. He was the senior organ scholar at Christ Church in Greenwich, served as assistant conductor of the New Haven Chorale and finished a master's degree in solo piano performance.

He joined Metropolitan Opera's young artist program, eventually acting as assistant conductor and pianist for Wagner's *Die Walküre* with legends Valery Gergiev and Plácido Domingo. Ainsley even found the time to launch the Greenwich Music Festival, a program aimed at getting high

school kids interested in classical music, which he says has "taken off" in the past several years.

In early 2006 he spent a couple of months here to audition for Portland Opera's multifaceted position of coach, chorus master and assistant conductor. During that time he prepared the chorus for *Nixon in China*, leading *Opera* magazine to praise him for "a superb job."

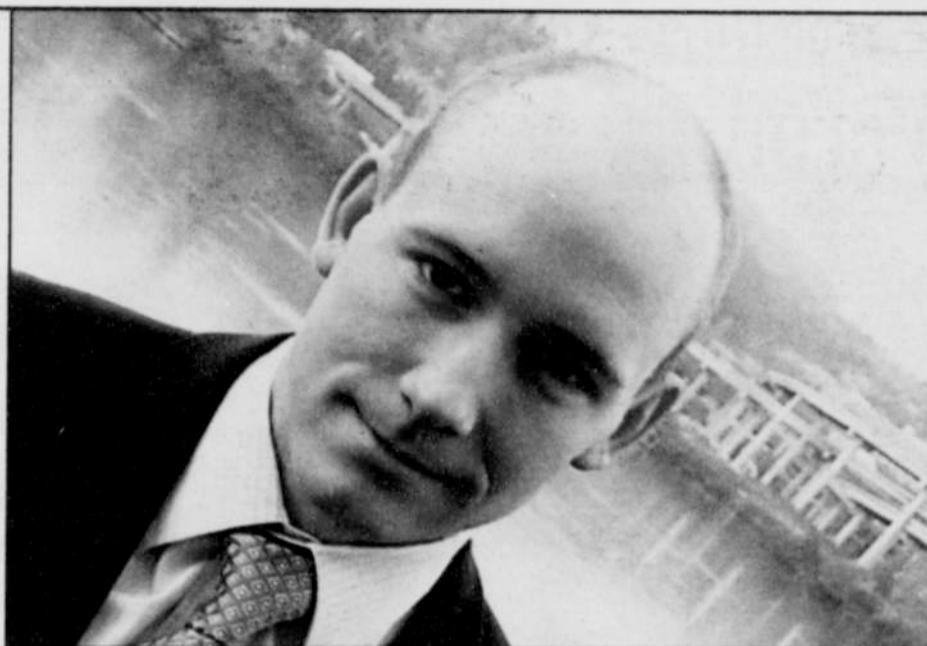
Although three other candidates also had two-month stints with Portland Opera, 28-year-old Ainsley was the one selected for the position, which officially began with the opera's 2006-2007 season.

You might think that all these accomplishments could lead to arrogance. Not in Ainsley's case.

While he seems generally self-possessed and confident—a consummate people-person—at times he can come off as humble, even a little self-deprecating, such as when he describes directing Monteverdi's *The Return of Ulysses* as "waving my hand in a very artistic fashion from the harpsichord." In fact, Ainsley's job is vastly more complicated than he makes it sound at first; he later admits that his role is a "relatively big post in terms of responsibility."



Claudio Monteverdi's baroque masterpiece *The Return of Ulysses* focuses on the Trojan War hero's reunion with his dearest Penelope.



In addition to the Latin and Greek he learned in university, Robert Ainsley studied Italian, German, French and Russian while training at Metropolitan Opera.

As chorus master, he is in charge of rehearsing 50 to 60 singers, depending on the production. When necessary, he plays the piano during rehearsal. And he makes sure that the singers have an in-depth knowledge of the text and music and that their diction is spot-on.

Ainsley explains: "There's little linguistic things that people might have, like they put their Italian 'r' too far back, or they might not do double consonants, or do double consonants when they shouldn't. Or maybe their French vowels are too closed, or their vowels are too far back."

In order to do his job properly, Ainsley studied several languages, in addition to the Latin and Greek he learned in university.

When he began Metropolitan Opera's young artist program, he says he almost killed himself trying to force Italian, German, French and Russian into his brain. He did hours upon hours of exercises and underwent intensive language coaching.

"You have to know the language. It's just fundamental," he says.

But what might sound like linguistic torture to some of us was intriguing for Ainsley, who maintains that knowing so many languages is one of the best parts of his job.

He recalls his amazement upon first arriving at the Met: "I'd be walking around and people would be speaking in German and they'd turn around and speak French, then back into English. It seemed that everyone could do this. At first it was like, 'Oh no, I'll never learn.' You pick it up."

At Portland Opera, Ainsley coaches both the principal artists and chorus members. He also does all the coaching for the new young

artist program, called Portland Opera Studio Artists.

Although he has coached myriad people, through this program he will be spending more time with the young singers than he has in any past position—four or five hours a week for an entire year.

"That's been the most interesting part of it—learning how to keep what you're doing fresh and interesting and keep a check on what's going on in a more long-range way," says Ainsley.

His time on the job is split relatively equally between coaching and playing or conducting.

*The Return of Ulysses* is the first time Ainsley has acted as conductor, rather than assistant conductor, for Portland Opera. In this role, he oversees all the musical aspects of the production, from inventing the accompaniment to writing the parts.

"That's why we don't do Baroque opera very much," he explains. "It's an extreme amount of work."

Even when Ainsley goes home for the day, he usually keeps working—either practicing or preparing.

"When you end up doing something you love," he says, "it kind of takes up your whole life."

Despite his hectic schedule, Ainsley always takes a break to watch *South Park*, which he says is his "one little treat every day." He also likes to get out and party when he can, but as of yet, he hasn't had a lot of time to meet people or explore Portland.

What he has seen of the Rose City, he likes: "Oh, I love it. It's fantastic. It rains all the time; it reminds me of home. The beer is bloody brilliant. The boys are beautiful." ☉

Robert Ainsley conducts *THE RETURN OF ULYSSES* through Dec. 16 at Portland Opera Studio Theater, 211 S.E. Caruthers St. Tickets are \$75 from 503-241-1802.

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