



**BY WARREN BOROSON**  
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I keep hearing from people that opera singers are no damn good at singing popular songs. And I must admit: There's some truth to this.

Opera singers may break butterflies upon a wheel - overwhelm the fragile songs of Irving Berlin and Jerome Kern with their powerful voices, with their trills, vibrato, other ornaments.

The worst example I've heard of an opera singer misbehaving is a recording by Birgit Nilsson, the Swedish soprano, belting out "I Could Have Danced All Night" from "My Fair Lady." Right at the end, she produces a few deafening high notes. Gosh, if Liza Dolittle could sing like that, I thought, she could be singing at the Met and raking in the dough. Totally inappropriate.

Then there's Joan Sutherland singing "Indian Love Call." One of my favorite songs - and possibly one of hers. But, again, inappropriate for her. That song simply doesn't call for a singer with an especially powerful voice.

The opera singer Lawrence Tibbett knew how to sing popular songs. His advice for other opera singers: Take it easy. Relax. Don't break a butterfly upon a wheel.

When opera singers relax and sing popular songs, everybody benefits. The song benefits by being sung by someone with an exceptionally good voice. (Think of Ezio Pinza singing in "South

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Pacific.”) And non-opera-loving people may yet get to appreciate operatic voices.

I'm not saying that all operatic singers are superior to all singers who specialize in popular songs. One of my all-time favorite singers is Ruth Etting - whom Doris Day portrayed in the film "Love Me Or Leave Me." And then was Helen Morgan - remember her singing Jerome Kern's "My Bill"? And plenty of others.

Still, Kiri te Kanawa has one of the most beautiful voices heard in the last 100 years. And she's recorded Jerome Kern, George Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, Richard Rodgers, and other masters of popular music.

Give her a listen.

### **Opera Singers Sing Popular Music:**

Kiri Te Kanawa, "Always," Berlin

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0ihSNeG2Tg>

Richard Tauber, "White Christmas," Berlin

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WI2TUI3klcY>

Risë Stevens, "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," Kern

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOLxo3NX8dg>

Lawrence Tibbett, "Without a Song," Youmans

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCSZeYDAAow>

Lily Pons, Kern song (that's Henry Fonda)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78HwM8c0XzI>

Thomas Hampson, "The Song is You," Kern

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KAcvrEPizLw>

Cesare Siepi, "One Alone," Romberg

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5kcrsTdcaAg&feature=related>

Birgit Nilsson, "I Could Have Danced All Night," Loewe

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DjZol0WN898>

Joan Sutherland, "Indian Love Call," Friml

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[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9wWBK5VgxA&playnext=1&list=PLCCA0B676E93AFD50&feature=results\\_video](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9wWBK5VgxA&playnext=1&list=PLCCA0B676E93AFD50&feature=results_video)