

Parables of public and private funding in tales from two cities

SPRING 2014
VOLUME LV \$5.95

OperaCanada

GROUP DYNAMICS

An insider's guide to the art of singing in the opera chorus

Opera from the Truck

How live Met stagings get to the silver screen

Community Affairs

Vancouver Opera sets strategy to build a new audience

On Stage

Rayanne Dupuis
Mark S. Doss
Leslie Ann Bradley
Robert Clark
Shirin Eskandani



VII FESTIVAL DEL MEDITERRANI

Destins Destinies

Intendent: Helga Schmidt

President: Zubin Mehta

La forza del destino

Giuseppe Verdi

31 May 2014

5, 10, 14 June 2014

Zubin Mehta Conductor

Davide Livermore Stage Director

Gregory Kunde Don Alvaro

Liudmyla Monastyrská Leonora

Simone Piazzola Don Carlo di Vargas

Stephen Milling Padre Guardiano

Ekaterina Semenchuk Preziosilla

In-Sung Sim Il Marchese di Calatrava

Valeriano Lanchas Fra Melitone

Mario Cerdá Mastro Trabuco

Cor de la Generalitat Valenciana

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New production

Palau de les Arts Reina Sofía

Concerts

Recitals

Cinema

Exhibitions

Meeting with...

Turandot

Giacomo Puccini

11, 13, 15 June 2014

Zubin Mehta Conductor

Chen Kaige Stage Director

Lise Lindstrom Turandot

Jorge de León Calaf

Jessica Nuccio Liù

Alexander Tsymbalyuk Timur

Ventseslav Anastasov Mandarin

Germán Olvera Ping

Valentino Buzza Pang

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Production

Palau de les Arts Reina Sofía

Concert

Richard Strauss, 150 years

4 June 2014

Also sprach Zarathustra

Der Rosenkavalier (Suite)

Vier letzte Lieder

Dorothea Röschmann Soprano

Zubin Mehta Conductor

Orquestra de la Comunitat Valenciana

Centre de Perfeccionament

Plácido Domingo

Canti dall'inferno

Music by Andrea Chenna. Texts by Ramón Sampetro, Beatriz de Día, Roberta Cortese and Luigi Chiarella

Davide Livermore Stage Director

20, 22, 26 June 2014

Romancero Gitano

Federico García Lorca

Transcription for narrator, four voices and guitar by Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco.

Rossy de Palma Actress

21, 27, 28 June 2014

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Notebook

BY WAYNE GOODING

We had already gone

to press with the last issue when word came that our review of Verdi's last opera, *Falstaff*, would also be our final review from Opera Hamilton. Following a debilitating bankruptcy and considerable downsizing just a few years ago, the company finally faced financial realities and closed its doors after more than 30 years. It was, as General Director David Speers wrote in a Jan. 11 letter announcing the news, "a truly tragic and sad development." Speers had actually resigned last November 30, though no announcement was made in hopes some 11th-hour financial miracle might avoid total shutdown, but there was none. Indeed, one of the reasons Speers gave for the final decision to cease operations was the failure to realize "one major contribution which was committed to us over a year ago," but which in the end "did not come through in time to help." Even if it had, the funds would only have seen OH through to the end of the current season, and the outlook remained bleak and daunting beyond that.

If you follow opera around North America, you'll know that OH isn't the only casualty of this 2013/14 season, which got off to a terrible start with the failure of New York City Opera last October. Indianapolis Opera has canned its fourth and final production of the season, citing financial challenges, while its board works to address "systemic and national trends in the opera business model." That traditional model appears to have failed, too, at the higher-profile San Diego Opera—it's among the biggest 10 companies in the U.S.—which stunned everyone in March when it announced that it would close down at the end of this season, right on the eve of its 50th anniversary. "The option was to borrow and limp a little longer and hope something would change, or to ride it out until we hit the wall," Faye Wilson, a lifetime member of the San Diego board, said of the decision.



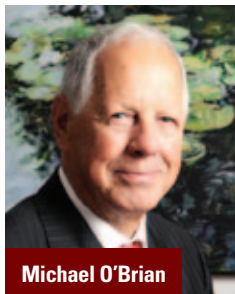
At press time, the company was in fact looking again to see if there may be any way of continuing (it had already cut down the number of productions and performances given annually). But even if this turns into a near-death experience rather than the real thing, San Diego's plight, like Opera Hamilton's, is another dark reminder that the model for running an opera company needs a radical rethink. Christopher Koelsch, President and CEO of Los Angeles Opera, put matters succinctly when he issued a public comment on events further down the coast in San Diego. "Even now, we fight the perception that opera companies are for-profit industries, rather than the simple, stark truth that we are entirely dependent on the good will of the ticket buyer, and the generosity of the philanthropist."

Even the biggest companies are sounding alarm bells. At San Francisco Opera's annual general meeting in March, General Director David Gockley talked about the "structural problems we face as a company and some of the systemic issues facing the industry as a whole...the slowly declining role of subscriptions, the difficulty of balancing budgets, the lack of bankable stars, the marginalization of the classical arts in education and the mass media, the plethora of competing entertainment forms and opportunities... that compete for the time and attention of people who could be going to the opera."

Speers cited some of these same problems in his Jan. 11 letter (p. 6), and elsewhere in this issue we learn something of how Vancouver Opera is rethinking its business model to survive and thrive in a changing world (p. 32). It's instructive in this context, too, to read our Letter from Linz (p. 16), which underlines again the radically different approach to arts funding enjoyed by many European companies—though this is perhaps less about money than it is about the value society puts on the arts. It underwrites a model North American companies can only dream about. **OC**
—editorial@operacanada.ca

Honors and Awards

Opera.ca has announced that BC-based investor, businessman and philanthropist Michael O'Brian is the recipient of the 2014 National Opera Directors Recognition Award, sponsored by BMO Financial Group. O'Brian was cited for his deep ongoing commitment to supporting Vancouver Opera, including two separate terms on the organization's board and the leading donation that resulted in the 2011 establishment of the company's headquarters in the Michael and Inna O'Brian Centre for Vancouver Opera. General Director **James Wright** lauded O'Brian as "a visionary philanthropist, a committed community builder and a tireless arts advocate. His exemplary leadership has supported and raised the artistry and reach of Vancouver Opera to new levels, leaving an indelible mark on audiences in this province and this country."



Michael O'Brian

Among the 90 new appointments to the Order of Canada announced in the New Year are: **R. Murray Schafer**, named a Companion for his "contributions as an internationally renowned composer of contemporary music, and for his groundbreaking work in acoustic ecology;" **Nancy Hermitson**, Chair of the Voice and Opera divisions at University of British Columbia, named an Officer for her "achievements as an opera singer, stage director and educator;" Calgary Opera General Director **W. R. (Bob) McPhee**, named a Member for his "artistic and administrative leadership of Alberta's arts scene and for his role in the development of Canadian talent;" and composer **Walter Boudreau**, named a Member for "contributions to contemporary music as a composer, conductor and promoter of musical creation."

The Ontario Arts Foundation in February awarded Adrienne Pieczonka with the \$50,000 Paul de Hueck and Norman Walford Career Achievement Award. In its citation, the jury noted that the soprano has "remarkable gifts as a performer of opera and she is at the top of her career. She has a wide and varied repertoire, and has made a strong contribution to musical life in Canada through her many Canadian performances." The award was established at the OAF by the late **Norman Walford**, former Executive Director of the Ontario Arts Council, and the late **Paul de Hueck**, former CBC Television production manager.



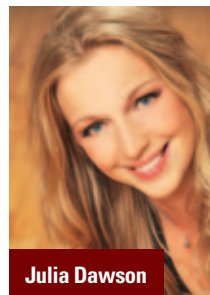
Adrienne Pieczonka

Actor, playwright and director Robert Lepage was awarded the 10th Glenn Gould Prize Mar. 31 at a gala ceremony at Rideau Hall, hosted by the Glenn Gould Foundation and their Excellencies the Right Honourable **David Johnston**, Governor General of Canada, and Mrs. **Sharon Johnston**. Lepage was recognized for his artistic excellence and lifetime devotion to the arts. Among the video tributes and performances scheduled for the gala, Lepage's work in opera was recognized in a performance by American tenor **Jay Hunter Morris**, accompanied by Canadian coach and collaborative artist **Anne Larlee**. Hunter Morris won wide renown when he was tapped late in rehearsals to sing Siegfried in Lepage's recent production of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* at the Metropolitan Opera.

Besides the \$50,000 prize, the Gould Prize winner also nominates a protégé or emerging artist for a \$15,000 stipend. Lepage has chosen **L'orchestre des hommes-orchestres**, an eclectic Quebec City-based performance collective that mashes arts forms and genres in their pieces. "Somewhere between music, poetry and visual performance, they create their own art form, and you suddenly find yourself treading territories you never knew existed," Lepage said when he announced his nomination.



Cameron McPhail



Julia Dawson



Jessica Strong

Baritone Cameron McPhail, a member of the Canadian Opera Company Ensemble Studio, in January won the US\$10,000 George London Award sponsored by **Liliane and Robert Brochu** for a Canadian singer. Mezzo **Julia Dawson**, a Resident Artist at the Academy of Vocal Arts in Philadelphia, was awarded the US \$1,000 Encouragement Award designated for a Canadian singer, and soprano **Jessica Strong**, a graduate of Calgary Opera's Emerging Artist Program, a US\$500 Honorable Mention.

Laureates from the realms of opera and vocal music in the 2014 Prix Opus awards made by the Conseil québécois de la musique in January included: **Opéra de Montréal** (Musical Event of the Year for its production of Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*); contralto **Marie-Nicole**

Opera in the News

Lemieux (Performer of the Year and, with the **Trois-Rivières Symphony**, Regional Concert of the Year); soprano **Karina Gauvin** (one of the Disc of the Year awards for *Prima Donna* on the ATMA label); **Orchestre Métropolitain** and **Festival de Lanaudière** for its presentation of Wagner's *Lohengrin*; **Les Violons du Roy** and **La Chapelle du Québec** (Concert of the Year, Quebec City, for its performance of Handel's *Theodora*); baritone **Christian Gerhaher** (a Disc of the Year award for *Mahler Orchesterlieder* with the **Montreal Symphony Orchestra** conducted by **Kent Nagano** on the Analekta label); conductor **Yannick Nézet-Séguin** (International Achievement); and Université de Montréal musicologist **Marie Hélène Benoit-Otis** (Book of the year for *Ernest Chausson, Le Roi Arthus et l'opéra wagnérien en France*, published by Frankfurt-based Peter Lang Verlagsgroupe).

Appointments

Toronto-born, New York-based conductor Yves Abel has been appointed Chief Conductor of the Nordwestdeutschen Philharmonie, based in the historic, former Hanseatic town of Herford in North Rhine-Westphalia. The appointment is effective Jan. 1, 2015. From 2005–2011, Abel was Principal Guest Conductor of the Deutsche Oper, Berlin, and enjoys an active career conducting in leading opera houses and concert halls around the world. This spring sees him conducting *La fille du régiment* at Covent Garden and *Les contes d'Hoffmann* for Seattle Opera, while future engagements include *Hänsel und Gretel* for Opéra de Paris, *Hoffmann* at the Metropolitan Opera (sharing the podium with **James Levine**), *Madama Butterfly* in Berlin and *La traviata* in Tokyo.



Yves Abel



Michael Mori

Toronto-based Tapestry New Opera has formally announced the appointment of **Michael Mori** as Artistic Director, succeeding founder **Wayne Strongman**. Mori had worked with the company as Associate Artistic Director for two years, and as Artistic Director Designate for eight months prior to his appointment.

Company News

In January, **Opera Hamilton** closed down after more than 30 years as a leading regional company. In a Jan. 11 letter to stakeholders, General Director **David Speers** wrote: "Ultimately, the management of cash required at very specific points in the season, and the ongoing attempt to deal with and



David Speers

reduce a long historic deficit proved too daunting a task." The company had already had one brush with bankruptcy earlier in the decade, and had only become active again over the past couple of seasons after considerable downsizing. In his letter, Speers attributed some of the problems at OH to specific local challenges, but others to "issues and trends that the performing arts face across the entire industry—a very clear erosion in the value placed upon attending 'live' performances in a digital age."

Audio-visual

Singer and composer Rufus Wainwright has turned to crowdfunding to finance a recording of his first opera, *Prima Donna*. As of Apr. 1, and with more than two months to go, about 850 donors had signed on, raising just over 40% of an undisclosed total. Offers attached to a wide range of donation levels go from a digital download of the opera with updates during the recording process (US\$15) through the opportunity to sing **Leonard Cohen's** "Hallelujah" as part of an onstage choir during a Wainwright concert (US\$99) and a signed copy of the full score (US\$1,010) to "Dinner & A Song Written about You" (US\$65,000). Five per cent of the proceeds raised will be allotted for sarcoma research through the **Kate McGarrigle** Foundation, named for Wainwright's late mother. For more information: pledgemusic.com/projects/primadonna.

Quebec-based publisher L'instant même has released **Bernard Gilbert's** *Le Ring de Robert Lepage: Une aventure scénique au Metropolitan Opera*. Gilbert, formerly production manager in the opera division of Lepage's Ex Machina production company, was intimately involved in the evolution of the massive production and provides an insider's view of a high-tech staging that proved difficult in its execution and elicited a controversial response in performance. The French-language book is copiously illustrated with behind-the-scenes and staging photos and covers the full production period of almost five years. The text is part explication of the *Ring* operas, but most usefully a diary-like account of how Lepage and his many collaborators in Quebec and New York brought the complex piece to the stage. The



Bernard Gilbert



production, which the Met intends to revive in its 2018/19 season, is also fully documented in performance on DVD, and its evolution is also the subject of a 2012 documentary, *Wagner's Dream*, by American director **Susan Froemke**.

The 2014 Juno Award for Classical Album of the Year, Vocal or Choral Performance, went to *Lettres de Madame*



Marie-Nicole Lemieux

Roy à sa fille Gabrielle, a six-song cycle by composer **André Gagnon** to text by **Michel Tremblay**, their first collaboration in about two decades after their opera, *Nelligan*. The cycle, which imagines family letters written to Quebec author **Gabrielle Roy**, is performed by contralto **Marie-Nicole Lemieux**, with the Trois-Rivières

Symphony Orchestra conducted by **Jacques Lacombe**. The disc was released on the independent, Quebec-based Audiogram label (audiogram.com).

PHOTO: DENIS ROUVRE

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- a) resolving to continue the Corporation under the *Canada Not-for-profit Corporations Act* S.C. 2009, c. 23, to be effective as of the date of articles of continuation received from Corporations Canada; and,
- b) to consider and pass a new general by-law for the Corporation.

Copies of the resolution and of the draft general by-law may be obtained from the office of *Opera Canada*, Suite 244, 366 Adelaide Street East, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5A 3X9.
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Rayanne Dupuis

She loved her father, hated her mother, plotted murder with her brother and saw all three of them dead. That was Rayanne Dupuis' uncomfortable task last November, playing the tortured Lavinia in Florida Grand Opera's staging of Martin David Levy's setting of the Eugene O'Neill play, *Mourning Becomes Elektra*. "When I looked at the score, I didn't like a single character," the soprano from Kapuskasing, Ont., laughed between performances. But as a singing actress, she did like the challenge of returning to a tough role she had sung successfully in Seattle a decade previously.

That Seattle Opera engagement marked her American debut. And aside from a single appearance with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra under Kent Nagano, she hasn't sung in her native Canada in something like 15 years. Dupuis' career

has taken place almost exclusively abroad. "Bless Richard Bradshaw," she says. Recognizing that the Canadian Opera Company Ensemble Studio member's light soprano might encounter limited opportunities on this side of the Atlantic, the Canadian Opera Company's late General Director advised her to go to Europe.

Armed with a Canada Council grant, she did just that, winding up in short order on an Athens stage singing Poulenc's *La voix humaine* with Ópera de Montpellier and after that Alban Berg's *Lulu* in Metz, under Jacques Lacombe's musical direction. "All of a sudden, I got branded as a contemporary-music specialist," she says, perhaps the logical consequence of being a quick study with an impressive musical education. Not only does she credit Mary Morrison at the University of Toronto with setting her on the right vocal path, she went on to take her Master's degree at Yale and her doctorate at the State University of New York, Stony Brook. "We have a fantastic education system over here," she says, "but a lack of work. Watching someone like Judith Forst nevertheless showed me the kind of singer I wanted to be. I am in awe of her, of the way she inspires you to be so incredibly present that you forget you are singing. But I found my opportunities in the middle-range houses of Europe."

Starting with the role of Helen in Gary Kulesha's *Red Emma* for the COC, Dupuis has a number of world premieres to her credit, including the title role of Gerald Barry's *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, Wolfgang Rihm's *Drei Frauen* and the title role in the Canadian and French premieres of Michael Daugherty's *Jackie O*. She has also enjoyed success in the title role of Strauss's *Salome* and The Woman in Schoenberg's *Erwartung*. Along the way, Dupuis found a "wonderful" French husband, with whom she lives with their young daughter in Paris. "He knows it is important for me to keep singing. It is important for my soul. I'm not wildly ambitious. I just like to do really great stuff with really great people. I spent quite a few seasons in Nantes, where they did at least two world premieres per season."

Dupuis cites FGO's *Mourning Becomes Elektra* as the kind of enterprise that engages her, with an open-minded director (Kevin Newbury), a conductor (Ramon Tebar) who can find the lyricism in a contemporary score and a deeply involved cast that works together as an ensemble. "I thought that this was a strong piece with good music, but I didn't expect it to reach the level it did in this production. We were able to work with the composer, too. He is 81 and still so open to the things I wanted to do, as long as they sounded good and made sense. To work this way is a privilege. This was one opera I was happy to revisit." —William Littler

Bass-baritone Mark S. Doss didn't set out to become an opera singer. He was a talented basketball player at East Technical High School in Cleveland, Ohio, and was preparing to enter the priesthood. But he had an interest in opera, one that resulted in one of his earliest appearances when a high-school teacher got him a job as a supernumerary in a Metropolitan Opera *Aida* on tour at the Music Hall in Cleveland, for which he was paid US\$8 to appear with an all-star cast conducted by James Levine. While at St. Joseph's College in Rensselaer, Indiana, he switched from the seminary to arts and subsequently entered a Met Auditions district competition, which he won at 21. After only two years of vocal training, he headed to Indiana University for a Master's, then entered Santa Fe Opera's apprenticeship program, followed by Lyric Opera of Chicago's professional-

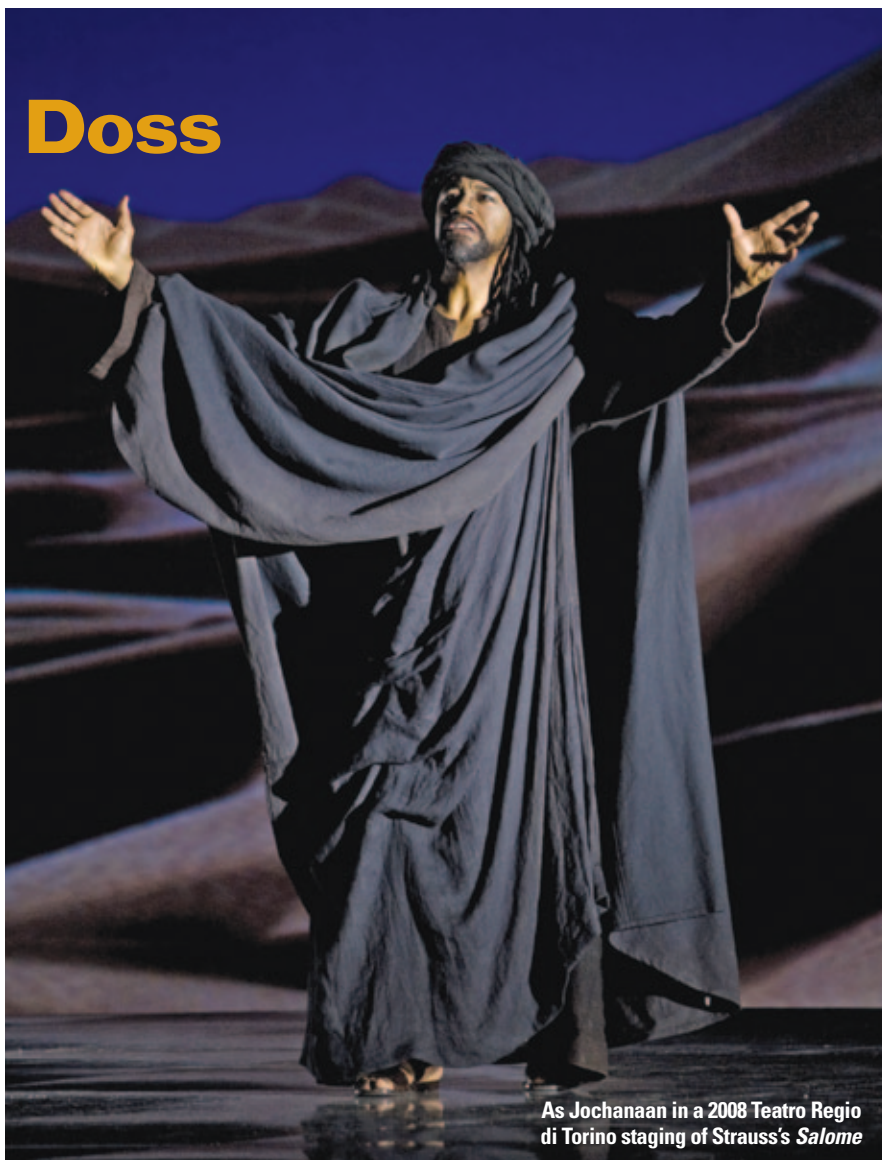
Mark S. Doss

development program. While in Chicago, Doss connected with the late Lotfi Mansouri: "The impact of his bringing me to the Canadian Opera Company for the first time was extremely important. It was my first professional contract coming out of the Lyric program. Lotfi directed me as Lord Rochfort in the *Anna Bolena* featuring Joan Sutherland in Chicago in the fall of 1985, and insisted I give him my CV when we were in rehearsals. On opening night, he said, 'I would like to cast you in Sparafucile in *Rigoletto* at the COC in Toronto.'" That 1987 *Rigoletto* was the first of numerous COC appearances for Doss, the most recent as Thoas in Robert Carsen's production of Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride* at the beginning of the 2011/12 season. In fact, Doss's connections with Canada are many. His wife, the Emmy Award-winning makeup artist Dawn Rivard, is from Windsor, Ont., and they make their home in Toronto and Erie, Pennsylvania. He studied languages at the Berlitz School and the Goethe Institute in Toronto, as well as drama with coaches Miriam Laurence and David Smukler. His philanthropic activities around Toronto include the Arts for Children and Youth program, visits to local schools and benefit concerts. In 2011, he received the Planet Africa's Entertainment Award in Toronto at Roy Thompson Hall for his many achievements as a positive role model for youth.

A Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions winner in 1986, Doss's international career was launched the same year after he took first prize in the International Verdi Competition in Busseto, Italy. "Winning at the beginning of my career was a

surreal experience," he says. Since then, he has performed in that country in a variety of roles, including in *Aida* and *Salome* at La Scala and as Wagner's Dutchman in Bologna. He considers the 2013 Dutchman a highpoint of his career to date. "It is one of the rare times when I can simply say: 'Look and judge for yourself concerning the artistry of this singer.'" (Extracts are on YouTube and it's available on DVD on the RAI Trade label.)

Recent performances include a Naxos recording of Beethoven's *9th Symphony* from a concert in Princeton, New Jersey, this past January, and a return to Italy in March to sing Simone in Zemlinsky's *Eine florentinische Tragödie* at Turin's Teatro Regio. This fall, he will create the baritone role in the world premiere of *Shell*



As Jochanaan in a 2008 Teatro Regio di Torino staging of Strauss's *Salome*

Shock: A Requiem of War by composer Nicholas Lens and librettist Nick Cave at La Monnaie in Brussels. He is also continuing to work on developing his repertoire. "After singing the Dutchman three times now, I feel the Wagner repertoire is ideal for my voice, and I've been asked a lot to sing such German roles because I bring an Italianate sound to them. I will continue to add Italian, French, Russian and Czech roles, but it is definitely the Helden Baritone/Bass roles that I will concentrate on." —Dawn Martens



Leslie Ann Bradley

This past winter found Canadian-born, New York-based soprano Leslie Ann Bradley busier than ever, making her debut with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra as soloist in Mozart's *Coronation Mass* and *Laudate dominum* and then following this with two of her favourite Mozart ladies—Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni* for Vancouver Opera and the Contessa in *Le nozze di Figaro* for Pacific Opera Victoria. At that TSO concert, the familiar *Laudate dominum* was particularly intriguing; it's a glorious paean to the soprano voice, but also decidedly an acid test. The trickiest phrase is near the end, when the soprano enters on a *F dolcissimo*, seemingly out of thin air, then soars to a magnificent crescendo in a line that requires consummate poise and seemingly inexhaustible reserves of breath. The exacting passage sounded like a cakewalk for Bradley, who executed it with a lovely shimmering soprano.

Born and raised in Port Perry, Ontario, Bradley's father is a farmer and her mother a fashion stylist; "I received a good education—from Coco Chanel to John Deere," she quips in a new promotional video she made in the U.K. last year. While her music-loving parents recognized her talents, an organist-grandmother inspired the young Leslie Ann to a life in music. One of her earliest memories is of standing on a piano bench as a five-year-old singing through the hymn book with her grandmother at the keyboard. "Apparently, I told my Grade 9 typing teacher that I was going to be an opera singer," she says, even though she hadn't gone to an opera at that point. "I saw this thing on TV, which turned out to be *La*

traviata, and I knew right then and there that's what I wanted to do."

Bradley learned from some of the best voice teachers in Canada and abroad. She speaks fondly of her first teacher at University of Toronto, Mary Morrison: "She was terrific. I was hungry to learn and she fed me as much as I could absorb, music of all kinds from Baroque to new music." Her lyric soprano has always had an upper extension with excellent coloratura, so her first professional engagement was as the Queen of the Night for Saskatoon Opera at age 20. "Instead of saying no, Mary was encouraging. She taught me not to be afraid." As the voice matured, it settled lower in the range, and Montreal teacher Marie Daveluy, who also taught Karina Gauvin, honed Bradley into a true Mozartian. Her natural affinity for the French repertoire was a result of studying with Françoise Pollet at the Academie International de musique Maurice Ravel in France. Currently, Bradley works with Wendy Nielsen, mentor to many young Canadian artists.

Now in her early 30s, Bradley's soprano, while retaining its enviable flexibility, has gained in volume and power, opening a world of possibilities. A previous Queen of the Night and Norina is now a Contessa, Donna Elvira, Rosalinda, and Valentin in *Les Huguenots*. The shimmering, silvery quality and prodigious breathline also make the great heroines of Richard Strauss an ideal fit: "I am studying Arabella at the moment, and my dream is to sing Countess Madeline in *Capriccio* and the Marschallin."

Currently, Bradley is completely captivated by the voice and

artistry of the late Austrian soprano, Lisa Della Casa, perhaps the most aristocratic Arabella of all. Perhaps not so likely a role model is the late American mezzo, Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, whose artistry and spiritual quality Bradley greatly admires: “She has been a huge inspiration. I got to know people who knew her well and what her impact had been on them. And then I started listening to her—the soul of that woman, and how directly she communicates!”

Given her vocal gifts, Bradley’s future seems bright. Equally important is her musical intelligence, her strong sense of self and

her ability to stay focused in her career: “The best advice I’ve ever received was from Dawn Upshaw, who I met at Tanglewood in 2011. She said that we singers must choose the kind of career we want. As young singers, we often want to please people and get caught up in asking permission without asking ourselves if what we are doing is true to ourselves. I was so inspired because she is fearless about who she is as an artist and what she wants to achieve. Right then and there I adopted her motto, and I try to make my choices as courageously as she has made hers.” —Joseph So

In 2006, Robert Clark won a scholarship from Edmonton’s Johann Strauss Foundation that allowed him to study over the summer at the Mozarteum in Salzburg. He left as a baritone, but returned a somewhat shaken tenor. That summer stint also led him to the door of soprano Edith Wiens, who auditioned him for her studio, though didn’t take him. She did break the news to the University of Alberta graduate that he had been singing too low in his time there. “I want you to go home and listen to *Lohengrin*,” she advised him. “Don’t dare sing it for at least five or six years, but listen to it because that’s where [you’re] headed.”

All set to move the following fall to Ted Baerg’s graduate program at the University of Western Ontario, Clark concedes he was at first confused, distraught even, about his voice, but still determined to be a singer. Whatever musical future he had thought he had before Salzburg, he now knew it probably wasn’t the one he had envisioned. On a frigid morning this past February at the kitchen table of the suburban Edmonton townhouse he shares with his wife, Meaghen, and their four young children, the 35-year-old dramatic tenor can look back on his vocal switch more securely. His reputation is growing in western Canada, where as a tenor he has sung Macduff for Pacific Opera Victoria, three roles with Edmonton Opera and five for Calgary Opera, all stemming from that European trip and his meeting with Wiens. “It was probably the most valuable month of my entire life,” he says now.

After he finished his Master’s in 2008, Clark won a place in Calgary Opera’s Emerging Artist Development Program. Normally, the program has a one-year term, but since Clark was still adjusting to his new voice, he was invited to stay on for an extra year. In the summer hiatus between his two years, he spent two weeks in New Brunswick working with Wendy Nielsen, whom he’d first met when she sang Strauss’s *Ariadne* in Calgary in 2009. If Wiens had turned Clark’s musical life upside down, Nielsen would help him find his feet. “I don’t

think I ever learned in one lesson as much as I did when I had a lesson with Wendy Nielsen,” he says.

He describes his first as “absolutely groundbreaking.” When he switched to tenor, everything had, as it were, seemed to go to his head. He had tension. His jaw shook uncontrollably in the higher register. “The main thing she did was to bring me out of my head and down to the ground.” She wanted him to learn to “consistently sing high without it costing so much, and not passing out.”

Clark has sung mainly small roles for Calgary, including Flask in the company’s co-production of Jake Heggie’s *Moby Dick*, in which he also covered the part of Ahab. The January 2012 production’s actual Ahab, Ben Heppner, took him out for dinner a couple of times and was encouraging: “He thinks I’m headed in the same direction as he is in terms of repertoire.”

Now on the roster of MIC Artists in Montreal, Clark will gain some experience singing Don José for Opera Nuova’s staging of *Carmen* in June in Edmonton, and is set to return to Calgary Opera in November in Kevin Puts’ *Silent Night*. He is also booked to sing Arturo in Edmonton Opera’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* next season, as well as First Priest and First Armed Man in the company’s production of *Die Zauberflöte*. Clark sang the Steersman in Calgary’s recent production of *Der fliegende Holländer*, when he met Valerian Ruminski, Artistic Director of Buffalo’s Nickel City Opera. Ruminski has invited him to make his U.S. debut in June 2015 singing the Vaudevillian in the world premiere of Persis Anne Vehar’s *Shot!*, about the 1901 assassination of President McKinley in Buffalo.

Meanwhile, the budding Heldentenor may be getting a little unconventional national exposure whenever *Hockey Night in Canada* broadcasts Edmonton Oilers games. He has added a certain gravitas to the Oilers’ often-buffo performances as the team’s new anthem singer. I’ve heard his delivery of “O Canada” bring rowdy fans to respectful silence some nights. He’s just waiting now for someone to ask him to sing *Lohengrin*. —Bill Rankin



Robert Clark

Artists on Stage

Mention the name Eskandani to the average North American operagoer and you're likely—for the moment—to provoke a quizzical frowning of the brow. In mezzo Shirin Eskandani's native Iran, though, it's a different story. "On my dad's side, my grandmother and great-grandmother were very famous singers," she tells me, via telephone from California. "Everyone knows their names. I grew up in Canada, but with a strong sense of being Iranian. I've always loved to sing, I've loved to perform—so I guess the family affinity for it was passed down to me."


That part of her heritage evinced itself early. Her parents moved from Tehran to Vancouver when she was four, and it wasn't long afterward that she started singing in a children's choir. A

Brahms, for example"—a composer she especially loves—"lets you do some really dramatic stuff to go with the lighter and the comic. You can explore your voice without pushing it. Opera is wonderful, but now that I'm doing it professionally, I really miss doing recitals. There just isn't enough time."

After graduating from UBC, she moved to New York to pursue a Master's at the Manhattan School of Music, and with the change of countries and coasts came a change in focus from song to opera. At Manhattan, she met another valued mentor, Canadian-born soprano Joan Patenaude-Yarnell and (still exercising laudable caution) sang "mostly smaller roles" in the school's opera productions. Since earning her Master's in 2008, she's been welcomed by a string of young artists' programs: at Syracuse Opera in upstate New York, Ash Lawn Opera and Opera on the James (both in Virginia), the Green Mountain Opera Festival in Vermont, the Banff Centre and Florida's Palm Beach Opera. This summer, she'll be part of San Francisco Opera's prestigious Merola Program. "I'm thrilled about it!" Eskandani says, her excitement palpable even from a distance of 2,500 miles.

Right now, though, in mid-March, she's in Livermore Valley, just east of the Bay Area, singing for the first time a role she cherishes, Angelina—Cinderella herself—in Rossini's *La cenerentola*. Only last year, she was Tisbe, one of the comically vain stepsisters, at Palm Beach Opera, to Vivica Genaux's Cinderella and under Will Crutchfield's stylistically acute baton. The progression has been a natural one. "It's a wonderful role, and it sits really well in my

voice. I've got a fairly easy high extension, but then I can sing in the middle, too, and do all that fun coloratura stuff. I used to like this opera—now I love it." Afterward, she'll be returning to New York—where she made a mellifluous impression last fall in Teatro Grattaciolo's resurrection of Alfano's *Sakuntala*—for the Mother in *Hansel and Gretel*. Then it's back west for the Merola.

Where does she see her voice taking her? "Right now, the best rep for me is the Handel-Mozart-Rossini, the coloratura mezzo roles. I've done Carmen in *La tragédie de Carmen*"—the Peter Brook/Marius Constant chamber condensation of Bizet's opera—"and I know that one day [the full-length] Carmen will be a good role for me." (With her dark-eyed allure, she certainly has the apposite look.) "But for now, I'm pretty happy with what I'm doing, all the fun Rossini that's so well suited to my voice and temperament. And I really do love singing coloratura!" Powered by the proven partnership of good advice and good instincts, her voice and she are clearly moving in the right direction. —Patrick Dillon 



Shirin Eskandani

decade and change later, she followed her director at the Vancouver Bach Children's Chorus, Bruce Pullan, to the University of British Columbia, where he headed the choral music department. "I got very fortunate in that I met the right people, the right mentors, at the right time. I really loved opera, and UBC has a really fine opera program. But both my family and Bruce told me, 'There's always time for opera.' The song literature was one of Bruce's fortes, and both he and another teacher, Marisa Gaetanne, steered me into exploring that instead—which also gave me the time to take a lot of courses in anthropology, in English lit. Looking back, I'm so happy I did that. Once you've become involved in it, it's just opera, opera, opera all the time. I had a fairly rich instrument even back then, but doing song helped me not to overtax it, as you can do singing the big opera roles too early on.

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New Productions New Roles

Michael Cavanagh

Meet the would-be singer from the Prairies who found his voice as a stage director

By JOSEPH SO

A self-admitted iconoclast and nonconformist, Michael Cavanagh's journey from Prairie boyhood to stage director is singularly circuitous. Growing up in a music-loving family in Winnipeg (both parents sang in the Winnipeg Philharmonic Choir and his father was an original member of the Manitoba Opera Chorus), Cavanagh got his first taste of the stage in the children's chorus in *Carmen* and *Tosca*. But any youthful enthusiasms didn't extend to his studies. "School really wasn't for me," he says. "I dropped out of both University of Manitoba and University of Winnipeg. My English teacher called me in and said, 'I really should fail you, but that's ridiculous—here's a 51%, get out of my school and do something with your life!'"

By the time he was in his 20s, Cavanagh had cobbled together a living as a classical singer in Winnipeg, as a member of a local *cappella* choir, appearing on CBC's *Hymn Sing* plus various opera chorus and church gigs. "I was a 'necktie tenor'—not terrible, but I wasn't very good either. Mainly, I just wasn't that committed."

Through family connections, Cavanagh made his way to Hamburg, Germany, where he took private lessons from retired baritone Claus Ocker, a noted teacher at the famous Hochschule für Musik und Theater. Taking classes by day, he spent many evenings at the Staatsoper, buying cheap tickets at the back of the theatre, but taking it all in. "It really was a series of small epiphanies. Seeing the different approaches to the standard repertoire, I got excited and fired up afterwards. Soon I realized that I was in the wrong end of the business. Singing was always a struggle and a default position when nothing else was happening. As soon as I decided to give directing a try, the world opened up." With its strong opera culture, Hamburg proved the ideal environment to start making the transition, and Ocker an effective influence. "He gave me a strong dose of reality, and taught me to think in wider terms about what I was going to do with my life."

On his return to Canada, another key influence was stage director Irving Guttman, whom he knew from his chorus days in Winnipeg. Guttman took a chance and put Cavanagh to work as an assistant stage manager building props and working on school tours. Soon, he attracted the attention of Vancouver Opera, which hired him to assist on a production of *Rigoletto* in 1992. The following season, he got a job as assistant to director Kelly Robinson. "He



was the first person to generously treat me as an equal, and that was the beginning of my apprenticeship. I learned from many directors, among them Leon Major, Lotfi Mansouri and Tito Capobianco."

In 1996, Cavanagh made his professional mainstage debut directing *La cenerentola* for Calgary Opera. He also went back to Winnipeg for its Fringe Festival, and, thanks to director and choreographer Brian Macdonald, found his way to the Banff Centre. It was at Banff that he met John Hess and Dáirine Ní Mheadhra of Queen of Puddings Music Theatre, the start of a partnership that led to his directing in Toronto the company's groundbreaking productions of composer James Rolfe's *Beatrice Chancy* (1999), and Ana Sokolovic's *The Midnight Court* (2005) and *Svadba-The Wedding* (2011). His time at Banff was doubly felicitous in that he also met his future wife there, soprano and teacher Jackalyn Short. After Banff, other assignments followed—with Opéra de Montréal, Manitoba Opera and Canadian Opera Company—and by the late '90s Cavanagh was well on his way to remaking himself as a director.

Since those early years, he has directed more than 100 productions in Canada and the U.S., including a few forays across the Atlantic (remounting Queen of Puddings' *The Midnight Court* in London at Royal Opera, Covent Garden's Linbury Theatre, for example). Another auspicious breakthrough came in 2012, when he made his San Francisco Opera debut with John Adams' *Nixon in China*, a show he had developed for Vancouver Opera at the time

of the 2010 Winter Olympics. (Currently, Cavanagh is preparing *Nixon* for its Irish premiere at Wide Open Opera in Dublin in May.) The San Francisco staging was so well received that Cavanagh was asked to mount a new production of Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah* this Fall: "When the final curtain came down on *Nixon*, (SFO General Director) David Gockley grabbed me and my designer, Erhard Rom, by the arm, asking us if we would be interested. We hesitated for about a second. It was a very gratifying moment."

Of the many operas he has directed, Cavanagh is particularly drawn to either modern works or those that have contemporary resonance. "I love *Nixon*, Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* and all of Benjamin Britten." He fondly recalls his first *Peter Grimes* in 1994, as an assistant to Leon Major at Vancouver Opera in what was Ben Heppner's first *Grimes* in a fully staged production.

Despite his early training in Europe, where productions tend to be more concept-driven, Cavanagh is not a directorial provocateur. Though not averse to updating or reimagining operas, his intention is to serve the music rather than shock. "As a lover of the art form, I appreciate a fresh take on traditional pieces. Sometimes, even a complete deconstruction is necessary to keep things fresh, rather than treating the work as a museum piece."

But any approach must be made with care and with respect for the composer and librettist. "Any time you stray from the stated intentions of the creators—such as changing the time and place or tinkering with the thematic material—the bar is raised higher and it's harder to get it right. One bit of (directorial) violence imposed when it isn't intended, and you can just feel the audience turning off, and that's a great tragedy."

While he believes reinterpretations can be revelatory—he cites Jonathan Miller's English National Opera *Rigoletto* set in the Mafia world of New York's Little Italy as a good example of a reinterpretation that remains faithful to the thematic material, the emotional content and the characters—Cavanagh is adamant about not creating a staging in which what the audience sees contradicts the written music or libretto. "A *Don Giovanni* with submachine guns while they're singing about swords doesn't work. I refuse to change the text or the surtitles. If you are going to take on a project, you need to give it the respect it deserves. I feel I have concentric circles of responsibility—to the creators, to the audience and to my performers."

Responsibility to the performers means working to bring out the best in every artist. In our visually oriented culture, dramatic

verisimilitude is more important than ever, though the voice and the music should remain the most important elements in a production. "It's easier for me than other directors because I am a singer and I speak the language of a singer," he says. "I understand the limitations. Singers love their comfort zones, but a large part of my job is to move them outside of their comfort zones. I know how to collaborate. I've never been the director who throws a fit when my vision isn't fully realized."

"I've never been a puppeteer, expecting all my singers to be the same. My production of *Rigoletto* is very physical for the title character, but if I have a *Rigoletto* who isn't so nimble, my view of the character has to change. That's what I mean about collaboration—it forces me out of my comfort zone. My interpretation of the role needs to be with the particular artist in mind; it needs to be his *Rigoletto*, not mine. If I let the artists do their best work, I am often surprised at how electrifying the performance is as a result. Virtually every stage director is respectful of the artists, but unfortunately it's the few exceptions that get the headlines."

Cavanagh learned his craft as an apprentice rather than as a student in a classroom environment. He believes that his iconoclastic nature, an underlying restlessness and his predilection for doing the unexpected have informed his work and fueled his creativity.

Besides, there were no formal programs for would-be directors in his student days. That has changed and now Cavanagh also finds himself in demand as a teacher, offering a course on acting for opera singers and the occasional masterclass on stage directing. Based in London, Ontario, he teaches at the University of Western Ontario and has staged student productions there as well as at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, and University of Toronto, among other institutions. He was also recently appointed Resident Producer and Director at the Opera on the Avalon young artist program in St. John's, Newfoundland.

When it comes to bringing opera to life, he argues, life itself is the best teacher. "Students ask

me, 'What can I do to get better? Should I take more language courses, or go somewhere to study?' I tell them that they should break someone's heart and get their heart broken, volunteer at a homeless shelter, put on a backpack and travel and be willing to embrace life—that's the best training you can get. How are you going to empathize with those big operatic characters and their big motivations sitting in a classroom? It's no wonder our most resonant operatic artists are the ones who live big lives." **OC**



From Cavanagh's staging of *Die Zauberflöte* for Wilfrid Laurier University

Letter from Linz

William Littler explores another example of the divide between Europe and North America in attitudes to the place of the arts in daily life



The new Musiktheater am Volksgarten is designed to serve the whole community

Austria's third city has been described as a victim of the middle child syndrome, neither as cosmopolitan as Vienna nor as charming as Salzburg. Yet Linz made international headlines last April with the opening of Musiktheater am Volksgarten (Music Theatre on the Park). That an unprepossessing regional centre in a primarily agricultural and industrial area with a population of only about 200,000 should suddenly unveil a US\$236 million showcase for opera, ballet, symphonic music and musical theatre defies North American logic.

Not that “suddenly” is quite the right word since the project took nearly three decades to realize. All the same, it is not just difficult, but virtually impossible to imagine such a project mounted in a Canadian city of comparable size, and with 95% of the funding coming from three levels of government—in this case, 20% from the Republic of Austria, 50% from the State of Upper Austria and 25% from the City of Linz. Such funding was possible

because in Austria, as in much of Europe, culture is regarded not as mere entertainment but as education for the spirit—and therefore a responsibility of the state.

That is why government money not only built the Musiktheater am Volksgarten, it will also continue pay most of its operating costs. Subsidies cover 85% of the US\$52 million annual budget of the Landestheater, which embraces both the new facility and

the old opera house, now functioning as a playhouse.

It's little wonder that Dennis Russell Davies, one of the leading American conductors of his generation, has spent upwards of a decade as Music Director in this provincial European city. “Look around you,” he laughed when interviewed backstage during the new facility's gala opening week last year. “There is cultural support here. The state government even funds music schools in small villages.”

The support extended, in the opening week of celebration, to the mounting of a



PHOTO: (TOP) SIGRID RAUCHDORFER; (BOTTOM) URSULA KAUFMANN

handsome production of Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*, starring Anne Schwanewilms as the Marschallin and Kurt Rydl as Baron Ochs, and the premiere of *Spuren der Verirrten* (*The Lost*), a new German-language opera by no less a marquee composer than Philip Glass—both of which Davies conducted.

The Lost might almost have been called *The Found*, judging by the army of performers marshalled on stage for its premiere. Based on the eponymous 2006 play by Peter Handke and adapted by the new Musiktheater's Intendant, Rainer Mennicken, the text poses the existential question, "Where are we?" (just as novelist Robertson Davies once posed Canada's similarly existential question, "Where is here?"). Glass's piece employs an impressive array of singers, dancers, actors, choristers and orchestral players to leave us in doubt about the answer. Director David Pountney and set designer Robert Israel obviously produced the new opera in a way to show off the new house, whose 32-metre revolving stage is one of the largest in Europe and whose shops assembled almost the whole production in-house.

Although no prizewinner for imaginative design, London-based architect Terry Pawson's glass and concrete palace of culture turned out to be admirably functional, embracing a restaurant, cafe, shop, 300-car parking garage and spacious, adaptable lobby spaces in accordance with the goal of providing Linz with a downtown "living room for the city." In order to provide an advantageous park-side setting, the city even agreed to change the route of one of its streets (something civic authorities in Houston refused to do for its Wortham Centre, leading to the construction of an enormous over- and across-the-street lobby that has all the charm of a railway station).

With its extensive catering facilities, the Musiktheater offers a range of dining options from Sunday brunches to receptions for 1,000 people, with a nod to Vienna's coffee-house tradition in its Café Volksgarten, with service from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. Unlike so many opera houses, this one aims to be accessible to its community all day.

The psychological underpinning for this philosophy is to make the new Musiktheater quite different from the Staatsoper in Vienna or any of its other monumental 19th- and 20th-century predecessors—less of a temple, in other words, and more of a forum, so that what takes place within its walls comes to be regarded as integral to daily life. As Executive Director Thomas Koenigstorfer puts it: "We felt we had to build a building to serve the whole community, not just 3%-5% of the population."

In North America, serving the whole community used to be regarded as either an elusive goal for a performing-arts

"In Austria, as in much of Europe, culture is regarded not as mere entertainment but as education for the spirit—and therefore the responsibility of the state."

facility or a reason to maximize the seat count. Without the subsidies available to comparable European houses, the box office has tended to rule. Although we have, perhaps, since learned that the way to develop an audience for the performing arts is not to give a large number of people a compromised experience (Toronto's recently built opera house and Montreal's even more recently built symphony hall are both close to 1,000 seats smaller than their predecessors), the goal of Linz to create a public living room for downtown has usually been abandoned in the face of real-estate realities. As long ago as 1959, when

Vancouver built its Queen Elizabeth Theatre as a home for opera and symphonic music, an architecturally integrated restaurant was opened on the adjacent plaza. It stands today as an empty shell.

So is the Linz ideal unrealistic on the other side of the Atlantic? It surely depends on the time and the place. It also depends on a community's conception of the role of the arts in society. Meanwhile, when in culture-loving Linz, let's go to the Musiktheater for coffee. **CC**

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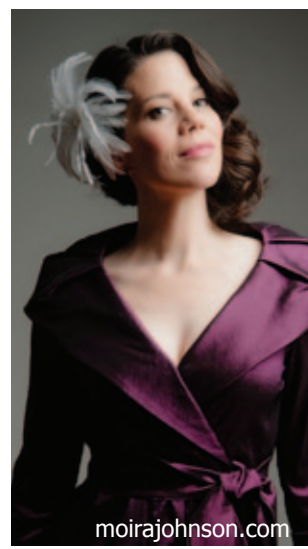
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Letter from Montreal

Richard Turp explains the mission of a vital resource for a whole generation of young Canadian artists

It is a truism that to enjoy a career as a classical vocalist today, a young singer needs more than a beautiful voice, which though a necessary condition is not sufficient. A modern opera singer requires, among other things, a good musical and cultural background, a solid vocal technique, fluency in several languages, some semblance of stylistic awareness and, increasingly, theatrical flexibility and openness when working with stage directors. Most importantly today, singers have to acquire a psychological and emotional maturity to cope with the constant and often unsettling demands of a modern career.

Academic institutions and individual teachers are able to furnish young artists with many, though certainly not all, of these requirements. In Canada, federal and provincial governments and agencies have also helped in a variety of ways through some public funding. In recent years, however, financially strapped government bodies and programs have been unable to keep up with the increasing demand for financial support. As a result, many young vocal artists have been limited in their access to the necessary human or financial resources that might allow them to fulfill their potential to develop promising careers.

In 1997, one key private source tried to ameliorate the situation. That was the year Jacqueline Desmarais, the Montreal-based opera lover and cultural patron, decided to coordinate her support of individual singers more effectively by creating the Jacqueline Desmarais Foundation for Young Canadian Opera Singers. The Desmarais family has long been associated with endowments in a variety of social areas, but its support of the cultural sector has been of profound importance to a wide number of organisations—from the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts to l'Opéra de Montréal and the Metropolitan Opera in New York. As anyone who has attended the Met's Live in HD cinema broadcasts will know, the Canadian transmissions are made possible by funding from Madame Desmarais, in memory of her late husband, Paul Desmarais Sr.

Since its creation, the Foundation's support of young artists has become an inescapable and invaluable part of Canada's operatic infrastructure. Administered since its creation by the indefatigable

Margot Provencher, the foundation has been instrumental in helping these artists develop and flourish both on a personal and professional level. It has, in many respects, become a leading source of career development for almost a generation of Canadian singers. Just ask bass baritone Philippe Sly: "The Desmarais Foundation gave me the means to study the art of German lieder at the Schubert Institute in Austria. Thanks to this trip, the recital repertoire—and especially the German lied—has become a critical part of my career and journey as an artist. Thanks to Foundation, I was able to pursue what my heart and my singing longed for."

Over the years, about 100 young Canadian singers from coast to coast have received financial support from the Foundation, which has expended well over \$1 million to help these individuals achieve their career objectives. The Foundation's annual audition regularly attracts about 80 applicants, of which about 20 are subsequently invited to perform in a live audition in Montreal each

spring. About a dozen singers are ultimately chosen to receive grants from the Foundation.

The goal of the auditions is to select singers who have real career potential. Successful candidates are awarded individual grants that are designed to help them realize important projects related to their career development. A jury of music professionals evaluates the auditions and career projects, though Madame Desmarais herself, deeply committed to the young singers she encourages, is also personally involved in all the decisions of the Foundation.

As the guiding light of her Foundation and always sitting on the final jury, her hands-on support extends well beyond the annual adjudication sessions. She remains in touch with many of the artists she has encouraged over the years and often has occasion to see them in performance. In a recent interview, she proudly referred to a "a recent article in *Opera News* magazine reporting that my little Michèle Losier [the mezzo is a former Desmarais bursary winner] had triumphed at l'Opéra de Paris-La Bastille. The article spoke of her magnificent voice and presence. When I read such things, I am simply overjoyed."

The Desmarais credo at the Foundation is simple and unwavering: "We have to support them until they become



Based in Montreal, the Foundation has a national reach

Over the years, about 100 young Canadian singers have received financial support from the Foundation

Jacqueline Desmarais:
"We have to support young
artists until they become
fully autonomous."



fully autonomous." This helps explain why the Foundation has and continues to support some singers over several years. Soprano Marianne Fiset, who has already appeared at Opéra de Paris as Massenet's *Manon*, is one of them. "The Foundation has been of capital importance. At the beginning of a career, a classical singer is confronted by a multitude of expenses, each one as essential as the next. There are coachings and voice lessons, often with professionals who live abroad, foreign audition tours, concert and audition dresses and attire, language classes, fitness classes and so many other expenses. The Foundation is an indispensable source of support not only from a financial point of view, but also from a professional one. The members of the jury, for example, are eminent personalities from the world of music who have offered me precious advice and comments that have greatly assisted me in orienting myself in a profession that is fraught with numerous challenges and dangers. I am deeply proud and extremely grateful to count myself among the singers the Foundation has helped over the years."

Many would applaud Fiset's sentiment. Over the years, the Foundation has supported most of the current wave of singers—from mezzo Julie Boulianne and soprano Mireille Asselin to soprano Simone Osborne and baritones Philip Addis and Geoffrey Sirret. A current Desmarais bursary awardee and rising vocal star, soprano Layla Claire, not only made her debut as

Fiordiligi in the Canadian Opera Company's *Così fan tutte* this season, will sing Anne Trulove in the Metropolitan Opera production of Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* next season alongside fellow Canadian Gerald Finley.

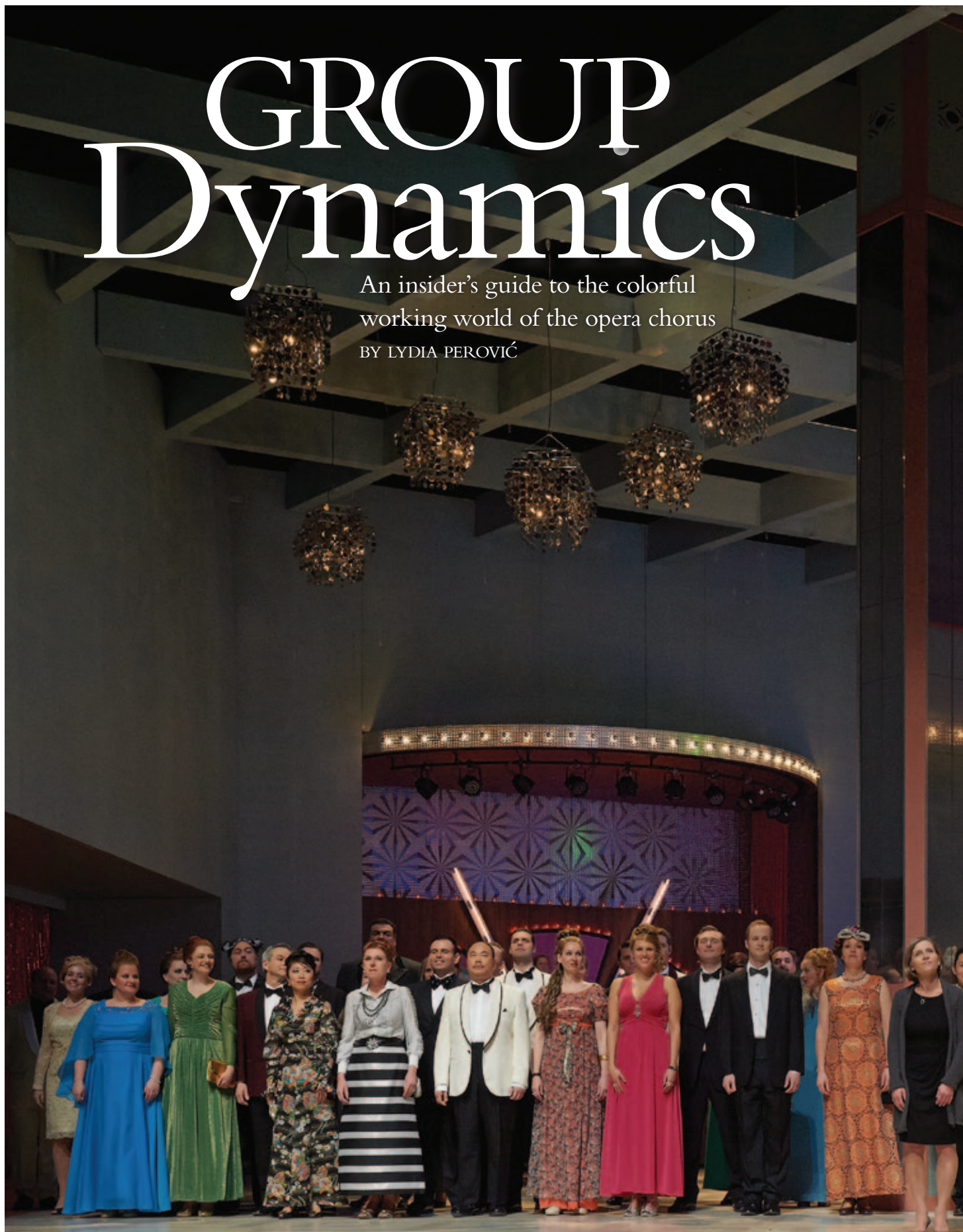
The Foundation has also established an impressive and constantly evolving network of advisors and jury members, a network that stretches across North America and Europe. While seeking to keep the independence of her Foundation intact, Madame Desmarais has also forged very specific and mutually beneficial associations with a variety of institutions such as the Canadian Vocal Arts Institute (of which she has been a Patron of Honour since 2004) and the Schubert Institute in Baden bei Wien.

She has also used her considerable personal influence to help such artists as conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin knock on certain doors. That they have subsequently been able to profit from the opportunities afforded them is both a direct compliment to the Foundation's talent-scouting abilities and to its principal's faith and belief in young Canadians. "For artists like us," says Boulianne, "Madame Desmarais and her Foundation do not only allow dreams to come true. She realizes these dreams with love, passion and intelligence. She not only shares our dreams, but our successes. It is, among so many other things, what makes her a great lady of the arts. I would never have succeeded without her help. And I am not alone." **OC**

GROUP Dynamics

An insider's guide to the colorful
working world of the opera chorus

BY LYDIA PEROVIĆ







Soprano Ingrid Martin:
 “I work until 5 in an office
 for an insurance company.
 It takes a bit of time to
 change gears.”

PHOTOS: (PREVIOUS PAGE AND THIS PAGE) MICHAEL COOPER; (PREVIOUS PAGE) FROM THE 2014 COC STAGING OF *UN BALLO IN MASCHERA*; (THIS PAGE) DIE FLEDERMAUS

Ask a chorister what kind of unique pleasures singing in a chorus brings, and they will not prevaricate. “I have never been part of a group that can create that kind of sound,” says soprano Ingrid Martin of her first rehearsal with the Canadian Opera Company Chorus. “I sat there thinking: ‘Oh, my God.’” For mezzo Karen Olinyk, “It’s the power, the energy—it’s making a sound louder than any sound I can make on my own. Even when you’re whispering together, there’s something powerful—you do feel that mob mentality in *Peter Grimes*.” For baritone Michael Sproule, “There is nothing like being in concertante—in Verdi’s *Simon Boccanegra* there are fantastic scenes when everybody’s on stage and the soprano is on top and you’re like the carpet underneath everything.” In addition, says mezzo Lilian Kilianski, “There’s the joy within a section, and I really experienced that in Handel’s *Semele*. We sing together as a line and we know when each other breathe. You can even sense if someone is stronger on a certain note than you are and vice versa.” All the choristers mention a camaraderie rarely found elsewhere. The COC Chorus and Sandra Horst, its Chorus Master



Chorus Master Sandra Horst

of 17 years, seem to win kudos in every production no matter the general tenor of the review. The chorus consists of trained singers and musicians whose lives, ages and careers are otherwise very diverse. Bass Kenneth Baker is in his 33rd season, while mezzo Erica Iris Huang’s first contract was the 2010 production of *Aida*. Some, such as soprano Alexandra Lennox-Pomeroy, teach voice privately, or teach an instrument and maintain a freelance instrumental career, such as baritone—and violinist—Sproule, a former member of the COC Orchestra and a current regular with Esprit Orchestra. Other choristers, such as Martin and Olinyk, have full-time jobs in other fields, in their cases in insurance and arts administration respectively. Then there are the teachers: Kilianski teaches Grade 6 and tenor James Leatch history, in addition to coaching rugby and hockey.

Each year, the chorus is assembled anew after mandatory auditions. “Usually, I decide on a core group of people who will be continuous through the whole season,” says Horst. “Then, depending on how many people are required in each show, I add or subtract from that.” Horst is an energetic, multi-talented

musician—accompanist, répétiteur, conductor, Director of Music Studies in the Opera Division of the University of Toronto's Faculty of Music—who took over the COC Chorus from Donald Palumbo, now Chorus Master of the Metropolitan Opera.

Opera Canada spoke with Horst and the singers in February, during the COC's run of *Un ballo in maschera* and *Così fan tutte*. Singing Verdi and Mozart on alternate days is par for the course for chorus singers: they often sing what for soloists would be the repertoire of disparate voice types. "It's fun—I would never have sung Verdi if I wasn't in the chorus," says Lennox-Pomeroy, who describes herself as a light soprano. "When I sing Verdi, I have to 'darken up' my voice so I don't sound bright and stick out. Other singers will have a harder time singing lighter stuff. But we all know how to fit the sound—and Sandra is good at that. She knows exactly how each of us sings, and sometimes adjusts things by saying, 'Sopranos, cover here' or 'Don't use so much diction' and so on."

Still, programming affects the composition of the chorus since chorus size varies from opera to opera. Occasionally, there is directorial input. "Atom Egoyan's *Così* was built on the concept of the school for lovers, so he wanted people that looked the age of the principal soloists," says Horst. "That informed who I chose for that chorus, but that's really unusual. Most of the time you want to have a cross section of the ages, so that they represent a population. Usually, the director takes what I've chosen." Horst finds out about seasons two years in advance, but the singers audition in the winter before the beginning of a new season so they know which shows they will be considered for and whether a female and male chorus will be required to the same degree (there is no female chorus in next season's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, for example).

The singers get the music eight weeks before the start of the rehearsals, and they all have developed their own ways of preparing. Some start by listening. Lennox-Pomeroy downloads audio of chorus parts: "I put them on my phone and listen during the hour-long drive from my home in Orangeville. Then I'll look at my score. I try to get my words memorized as much as I can." Sproule takes a similar tack: "First of all, I listen to it. I listen to a lot on YouTube or recordings, then plunk through my part on the piano, then speak through the words in rhythm, something Sandra does in the rehearsals as well." Kilianski is also an aural learner: "I listen to the chorus parts—I live with the chorus and listen, and then I start singing and planning. I know of the six *Hercules* choruses [Handel's piece is one of the COC's

Spring 2014 presentations] which ones are going to be most challenging so I spend a little more time with them."

Martin and Leatch prefer taking the score to the piano right away. "I'll be taking the choral score into the practise room, and plunking out the notes and reading through the words and trying to get a handle on it before we get into the rehearsals," says the soprano. Similarly, the tenor starts by "teaching it to myself at the piano... They give us the chorus score with some leads, and with the Internet you can find all kinds of things. But I don't listen to recordings; usually, I can't hear the tenor line. It's like a mush of sound—with the orchestra and the soloists, I can't even tell where the tenors are. I'm better learning my part on my own." There are also singers who, like Olinyk, begin from the text: "I read through the libretto. I like to get the overview, just text on the page. I go through the translation—and word by word. What am I singing and why am I singing it? You also look at how the text scans with the rhythm, with the notes. It's



Soprano Alexandra Lennox-Pomeroy: "Where you are on stage triggers the memory of where you are in the score."

very tempting to dive into the music right away, but I really try not to, especially with something new. You really want to get the word laydown in the right kind of way. Then I go to the piano and try to figure out notes. There are times when I listen to recordings—I try not to for as long as I can—just to hear the orchestration." Baker starts from text, too: "I will look at the history of the piece, at the composer, read the libretto, get a translation of the libretto. If it's something I'm not familiar with, I'll get a recording. I don't want to learn it from that, but it's nice to get a full sense of the thing. Then you're down to the logging—learning the notes and memorizing."

Most singers do not memorize their music before the first rehearsal since they may end up splitting into the neighbouring voice part if the chorus master decides to adjust the coloring at certain junctures. "Once we start, Sandra has a fabulous technique of structuring the rehearsal to help you memorize," says Baker, who

concedes that memorizing is never the easiest task. For Lennox-Pomeroy, stage rehearsals can also serve as an aid: “Where you are on stage triggers the memory of where you are in the score.”

The chorus will typically have six three-hour rehearsals with Horst before they start working with the director and the conductor—but the number of pre-staging rehearsals will depend on how chorus-heavy the opera is. During this period, Horst is not in contact with the conductor, so she prepares the group for a variety of scenarios and for different tempi. They often start by just speaking the words in the rhythm. “You can notice a lot when the entire chorus is speaking the text in a sort of sung way together,” says Sproule. “Do you have the right rhythm? Is the pronunciation there?” Although they learn the music by sections, Horst mixes the sections up. “That’s how we’re going to be on stage,” says Olinyk. “First of all, you have to be very strong in yourself in your part. You also have to be aware of everybody else and to make a good cohesive sound. Still later, the director usually wants you to be an

to focus everyone’s energy, it brings it all together.” Horst watches each live performance from the back of Ring 3, her favourite spot in the Four Seasons Centre. “I like the sound there best. I can see exactly what’s going on and I can see the conductor. I am backstage only if the chorus is, too, and I need to conduct them.”

Being nimble and open to all kinds of staging requirements is part of a chorister’s job. In some productions, they will be directed tightly and precisely, but then asked to create their own individual characters in others. One director may put them in the dark orchestra pit (as Robert Carsen did in Gluck’s *Iphigénie en Tauride*) while another positions them backstage and mikes them (as Daniele Finzi Pasca did in Saariaho’s *L’amour de loin*). Or consider Robert Lepage’s Stravinsky production of *The Nightingale and Other Fables*, cited by many choristers as one of their favourite recent productions, in which their tasks might have included handling puppets while wading through a tank of water, or Carsen’s Gluck *Orfeo ed Euridice*, in which choristers found themselves



Mezzo Karen Olinyk: “You have to plan your meals, your shopping, your laundry. You have to sleep. You really have to be disciplined.”



Auditions take place in the winter before the beginning of each season.

individual in the picture. The demands of the job are multifaceted.” Fellow mezzo Huang agrees: “I try to sit next to a different person each time, and not always a mezzo. I usually favour tenors. It’s the real test of whether I have the stamina to sing against their line.”

Even after the chorus starts working with the conductor, Horst remains the conduit of communications. “The conductor will give me notes, the chorus doesn’t really work with the conductor directly.” As rehearsals proceed, the conversations between chorus master and conductor continue. “Part of my job is to make sure the chorus does exactly what the conductor wants it to,” says Horst, whose music direction continues well after opening night. “This is one of the few choruses where they have actual notes before every show. The Met chorus does not, nor does Chicago’s, but here it’s built into the chorus contract that there’s 15 minutes of notes with me before every performance. Which is great, as so many things can be improved on in that time. It helps

in body bags writhing across rugged terrain amid balls of fire. “You have to make sure you do justice to the director’s vision,” says Huang. Or, in the words of Kilianski, “Buy into it. Put your soul into it. It almost always works. And that’s when you have fun.”

Several choristers note that modern directors tend to be capable communicators. “Recently, we’ve had a lot of good directors who are easy to work with. I can’t remember the last time we had a grumpy director,” says Sproule. Among his stand-outs, he cites Tim Albery’s Prokofiev *War and Peace*, Lepage’s *Nightingale* (“We stood on stage and had the puppets under the cloaks. At the Brooklyn Academy of Music, where we toured, the audience felt physically close due to the architecture of the hall, and there was an audible gasp when we revealed those puppets”) and Paul Curran’s Shostakovich *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (“It was the first season in the opera house and it was thrilling. Such fun to act, and you always knew what to do on stage. You just went for it.”)

PHOTO: LUCIA DI LAMMENORNICHAEL COOPER

In addition to singing and acting, choristers are also expected to be good fixers and improvisers. If something goes awry on stage, or if a different principal comes in on short notice and needs some guidance, choristers are there to lend a hand. Says Lennox-Pomeroy: “If something’s missing on stage, or is left behind on stage, if something falls or breaks, occasionally doors don’t open...we take care of it. And if a cast member is switched on short notice due to illness, we are always aware of the new member. They sometimes ask us discreetly, ‘Should I be here?’ while on stage, and we try to help. You have to do it in character, and so that nobody notices.”

While dressers help them into costumes and wigs, chorus members typically apply their own make-up. “We have make-up charts and suggestions pasted on our dressing room walls,” says Lennox-Pomeroy. And with all the wigs you end up wearing, “you get to see yourself in every hair colour. And know what *not* to do next time you go to the salon.”

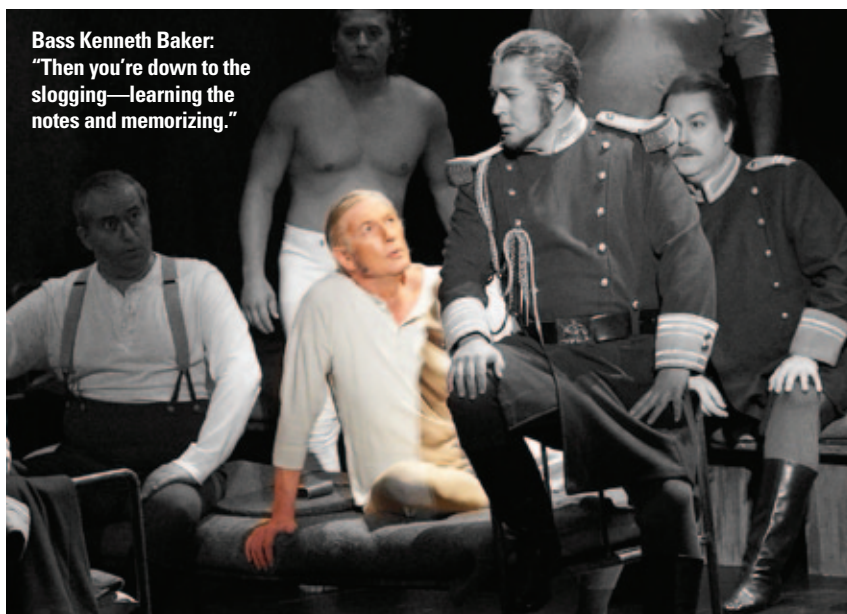
school, “it’s nice that we share this job at night”. Being part of the chorus means you are not the one in charge of everybody else—a big change from his day job as a teacher. “I get tired, but it’s good tired. It’s great to have this creative outlet.”

Those who have children heap praise on their partners. “I usually need the transition time between school and here, and I lie down for 30 minutes while something’s cooking,” Kilianski says of her typical day. “The kids are grown now, but I used to eat with them. Then my husband would come in the door and he’d start childcare and I would leave. Very often, I’d play my music on the way down. So my husband is the unknown hero here. He’s only been able to come to the operas in the past five years because the kids have grown. He works full-time, too.”

Young mezzo Huang, who is working to build up a solo career, describes each new contract as a gift. Her first contract, which included just that 2010 *Aida*, allowed her the time and



Baritone Michael Sproule:
“You can notice a lot when the chorus is speaking the text in a sort of sung way together.”



Bass Kenneth Baker:
“Then you’re down to the slogging—learning the notes and memorizing.”

Whether they are building a musical career or entering its final act, whether they have full-time jobs in unrelated professions or are busy freelance instrumentalists, whether they teach voice privately or history in school, all of the choristers consider their chorus work as an essential component of their professional lives. Full-timers in other jobs have developed strategies to cope. “You have to plan your meals, your shopping, your laundry, you have to sleep,” Olynyk explains laughing. “You really have to be disciplined.” Martin echoes the sentiment: “It gets to the point where the less time I have on my hands, the more I get done because I have to be twice as disciplined. I work until 5 in an office for an insurance company, and that’s such a different job. It takes a bit of time to change gears. So I welcome the opportunity to walk from Bloor and Yonge down to the theatre—that’s my time to get rid of the 9-to-5 and start preparing.” Leatch’s wife is also in the chorus, and although during the day she works in another

financial support to prepare for the Eckhardt-Gramatté Competition (she won). Since then, her contract has grown to the full season. “It’s such a driving force in my career as a young artist. If I didn’t have the chorus engagement, I don’t know if I’d be singing today. Financially, it’s very difficult for young singers to maintain the lessons, the auditions and the coaching. Chorus has enabled me to keep that up.” Scarborough-born and raised, the mezzo also helps her mother run their joint voice and piano studio out of the family home. “Every time I get a contract, I call my parents and take them out for a very nice dinner. You never know what will happen because your previous contracts don’t guarantee anything. I always work to my audition date as if it will be my lifeline for next year. When I found out I was in for the entire season, I thought it was a mistake at first. I had to reread the letter.” Her parents didn’t miss a beat. “They immediately asked if that meant I would take them out to dinner seven times. We’ll have to see about that.” **OC**

PHOTOS: MICHAEL COOPER (LEFT), PETER GRIMES, (RIGHT) IL TROVATORE

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PROGRAM

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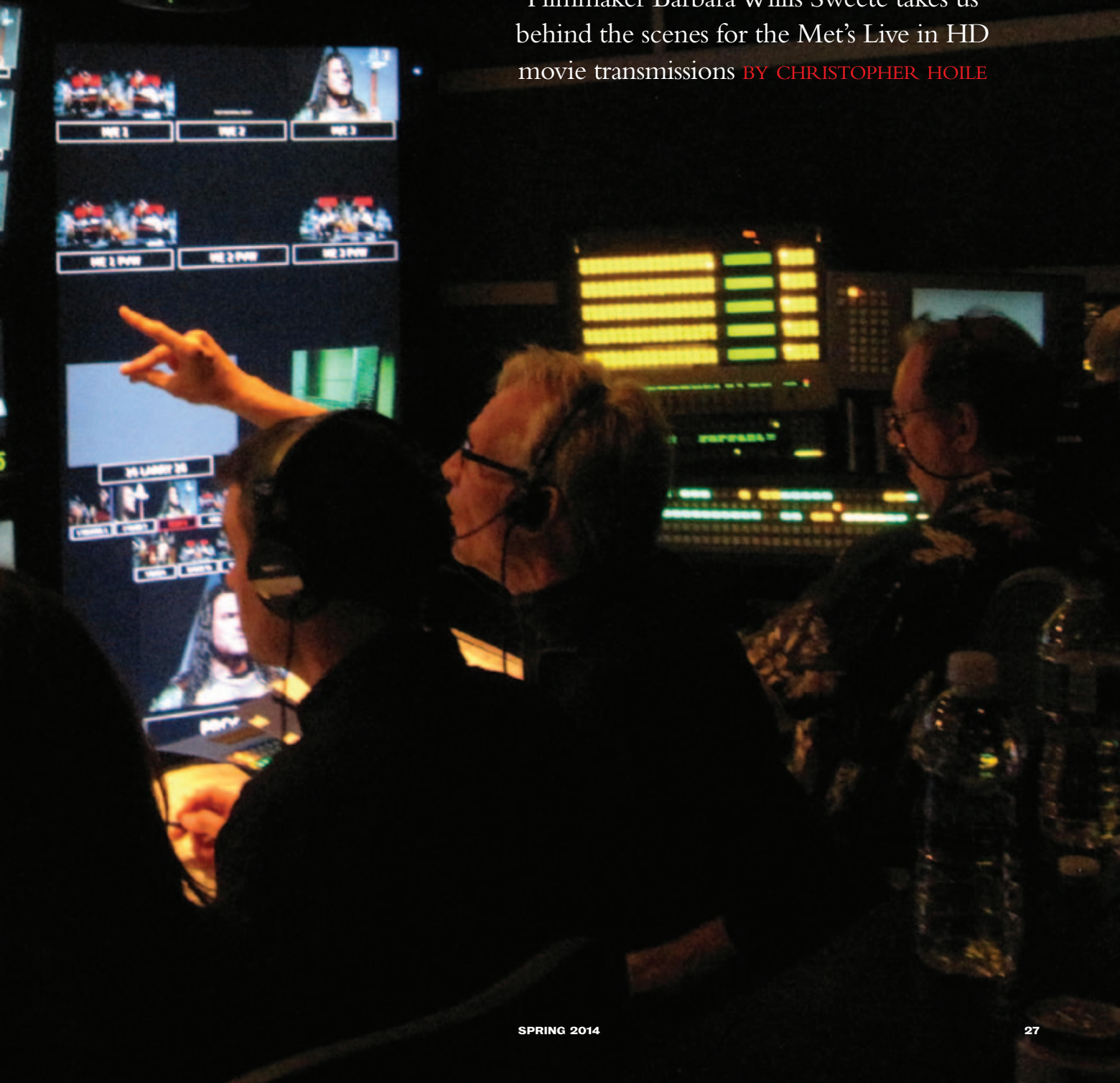
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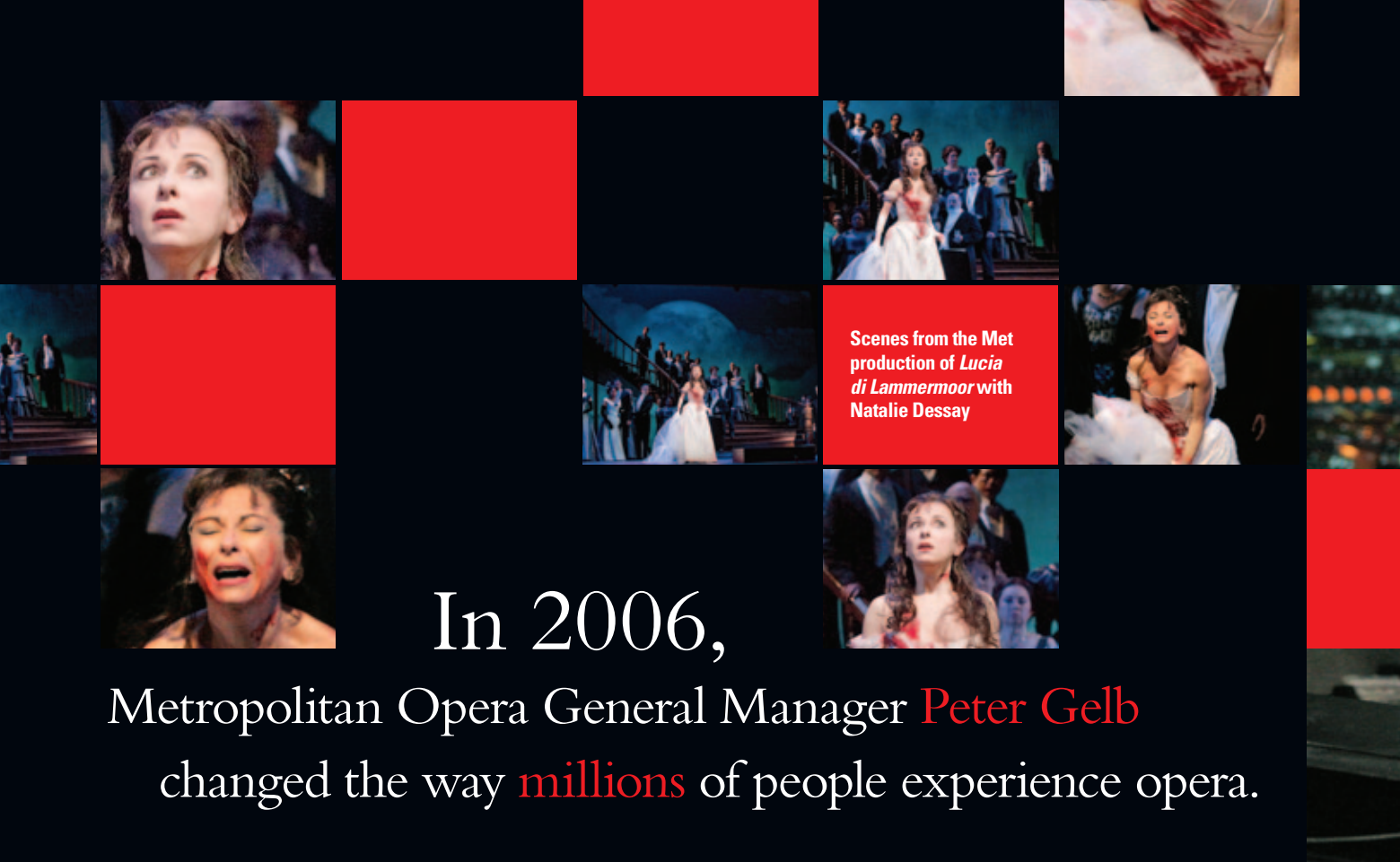




OPERA FROM THE TRUCK

Filmmaker Barbara Willis Sweete takes us
behind the scenes for the Met's Live in HD
movie transmissions **BY CHRISTOPHER HOILE**





In 2006,
Metropolitan Opera General Manager **Peter Gelb**
changed the way **millions** of people experience opera.

Live broadcasts from the Met stage began as early as 1910, with the Saturday matinee radio broadcasts launched in 1931 and televised productions in 1977. Gelb decided to take this one step further. In an effort to “democratize opera,” he instituted live broadcasts of performances in high-definition video to cinemas around the world. The Peabody and Emmy Award-winning series of Live in HD transmissions, which entered its ninth season in 2014/15, currently reaches more than 2,000 theatres in 65 countries. More than 14 million tickets have been sold since the series’ inception.

Gelb had worked with Canadian filmmaker Barbara Willis Sweete on several films about classical music for Rhombus Media, the Toronto-based media company she co-founded. In 2007, he approached her about joining his new project. Her first Live in HD assignment was *Hänsel und Gretel* in 2008, but since then she has directed 40% of the transmissions—second only to Gary Halvorson—in operas ranging from Gluck to Philip Glass.

Unlike broadcasts of live sporting

events, which are filmed and edited on the fly, Live in HD transmissions require considerable planning and preparation since opera requires the filmmaker to communicate a preexisting narrative. As Willis Sweete puts it: “Opera is very different from covering any other kind of live event because you have to tell a story, and you have to make the story work.” The paradox of planning a live broadcast is that “it has to seem like it’s improvised and yet it has to be absolutely foolproof.” Over the course of several interviews, Willis Sweete explained what goes into solving the paradox.

THE ASSIGNMENT

Shortly after the press conference announcing the Met’s new season, Gelb separately contacts the directors he has in mind with a list of operas he would like them to film. He takes into account the approach of each director and the works they have done in the past. Since Gary Halvorson had filmed Puccini’s *La bohème* in Franco Zeffirelli’s production for broadcast in 2008, Gelb offered it to Willis Sweete this year, knowing that she

would give the production a different look and feel.

THE PREPARATION

In the time leading up to the dress rehearsal, Willis Sweete familiarizes herself with the opera by any means she can. She reads the libretto, gets to know the characters and watches whatever videos she can find. For *La bohème* (see p. 35 for live and encore transmission times), she had the PBS tape Halvorson directed and thus the chance to assess the specific challenges posed by the set and staging much more precisely than she would for a new production.

About a week before the dress rehearsal, Willis Sweete must let the Met know where she wants three or four of the final contingent of up to eight cameras that will be used to film the production. If the dress rehearsal is open to the public, the seats around some of the cameras will have to be reserved so that the public and the cameramen do not get in each other’s way.

Ideally, at least one camera will be a jib and the other two or three will be fixed-location cameras. She chooses the cameras

PHOTO: (PREVIOUS PAGE) METROPOLITAN OPERA; (ABOVE) KEN HOWARD



Met General Manger Peter Gelb and director Barbara Willis Sweete in the studio

“based on which angles will tell me the most in order to plan the shots later.”

A jib is a device like a boom with a camera on one end and a counterweight on the other for shots into the stage from above. She places the jib on the left or right of the stage, depending on where the set design suggests most of the action will occur. She then chooses a fixed camera on the main floor on the opposite side of the jib and one at the very back of the hall with a massive telephoto lens that can zoom from a view of the entire stage to an extreme close up of a face.

THE LIGHTING TEST

Willis Sweete arrives in New York the night before or the day of the dress rehearsal, which itself may occur two-to-three weeks before the broadcast date. For the film crew, the dress rehearsal is known as the “lighting test” because the way the singers and set are lit during the performance is critical to how they will be filmed. The lighting test is used to “identify all the issues for the HD broadcast,” such as whether the stage lighting is so dark that it won’t work well in HD.

During the test the three or four cameras film simultaneously. An assistant alerts the cameramen to the singers’ physical and vocal entries. While watching, Willis Sweete can request specific shots from a cameraman, such as a close up or wide shot, but overall she asks the cameramen to explore the production from their vantage points, looking for what they think might be their best shots and identifying any problems. Willis Sweete regards the cameramen as “true artists” and “the unsung heroes of live broadcasting.” She says of the combination of teamwork and excitement during the lighting test that “it’s like we’re on the Starship Enterprise navigating new worlds together.”

PLANNING THE SHOTS

To plan her approach to the opera, Willis Sweete repeatedly views the output of the three or four cameras during the lighting test as well as a version of these films edited together as a very rough draft. She cherishes that moment “when I find out what the material wants to tell me.”

An assistant has already prepared a

special piano reduction of the score for her. “Depending on how thick the texture is, we put two to three musical staves on a page with lots of room to write underneath each. Then we cut the score apart and put it on legal sized paper in a binder.” The score assistant also writes in time code numbers from the cameras for every line on the cut-up score to link the musical notation to what is happening on film, and Willis Sweete will note if a composer uses a particular instrument to give a cue. The assistant also writes in a word-by-word translation by hand under the printed text so that in the filming the “important words are honored.” Willis Sweete then color codes each of the characters in the opera and the words each sings.

The assistant starts work as soon as the lighting test is finished and tries to get far enough ahead that Willis Sweete can begin planning the shots the following day. By the time of the lighting test, she has already decided where all eight of the camera positions will be for the broadcast. Before she starts planning her shots, however, she spends the best part of a day with the stage director, if he or she is available, or



The Live in HD transmissions are controlled from trucks on 11th Avenue



with whoever is in charge of the production creatively to understand the directorial vision of the opera. “It’s like serving many masters because I’m trying to realize the vision of the stage director, and the vision of the composer of the opera and tell the story in a coherent way.” At the same time, she likes to use the camera operators’ insights from the lighting test “to give back to them what they have discovered.”

Willis Sweete writes all her shots in pencil on the specially prepared score, sideways to get them all in, with a line for where she wants the cut to be, on exactly what beat or before what word. She starts with the overture, if there is one, and works steadily to the end because she finds that only by working forwards through the score can she capture its flow. “I imagine that I have just one camera, and that each of the cameras in the hall is just another position of that camera so that I am always in the ideal place and every shot develops until it is about to lose its integrity, when I cut.”

Willis Sweete hopes that each of her broadcasts appears to be done in a different style because she sees the film as “basically a visual enhancement of what is already in the text and music. If the operas I film look different from each other, it is because I’ve tried to get the material to tell me what to do.”

Nevertheless, operas from different periods do have different feels: “With Baroque and classical operas, I’m always imagining that the score is a crystal, and

that I take a delicate chisel and I tap and all the pieces fall away to tell me where the shots are and what the structure is going to be. Whereas with Richard Strauss, it’s more like being a great butcher and carving up a carcass without destroying the integrity of the joints versus the sinews versus the tendons. So I try in my own imagination to reference the musical vocabulary of the opera in the shots.”

After planning her shots, the Associate Director (AD) has 12 to 14 days to prepare for what’s known as the “scratch taping.” He numbers all her shots, as well as identifying the camera for each one. He then makes up a separate shot list on what looks like a cash-register tape for each cameraman to use during the scratch taping. A live broadcast can require anywhere from 750 to 2,000 shots, depending on the nature of the opera. A fast-paced work such as *Don Giovanni* may need 1,500 shots, whereas a slower-moving one, such as *Parsifal*, which although twice as long, may need only 1,000.

THE CAMERA CONFERENCE

The scratch taping is preceded by a camera conference, in which Willis Sweete and the cameramen watch the lighting test and rehearse the shots she has listed for each of them. At the conference, Willis Sweete sits with her score reader and the AD and calls the shots exactly as she will during the live transmission.

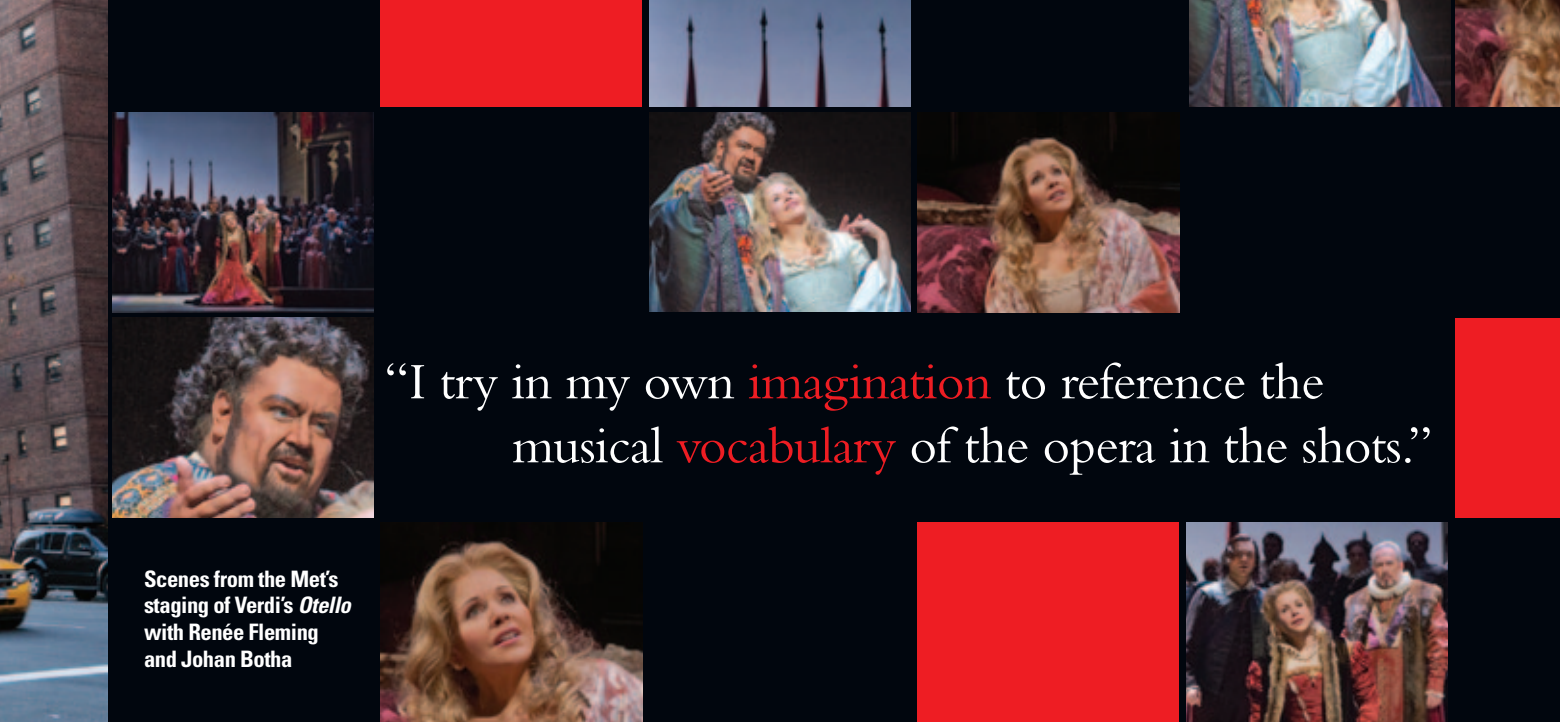
THE SCRATCH TAPING

The scratch taping is a filming of the Tuesday or Wednesday performance prior to the live broadcast. It is the sole live rehearsal Willis Sweete has with the cameramen. Gelb watches the scratch taping, writes down time code numbers and comes in at 9:30 the next morning “sometimes with nothing to add, sometimes with hours worth of stuff to say.” Then Willis Sweete has Wednesday afternoon and all day Thursday to work on any changes in her script. On the day before the live Saturday transmission, she meets again with the cameramen for an all-day session with the new script and the film of the scratch taping. “I’ve made all the adjustments from my point of view and the cameramen weigh in if they have anything to add.”

THE TRANSMISSION

The live transmission is always on a Saturday afternoon. On that day, Willis Sweete sees her team in the conference room. “We have a dry run, make any last-minute changes, have a group hug and we go to war together.” For the transmission, the team is situated in a truck outside the loading bay on 11th Avenue behind the Met. The truck is divided into three rooms. Willis Sweete and her team are in the middle room, the audio technicians are in the room to their left and the engineers are in the room to their right.

PHOTO: MARTY SOHL



“I try in my own **imagination** to reference the musical **vocabulary** of the opera in the shots.”

Scenes from the Met's staging of Verdi's *Otello* with Renée Fleming and Johan Botha

Willis Sweete sits at a desk where she can see ten monitors for the eight cameras she is using plus two backstage cameras set up for the intermission features. She can also use these so long as they are back in action for the intermissions. To her right is the Technical Director (TD) and to her left is the score reader and then the AD, who, she says, functions like an air traffic controller. Among the other people in her room are the staff producer and the two people who send out the live subtitles in four languages. As if there weren't enough pressure, Gelb sits on stool right behind Willis Sweete.

The score reader usually has a doctorate from Juilliard in collaborative piano or conducting and can be relied on to count accurately so Willis Sweete can watch the monitors and not the score. The AD audibly tracks the shots by shot number, the score reader counts down and announces “Ready and,” and Willis Sweete makes a tap on a sounding block to signal a cut, which alerts the TD to switch cameras. She has worked with the same TD so often that “he knows how to dance with me.” She gives her tap just enough in advance of the beat for him to switch exactly on the beat. During transmissions, says Willis Sweete, the team is “completely locked together in terms of our consciousness.”

Despite all the preparations, there still are times—whether due to camera

malfunction, an unplanned move by one of the singers or the sudden appearance of an amazingly good shot—when Willis Sweete might decide to go “off book.” When this happens, she says, the mood in the truck quickly changes. “We were already on high alert, but then everyone becomes extra vigilant, like a cat watching a mouse hole.” When this happens, Willis Sweete takes over to give all the signals. The AD announces, “We're off the book,” and then lets everyone know again when they are back to the predetermined script. When Willis Sweete returns to a scripted shot number, everyone heaves a sigh of relief. “That's a very interesting shot of adrenalin when we go off the book, I can tell you. But sometimes it yields the most beautiful results.”

THE DVD

At 9:30am on the Monday following the broadcast, Willis Sweete goes into the edit room to edit the live broadcast tape for DVD, luckily working with the same team to produce all her videos. They are running against the clock because they have only five days to do their work, and they want to screen the final version at the end to make sure they haven't missed anything.

Editing for the DVD basically involves “a lot of repair work” and the chance to tweak the tape to make it better. This might involve finding substitute

shots for any that are not quite in focus, for cuts to reaction shots when a singer is not reacting or for shots when a singer reaches his mark too early or too late. They also get notes from the audio people about really bad mistakes, such as a cracked note or a wrong word. To fix these errors, Willis Sweete and her team have to review the scratch taping, in which, they hope, the singer has sung the right note or word. They also have access to all the shots that don't go on air to find substitutes for other shots they feel would be better replaced. “But,” Willis Sweete says, “we don't want to do too much. That's why there is so much planning in the first place. You can't change the architecture of the whole thing or recut a whole new opera. All you can do is ‘milk’ it more by making the cutting a little bit more precise.”

In editing for the DVD, Willis Sweete feels a great sense of responsibility. “I am really so personally aware that this will be what these people will be remembered for. We were so excited, for instance, that we got Renée Fleming in a great performance of Desdemona in *Otello*, not knowing that right after that performance she would retire the role from her repertoire. Or again that we got the last performance of Natalie Dessay in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, when she absolutely nailed it. And I'm thinking, ‘Wow, we got it! We got it forever!’” **OC**

Late last fall, season ticket holders received a letter from Vancouver Opera General Director James Wright informing them of changes they would see when they received the 2014/15 season brochure and of others to come later. The letter contained such phrases as “setting a new course,” “new audiences, new engagement” and “innovative new opera, intimate new venue”—language that conveys the strategic imperatives of many opera companies in today’s challenging world. In a recent interview, Wright spoke candidly about the main issues facing his company and the way he wants to address them.

The research arm of OPERA America, the New York-based professional service organization, reports a 10% decline in audience numbers over the past several seasons, particularly among season subscribers, and, Wright says, VO’s experience is in line with that. He cites a number of factors, including: an aging population; the growth of a more ethnically diverse community; price sensitivity; seasonal volatility at the box office as a result of particular programming; the fact that people are not making the long-term commitments they used to for various reasons; and

Two new developments presented in the 2014/15 season brochure aim to boost subscribers. For those who might be away during the run of a production (usually four performances) or simply don’t want to see a particular opera, there’s now the option to choose either a three-opera subscription or the full four-opera package. Also, the price of all the four-opera subscriptions has been lowered, which will please everyone looking at that option.

VO is targeting the cities of Surrey and Richmond—two rapidly growing urban centres south of the Fraser River and connected to downtown Vancouver by rapid transit—as fertile ground in its search for new audiences. Starting in Surrey in February, the company sponsored three concerts featuring singers and a pianist from the company’s Yulanda M. Faris Young Artists Program performing some of opera’s best-loved arias and selections from *Don Giovanni* and *Don Carlo*, the final two productions of the current season. A second concert is set for Steveston, a historic Richmond village, and a third in central Richmond. Adult tickets cost only \$20, though each purchaser also received 20 “opera bucks,” usable at the VO box office against the cost of a ticket to either of the two remaining mainstage operas. The con-

REMODELING VANCOUVER OPERA

the advent of a generation of young adults whose upbringing or education has never introduced them to operatic music. With all these in mind, VO is determined to rebuild its audience while making programming decisions that underwrite financial stability without sacrificing innovation and creativity.

Over the past two seasons, VO experimented with Sunday matinees as additional non-subscription performances to see if they would appeal to older subscribers and single-ticket buyers. The results were so encouraging that, starting this season, Tuesday evening performances have been cut and Sunday matinees are now a permanent feature in each opera’s run. “We were able to move all the returning Tuesday night subscribers into other nights, and satisfy 99.5% of them with seats they were happy with,” says Wright. “A lot of people [had] quit coming to the opera...in many cases elderly people who no longer could or wanted to drive downtown at night. We had hoped for a higher subscription number, but we’re happy with the single-ticket sales.” While acknowledging that it is “early days” in the evaluation process, the company has been further encouraged by the number of families bringing their children to the opera house for the matinee performances.

certs proved a happy innovation, generating sell-out audiences.

An unusual, but important, partner in the venture is TransLink, the administrative authority for Metro Vancouver’s rapid transit system, which has given VO 500 day passes for those who have bought tickets to *Don Giovanni* or *Don Carlo*, allowing them to free rides into Vancouver on designated Expo Line cars called Opera Trains. On the matinee days when the Opera Trains run, VO staff will be at the Surrey Central Station to provide what Wright calls “some hoopla,” and will board the train to hand out brochures, tell riders about material the company has prepared that they can access on their smart phones and generally be friendly and informative representatives of the company. VO hopes to make similar arrangements with InTransitBC, the manager for the Canada Line, which runs between Richmond and downtown Vancouver. This innovative project so impressed the jury of OPERA America’s new Building Opera Audiences Grant Program that it awarded VO a grant of \$25,000. Wright believes the TransLink component and the fact that “we are going to communicate with a very high percentage of the ethnic population that does not go to our opera or anybody else’s” favoured VO’s application in a very competitive field.

The delicate art of setting repertoire several seasons ahead continues to be a challenge—compounded by having to fill the 2,665-seat Queen Elizabeth Theatre four, sometimes five, times for each production in what people like to say is a hockey town, not an opera town. Perhaps Wright had the QE in mind when he responded to the criticism that the company stages the same 18th- and 19th-century operas too frequently. “The fact is there are about five operas that almost every company schedules one of a year because they bring in the single-ticket revenue...because they will be the financial foundation of earned income for the season, as *La bohème*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Carmen*, and *Aida* are [for us]. We pay by performance...so the ideal for a big house is fewer performances with lots of people, which is a stronger economic model, but it’s not necessarily the best artistic model. We struggle a lot...it’s a



Vancouver Opera has partnered with the city’s transit authority on an innovative program to get people to the opera downtown

an important part of the conversation about an issue that has taken society by storm—bullying—so we want to be a part of that.” There are also more practical reasons. “Some of our funders expect that we will promote Canadian content and Canadian creativity. For example, Canada Council and the B.C. Arts Council are very pro-Canadian work and creativity. These pieces are of much more interest to public funders than is another production of *Lucia di Lammermoor*.”

In February, the Province of British Columbia awarded VO a \$500,000 grant in support of *Stickboy*. But even if there’s money available for new commissions, funding issues make it generally unrealistic for one Canadian company to stage another’s commissioned work. “Second productions are difficult because you’re not creating the work yourself, you’re not

VO PERA



General Director James Wright sets strategy to build a new audience in a changing world

BY ROSEMARY CUNNINGHAM

real problem when we guess wrong and audiences don’t show up.”

For future seasons, “we’re going to mix it up a bit,” so opera lovers should expect a less predictable approach to scheduling. A typical season will comprise one traditional work from the 18th- or 19th-century repertoire, a modern work or a premiere of a commissioned work, something from the middle repertoire and a music theatre piece. The upcoming 2014/15 season exemplifies the model: *Carmen* to open in the Queen Elizabeth, followed by the world premiere of *Stickboy*, VO’s latest commission, then *Die Fledermaus* and *Sweeney Todd*. Part of VO’s new approach is to mount works outside of its traditional Queen Elizabeth space, and *Stickboy* will be staged in the 650-seat Vancouver Playhouse next door.

Despite the uncertainties and the fact that new works tend to disappear after their premieres, Wright is clear on the reasons why companies need commissioning programs. “One is the creative urge. It does something to the organization that is indescribable as far as synergy, pride, solving problems together, raising money to do a new production, creating—being part of something new is part of art. Also, an opera company, like most arts organizations, wants to be part of ‘the conversation.’ *Stickboy*, obviously, can be

engaging a new process. You are probably not going to get the same kind of financial support, public support as you do for a premiere.”

Explaining his vision for a company he has headed since 1999, Wright says: “We want to continue in the amount of new work we do. We have a reputation for innovation and creativity. Preceding me, there was *The Architect* [by composer David MacIntyre and librettist Tom Cone]. We have commissioned composers Veda Hille (*Jack Pine*), Ramona Luengin (*Naomi’s Road*), John Estacio (*Lillian Alling*) and now Neil Weisensel (*Stickboy*). We have done wonderful experimentation with our *Magic Flute*, our *Nixon in China*, so we have a track record of innovation. We have a track record reflecting our community with *Flute*, *Jack Pine*, and with *Nixon* by tying it to Canadian foreign policy during the Vancouver Olympics. We want to reflect this city and this environment—it’s innovative and forward-thinking with new ideas, new audiences, new Canadians—as much as we can. It’s not without risks, and it’s not without challenges. We hope that everyone will come along with us, but they may not. This is not the same place it was when the company was founded, or even that it was 10 years ago. We have to continue to reflect it and be an opera company that talks about the art.” **OC**

PHOTO: (TOP) COURTESY VANCOUVER OPERA; (MIDDLE) TIM MATHESON

Compiled by B. Krsek. Legend:
C: conductor; D: stage director;
Des: designer; Ctms: costumes;
Lght: lighting; Chor: choreographer;
*new production; **world premiere;
***national premiere; Op: opening
date; M: matinée. Information correct
as of March 19, 2014. Programs
subject to change.

Against the Grain Theatre (Toronto).

againstthegraintheatre.com.
info@againstthegraintheatre.com.

Pelléas et Mélisande

(Debussy). D: Ivany;
M: LeBlanc; Des: Koo; Ctms:
Wong; Lght: Hand. Khalil,
Dupuis, Dahl, Coulombe,
Latham. Jun 19, 21, 23, 25.

Buchanan Park Public School (Hamilton, ON).

905-387-5212. bpoc.ca.
Carmen (Bizet). May 01-03.

Calgary Opera. 403-262-7286.

calgaryopera.com.
Madama Butterfly

(Puccini). C: Mechavich;
D: Leyshon. Dibblee, Pomeroy,
Okulitch, Segal, Glenn,
Fitzgerald, Dimoff, Murias.
Apr 05, 09, 11. **The Rape
of Lucretia** (Britten).
Ludwig, McLean, Beley,
Murias, Abrego, Johnson,
Dimoff, Fitzgerald.
May 02, 04, 06, 08.

Canadian Children's Opera Company

(Toronto). 416-366-0467.
canadianchildrensopera.com.

Opera Cabaret. May 09.

****East o' the Sun and
West o' the Moon** (Palej).
D: Ivany. May 29-Jun 01.

Junior Division Spring Concert. Jun 07.

Canadian Opera Company

(Toronto). 416-363-6671.
coc.ca. ***Hercules** (Handel).
C: Bicket; D: Sellars;
Des: Tsy-pin; Ctms: Ramicova;

Lght: Ingalls. Owens, Coote,
R. Croft, Daniels, Crowe.
Apr 05M, 11, 15, 19, 24,
27M, 30. **Roberto Devereux**
(Donizetti). C: Rovaris;
D: Lawless; Des: Dugardyn;
Ctms: Bernerth. Radvanovsky,
Braun, Filianoti, McHardy. Apr
25, 29, May 03, 10M, 15, 18M,
21. **Of Love and Longing**.
McHardy, Haji. May 06M.

Don Quichotte (Massenet).

C: Debus; D: Brovsky; Des:
Eastman; Ctms: Poddubiuk;
Lght: Yun. Furlanetto, Kelsey,
Gubanova. May 09, 11M, 14,
17, 20, 22, 24M. **Journeys of
the Soul**. Braun. May 13M.

Les Adieux. COC Ensemble Studio. May 20M.

Chants Libres (Montreal).

514-841-2642. chantslibres.org.
Rêve de Grégoire
(Michaud). C: Boudreau;
D: Dubois. Jean, Béliveau,
Mazerolle, Stec, Woodmass,
Bell. May 15, 16, 17.

Edmonton Opera. 780-424- 4040. edmontonopera.com.

Madama Butterfly (Puccini).
C: Tweten; D: Albery; Ctms:
Jebens; Lght: Moore. Duprels,
Ganci, Thompson, Fanning,
Kriter, Tiggers, Frazer, Daniel.
Apr 05, 08, 10.

FAWN Opera & New Music

(Toronto). fawnopera.com.
****L'Homme et le ciel**
(Scime and Koiter). Apr 09, 11.

Synesthesia III. May 03.

**Jeunesses Musicales de
Canada** (Montreal). 514-845-
4108. jeunessesmusicales.com.

La bohème (Puccini). Apr 06
(Midland, ON), 09 (La Sarre,
QC), 11 (Amos, QC), 13
(Sudbury, ON), 15 (Rouyn-
Noranda, QC), 18 (Val d'Or,
QC), 24 (Quebec City),
25 (Thetford Mines, QC),
May 02 (Ottawa), 04 (Saint-

Georges-de-Beauce, QC).

Manitoba Opera

(Winnipeg). 204-253-2787.
manitobaopera.mb.ca.

La bohème (Puccini).

C: Lipton; D: Deedrick.
Fennell, Pastin, Phares,
Ciekiewicz. Apr 05, 08, 11.

Metro Youth Opera

(Toronto). 416-543-9209.
metroyouthopera.ca.

Hänsel und Gretel

(Humperdinck). C: Salter;
D: Wong. Promane, Applin,
Vicary, Bass, White, Smither,
Tritchew. Apr 25, 26, 27M.

Montreal Symphony.

514-842-9951. osm.ca.

Dmitri Hvorostovsky.

May 16.

Off Centre Music Salon

(Toronto). 416-466-1870.
offcentremusic.com.

Russian Salon: Composers born in the wrong

century. McGillivray, Martin,
Bogdanowicz, Ramirez.
May 04M.

Opera Atelier (Toronto).

416-703-3767. operaatelier.com.

Persée (Lully). C: Fallis;

D: Pynkoski; Des: Gauci; Ctms:
Rust D'Eye; Lght: Beecher:
Chor: Lajeunesse Zingg.
Enns, Asselin, Dye, Laquerre,
Huhtanen, Fernandes. Apr 26,
27M, 29, 30, May 02, 03.

Opera by Request (Toronto).

416-455-2365. operabyrequest.ca.
Il trovatore (Verdi).
MD: Shookhoff. Williamson,
Tylman, Line, Clarke, Sanfilippo,
Yakautsova, Parker. Apr 26.

L'Opéra de Montréal. 514- 985-2258. operademontreal.com.

Turandot (Puccini).

C: Nadler; D: Murphy;
Des & Ctms: Fredrikson;
Chor: Murphy. Shesterneva,
Chanev, Omura, Soloviov.
May 17, 20, 22, 24.

Opéra de Québec. 418- 529-4142. operadequebec.

qc.ca. **Macbeth** (Verdi).
C: Rivest; D: Gauthier.
G. Dahl, Fortin, Coulombe.
May 17, 20, 22, 24.

Opera Lyra Ottawa.

613-233-9200. operalyra.ca.

Madama Butterfly

(Puccini). C: Paterson. Li,
Bélanger, Westman, Kassabian,
Hu, Ruminski, Wu, Wehrle.
Apr 19, 21, 23, 26.

Pacific Opera Victoria.

250-385-0222. pov.bc.ca.

Le nozze di Figaro (Mozart).

C: Vernon; D: Krysa;
Des: Porteous. Bradley,
Addis, Khalil, Welsh.
Apr 24, 26, 30, May 02, 04M.

Recitals at Rosedale

(Toronto). 416-921-1931.

rpcc.ca. The Seven Deadly

Sins. L. Barrett, Braid, Colvin,
Gleadow. May 25M.

Saskatoon Opera. 306-374- 1630. saskatoonopera.ca.

Die Zauberflöte (Mozart).

C: Mokrzewski.
Jun 14, 17, 19, 21.

Shaw Festival (Niagara-on- the-Lake, ON). 800-511- 7429. shawfest.com.

Cabaret

(Kander). Apr 10-Oct 26.

Soundstreams Canada

(Toronto). 416-504-1282.
soundstreams.ca. **Airline**

Icarus (Current). D: Albery.

Szabó, Dobson. Jun 03-08.

Stratford Festival (Stratford,

ON). 519-273-1600 or 800-
567-1600. stratfordfestival.ca.

Crazy for You (Gershwin).

Apr 21-Oct 12.

Man of La Mancha (Leigh).

May 08-Oct 11.

Tafelmusik (Toronto).

416-964-6337. tafelmusik.org.

The Rival Queens

with Isabel Bayrakdarian.
C: Lamont. Apr 09, 10, 12, 13M

SATURDAY AFTERNOON

Broadcasts and Movie Transmissions Starting at 1 p.m. EST unless otherwise stated

Tapestry Opera

(Toronto). 416-537-6066.

tapestryopera.com.

Shelter (Palmer & Salverson). C: Dala;

D: Turnbull; Des & Ctms: LePage; Lght: Lamb.

Duncan, McGillivray, Kashahara, Klassen, Ludwig. Jun 12, 13, 14, 15M.

Toronto Masque

Theatre. 416-410-4561.

torontomasquetheatre.com.

The Myth of Europa.

LeBlanc. Apr 25, 26.

Toronto Operetta

Theatre. 416-366-7723.

torontooperetta.com.

*****Cousin from**

Nowhere (Künneke).

May 01, 02, 03, 04M.

Toronto Symphony

Orchestra. 416-593-4828.

tso.ca. **Inspired by Love**.

C: Carneiro. Van Doren,

Giunta. Apr 26, 27M.

Classic Broadway: Lerner & Loewe. C: Reineke.

Wallis, Ainsworth, Estabrooks.

May 20, 21M, 21.

Songs for Soprano.

C: Oundjian/Bard.

Radvanovsky.

Jun 05, 07. **Gershwin**

Highlights. C: Tovey. Lister, Smith, Walker. Jun 20, 21.

UBC Opera Ensemble

(Vancouver). 604-822-0182. ubcopera.com.

The Cunning Little

Vixen (Janáček).

C: Baxa; D: Hermiston.

Jun 26, 27, 28, 29M.

Vancouver Opera

604-683-0222.

vancouveropera.ca.

Don Carlo (Verdi).

C: Darlington; D: Cavanagh.

Carè, Henson, Volpe,

Polegato, Frank.

May 03, 08, 10, 11M. **OC**

Metropolitan Opera Saturday Matinee Radio Broadcasts

Apr. 5

La bohème

Puccini

C: Ranzani; Hartig, Phillips, Grigolo, Cavalletti, Carfizzi, Gradus, Maxwell

Apr. 12

Andrea Chénier

Giordani

C: Nosedà; Racette, Álvarez, Lučić

Apr. 19 (12:00 p.m.)

Arabella

R. Strauss

C: Auguin; Byström, Kühmeier, Saccà, Volle, Winkler

Apr. 26

Così fan tutti

Mozart

C: Levine; Phillips, Leonard, de Niese, Polenzani, Pogosso, Muraro

May 3

I Puritani

Bellini

C: Mariotti; Peretyatko, Brownlee, Kwiecien, Pertusi

May 10

La cenerentola

Rossini

C: Luisi; DiDonato, Flórez, Spagnoli, Corbelli, Pisoni

CBC Summer Season

May 17

Otello

Verdi

Chicago Symphony Orchestra (in concert)
C: Muti; Antonenko, Gueffi, Gatell, Spyrès, Owens, Stoyanova

May 24

Die Lustigen Weiber de Windsor

Nicolai

Opéra de Lausanne
C: Beermann; Peeters, Farca, Zwarg, Capt, Hubeaux, Surdu, Glaser

May 31

Roméo et Juliette

Gounod

1994 EMI Recording
C: Lombard; Corelli, Freni, Cales, Gui, Vilma, Cardon, Lublin, Deprez

June. 7

Cendrillon

Massenet

Gran Teatro del Liceu, Barcelona
C: Davis; DiDonato, Podles, Coote, Massis, Obregón, Naouri

Jun. 14

Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh

Rimsky-Korsakov

Gran Teatro del Liceu, Barcelona
C: Pons; Halfvarson, Aksenov, Ignatovitch, Kuterma, Tiliakos, Poyarok

Jun. 21

Guglielmo Tell

Rossini

Teatro Regio, Turin
C: Nosedà; Alvarez, Chiuri, Grimaldi, Meade, Osborn, Prestia

Jun. 28

Oklahoma!

Rogers

Lyric Opera of Chicago
C: Lowe; Cudia, Brown, Moore, Kelly, Holbrook, Scrofano

Jul. 5

Armide

Gluck

De Nationale Opera, Amsterdam
C: Bolton; Gauvin, Antoun, Strobos, Quintans, Foster-Williams

Jul. 12

Tancredi

Rossini

Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris
C: Mazzola; Lemieux, Ciofi, Siragusa, Tagliavini, Lo Monaco, Tynan

Metropolitan Opera Live in HD Movie Transmissions

Apr. 5

La bohème

Puccini

See Apr. 5 radio broadcast.

Encore transmissions:

Jun. 7, 12:00 p.m. EST;
Jun. 9 and Jun. 18, both 6:30 p.m. local time.

Apr. 12 (12:00 p.m.)

Prince Igor

Borodin

C: Nosedà; Dyka, Rachvelishvili, Semishkur, Abdrakov, Petrenko, Kocán
Encore transmission, also Apr. 14, 6:30 p.m. local time

Apr. 26

Così fan tutti

Mozart

See Apr. 26 radio broadcast.

Encore transmissions:

Jun 21, 12 p.m. EST;
Jun. 23, 6:30 p.m. local time.

May 10

La cenerentola

Rossini

See May 10 radio broadcast. Encore transmissions: Jul. 5, 12 p.m. EST; Jul. 7, 6:30 p.m. local time and Jul. 16, 6:30 p.m. local time.

May 24 (12 p.m.)

Werther

Massenet

C: Altinoglu; Oropesa, Koch, Kaufmann, Bižić, Summers
Encore transmission, also May 26, 6:30 p.m. local time

• For CBC's opera broadcasts: music.cbc.ca/#/Saturday-Afternoon-at-the-Opera
Check local listings for times of radio broadcasts.

• For all Metropolitan Opera broadcasts: metoperafamily.org/metopera/broadcast/on_air.aspx

• For Cineplex Odeon Met Live in HD movie transmissions: cineplex.com/Events/MetOpera/Home.aspx

Royal Opera, Covent Garden, Movie Transmissions

Media Events International (MEI Group) is showing filmed Covent Garden productions in independent cinemas in major centres. Operas scheduled from April-July include: Bizet's *Carmen*, Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Puccini's *Tosca*, *Turandot* and *La bohème*, Verdi's *La traviata*, *Nabucco* and *Les vêpres siciliennes* and Wagner's *Parsifal*. Not all operas are scheduled for all locations, and dates and times vary.

For schedule and locations, go to: www.meigroup.ca

Opera in Review



Hugh Russell as Taddeo in Calgary Opera's premiere staging of *L'italiana in Algeri*

CANADA

CALGARY

As every opera enthusiast knows, Verdi and Wagner were born in 1813, but few remember that was also the year the premiere of *L'italiana in Algeri* effectively launched Rossini's spectacular career. **Calgary Opera** celebrated this last November in its first-ever production of this opera.

As with last season's Verdi *Falstaff*, special kudos must go to director Michael Cavanagh for his imaginative, never-miss-a-trick direction. Updated to the early 20th century, the production nevertheless stayed true to the spirit of the original, with all the clichés of its original comedy fully intact: a clever heroine, a hapless lover, a comical villain, as well as an assortment of secondary parts, each with a different role to play in the comic soufflé.

The clever direction was matched with an inventive set that represented different pop-up storybook pictures, allowing the

production to unfold as the zany, fanciful work it is. Cavanagh took advantage of his updating to include a number of clever gags—Isabella, for example, is like an operatic version of a *Thoroughly Modern Millie* “new girl!” of the 1920s—and the costumes, too, contributed importantly to the total effect of a stylized Algeria of storybook imagination.

Allyson McHardy was an Isabella of the first rank. With her wide-ranging lyric mezzo, she had no difficulty with the florid writing or with the role's wide range. She commanded the stage beautifully in her mixture of hauteur and sentiment, and she was totally captivating as the lead figure. She was especially successful in the brilliant extended final aria, which requires the upmost of a virtuoso singer.

As Lindoro, tenor John Tessier handled the stratospheric writing in a way that was both beautiful and thrilling. His is a light, high tenor, but his voice carries

remarkably well and he had no difficulty projecting into the hall. Dramatically, he made a fine pairing with McHardy, a believable lover for a feisty lass. Eduardo Chama played the challenging role of Mustafa, both a villain and a chump. He projected the character very well, especially dramatically, if without quite the vocal ease of the other two principals.

The surrounding characters were also well performed, notably Hugh Russell in the very difficult, ever-changing role of Taddeo, Isabella's remorseless, though ultimately unsuccessful, would-be lover and companion. Soprano Jessica Strong, from the company's Emerging Artist program, sang Elvira with a sure, clear voice. In smaller parts, Alexandre Sylvestre and Dionne Sellinger provided additional comedy as Haly and Zulma, two members of Mustafa's court.

The men of the CO Chorus were well integrated into the comedy of this production and also sang very well.

PHOTO: TRAUDE LEE

The Calgary Philharmonic, conducted by Robert Tweten, played the score in an idiomatic manner, complete with some very fine woodwind solos. The extended overture, one of Rossini's best, was exceptionally tight, the entire performance notable for its humor, charm and fine singing.

Slightly belatedly, CO celebrated the Wagner bicentennial in February with a new production of *Der fliegende Holländer*, its previous staging 20 years ago one of the company's less-successful ventures. Many things were different this time, with the production mounted almost completely "in house," with director Kelly Robinson in control of staging and set and lighting designer Harry Frehner, who has worked with Kelly many times, celebrating his 60th production with the company. The result was a production with a clear, unfussy underlying concept that engaged the symbolic elements of the score without overwhelming them with gratuitous interpretive layers.

The set, developed for this production and created by Scott Reid, consisted of modular units combined in different ways to suggest a rocky shore, the deck of a ship, the interior of a house and a wharf. Effective projected backdrops also animated the physical set to help capture the emotional ambience of the rocky Norwegian setting, with its storms, bleakness and sense of an ancient epic landscape. The costumes, from Lyric Opera of Kansas, were suitably Nordic and provided a splash of color to the staging.

In many ways, the most difficult aspects of the opera to represent visually were its strongest elements—the opening storm and the transfiguration at the end. Techniques developed in film to create the world of fantasy epics were used impressively and successfully to the dramatic purpose. Equally telling were the big scenes involving the chorus—the extended chorus in the final act, especially. Richly detailed and expertly sung by an augmented CO Chorus, these scenes put the "grand" back into grand opera, the sense of pageantry wonderfully realized.

Vocally, the cast was strong. Richard Paul Fink sang the title role, a part he

knows inside out by now. His voice—dark, well projected and superbly colored for Wagner—was just right for the role. Right from his great opening monologue, "Die Frist ist um," he was a significant presence throughout the production. Fink was well paired with the Daland of Valerian Ruminski, whose voice contrasted with the Dutchman's and provided a more practical, human character in counterpoint to the Dutchman's inner intensity.

As Senta, Joni Henson acted her part very well and was convincing in her representation of the character's obsession without overdoing this aspect. A capable singer, her voice carries well, although it is not yet fully of Wagnerian steel and she would likely still be heard to better advantage in Italian and French roles. Much the same might be said of David Pomeroy, who was excellent as Erik, but whose innately beautiful voice also demonstrated Italianate qualities. Plausible as a couple, both young singers gave this staging a more human dimension than productions sometimes have, allowing the epic element to emerge in striking contrast. Robert Clark, an alumnus of CO's Emerging Artist Program, was a fresh-voiced Steersman at the outset, also providing a welcome comic measure to the proceedings. Emilia

Boteva, as Mary, completed the cast, singing well with a substantial, attractive voice.

Robert Dean conducted the production, bringing his customary vigor and sense to the task at hand. The difficult score was handled with competence by the CPO, if not with quite the polish and refinement of other, more familiar operas. Overall, Dean was successful in creating the necessary orchestral presence without overwhelming the singers, no mean feat in such an opera. —Kenneth DeLong

EDMONTON

So enthusiastic was the audience's response to **Edmonton Opera's** English-language production of Johann Strauss Jr.'s *Die Fledermaus* in early February that it could have been the source of a classic sitcom laugh track. Besides the consistently entertaining singing, the staging and direction were also much appreciated. Supported by a Forth Worth Opera set that was so crammed with furnishings in the party scenes that there wasn't room for one more potted palm, director Allison Grant made excellent use of the EO Chorus, which looked great, sang and danced up a storm and, like the principals, seemed to be genuinely enjoying themselves.

Prince Orlofsky, normally a trouser role, was sung by countertenor Gerald

Betty Wayne Allison
(Rosalinde) in Edmonton
Opera's *Die Fledermaus*



Opera in Review

Thompson. Most of Orlofsky's early business is spoken, so when he sang his first note, the audience took his voice as a fresh joke—and perhaps never really took Thompson for what he is, a serious singer with a special voice. In a lark like this *Fledermaus*, introducing such a voice plays into the gag factor. The company also enlisted a local actor to play the non-singing role of Frosch, the jailer. Julien Arnold is a very funny man, and he milked the standup opportunity in the final act uproariously.

Betty Wayne Allison sang Roselinde with a resonant soprano, adding heft to the fluffy operetta, but she also excelled theatrically in her plot to expose the deception of her husband, von Eisenstein. Her "Czárdás," in particular, reminded us that *Fledermaus* is a serious opera vehicle when not being totally silly. As Eisenstein, tenor Gordon Gietz had leading-man presence and an attractive tone, but he, too, has comic chops, and delivered the farcical elements of the plot fluidly and playfully. Tenor Adam Fisher played Alfred, Roselinde's paramour, with just enough hambone to capture his scenes without detracting from the musical purpose. Adele, the sneaky maid, is a consummate

a very welcome representative of Canada's new crop of young singers.

The singers were miked to help project the spoken dialogue, though some listeners were annoyed that the mikes often remained on for the singing, in some cases to distorting effect.

Peter Dala, EO's former Music Director, returned for this production, and, from the first crisp downbeat of the up-tempo overture, he helped the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra generate all the high energy and melodic richness of Strauss's masterpiece to the further delight of the audience. —*Bill Rankin*

MONTREAL

Despite its being Verdi's most musically demanding and subtle opera, **Opéra de Montréal's** production of *Falstaff* (seen Nov. 9) was a resounding success with the public. The cast was almost entirely excellent, the conducting of Daniele Callegari first rate and the New York City Opera/Glimmerglass Opera production better than acceptable. Oleg Bryjak, a last-minute replacement from Kazakhstan, was a marvellous Falstaff. Though he sang too loudly in the opening scene, he soon toned down to the subtle role.

Quickly should, but it worked magically. In this comic role, Lemieux has charisma and stage presence in abundance. Alice, usually the most important in the quartet of women, was convincingly portrayed by Gianna Corbisiero, though she sounded tired and her voice quickly developed an unpleasant wobble. Despite the relative unimportance of Meg in the opera, mezzo Lauren Segal managed to equal the other women, thanks to her stage presence and acute dramatic sense. Gregory Dahl's Ford was appropriately threatening. Aline Kutan, who has a ravishing coloratura, and Antonio Figueroa, his sweet voice somewhat underpowered in Place des Arts' Salle Wilfrid-Pelletier, sang the young lovers, Nanetta and Fenton. Bardolfo and Pistola were portrayed with gusto by Jean-Michel Richer and Ernesto Morillo. Since the libretto makes it clear that Dr. Caius is an old man and that this is the main reason Alice, Meg and Quickly agree to help Nanetta marry Fenton, it was a pity that James McLennan looked too young as the unwanted suitor.

Centering the staging around Dame Quickly led to a degree of vulgarity incongruent with the epoch or the rank of the characters. In the "Reverenza" scene, in which Quickly recruits Falstaff to seduce Alice and Meg, the rotund knight tries to have his way with the matron. At the end of the scene, he gives her a coin as a tip. Though they got laughs, such gestures seemed inappropriate and undermined the characterizations. The indoor sets were drab, and had the cast not been as charismatic, the production may not have been as appreciated as it was. The Windsor Park scene, despite relative simplicity, was enchanting, in large part due to the costumes and the choreography. Despite some reservations, kudos to OdeM for turning Verdi's last opera into a public hit.

After a smashing success last year with *Le nozze di Figaro* as its first production, **Opera da Camara** presented Masenet's rarely performed *Cendrillon* in February. Young singers established this new company to provide performance



Marie-Nicole Lemieux (Mistress Quickly) and Oleg Bryjak in the title role of Opéra de Montréal's *Falstaff*

coloratura part, and soprano Jacqueline Woodley has the technique. Her rendition of the Act II "Laughing Song" was pleasant and precise, though might have been more playful. Overall though, she proved

The public's favorite was international star and Quebec native Marie-Nicole Lemieux. The production was largely promoted around her, and she probably assumed more importance than Mistress

opportunities, so the choice of this ensemble piece was a good one.

Carol Leger, as Cendrillon, was an excellent actor. One could feel her humility as the abused daughter, bedazzlement at her own transformation and overall grace. The voice was good, sometimes strained in the higher register, though never shrill. The star of the show was mezzo Kathrin Welte, who sang Prince Charming effortlessly and with style, an essential element in French romantic opera. Martin-Michel Boucher was Pandolfe, Cendrillon's father, his supple voice and excellent acting conveying a warm fatherly character. The Fairy Godmother is a high coloratura role, and while Sarah Halmarson may have the required instrument and was much appreciated by the

public, her high notes were often more screamed than sung. The supporting roles of the stepmother and two stepsisters were delightfully portrayed by Geneviève Couillard-Després, Valerie Belanger and Meagan Zantingh. The audience adored their antics. Thankfully, the comedy was intelligently underplayed, making it truly funny. Though only half the cast members were native Francophones, the entire cast sang with an excellent diction.

Opera da Camara's biggest success has been its capacity to attract an almost entirely young public to their performances. The venue is the Rialto Theater, a grand old cinema with a National Historic Site of Canada designation and now converted into a cabaret theatre with tables and drinks served before the performance in the orchestra and regular theatre seating in the balcony. The Rialto's relaxed and informal atmosphere is probably key to the company's ability to attract a young crowd. This young company does not try to make opera appealing through vulgar humor or other shock tactics to attract its audience. It succeeds brilliantly in bringing a new



(From left): Robert Gleadow (Guglielmo), Paul Appleby (Ferrando), Wallis Giunta (Dorabella) and Layla Claire (Fiordiligi) in the Canadian Opera Company production of *Così fan tutte*

public to the glory of opera through subtle humor, simplicity and the choice of an original venue. —Reviews from *Montreal* by Ossama el Naggar.

TORONTO

In none of my full-score editions of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* could I find a title page identified by its librettist Lorenzo da Ponte's subtitle for the opera, *La scuola degli amanti* (*The School for Lovers*), but this is literally how Atom Egoyan staged his new production for the **Canadian Opera Company** in January. With the collusion of designer Debra Hanson, he outfitted the cast in private-school uniforms and accommodated them in a classroom complete with scientific implements, taking notes from the amorally cynical Don Alfonso. An eccentric concept, but a clever one—despite some heavy-handed symbolism from Frida Kahlo bleeding heart portraits and pinned butterflies—with the added twist of having the female lovers in on Don Alfonso's plot.

None of this revisionism compromised the engagingly stylish way Johannes Debus conducted the score or the accomplished way in which it was sung, and there was

even a case to be argued that the characters' emotional roller-coaster ride was made more believable by portraying them as volatile adolescents.

The debuting soprano Layla Claire and mezzo Wallis Giunta made an especially well paired Fiordiligi and Dorabella, their voices blending beautifully opposite the Ferrando of debuting American tenor Paul Appleby and the Guglielmo of bass Robert Gleadow. Veteran British baritone Sir Thomas Allen made his belated COC debut as a wily Don Alfonso, while veteran soprano Tracy Dahl returned to the Toronto stage as a wily, if at times intonationally challenged, Despina.

In his classic study of Mozart operas, Edward J. Dent suggests that *Così* is an opera of ensembles, "quite possibly more than in any [other] opera ever written," so what could have been more appropriate than this production for the COC's annual mainstage showcase for the well-matched voices of its Ensemble Studio? Not only did its single performance employ the same sets, costumes, director and conductor as its subscription counterparts, its vocal talents proved sufficient to double



The Act I finale of the Canadian Opera Company's staging of *Un ballo in maschera*

cast the pairs of lovers, with Andrew Haji (Ferrando) and Cameron McPhail (Guglielmo) pairing Aviva Fortunata (Fiordiligi) and Charlotte Burrage (Dorabella) in Act I and Owen McCausland, Clarence Frazer, Sasha Djihanian and Danielle MacMillan respectively taking over in Act II.

Within Egoyan's conceit of setting the opera literally inside a School for Lovers, the youthfulness of these singers made their behavior more than usually credible, and such were Gordon Bintner's and Claire de Sévigné's histrionic skills as Don Alfonso and Despina that both da Ponte and Mozart were well served.

Censorship forced Giuseppe Verdi to move *Un ballo in maschera's* tale of 18th-century Swedish regicide to Colonial America, but no such necessity motivated directors Jossi Wieler and Sergio Morabito to move their February COC production into the America of John and Jacqueline Kennedy. Staged originally for Berlin's Staatsoper Unter den Linden, this all-too-typical exercise in German *Regietheater* even added a mute Jacqueline Kennedy character in pillbox hat to shadow her husband's infidelity and arrange for her rival's departure through that lady's husband's promotion. This strained effort to suggest contemporary relevance proved superfluous to an understanding of the plot, leading instead to the creation of a garish unit set by Barbara Ehnes that seemed to confine all of the opera's action to the lounge of

an inelegant hotel. Sadly, I neglected to bring sunglasses.

Happily, I did bring ears to hear a splendid musical performance, ably conducted by Stephen Lord and sung by a strong cast headed by the sumptuously sung Amelia of Adrienne Pieczonka, a soprano with the command of vocal coloration to illuminate the many conflicting emotions in this challenging role. With American tenor Dimitri Pittas as a bright-toned Riccardo, debuting English baritone Roland Wood as a convincingly anguished Renato, Simone Osborne as a female Oscar (it's usually played as a trouser role) and Russian mezzo Elena Manistina as a somewhat underwhelming Ulrica, the cast certainly sounded better than the production looked. —William Littler

Hippolyte et Aricie was the 49-year-old Jean-Philippe Rameau's first venture into the operatic form and sparked off the great dispute between his supporters and those of the older Jean-Baptiste Lully. Although Rameau's music no longer seems shocking, the inventiveness and originality that disturbed the purists of 1733 is clearly on display. This came across, albeit somewhat less colorfully, even with the reduced forces of the Aradia Ensemble under Kevin Mallon used by **Voicebox: Opera in Concert** for its single performance Feb. 2.

It wasn't just the ensemble that was reduced. We were given a quite severely

cut version of the work, rearranged into two acts. Gone was the prologue and a fair chunk of the second half of the opera, making for a rather abrupt conclusion. This was perhaps understandable since Rameau shorn of spectacle is inclined to drag, and, although this semi-staging was quite inventive and made good use of video projections, it was still essentially a concert performance.

The sound of the Aradia Ensemble may have been on the small side for Rameau, but the same was not true of the principal soloists. Alain Coulombe as Thésée and Colin Ainsworth as Hippolyte sang with a winning combination of power and stylishness, while Allyson McHardy was truly venomous as Thésée's vengeful queen, Phèdre, though also capable of showing great tenderness. What Meredith Hall's Aricie lacked in power she made up for with sweet tone and appropriately stylish singing.

The supporting roles were a bit mixed, but Vania Chan made a delightful Diane and did a very fine job of the birdsong aria in Act II. There were pleasing performances, too, from Leigh-Ann Allen (High Priestess), Max Van Wyck (Pluton) and Christina Campsall (Oenone).

It would be wonderful to see a fully staged Rameau opera, but for now, let's be grateful that Voicebox at least was prepared to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the composer's death in such fine style. —John Gilks

PHOTO: MICHAEL COOPER

VANCOUVER

Albert Herring is only the second staging of a Benjamin Britten opera in **Vancouver Opera's** five-decade history. Unlike the intensely dramatic *Peter Grimes* (magnificently realized here in 1994), the small-scale *Herring* is Britten's only comic opera. Comic and clever—though perhaps a little too clever since only sophisticated operagoers are likely to savor the stylistic references, parodies and musical complexities. Many of these complexities are handled by the orchestra, and, on the Nov. 30 opening night, the diminutive 13-piece orchestra, conducted with empathetic flair by Leslie Dala, handled them deftly. Even if the ensemble was not note perfect, it certainly honored the spiky, satirical spirit of the piece.

There are also 13 solo vocalists, and the casting, both vocally and theatrically, was exemplary. In the title role, Lawrence Wiliford assumed a Rowan Atkinson-esque comedic presence in the funnier moments, but with equal cogency conveyed his character's exasperation and anguish at his inability to wrestle free from his domineering mother's apron strings. Rebecca Hass, as that domineering mother, was indeed a force to be reckoned with.

Not so strong a force, however, as the ferociously blonde and hot pink-clad Lady Billows, sung with aplomb and exhilarating dexterity by soprano Sally Dibblee. Mezzo Susan Platts demonstrated consummate comic flair as Florence Pike, Lady Billows' right-hand woman, while bass-baritone Giles Tompkins was a sturdy and authoritative Superintendent Budd.

Unlike the uptight, repressed Albert, his young friends Sid and Nancy have no qualms about flaunting their affection for each other. The breezy, devil-may-care chemistry between baritone Aaron Durand and mezzo

Sylvia Szadovszki made their portrayal of this pair as fetching as it was credible.

Director Glynis Leyshon updated the setting of Britten's fictional Suffolk town of Loxford from Edwardian England to the early 1950s. Despite Britten's aversion to such updating, it certainly worked here. Patrick Clark's set and costume design lent an effortless, step-back-in-time charm to the opera's locale against which the plot machinations and general shenanigans had great believability and charm.

Britten's strident sonorities threaten to bite through the work's satirical edge at times, but otherwise *Herring* is eminently accessible. It was a shrewd choice for VO to pair with Pacific Opera Victoria to present this vibrant co-production for the centenary of the composer's birth.

VO's *Don Giovanni*, a technologically bolstered co-production with the Banff Centre, opened Mar. 1 with Bob Bonniol's mixed-blessing video projections

greeting the eye and mostly terrific singing caressing the ear. The frisson between the technical wizardry of the former and the classical purity of the latter made for a memorable, if not altogether cohesive, evening.

Daniel Okulitch was the kind of Don Giovanni one can easily imagine having his way with all 2,065 women enumerated in Leporello's hilarious "Madamina, il catalogo è questo." Expertly deploying his agile, mellifluous bass-baritone, Okulitch flaunted abundant masculine charm yet never was more than an eighth-note away from his character's ruthless core. It was not hard to see why Donna Elvira, heartrendingly sung and acted by Krisztina Szabó, would be so besotted—and prepared to forgive Giovanni's inconspicuous. Erin Wall's prodigious vocal gifts were on ample display as a coolish Donna Anna, while Rachel Fenlon was a feisty, coquettish Zerlina, although sometimes



Lawrence Wiliford (Albert) and Rebecca Hass (Mrs. Herring) in the Vancouver Opera staging of *Albert Herring*

lacking sufficient vocal heft to be heard above the orchestra.

The long-suffering Leporello, sung with breezy masculinity by Stephen Hegedus, bears the brunt of Giovanni's abrupt, volcanic mood swings. But a kind of buddy chemistry between Okulitch and Hegedus made it clear why Leporello, despite recurrent griping about ill treatment, never seeks alternative employment. Colin Ainsworth's purity and nobility of voice lent themselves well to the role of Ottavio, and Aaron Durand was endearing as the hapless Masetto. Conductor Stuart Bedford produced an elegant Mozart sound throughout, which, with the exemplary singing, anchored the whole performance on solid musical values.

There was a narrow walkway between audience and orchestra pit, which director Kelly Robinson periodically used for ensembles. Their proximity to the front rows of the audience was visually engaging and surprisingly intimate for such a large theatre as the Queen Elizabeth. Although video projections can establish atmosphere and facilitate scene changes, I was not always convinced their full potential was realized here. The visuals on Giovanni's descent into Hell were

set (recycled from 2010's *Lillian Alling*) was the backdrop to the stage action. This production had many clever elements, but somehow never completely jelled.

—Robert Jordan

VICTORIA

Pacific Opera Victoria's production of Rogers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* (seen Nov. 24), presented with the Victoria Symphony Orchestra, was billed as an "in-concert" performance, but in fact felt fully staged. Director Jacques Lemay's clever use of space in front of, below, behind and through the onstage orchestra meant that the large chorus was able to move—and even dance—as if they had the space to themselves. At the same time, having room for a full orchestra instead of a smaller pit band meant that the marvelous tunes, warmly conducted by POV Artistic Director Timothy Vernon, had much more depth and presence than usual.

Baritone Jason Howard was a suave and elegant Emile de Becque, easily believable as the older man who captivates the charming young Nellie Forbush, skilfully played by soprano Lara Ciekiewicz. Some opera singers are at a disadvantage in musicals, where their highly trained

I would have liked Bloody Mary (Lynne McMurtry) to be bigger in voice and presence, but Adam Fisher as Lieutenant Joe Cable was spot on, Dan Costain as Luther Billis was a delight, and the chorus, particularly the men in "There Is Nothing Like a Dame," brought the house down.

The orchestra ruled in POV's production of Richard Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos*, (seen Feb. 13). Conductor Timothy Vernon's love for Strauss was clear from the first note, and the playing from the three-dozen players did justice to a score that travels virtually every operatic byway, from the grandest aria to the silliest song. The singers, however, fared less well. For the majority of the principals, the talent was there—lovely tone, good color, if a little weak on diction—but the music just didn't seem to sit properly in them. They didn't fully inhabit their roles as singing actors.

Mezzo Arminè Kassabian, for example, was tentative in her trouser role as the Composer. This is the Composer's big debut, yet Kassabian could not quite convey that through either voice or body. The audience should not have to depend on surtitles to understand the ardency of this character, or the purity and beauty of the ideal woman he has created. Ariadne (soprano Colleen Skull), you should believe, is ready to die after being jilted in love, but she seemed merely sleepy. And there was no chemistry between her and her new inamorato, Bacchus (Roger Honeywell).

Some of these issues can be laid at the director's door. Oriol Tomas clearly sided with the opera buffa component—the sassy Zerbinetta (soprano Suzanne Rigden, who nailed the high E), baritone John Brancy (Harlequin) and tenor Joseph Schnurr (Dancing Master) could give classes in how to sing well while bringing a character to life with a gesture or a glance. Tomas seemed to give much more thought to their development, particularly through movement. Other vocal highlights for me came from the trio of lovely nymphs, Naiad (Virginia Hatfield), Dryad (Aidan Ferguson) and Echo (Eve-Lyn de la Haye).



(From left) Virginia Hatfield (Naiad), Aidan Ferguson (Dryad), Eve-Lyn de la Haye (Echo) and Colleen Skull in the title role of Pacific Opera Victoria's *Ariadne auf Naxos*

spectacular, but many others were murky and diffuse. Besides, much of the character interaction took place on the stage floor, well below most of the projected images. Frequently, only the concrete grey of the

voices can seem overwrought, but both principals here modulated their style to let the text take precedence over the sound—yet still ensuring that the sound was delightful.

Ian Rye's clever backstage set for the Prologue, complete with costume, wig and makeup rooms, gave way to a typically Attic scene of a column here and a column there for the Opera proper. Sheila White's costumes were an interesting mash up of eras: in the Prologue, the Composer could have passed for a Victorian, while the Prima Donna carried a smartphone.

The night, however, belonged to the orchestra. The final measures were, as Ver-non put it in his program notes, "as close to musical starlight as you will ever hear."
—Robin J. Miller

WINNIPEG

Manitoba Opera saddled up opera fans with its Spaghetti Western version of Donizetti's *Don Pasquale*, which opened the company's 41st season Nov. 23. This tongue-in-cheek version, based on San Diego Opera's 2002 production, transplants the story 40 years later to an imagined American Wild West, where men were men and women packed pistols while belting out high Fs.

Directed by Winnipegger Robert Herriot, the production also featured the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra conducted by Tyrone Paterson. Tony Fanning's intricately detailed sets featured a hotel lobby, study and garden, with a wheeled horse providing dramatic entrances for the cowpokes. Bill Williams's lighting design and Helen Rodgers' period Western costumes rounded out the show.

MO is to be commended for daring to mess with the popular comedy. However, too often, all the extra hijinks and stage business pulled the focus from the big vocal moments, which had to compete with mariachi bands, pantalooned floozies and even a stuffed squirrel. The libretto contains enough inherent comedy; by negating or avoiding poignant contrasts, such as Norina and Ernesto's heartfelt Act III duet, "Tornami a dir che m'ami," in which they pledge their love, the additional comic elements could actually diminish the effect.

Donizetti's operas, however, are ultimately about bel canto, and MO's production teemed with soaring arias

and vocal pyrotechnics delivered (almost) flawlessly by the fine international cast. Winnipeg-born Nikki Einfeld flounced about the stage as sassy widow Norina during her opening cavatina, "Quel guardo il cavliere," before her wheedling "Via, caro sposino" replete with gravity-defying runs. Her crystal-clear lyric coloratura has grown stronger and more

of "Aspetta, aspetta, cara sposina," performed with a spluttering Strummer.

The MO Chorus, prepared by Tadeusz Biernacki, injected welcome spectacle and energy as the newly hired household help during Act III's "I diamanti, presto, presto" and later a "Che interminabile andirivieni!" performed with mocking glee.



Michele Angelini (Ernesto) in Manitoba Opera's production of *Don Pasquale*

confident with each passing year—and she swings a mean lasso, proving herself both a comedic and vocal heir apparent to her renowned mentor, Tracy Dahl, who sang the same role in the company's prior 1997 production.

Acclaimed comprimario bass-baritone Peter Strummer was a pleasure in the title role. After a few balance problems with the orchestra were resolved during the opening "Ah, un foco insolito," his booming voice and fearless buffo comedy always entertained. American tenor Michele Angelini's chaps-wearing Ernesto enthralled right from his first aria, "Mi fa il destino mendico." In Act II's "Cercherò lontana terra," his golden voice floated even higher than the frothy bubbles in his bathtub. Baritone Brett Polegato's Dr. Malatesta, styled as a cigar-toting Buffalo Bill with sidekick Hop Sing (Alan Wong), machinated the plot like a master puppeteer. His robust opening aria, "Bella siccome un angelo" was matched only by his rapid-fire delivery

University of Manitoba Opera Theatre brought love and war to the stage with Handel's epic *Rinaldo* at St. Andrew's River Heights United Church. The two performances (Nov.) marked the Winnipeg premiere of the Baroque master's classic, as well as only the second large-scale opera presented by the ensemble after its 2011 staging of Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*. With Katherine Twaddle's stage direction, Julian Pellicano, newly minted Resident Conductor of the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, led the UofM Symphony to provide a sprightly, crisp accompaniment, particularly by its continuo players, led by harpsichordist Christopher Kayler.

At nearly 130-minutes (condensed even at that), the three-act opera, sung entirely in Italian, quite possibly shocked audience members accustomed to surtitles. Those unfamiliar with *Rinaldo*'s complicated plot likely also struggled. But despite these factors, the Herculean effort spent preparing, memorizing, staging, blocking and performing the opera spoke volumes

about the program's strong leadership and its cohort of dedicated, gifted students.

As Armida, soprano Anne-Marie MacIntosh cast her own spell with her confident, controlled coloratura, effortlessly plucking out stratospheric notes seemingly from midair. Baritone Jason Klippenstein as the booming Saracen King, Argante, is also someone to look out for, his sheer vocal power alone enthralling despite some straining in the role's upper range. Tenor Jan van der Hoof, as General Goffredo, displayed both his military prowess and expressive, legato phrasing. Lyric soprano Jessica Kos-Whicher, as Almirena, performed her showstopper "Laschia chi'io pianga" with utter sincerity and warmth. Lyric mezzo Meghan Symon likewise gave a convincing performance crossing genders as the lovesick warrior, Rinaldo.

The traditional production featured Medieval-period costumes. Sightlines frequently proved a challenge, despite Twaddle's clever use of the limited stage area, including positions behind

the orchestra. However, effective lighting helped by underscoring the show's most dramatic scenes, including Act III's climactic battle, replete with clashing swordplay and blasting trumpet fanfares. —*Holly Harris*

UNITED STATES

CHICAGO

Lyric Opera of Chicago's first new production in 25 years of Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (seen Feb. 1) was by and large a success, thanks mostly to the conducting of Michele Mariotti and the Rosina of Isabel Leonard, both in their Lyric debuts. Mariotti is a real find. The overture was taken at a breakneck pace, but once past the finish line, his work was most sympathetic to the singers and surprisingly full of nuance (badly needed in this score). Ever since its first *Barbiere* in 1954, Lyric has always used a mezzo-soprano for Rosina (except for a few performances by soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian, who did, however, perform it in the original keys). Leonard is a striking beauty, both on- and offstage.

Moreover, her voice is not only smooth and warm, but delightfully accurate in rapid passages. And her acting was gratefully free of coyness.

Director/choreographer Rob Ashford has worked predominantly in theater and this was his first opera. He invented no strange concepts, though a dozen or so lackies prancing through Dr. Bartolo's household added little to what was otherwise a straightforward, unobtrusive staging. The costumes of Catherine Zuber and set designs of Scott Pask were extremely pretty, though I wonder if the extensive use of wrought-iron gates against a neutral cyclorama dominating both sets prevented the sound from projecting well, even to the seventh row. This was especially true in the first scene. There was improvement later; perhaps the singers—or my ears—adjusted.

The Figaro of Nathan Gunn and Count of Alex Schrader initially sounded unremarkable, nor was Schrader up to the strenuous Almaviva aria restored to the finale. Alessandro Corbelli was immensely funny as Bartolo, while Kyle Ketelsen's fine bass was a pleasure as Bartolo, neither overdoing the comic business. Berta is usually given to a mezzo, but since Rosina commandeered that range here, Canadian soprano Tracy Cantin got the assignment. Cantin is not a character singer (she has covered the roles of Desdemona, Rosalinde and Rusalka this season), but sang her aria delectably and, in the Act I finale, taking the musical line soprano Rosina usually sings, her voice soared impressively. —*Richard Covello*

HOUSTON

The old saw has it that a new Broadway musical is a flop when the audience leaves humming the scenery. It takes nothing away from Polish-Russian composer Mieczesław Weinberg's *The Passenger* that David Pountney's staging is key to the international success of the 1968 opera, not given its world premiere until 2010 in Bregenz.

A co-production of Austria's Bregenzer Festspiele, Warsaw's Wielki Teatr, London's English National Opera and Madrid's Teatro Real, Pountney's staging had its American premiere at **Houston Grand**

PHOTO: DAN REST



Tracy Cantin (Despina) in Lyric Opera of Chicago's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*

Opera Jan. 18. HGO will perform the two-act, three-hour work at New York's Lincoln Center Festival in July 2014, and it will be part of Lyric Opera of Chicago's 2014/15 season.

Pountney also translated Alexander Medvedev's libretto, which was inspired by a radio play turned novel by Holocaust survivor Zofia Posmysz, from Russian into English. The title character is Marta, like Posmysz a Polish Catholic interned at Auschwitz and now, 15 years after the war, a passenger on the ocean liner taking former camp overseer Liese and her German diplomat husband, Walter, to a new posting in Brazil.

Marie-Jeanne Lecca's striking costumes and the stunning two-level set by Johan Engels, its railroad car-like carriages loaded with Holocaust symbolism, contrast with the ship's pristine-white easefulness and the grimy hell of the extermination camp, where Fabrice Kebour's haunting lighting design includes searchlights on looming guard towers.

Liese, who never confessed her past to her husband, is overcome with retroactive guilt when she spots Marta onboard. Mezzo Michelle Breedt, who created the role of Liese in Bregenz and ENO, sang richly, agonized fervently and was aptly steely as the dutiful SS overseer who can't understand why Auschwitz prisoners hate their guards even when she and her fellow tormentors-cum-executioners perform minor kindnesses. Soprano Melody Moore conquered Marta's often high-flying music, poignantly shared her fellow inmates' refusal to be dehumanized and ended the opera with a plea to remember their suffering.

Canadian tenor Joseph Kaiser fielded a solid tenor as the shallow Walter, who frets that Liese's shameful past might hobble his diplomatic career. Baritone Morgan Smith sang strongly as Marta's fiancé, Tadeusz, whose proud defiance of camp authority dooms him to the gas chamber she avoids with Liese's help. The many well-performed cameo roles included a deranged old woman (Victoria Livengood) and a Russian girl who sings a wistful Russian folk song a cappella (Kelly Kaduce). A blend of



Joseph Kaiser (Walter) and Michelle Breedt (Liese) in Houston Grand Opera's *The Passenger*

some lyricism, much spikiness and a few longueurs, Weinberg's score is reminiscent of the music of his friend Dmitri Shostakovich. HGO Artistic and Music Director Patrick Summers maximized the effect of every page as conductor. —William Albright

NEW YORK

I doubt that I'll ever be truly enchanted by Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—its sound world is just too inimical to my own take on Shakespeare's beloved play. But the **Metropolitan Opera's** autumn revival made as good a case for it as I can imagine, and if stretches of the score still seemed tedious and/or aurally wrong-headed, others proved newly beguiling. Director Tim Albery returned to supervise his true-to-Britten 1996 production, in Antony McDonald's complementary Day-Glo sets, with a new, sharp-eared conductor, James Conlon, and its best cast yet. All of them were newcomers but for two: Barry Banks, who's been Albery's inimitably endearing Francis Flute from the start, and Patrick Carfizzi, the stalwartly put-upon Quince of the 2002

revival. But no one seemed to be feeling his or her way; everyone was firmly in vocal and dramatic character.

Iestyn Davies's Oberon, eerie of presence and mellifluous of countertenorial tone, was an easy improvement on his immediate Met predecessor, David Daniels; and the tiny, sweet-voiced Kathleen Kim's Tytania made a striking contrast to hers, the tall, assertive Alexandra Deshorties of 2002. Matthew Rose's never-overplayed Bottom was a worthy successor to his namesake Peter's; and the four lovers were in the more-than-worthy hands of Elizabeth DeShong (Hermia), Michael Todd Simpson (Demetrius), and—a bit of luxury casting here—Canada's internationally busy Erin Wall (Helena) and Joseph Kaiser (Lysander). All fully embraced their roles' rumbustious physicality, along with their (until Act II's reconciliatory quartet) less-than-ideally grateful music. Ryan McKinny and Tamara Mumford made a vocally and physically imposing pair as Theseus and Hippolyta; the subsidiary comedians were a fine lot; and the four children playing the attendant fairies were at the very least just

Alice Coote as Anne Strawson (left) and Judith Forst as her mother in the Metropolitan Opera's staging of *Two Boys*



as charming as they needed to be. If Riley Costello's Puck didn't delight, he sparkled no less than anyone else I've encountered in this (to my mind) misconceived spoken role. All in all, though, this *Dream* proved a musically handsome, mostly diverting mid-autumn entertainment.

Nico Muhly's *Two Boys*—commissioned by the Met but premiered two years ago by the company's most frequent partner-in-production, English National Opera—displays one of its biggest flaws right from the start. Emerging, it seems, straight out of projected video-surveillance footage, a hulking, clarion-voiced, clearly heavily trained 30-year-old tenor shouts for help: a friend of his has just been stabbed. The problem is, he's supposed to be a somewhat ingenuous 16-year-old boy; and nothing that unfolds

over the next two and a half hours makes the impersonation any more convincing. In fact, Brian and the 13-year-old victim, Jake, register less as the “two boys” of the title than as a latter-day Peter Grimes and a more sophisticated, cyber-savvy “prentice.” There's a queasily predatory aspect to their interactions that wouldn't be there in real life—even when (spoiler alert!) the younger boy turns out to be the predator.

Craig Lucas's scenario, told largely in retrospect, flows fairly smoothly, but his words, and Muhly's setting of them, aren't exactly singer-friendly. I was dependent on MetTitles for large chunks of the libretto, since I could neither understand the singers nor, from my vantage point in orchestra row W, read the projected chat-room interchanges that make up so much of the text. (That brings me to

another problem: the Met auditorium is wildly too big for this—and pretty much any other—opera.) The murky realms of cyberspace are the setting for most of the opera, as a middle-aged British detective tries to sort out the fact from the fiction of the attack on the younger boy, which had its roots there. And cyberspace has inspired the best passages of Muhly's score, the eerily chattering choruses that evoke cyberchat. (I could, though, have done without Hofesh Shechter's silly, annoying choreography.) But Muhly seldom creates any big “operatic” moments for his singers; and at his worst, when inspiration fails him, he falls back on minimalist ostinato clichés. This was his first opera, and he's still a relative youngster; the pleasurable aspects of this work—it held the attention reasonably well—give hope that he'll eventually come up with a score that offers more than a clever soundtrack to the story being told.

Muhly and Lucas couldn't have asked for a more committed cast, who delivered all that was asked of them—and in the case of Alice Coote, as the conflicted Detective Strawson, a great deal more: this wonderful recitalist brought a lieder singer's delicacy and variety of inflection to page after page that I don't think possessed such eloquence on their own. She shared the opera's funniest, most-poignant scenes with the redoubtable Judith Forst as her addled mum—a Met debutante 45 years ago and still able to hold her own with the best. Nicky Spence, the role's creator, reclaimed Brian for the last performance of the Met run and showed his clear readiness to play a splendid Grimes; the other boy, Jake, was by contrast played by a real boy, and Andrew Pulver performed laudably despite his inability to fill the vast reaches of the Met. Bartlett Sher's staging, abetted by his usual crack design team of Michael Yeagan and Catherine Zuber and the busy projections of 59 Productions, was his best work yet at the Met; and conductor David Robertson and the Met orchestra were clear gifts to the composer. I enjoyed the show, but for a great opera achieved I wish the talented Muhly better luck next time.

It's been a lose-one, win-one season at

the Met for director Robert Carsen. Back in September, the company scrapped his eloquently minimalist, leaf-strewn *Eugene Onegin* for a grander but lesser production, presumably to coddle Met General Manager Peter Gelb's prima donna of choice, Anna Netrebko, with something new and shiny of her very own for yet another pearl in her string of opening nights. (In fact, it was a hand-me-down, first staged two years earlier by co-producing English National Opera.) But Carsen was given his due in December with a second British transplant: his delectable Royal Opera staging of *Falstaff*.

It's often easier to review a bad show than a good one, and this splendid production, splendidly performed, has me chasing superlatives. In case you haven't heard, Carsen—in cahoots with the handsome, witty set designs of Paul Steinberg—transports Falstaff and Windsor's jocular wives to a burnished-paneled British hunting lodge of the mid-1950s, with side trips to the Fords' spacious, lemon-yellow kitchen in Act II and to a stable (complete with an oat-munching—and, unfortunately,

scene-stealing—horse) in Act III. A high-walled Windsor Park with an invisible, fourth-wall Herne's Oak is the single bow to abstraction. I can't begin to catalog the production's pleasures—and I wouldn't want to spoil anyone's surprise upon discovering them on his or her own. What's especially nice about Carsen's staging is his palpable affection for the work—a virtue not to be taken lightly in today's opera world. Placing it in a different time and place seems not a gimmick, but a way of getting to its gist.

Affection was palpable, too, in the conducting of James Levine. I've heard many a Levine *Falstaff* over the years, but this is the first I'd ever call "genial." Rising from the pit on the automated chair that's the legacy of his extended medical travails, even the back of his trademark frizzy head looked happy. And no one gets this great orchestra to play better: the winds, in Verdi's magical scoring, were a particular delight—and one of the few criticisms I can make of Carsen's staging is that the roisterous onstage antics occasionally obscure the instrumental felicities. But his

cast's enthusiasm can easily be forgiven. All but two are newcomers to his Windsor: Carlo Bosi as Dr. Caius and, rather more prominently, Ambrogio Maestri in the title role. Bosi, like everyone else onstage, was fine and funny—but Maestri was something very special. In my four decades of *Falstaffs*, his was the only one that perfectly matched the right voice, the right physique (minimally padded), the right verbal acuity and—intimately bound to the latter—the right comic skills. He's sung Falstaff nearly everywhere else, but this was his first run of the role at the Met, and it couldn't have been more welcome. With Angela Meade on hand, I didn't worry at all about Alice's (and the opera's) climactic high C, but she also played the role with more spunk and verve than are her norm; and as her jealous husband, Serban Vasile made an unexpected but, overall, laudable Met debut. Jennifer Johnson Cano played the funniest Meg of my experience; and as Quickly, Stephanie Blythe can't have many, if any, rivals for plush, bosomy *Reverenzas*. Lisette Oropesa was near perfect in sound and sight as Nannetta; and if, as

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Sondra Radvanovsky in the title role of the Met's revival of *Tosca*



Fenton, Paolo Fanale got higher marks for sight than for sound, at least the sound was the right one. Keith Jameson and Christian Van Horn were the Mutt-and-Jeff Bardolfo and Pistola. For all of them, I could cite memorable moments, but I won't. Thanks to the Met's Live in HD telecast (and YouTube), they're probably all easily discoverable by now.

A quartet of Canadian-inflected wintertime performances at the Met scored two for revivals over the productions' variously back-when premieres, with (allowing for the vagaries of memory) a

tie for the third and a clear loss for number four.

In mid-December, the Met brought back, for its second run of the season and with a different cast from October's, its 2009 *Tosca*, in the widely reviled staging by Luc Bondy that's less outré than simply out-of-touch and (discourtesy of Richard Peduzzi's sets) butt-ugly. A misfire it remains, but with the best of its 2009 principals—George Gagnidze's sleazy Scarpia—back in place, Marcello Giordani (Cavaradossi) in better form than he'd sounded in years and Sondra

Radvanovsky as the glamorous, full-throated, fully engaged protagonist, this was a performance that surpassed expectations. Radvanovsky's *Tosca* has grown appreciably since her already excellent first Met ventures in the role two seasons back—there's much less nervous fuss—and it now ranks, like her *Norma*, at the zenith of the international heap: nobody does it better. Marco Armiliato held it all handsomely together.

On the other side of the New Year, a second laudably idiomatic Italian maestro, Maurizio Benini, launched the Met's first revival of its overthought, overbusy, underachieving Bartlett Sher production of Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*, which had opened the previous season with more of a whimper than the hoped-for bang. Its prima donna then, and its announced prima donna in January, was Anna Netrebko, at the Met these days the quite obvious *favorita del re*. I didn't think, back in the autumn of 2012, that Adina was the best role for her—the voice too sluggishly plush, the manner too overtly stellar—and when her cancellation of this season's first two performances brought Canadian soprano Andriana Chuchman in her place, I wasn't at all dismayed. Making an unexpectedly early house debut (she was scheduled to bow in February's *The Enchanted Island* revival), Chuchman was—as she always seems to be—a natural charmer, her moonlight shimmer of a voice caressing the ear with only half Netrebko's (superfluous) power and etching the rhythms far more infectiously, and her honest presentation of a tricky character never quite concealing Adina's deep affection for Nemorino. Not that he was hard to love, in the winning person of Ramón Vargas, whose rubber face was shaped for comedy and whose fine voice, after 22 years of leading roles at the Met, has held up remarkably well, despite the occasional taint of tarnish around its edges. He and Chuchman seemed to be enjoying each other—something that wasn't always apparent with Netrebko and her Nemorino, the elegant but somewhat sober-sided Matthew Polenzani. Also having fun, and singing very well in the doing so, were Nicola Alaimo as a Falstaffian

PHOTO: MARTY SOHL

Belcore, who ignored as best he could Sher's misconceived *risorgimento* business, and especially Erwin Schrott as a most atypical Dulcamara—a preening popinjay who seemed forever in search of a mirror. That these two are by physique more conventionally suited to each other's roles simply added to the pleasure.

A week later, Franco Zeffirelli's 1981 staging of *La bohème*—the most-performed production in the Met's history and probably the most beloved—returned with a cast that, if it couldn't surpass the production's initial lineup (Teresa Stratas, José Carreras, and Renata Scottò, under Levine), did awfully well, and seemed even more at home in Zeffirelli's wide-open scenic spaces. Maija Kovalevska and Joseph Calleja (is there a more sheerly beautiful tenor voice around these days?) were happily matched in their quickly vibrant tone and never overstated take on



Andriana Chuchman (Norina) and Nicola Alaimo (Belcore) in the Met's *L'elisir d'amore*

Mimi and Rodolfo; and as Musetta and Marcello, Irina Lungu and Alexey Markov were their fine, more volatile foils. The two odd-men-out Bohemians, Colline

and Schaunard, were handsomely embodied by Christian Van Horn and Joshua Hopkins. I've seen this production at least a dozen times, but I'd never enjoyed a Schaunard more than I did the increasingly prominent Canadian baritone's, with his obvious crush on Musetta and, vocally, a healthy vibrancy that echoed the two central lovers'. Conductor Stefano Ranzani was small of physical stature but much larger of musical, with a performance that occasionally flirted dangerously with languor but never toppled over the edge.

Last and, alas, least of the four revivals was the late-January *Rusalka*. The failure wasn't the fault of Yannick Nézet-Séguin, who led an aurally enchanting orchestral traversal of Dvořák's magical score, even if its vocal and symphonic elements weren't yet ideally balanced: while the Wood Sprites' trios were delightfully transparent, and their

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Opera in Review

adjacent dances rhythmically buoyant, he occasionally overwhelmed the singers' solo passages. With Renée Fleming's Rusalka, that was easy enough to do: this increasingly parsimonious prima donna seemed to be conserving her voice for the following Sunday's SuperBowl "Star-Spangled Banner." Much of the time she

black-humored witch. It's time that Boulianne, who's spent most of her Met career in trousers, got the chance to wear a leading lady's skirts: far more than Fleming or Magee, she gave the audience something real to enjoy. Otto Schenk's staging, in Günther Schneider-Siemssen's magically atmospheric sets, remains, like Zeffirelli's

called Delphine) now married to a prosperous painter named Monsieur Riss, who—as an extra dose of continuity—shows up, silently but rather annoyingly, throughout *Così*, as a struggling artist in seeming cahoots with his wife-to-be and Don Alfonso/Alphonse in stage-managing the plot's elaborate ruse.

Hitching the two operas works both for and against the almost-unknown Philidor piece. To take the latter effect first, the pairing created a five-hour-long entertainment whose lighter-than-air "dessert" (to employ Lafayette Artistic Director Ryan Brown's metaphor) follows one of the most "sumptuous meal[s]" in all of opera. That's well and good, but when the pâtissier's an honorable craftsman and the head chef a culinary genius, there's a natural penchant after the meal to wish you'd skipped the soufflé for a few more bites of the main course. Like Mozart's other two masterworks to texts by Lorenzo da Ponte, *Così* was composed during an era of revolution, and it exudes an air of danger, of mores overturned, of real emotional stakes, altogether lacking in Philidor's charming comedy, which predates by a year the epochal transatlantic uprising so stirringly supported by the Frenchman who gave Opera Lafayette its name. To move to the asset column, the identification with *Così*'s dramatis personae gave Philidor's paper-thin characters a fascination they wouldn't have had on their own: it was fun to imagine Fernand and Fleurdelise (to use their Gallified names) morphing into Monsieur Le Président and his equally stuffy madame, and Guillaume and Dorabelle into the lesser-ranking Monsieur and Madame Lek. And as with every Lafayette outing, I was happy to have seen *Les femmes vengées*, whatever its ultimate rank on the operatic honor roll.

Rose Hall, home of Jazz at Lincoln Center, was once again the Manhattan host to the company, which had presented the two operas separately at its home base in Washington, D.C.; this was the unveiling of the double bill, which traveled to Marie Antoinette's theatre at Versailles a week later. The evening tripped along happily despite its Wagnerian length, with Brown and his fine musicians



John Relyea as the Water
Goblin in the Met's *Rusalka*

was nearly inaudible; and even when she wasn't, she evoked inimical memories of her far more generous initial Met performances of the role, in 1997, whose lovely, full-hearted sincerity long ago gave way to brittle, posturing artifice. As the Foreign Princess, Emily Magee, whose work I've often admired, was miscast: too much like Fleming in basic timbre, with none of the requisite, cutting Slavic steel. Nor, similarly, was John Relyea an ideal Water Goblin, a role that calls for a fat, black, rolling bass with a Slavic edge; still, he sang it with great style and commitment and looked it to his last slimy green scale. Piotr Beczala was a handsome, sweet-toned Prince, and Dolora Zajick once again a delightfully droll Ježibaba. She contributed a third of my favorite scene of the evening, with Vladimir Chmelo's Gamekeeper pushing Julie Boulianne's timorous Kitchen Boy into a reluctant encounter with the

La bohème, a cherishable memento of a vanishing era of operatic production. Both could use some sprucing up, but both still inspire affection in a way that neither Bondy's *Tosca* nor Sher's *Elisir*, I'd easily venture, will ever manage to do.

The idea was clever: pairing Mozart's ever-surprising *Così fan tutte* (1790) with the surprise of a 15-years-older "sequel," François André-Danican Philidor's *Les femmes vengées*, in which, upending the *Così* plot, two wives trick their would-be philandering husbands, under the guidance of a third married lady who's far worldly wiser. **Opera Lafayette's** double bill offered a condensed, French-language *Così* (with spoken dialogue in lieu of the secco recitatives) followed by 90 minutes of the Philidor, with the Mozart/da Ponte lovers morphing into two vocally congruous wedded pairs, and Despina (here

bringing a particularly savory period tang to Mozart's score, and Nick Olcott's staging elegantly and drolly unfolding within Misha Kachman's handsome unit set, with enough doors to accommodate the farcical to-and-fro. Kendra Rai designed the equally handsome costumes. The splendidly adept cast was either French by birth or idiomatically Francophone, four of them veterans of William Christie enterprises: basso Bernard Deletré as a suavely commanding Alphonse; soprano Claire Debono as a clear-voiced, ungim-micky Delphine (I'd never heard her lines more prominent in the *Così* ensembles, and she rose nobly to her elevated status as the catalyst of *Les femmes*); tenor Jeffrey Thompson, when he wasn't miming aggressively in the Mozart, singing neatly as her husband in the Philidor; and mezzo Blandine Staskiewicz as a notably handsome-voiced Dorabelle. Completing the cast were three admirable Canadians. Soprano Pascale Beaudin lacks the *come scoglio* solidity at both extremes of the range for an ideal Fleurdelise, but over the evening's lengthy course she used

her slighter, shorter instrument to greater and greater advantage, and she played her role(s) winningly. So did tenor Antonio Figueroa, a finely sung, dramatically engaging Fernand, who lacked only two of his three arias and a proper wig. Lacking even less was the delightful Alexander Dobson as Guillaume, a splendid clown with a perfect face and lanky physique for farce, who sang his two solos with bite and relish despite their unusually slow tempi. If I seem to be neglecting their Philidor selves, well, blame Mozart and da Ponte, not me.

There's no doubt that Franco Alfano loved his *Sakùntala*. This colorful excursion into exotica first saw theatrical light as *La leggenda di Sakùntala* in Bologna in 1921 and quickly traveled to Naples and Milan; by mid-1923, it had crossed the Atlantic to Buenos Aires, and 1924 saw its premieres (in translation) in Germany and Belgium. That same year, Puccini's death led to Alfano's commission to complete the third act of *Turandot*, largely on the strength of the not dissimilar *Sakùntala*. It

was a mixed blessing: it brought Alfano's name to a wider public, but it also opened the door to nine decades of criticism for not being Puccini. The *Turandot* finale, which of course isn't wholly his, remains his best-known composition—unfairly, for it's hardly his best. Unlike the man himself, whose favorite child *Sakùntala* remained, I'd give the palm to *Risurrezione* or *Cyrano de Bergerac*.

Still, what well-informed opera lover wouldn't be curious about *Sakùntala*? Plenty of them, it seemed, from the less-than-capacity house at New York University's 870-seat Skirball Center, where Manhattan's indefatigably enterprising **Teatro Grattacielo** presented its annual resurrection from the still-misunderstood and underappreciated verismo repertoire. It was the no-shows' loss: this was a very good night not just for Alfano, but also for the many dedicated performers who brought him back to vivid life. Grattacielo presented Alfano's post-war version of his opera (*La leggenda di* dropped from the title), which he painstakingly reconstructed from a piano

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Brenda Harris (Lady Macbeth) and Greer Grimsley in the title role of Minnesota Opera's *Macbeth*



what has so far been a winning 51st season for the company. We first encounter Macbeth (Greer Grimsley) and Banquo (Alfred Walker) on a battlefield strewn with dead bodies, on which the weird sisters, dressed like crows with gas masks growing from their heads, are feasting. It's an ugly scene—Banquo stabs an enemy soldier, and nonchalantly walks on. But then it's a dour, violent society full of dark deeds that Ivany and his designer, Camellia Koo, present to us. In such a society, with its crumbling, concrete buildings and claustrophobic enclosures—no particular time or place is suggested—it's not so surprising that Macbeth and his Lady might be prompted to murder their way to the throne. They've probably done evil things before, and in a more just society would have a police record a mile long. At the end, when they're defeated, the victory chorus led by Malcolm and Macduff carries a hint of weariness—despite a welcome change in administration, things aren't likely to improve.

Grimsley, the charismatic Macbeth, shared the spotlight with Brenda Harris, his impressively ruthless Lady. Both strong actors, they've sung these roles together at least once, in Ottawa in 2010. As the evening progressed, Grimsley traced a clear and believable line from furtive ambition to homicidal frenzy and finally, in the battle scene, to a desperate grasp at self-preservation that rose to almost heroic scale. And except for brief moments of wayward pitch at the start on opening night, he used his prodigious bass-baritone to full effect in the climaxes while investing the more introspective moments with a grandly lyric, dark velvety sound. Harris, for her part, was an intense, combative, unyielding queen-to-be, which gave her sleepwalking scene, played with a subdued dreaminess—with none of the fevered movements that sopranos usually give it—such poignancy. Her tone showed patches of dryness, but that, of course, is at least in part what Verdi wanted in this role (“rough, hollow, stifled,” he wrote in one letter). Moreover, Harris dealt easily and accurately with the part's coloratura demands, delivering honest-to-goodness trills in the banquet

PHOTO: MICHAEL DANIEL

score when the full score and its parts were presumed destroyed by their publisher, Ricordi. (They hadn't been, but it took another five decades for them to resurface.) The fanciful plot, taken from a 4th-century play in Sanskrit, concerns a virginal attendant at a forested hermitage who's happened upon (among other things) by the local king, to whom (unbeknownst to him) she bears a child; and it repeatedly beckons to mind other “exotic” operas as far-flung as *Lakmé*, *Madama Butterfly* and *Die Frau ohne Schatten*. Musically, too, it's not hard to detect in the beautifully colored score a kinship to Ravel and Debussy as well as Puccini and the elder *veristi*. I didn't leave the theater humming the tunes, but I did enjoy the happy memory of Alfano's singably lyric melodic lines and his careful, canny building of a scene, and of one scene into the next.

He'd have been better served by larger, plusher orchestral forces than Grattacielo could muster, but under Israel Gursky's never-insensitive direction the instrumentalists all seemed to relish what they were up to, and it was a tautly dynamic

performance that the lucky audience heard. Michelle Johnson—a Glimmerglass *Aida* two seasons back—showed plenty of presence along with a warm, gleaming soprano in the title role; and Raúl Melo, as the King, rose to the vocal and erotic heights of their big duet. As always with Grattacielo, there were almost too many good secondary performances to mention: if I single out Japanese soprano Asako Tamura and Iranian-Canadian mezzo Shirin Eskandani, it's simple because, in their joint function as Mallika to Johnson's *Lakmé*, they gave such mellifluous pleasure. Pleasure seemed to be in the air: and while “Grattacielo” translates literally as “skyscraper,” at the end of each year's performance I'm invariably thinking “Thank heaven” instead. —*Reviews from New York* by Patrick Dillon

SAINT PAUL, MINN.

Verdi's *Macbeth*, never a lighthearted evening in the theatre, took on an extra measure of gloom and despair in Joel Ivany's production for **Minnesota Opera**, the third offering (opening Jan. 25) in

scene and ending the sleepwalking scene with an immaculate high D-flat.

Walker brought a noble, resonant sound to the role of Banquo, and Harold Meers gave ardent expression to Macduff's Act IV aria. Despite a few uncoordinated moments between the excellent chorus and orchestra in Act I, Michael Christie conducted with splendid brio and welcome crispness.

A few of Ivany's ideas didn't work, like having a simulation of Banquo's head painted silver and displayed on a platter during the banquet scene as if it were the head of John the Baptist. Generally, though, the staging carried a ring of truth, and though he couldn't make the Witches believable—no director can do that—he drew lively, limber performances from them. As a provocative touch, he had some of them appear in the background in scenes where we don't expect them, suggesting that the Witches are dictating the events of the story rather than simply predicting them. Sean Nieuwenhuis designed the atmospheric projections and Jason Hand the

lighting. Koo also conceived the striking costumes, black leather being the dominant motif. —*Michael Anthony*

INTERNATIONAL GERMANY: MUNICH

Bayerische Staatsoper last November celebrated the 50th anniversary of its reopening of the National Theater after its destruction in World War II bombing with a production of Strauss's *Die Frau ohne Schatten*. It also marked the first performances of the incoming General Music Director, Kirill Petrenko.

Inspired by oriental fairy tales and with a nod to Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*, the sixth collaboration between Strauss and librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal gave birth to a puzzling, massive work laden with symbolism and multilayered orchestral power. Director Krzysztof Warlikowski gave the story one of his ingenious twists, shifting it to the icy, white-tiled interior of a 1940s sanatorium where the Kaiser (Johan Botha) and Kaiserin (Adrienne Pieczonka) are taking a luxury rehab cure, accompanied by

the malicious Amme (Deborah Polaski). Barak and wife (Wolfgang Koch and Elena Pankratova) are laundry workers in the spa's cellar. Trips between the earthly and heavenly planes of the fantasy are achieved through a cage-like elevator that transports the protagonists.

With these complex logistics solved, the polish director, as he did with Berg's *Lulu* last year in Brussels, further explores his obsessive angst about children, in this case the "unborn." (In the 1943 bombing of Munich, essential social facilities were also hit, including a children's asylum and the municipal orphanage.) He ties this in with Strauss's murky Nazi past. The sweeping video projections of the Jewish graveyard in Warsaw, with thousands of tiny gravestones, leave no doubt about the reference. Warlikowski continues here a highly effective collaboration with the brilliant French video artist, Denis Guéguin.

The stellar cast followed Warlikowski's vision, playing out their mythological roles unaware of the human consequences. Pieczonka seems to have gained dramatically



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Opera in Review

and vocally from her striking work as Chrysothemis in the late Patrice Chéreau's *Elektra* last summer in Aix. Her grip on Straussian style is ever more convincing. Deborah Polaski's unusually masculine, Mephistophelian characterization of Amme intensified as the Kaiserin weakly submitted. Johan Botha was his usual inert self—a human form with heavenly notes. Koch was ideally plebian, though also sang like a god. Pankratova made the biggest individual impact through the beauty and astonishing volume of her voice, her keen sense of line, her detailed word painting and her complete commitment as an actress. The excellent children's choir and the numerous young extras were all important, integral parts of Warlikowski's moving concept.

Petrenko is making his mark as a bold dynamic force on the podium. He conducts in a clear, purposeful manner that is focused on the music and the players. He has already a fine chemistry with the Staatsoper orchestra, amply demonstrated in this most complex work. The audience, poignantly aware of the remembrance,

rebuilding and renewal symbolized in this anniversary event, rewarded the singers, Warlikowski and especially Petrenko with ecstatic applause. —Denise Wendel

SPAIN: MADRID

Against breathtaking images of the Wyoming mountains, a menacing black-coated cowboy entered to deep resounding chords from the pit. This was the most atmospheric start to the world première of *Brokeback Mountain* at Madrid's **Teatro Real** Jan 27. The Academy Award-winning film by Ang Lee, based on a short story by Annie Proulx, which narrates the doomed homosexual relationship between two cowboys, hardly seemed a likely project for a European house. However, Madrid's former Artistic Director, the late Gerard Mortier, had commissioned the opera when he was in New York. And although Mortier left the Real last fall, there was no turning back: the curtain went up with unprecedented interest in and outside Spain.

This is composer Charles Wuorinen's second opera—the first, *Haroun and the*

Sea of Stories, based on a Salman Rushdie novel, was seen at New York City Opera in 2004—and it is an intelligent score. In two acts with 22 scenes, there are also various orchestral interludes. Sweeping passages abound, along with a constant dialogue between the instruments and voices. Although there are several duos between the two lovers, this is really a composition of recitatives. The 75-year-old Wuorinen says his music accompanies the libretto, written by Proulx herself. He used her words to inspire the musical depiction of desolation in a hostile environment. The composer and Proulx also spent time together, exploring Wyoming and auditioning singer-actors.

Theatre there was in the fine performance of Ottawa-born bass-baritone Daniel Okulitch as Ennis del Mar. He had the most demanding role in the opera, and his commanding voice accompanied an enormous stage presence. Both musically and psychologically, Ennis evolves. He moves from silent nods and gestures to awkward one-liners, with a final outpouring of emotion after Jack dies. The 15

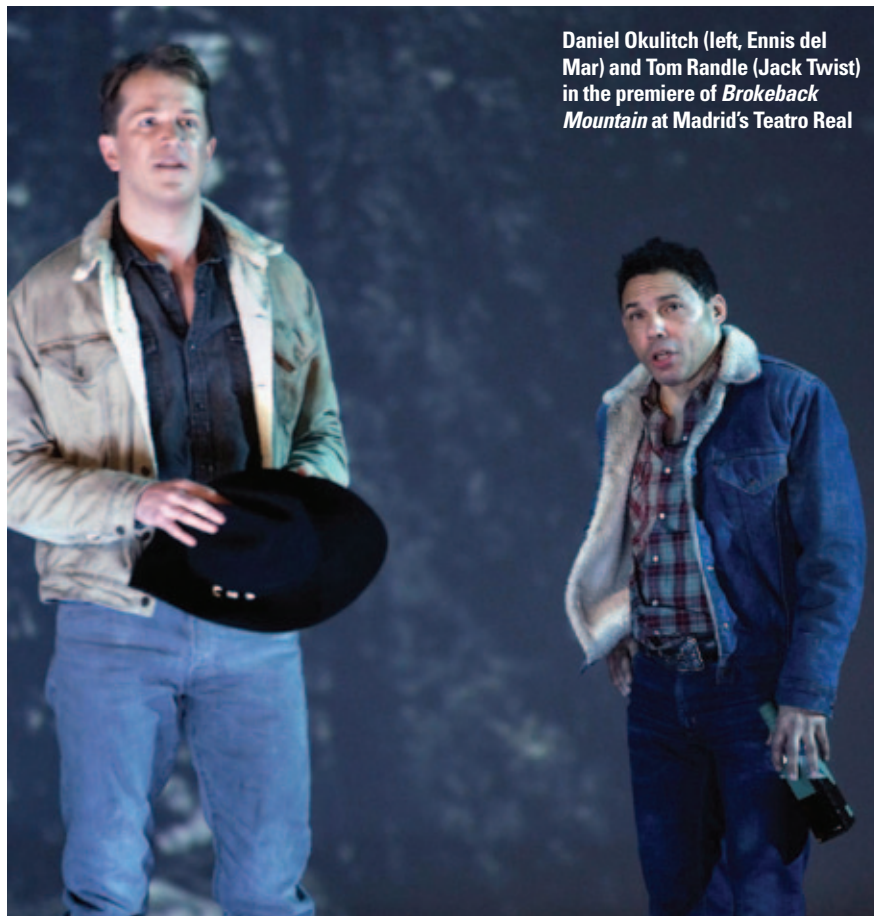


(From left) Johan Botha (Emperor), Elena Pankratova (Dyer's Wife), Adrienne Pieczonka (Emperor's Wife) and Wolfgang Koch (Barak, the Dyer) with Children's Chorus in Munich's *Die Frau ohne Schatten*

PHOTO: WILFRIED HOSL

minutes of the inevitably tragic denouement belonged to Okulitch, and they were the best of the evening. Tenor Tom Randle was a good counterpart as Jack Twist, the lovers' voices complementing each other. However, the only lyrical, briefly operatic moment of the opera was for the excellent mezzo Jane Henschel as Jack's mother. The rest of the cast was hindered by Proulx's trivial libretto. The wives were too predictable—Heather Buck as Alma and Hannah Esther Minutillo as Lureen—while the bad guys—Ethan Herschenfeld and Ryan MacPherson—were stock characters. Titus Engel conducted the Real's orchestra and chorus (as the Townspeople), balancing authority with delicacy.

The production by Ivo von Hove lent on John Cassavetes and Edward Hopper for the (unconvincing) small-town feeling, although Tal Yarden's powerful videos projected the mountain landscape most effectively. Yet few were touched at the end of the two hours. Wuorinen's carefully crafted score was not sufficient to overcome the facile libretto or artificial staging. —*Victorial Stapells* **OC**



Daniel Okulitch (left, Ennis del Mar) and Tom Randle (Jack Twist) in the premiere of *Brokeback Mountain* at Madrid's Teatro Real

PHOTO: JAVIER DEL REAL

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The common element in these two otherwise-disparate historical reissues is the casting of tenor Jon Vickers. The Cherubini is from June 30, 1959, a live BBC relay from London's Covent Garden. The Verdi is from May 19, 1963, recorded live at the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires. Both releases, then, capture the tenor in the ascendant relatively early in his career, although he was already established on the international scene.

The Verdi release is particularly attractive because we hear Vickers singing alongside his compatriot, Louis Quilico, who proves a compellingly villainous Iago. There have been other recordings of these two together in this opera live—including one from the Metropolitan Opera from a decade later—but in terms of dramatic and musical performance, I don't think I've heard anything better than the searing accounts both summoned here. Quilico is

creepily malevolent in Act I as he gets Cassio drunk and into a fight, then scarily vicious in Act II and Act III as he plays on Otello's weaknesses. Even in 1963, Vickers' portrayal of a man coming unhinged is pointed and harrowing. Singly and together, both are in great form. I wish that had also been true of Raina Kabaivanska, whose Desdemona sounds wildly uneven. She clearly takes some time to warm up, but her intonation remains iffy even after. While she's no match for Vickers in the Act I love duet, she does fortunately manage—just—to pull herself together vocally for the Act IV “Willow Song” and “Ave Maria.”

The other big star of this performance—brilliant enough alone to make this recording worthwhile—is conductor Berislav Klobucar, who whips up one of the most hot-blooded and excit-



ing performances I have ever heard of this opera. It's as detailed as it is driven right from the outset. The opening storm scene and even the street brawl are almost Wagnerian in their intensity (the chorus, by the way, was obviously very well drilled), while the lyricism and line of the love duet is achingly beautiful. Klobucar is in full

command of the contrasting ebb and flow of emotion and passion in the music throughout the opera. His pacing is spot on.

The sound of this release is acceptable enough, though variable. It's hard to figure out exactly where the microphones were placed—either over the orchestra or somewhere around the rim of the pit. You get a very detailed aural impression of some sections of the orchestra—if you want to study the trumpet parts in *Otello*, this is the right recording—but the voices can sound more or less distant, presumably depending on where they are on the stage. This problem affects how we hear Vickers more than Quilico, and, to be fair, recorded sound may be a factor in how Kabaivanska's performance comes across. But despite these factors, this is a must-hear performance. This is a budget release, with no booklet, just a leaflet with the most basic information (although nothing on the circumstances of the recording). It has, however, been usefully divided into individual tracks, which are listed.

Documentation and recorded sound are considerably better on the Cherubini release, the latter, of course, because the source material was a BBC radio broadcast (mono, not stereo). This has been available before, though here has been remastered to very fine effect. This performance pairs Vickers with Maria Callas in an opera that was

really staged for and around the great soprano as early as 1953 in Florence. The same production was mounted to huge acclaim in Dallas in 1958, which is where and when Vickers joined her as Giasone, and then was taken up by Covent Garden a year later (documented here). A final outing with the duo at La Scala in the 1961/62 season marked Callas's farewell to the Italian stage.

Coincidentally, I saw a remastered version of Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Medea*, made a decade after this London performance and starring Callas in her only film role, when I was listening to this recording. It's a remarkable film treatment considering that, though playing the central role, Callas is silent throughout. But her characterization remains very powerful and evocative, doubtless honed by her development of the character through Cherubini's opera. She's in very good voice here, bringing all the intensity, nuance and color that made her *sui generis*. Vickers is in good voice too, recorded just two years after his Covent Garden debut, and the rest of the cast includes some eminent artists of the day, including Fiorenza Cossotto (Neris), Joan Carlyle (Glauce) and Nicola Zaccaria (Creonte). Nicola Rescigno, who conducted in Dallas, is on the podium. This opera is rarely performed, in part because the title role is so demanding dramatically and technically. Anyone who takes it on is

singing in the shadow of Callas's assumption, and this splendid release shows just how big that shadow is.

—Wayne Gooding

WINTERREISE

GERALD FINLEY

Hyperion: CDA68034

Schubert's 24-song cycle

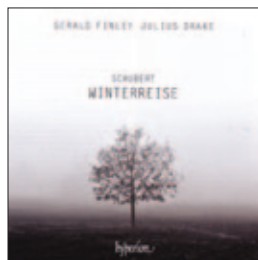
Winterreise (Winter's Journey)

is often considered one of the peaks of the male singer's lieder repertoire.

This recorded performance by baritone Gerald Finley and English pianist Julius Drake comes in the wake of their North American tour early this year. In a promotional clip on YouTube, Finley describes *Winterreise* as "one of the major works of music—of all music... a fundamental work of Western culture." Big words, though this new release illustrates the love and respect these two musicians hold for the piece, and the result is one of the finest recordings of it ever produced. Through poems by Wilhelm Müller, *Winterreise* tells of a jilted lover journeying through a cold, wintry landscape, revisiting his love experience in flashbacks, seeking escape and ultimately death by the end. As the great German baritone and *Winterreise* interpreter Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau once explained: "Regret and renunciation are his themes. Dreams are the lover's torture, and the battle with his emotions is long and despairing." Regularly performed and recorded by either tenor or baritone, I prefer the baritone

version, finding the lower, darker sonority more suitable to the poems and story.

Finley's vocal qualities in opera, concert and song have long been praised. The voice is not large, but focused and pure, even when he alters the shade and tone color to suit the text. This restraint only seems to add to the drama. But the vocal quality is really only the beginning. It's the intelligence and thought in this recording, the conception of Finley and Drake



that win you over. Finley is magical in conveying the past memories of happiness of the poet, as well as his despair and loneliness in his current situation, increasing to anger and near panic at times. Over the course of the cycle, he gradually lightens his tone, illustrating the slow shift from the poet's confidence at the beginning to his obsession with death at the end. It's more musical storytelling than singing—exactly as it should be—never melodramatic or overly sentimental.

For example, the emotional contrasts of song #5, "Der Lindenbaum" ("The Linden Tree"), are very broad as the poet wrestles with past memories of love and the cold, icy metaphor of his winter's journey. Similar vivid contrasts appear in song #11,

"Frühlingstraum" ("Dream of Spring"), yet another metaphor, this time for spring and happy memories versus winter and despair. The use of silence between verses here is perfectly gauged to increase tension and anxiety, while the tender warmth of the final line, where the poet ponders when he will again hold his lover in his arms, is very moving. Schubert completes this song in the minor key, answering the poet's question for us. As the cycle nears the end, the sense of exhaustion increases, reaching a peak in song #21, "Das Wirthaus" ("The Inn.") Although the piano gets to sum up this song loudly after the last line, Drake is able to bring across its sense of finality. The famous final song, "Der Leiermann" (translated here as "The Hurdy-Gurdy Player," which is preferable to the usual "Organ-Grinder"), has rarely been done so well. The overall "less is more" concept of the entire performance comes to its final fruition here, as this song is presented simply, unadorned and cold, with Finley vibrato-less and almost at a whisper. Of course, recorded in a closed studio session, there is no applause—something that can often ruin the effect of *Winterreise* when experienced live. Produced in a London church, the recorded sound is clean and transparent, with a warm bloom.

Drake deserves high praise as the equal partner to Finley—always supportive and complementary, never

intrusive, matching the singer in every aspect. Generally, he uses a small piano sound, classical and Viennese but full, in keeping with the less-is-more concept. Drake proves here that he is one of the finest collaborative pianists working today. The CD booklet contains good notes, as well as full German texts and translations. Don't miss this recording. —Rick Phillips

GUITARIAS

DOUG MACNAUGHTON

DougMacNaughton.com

Baritone Doug MacNaughton has appeared regularly in a variety of roles with Canadian opera companies from coast to coast since his debut with Edmonton Opera in 1982 at the age of 20. Oratorio, lieder, songs and contemporary music have also been important elements of his career—as well as the guitar, it seems. This new recording, on which he is featured as both singer and guitarist, is his fourth recording as a singer, but his first as a guitarist. It contains



a variety of songs for voice and guitar commissioned by MacNaughton from Canadian composers. These include: *Beckett Songs*, John Beckwith's setting of poems by Samuel Beckett; *Flower Arranger*, Leslie Uyeda's setting of Joy Kogawa poems;

Opera at Home

and the four-song cycle, *The Truth of Matter*, poetry by Linda Hogan set by William Beauvais. Also included is *Shadows*, British composer John Rutter's cycle using texts by 16th- and 17th-century poets.

MacNaughton has a rich baritone, stentorian at times, but he's able to bring it down with warmer, tenderer shades, although sometimes sounding a bit restricted up high. His diction has always been excellent, as it is here. Personally, I prefer the commissioned Canadian songs by Beckwith, Uyeda and Beauvais, which share a contemplative and meditative style and are programmed nicely on the disc. They suit MacNaughton well and he seems sincere and completely at home with them. Even with the occasional difficult leap and awkward landing on irregular phrases, these songs still have strong lyrical qualities, nicely negotiated by the baritone. The Rutter songs often lie higher in his range—and the songs themselves are too derivative, written in a kind of neo-English folk-song style that grew tiring. They don't match the sentiment, mood, style or quality of the Canadian material.

The recording, produced at St. George the Martyr Church in Toronto, is quite resonant, but works well for the material by offering space without any loss of clarity. Wisely, the guitar is close-miked, and the decision to record voice and guitar together was the right one. MacNaughton is an excellent guitarist, and is able to play and sing well together

to project a more complete musical performance than would emerge if voice and guitar had been tracked separately. Notes and full English texts are provided. —Rick Phillips

TROBAIRITZ SHANNON MERCER

Analekta: AN 2 9846

It's surprising no one has thought of this record concept before. Trobairitz were the female poets of the 12th and 13th centuries, mostly noblewomen in the south of France, wives and daughters of dukes and counts, often the lovers of troubadours and minstrels. Because they crossed the social strata of their day, their secular poems provide a truer view of their medieval society. Frowned on by the church, these poems deal with love from many female perspectives—from marriage to betrayal, motherhood to adultery, and even woman to woman. Unfortunately, the names of the poets are not listed with their corresponding poems. Writ-



ten in the ancient Romance language of Occitan or langue d'oc, the texts were undoubtedly sung, although the music has not survived. That task became the brainchild of Seán Dagher, composer, arranger and Music Director of Montreal-based La Nef. Wisely, Dagher did not shoot for historical authenticity, instead basing

his compositions on the medieval style of troubadours and trobairitz, but instilling them with his own love and familiarity with more recent folk and world music. As he says in the notes: "I think the style of these pieces reflects the time and place in which we live: Montreal 2013."

The result is a recording of very listenable songs that initially sound ancient, but mixed and updated with contemporary influences. Soprano Shannon Mercer is the highlight here, featured on most of the tracks (four purely instrumental selections are included). Dagher's music is demanding, often very wide in range, but Mercer shows her versatility and is completely up to the challenges, singing with her usual true, clean sound and crisp diction. The Occitan language—a kind of mix of French with Italian and Spanish—is weird and difficult to pronounce, let alone sing. Mercer manages it well, while nicely capturing the moving emotions and expression of the poems. Recorded sound is tight but warm, and very suitable for the material. The recording is available as a physical CD or as a digital download from the Analekta website (www.analekta.com). Sadly, the poems and translations are not included in the CD booklet and are only available at the web site. With a few clicks of the mouse, you can arrive there to find the original Occitan as well as modern French and English translations. (For some reason, there is no English translation for track #7.) This is an ongoing pet peeve of

mine—if I buy a CD, I still want the texts and translations included. —Rick Phillips

DVDs

DIE ZAUBERFLÖTE MOZART

Euroarts: BPH130011

Recorded live at the Baden-Baden Easter Festival from a single performance on Apr. 1, 2013, this Robert Carsen production of Mozart's charming and multilayered penultimate opera features a strong cast, along with the Rundfunkchor Berlin and the Berlin Philharmonic under the direction of Simon Rattle. The generous extras include an introduction by Rattle, comments by Carsen on the staging and a "Behind the Scenes" feature. I was surprised to learn that this marked the first live performances of *Die Zauberflöte* by the Berlin orchestra, although Herbert von Karajan helmed a major studio release in 1980 and Thomas Beecham led a memorable cast in his landmark recording from the the 1930s. "I've spent my life avoiding conducting it," the 59-year-old Rattle says. "The piece is a conductor's graveyard and I know many people who find it very, very difficult. It's very hard to be simple, and you absolutely must be simple in this piece."

The "graveyard" reference is an apt one for this production. Rattle and Carsen stress the opera's obsession with death, noting more than 60 references to the word or its derivatives in the libretto, plus multiple suicide and murder attempts. The forest setting, with film projections as a backdrop, has Monostatos (a suitably evil James

Elliott) and his henchmen dressed as shovel-brandishing undertakers, and various characters emerge from or descend into graves in the stage floor: Tamino climbs out as he escapes from the serpent (which turns out to be a very unthreatening long snake), and Tamino and Papageno are led down to Sarastro's subterranean abode for their trials. The Three Ladies (Annick Massis, Magdalena Kozená and Nathalie Stutzmann, all in fine form) appear as widows in black mourning attire, with veils and sunglasses.

The set, by Toronto-based designer Michael Levine, features an extended stage in the form of a walkway that surrounds all four sides of the orchestra pit, used in the overture to have the cast assemble one by one from the back of the hall and gather around the perimeter to listen to the orchestra and gaze down like rapt audience members themselves. During the overture's final measures, they stand one by one and begin to take their places on stage. The same process, in reverse, brings the opera full circle during the finale. It's a simple but effective touch.

Slovakian tenor Pavol Breslik cuts a young and dashing figure as Prince Tamino, with a very attractive, bright lyric tenor voice. English soprano Kate Royal, as Pamina, is one of the star attractions, and she does not disappoint. Her "Bei Männern" duet with Papageno is a delight and her poignant "Ach, ich fühl's" in Act II shows her to be a most elegant Mozart singer. In the role of the man-child bird

catcher (lugging a camping backpack and cooler), the youthful Hungarian-German baritone Michael Nagy is charming. As the Queen of the Night, Macedonian soprano Ana Durlovsky, clad in a little black dress and heels, is disappointing in "O zittre nicht" (sluggish runs and tentative high Fs), but she comes together better in her fiery Act II aria, "Der Hölle Rache." The Three Boys, who first enter in soccer uniforms kicking a ball, blend beautifully, and Russian-born bass Dimitry Ivashchenko is a dignified Sarastro, with a firmly focused, booming lower register.

Rattle's chief strengths are the clarity and beautiful pacing he brings to the performance, and the orchestra's brass section sounds glorious. The chorus is also magnifi-



cent. So there are attractions and drawbacks here. Not one of the great *Zauberflöte* performances, but some elements will draw me to return to it from time to time.

—Rick MacMillan

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L'ENFANT ET
LES SORTILÈGES
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Baritone

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Opera at Home

charming Ravel one-act operas, staged at Glyndebourne in August 2012 with the Glyndebourne Chorus and London Philharmonic Orchestra under conductor Kazushi Ono. *L'heure espagnole* is a restaging of Pelly's 2004 production for Paris, but *L'enfant et les sortilèges* was newly imagined for the Glyndebourne double bill.

The colorful set for *L'heure* is crammed with



clocks, all types of furniture and boxes, an imposing stuffed bull and a stairs leading to the bedroom, where some behind-the-scenes action takes place. Toronto-based baritone Elliot Madore (looking suitably Spanish in his beret and four-day stubble) takes on the central role of Ramiro, the rough and rustic mule driver who enters the shop of clockmaker Torquemada (Swiss tenor François Piolino) to have his watch repaired. The clockmaker is soon convinced by his lusty wife, Concepción (French soprano Stéphanie d'Oustrac), that he must leave immediately for his duties as regulator of the town's clocks. While moving furniture for Concepción, Ramiro catches her eye and the two are soon in the bedroom. Also in the mix are Concepción's lover, the poet Gonzalve (American tenor

Alek Shrader) and the hopeful, buffoonish banker Don Iñigo Gómez (French bass-baritone Paul Gay, in a gray three-piece suit and sporting a bad comb-over). There are various opportunities for hiding in grandfather clocks and lugging them about, but eventually Torquemada returns and the entire five-person cast joins together for a brief moral to the story.

Every singer is perfectly cast. Madore's lyrical baritone is ideally suited to his role. Piolino, whose part is small, plays the cuckolded husband to great effect, while Shrader is an elegant romantic figure. d'Oustrac is exquisite in vocal terms (with her warm, lovely soprano) and in characterization, hamming it up at every turn. It's a real hoot.

L'heure has much coming and going and a small cast, but there are opportunities for arias and extended character studies. *L'enfant*, on the other hand, has a much larger cast (with many singers taking on two or more roles) and is built from more than 20 scenes over its brief 45-minute duration. The longest lasts just two minutes, while the shortest flies by in less than one. This makes for some frantic backstage movement of sets, furniture and props, and multiple costume changes, but from the audience perspective everything unfolds in magical fashion on the darkened, dream-like stage. Props and other elements are constantly moving; nothing remains in one place.

L'enfant, based on a story by Collette, introduces us to a child (Russian-French

soprano Khatouna Gadelia, looking very much like a little boy) who refuses to do his homework and generally misbehaves—knocking dishes off of the gigantic table, injuring a squirrel, breaking a clock, tearing up his school books, vandalizing the wallpaper. During the course of the opera, various elements (furniture, dishes, the clock, images from the wallpaper and an assortment of animals) come to life and attempt to teach the child a lesson. In the end, after doing a good deed for an injured animal, he finds favor with the whole menagerie and is reunited with his mother.

Pelly's production is an absolute delight at every turn, and bursting with imagination. And, of course, Ravel's music is evocative and gorgeously scored. All of the cast members from *L'heure* have parts here with the exception of Shrader, and all are superb. Madore appears as the hilarious Tom Cat and grandfather clock; Piolino wears an awkward-looking teapot suit and later shouts out rapid-fire mathematical quizzes as Little Old Man (Arithmetic); d'Oustrac is a sexy female cat and later a puffed-up squirrel; and Gay takes turns as an Armchair (his suit patterned in identical fashion to the black-and-white stripes of the chair in which he sits) and a Tree. Especially impressive is coloratura Kathleen Kim, in dazzling roles as Fire and Princess.

Extra features on each opera offer interesting commentary by the director, conductor and singers,

including a relaxed Madore in his Blue Jays T-shirt.

—Rick MacMillan

LES CONTES D'HOFFMANN OFFENBACH

Erato: 46369140

Hoffmann represented Offenbach's first foray into grand opera after a life spent focusing on his lighter, less-risky operettas. Originally intended for the 1877/78 season of the Gaité-Lyrique in Paris, the opera, with libretto by Jules Barbier, was put on hold when that theatre declared bankruptcy. Hoffmann continued composing, but died in 1880 before completing much of Act IV or the end of Act V, and with none of the orchestration undertaken. (The work, which draws from various tales by E.T.A. Hoffmann, relates a story of the poet himself, regaling friends in a tavern with



memories of a series of doomed women in his life.)

After the composer's death, Ernest Guiraud was contracted to complete the work for a production in 1881 (cutting most of the Venetian act), but it has since gone through many editions and no one can be sure whether Offenbach's original intentions have ever been met. Modern performances sometimes

switch the order of the third and fourth acts, closing with either the romantic Venetian act (which launches with the famous barcarolle, “Belle nuit, ô nuit d’amour”), or, as in this staging, with the dramatic Antonia act.

This co-production by Laurent Pelly was created for Barcelona’s Gran Theatre del Liceu, San Francisco Opera and Opéra National de Lyon, and had its premiere in February 2013 in Barcelona (filmed for this DVD release), with a follow-up staging in San Francisco in July of that year. The cast is largely Spanish and French, apart from American tenor Michael Spyres in the title role, the diminutive Korean-American coloratura Kathleen Kim as the mechanical doll Olympia, Russian soprano Tatiana Pavlovskaya as Giulietta and Canadian mezzo Michèle Losier as Nicklausse/La Muse. The renowned French soprano Natalie Dessay (Antonia) is the only cast member who also took part in the San Francisco production.

Laurent’s staging focuses on the dark, moody elements of the tales, with 19th-century-style black or gray costumes throughout and a set that is surprisingly plain, even boring, comprising a series of modular walls that open and close to reveal or hide characters and stage elements. For the Olympia act, Kim is suspended in mid air while singing her glittering aria, “Les oiseaux dans la charmillie” (the machinery is magically shrouded in darkness at first, and then revealed as an obvious crane with operators, as though


we have suddenly dropped in on a film-production set). Once she alights, her metallic-colored dress with a hoop in the hem hides the fact that she is gliding about the stage (or being pushed about) wearing inline skates beneath. Kim is most impressive in the role, with a glorious top.

Spyres is only OK as Hoffmann, with a somewhat thin voice in a role that requires a great deal of stamina over the five acts, and Pavlovskaya is an equally average Giulietta. Overall, the chorus is a real standout, as is baritone Laurent Naouri in his multirole casting as the various forces of evil: Lindorf, Coppélius, Docteur Miracle and Dapertutto. Dessay, who recently turned 49, was originally contracted to sing all three major female roles—Olympia, Giulietta and Antonia—but bowed out when she realized her upper register might not be able to meet that challenge. Indeed, she has lost some of the glow in her top and a slight wobble is creeping in, but overall her performance as Antonia is a triumph of majestic singing and acting, even if she appears old enough to be Hoffmann’s mother. In her spoken lines, her beautiful French is a plus, whereas Pavlovskaya’s is clearly not idiomatic. Losier is charming in the dual roles of Hoffmann’s female Muse and his male friend Nicklausse, and in fine voice, especially touching in the final scene as she (he) and Hoffmann lie together, the poet quietly weeping over his lost loves.

—Rick MacMillan **OC**


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The final take

Music Sondra Radvanovsky can't live without

PHOTO: PAVEL ANTONOV

After spending the Fall in Metropolitan Opera productions of *Norma* and *Tosca* and the Vienna Staatsoper's *Un ballo in maschera*, 2014 finds soprano Sondra Radvanovsky criss-crossing the Atlantic again. In March, she reprises her *Tosca* for Barcelona's Gran Teatre del Liceu, and then comes back home for a role debut as Elisabetta in Donizetti's *Roberto Devereux* (Apr./May) at the Canadian Opera Company. There's another debut Jun. 5 in Strauss's *Vier letzte Lieder* with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra before she moves on to London's Covent Garden for more *Toscas*. In September, she opens San Francisco Opera's season in a new production of *Norma* (COC is a co-producer, and she'll be singing the role in Toronto in a not-so-distant season). In November, she'll be heard in recital with her New York-based coach, Anthony Manoli, at Los Angeles Opera, then ends the year on another regal note in the title role of Lyric Opera of Chicago's staging of Donizetti's *Anna Bolena*. It's a driven schedule, but then, that's always been the Radvanovsky way: "There was never any doubt about what I was going to do," she says. "I knew I was going to be an opera singer from the age of 11."

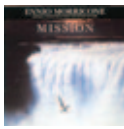


The Mission

Morricone

Virgin: 90567 2

When I heard the soundtrack to this movie for the first time, it was around the time my father died. The haunting melody for "Gabriel's Oboe" really resonated. It was so sad and lyrical that it made me cry uncontrollably.



Má Vlast

Smetana

Supraphon: 3661

My father was Czech, and I heard this music a lot growing up. I am generally a very happy, smiley person, but perhaps some darker colorings come from this side of the family and they're reflected in this music.



Greatest Hits

Carpenters

A&M: 1127387

This was the first album I owned after we got a record player when I was about 5.

I started singing because of Karen Carpenter, whose voice was pure



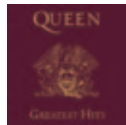
gold. At first I just sang along, then started harmonizing when I was about 7. "Sing, Sing a Song" became my life.

Greatest Hits

Queen

Hollywood: 161265

I think Freddie Mercury had one of the best operatic voices in the world that no one knew about. Just listen to him in "Bohemian Rhapsody." Fantastic.



Tosca

Puccini

EMI: 940198

Maria Callas is my inspiration, and her first (1953) recording of *Tosca* really taught me so much. Her voice isn't to everyone's taste, I know, but what she did with words, music and character was incredible.

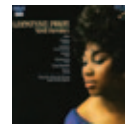


Verdi

Leontyne Price

RCA: 5444122

Price has been with me since I started singing Verdi. I started as a mezzo, then thought I was going to be the next Beverly Sills when I switched to coloratura soprano in my mid-teens. But when I was 18 or 19, one of my teachers, Martial Singher, told me I was going to sing Verdi, and one of the things he gave me was Price singing the "Ave Maria" and "Willow Song" from *Otello*.



Greatest Hits So Far

Pink

Jive: 7806457

This is music for the gym or dancing around. It's not typically repetitive pop music, and the vocals are amazing. She's a real powerhouse of a singer with a great voice, which she uses to communicate with great soul.



Roberto Devereux

Donizetti

Gala: 528

I listen a lot to whatever music I'm currently working on, and especially to hear the orchestration in works that are new to my repertoire. For *Roberto Devereux*, I started with Beverly Sills, but then started to listen to Monserrat Caballé on this disc. Her voice is bigger, but still effortless in this music. It's been instructive to compare and contrast the two, as well as other approaches I've found on YouTube.



We Wish You A Merry Christmas

Ray Conniff Singers

Columbia: 8692

I adore Christmas music, though the more traditional, classical-choral kind rather than songs about white Christmases or jingling sleigh bells. These carols remind me of singing hymns in church.



Silence

The fact is that much of the time I don't play music. Making music is what I do, and there's always music in my head. Since I'm usually working in the downtown core of a city, there's also a lot of noise in my life, so silence is truly something I treasure. I live in the country and love the silence. When my coach comes, he finds it too quiet. **OC**

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 Alison Balsom (EMI)

11 **MENDELSSOHN CONCERTOS**
 Alina Ibragimova (HYPERION)

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 La Pieta (ANALEKTA)

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 Mychael Danna (SONY)

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 Jonathan Biss (ONYX)

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