

Lara Ciekiewicz as Jenůfa & Tatiana • Berlin's Musikfest

OperaCanada

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Indigenous Opera

Canadian opera gains
an Indigenous voice

Staging Sexual Violence

Are singers
safely prepared?

On Stage:
Danika Lorén
Isaiah Bell
Charles Benaroya



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Notebook

BY GIANMARCO SEGATO

We would be acting like

the proverbial ostrich if we did not address 2017's (and potentially 2018's) biggest classical music news story—the accusations of sexual abuse and harassment brought against some of the industry's most



powerful men including Charles Dutoit, James Levine and closer to home in the Canadian arts scene, Soulpepper Theatre's Albert Schultz and former Opera Hamilton General Director, Daniel Lipton.

Even before the #metoo movement made its way to our industry, *Opera Canada* had already commissioned Natasha Gauthier to write a piece we hoped would offer opera artists a platform to share the same types of stories that were already making headlines in Hollywood. It is telling that although top-name Hollywood and Canadian theatre actors now feel liberated to share their stories of being sexually harassed, we have not seen opera singers do likewise. Other than a group of 653 Swedish opera singers who signed a statement in November, there has been hardly a word from any female singers who are on a level comparable to the likes of Hollywood actors such as Salma Hayek, Rosanna Arquette, Kate Beckinsale, Darryl Hannah, Angelina Jolie and Ashley Judd, all of whom have made their experiences public.

It is not difficult to hazard a guess as to why this might be so. Except perhaps at the very highest levels, opera singers possess nothing like the media clout and financial resources of even a moderately successful Hollywood actor, and if anything, the opera business is even more fiercely competitive. This is a special problem in Canada where the industry is relatively small and jobs are scarce. When companies such as Opera Lyra and Opera Hamilton are shutting their doors, and even bigger players like the COC and Opéra de Montréal truncate their seasons,

artists feel the crunch. One can understand why they might keep quiet and tow the line so as not to hinder their chances of being re-hired.

It quickly became clear that although opera industry artists were willing to talk with

Ms Gauthier, all of them stipulated they would do so only under strict assurances of anonymity. The resulting piece, while serving a purpose, would have been little more than a list of anonymous stories and so, she switched focus to examine a related, but by no means less important issue—the very real problem of staging sexually violent scenes in opera and their effect on artists and the audience (p.24).

Indigenous artists have not traditionally enjoyed a place at the table in the Canadian opera world. I had the privilege of working at the Canadian Opera Company during the genesis of Peter Hinton's new production of Harry Somers' *Louis Riel* which many of us viewed as a first step in bridging this gap. We hoped it might spur on more opera projects that involved Indigenous artists as creators and performers and Catherine Kustanczy's feature (p. 18) indicates there is significant momentum in this direction.

Long time readers will note the absence of the traditional Calendar in this issue and in its place, a listing of performance highlights from across the country. We're in an enviable position in Canada with the recent proliferation of smaller companies—so much so that it has become impossible to include them all on a two-page printed calendar! You can find a much-expanded listing of opera events across the nation at operacanada.ca/calendar. There, you can use the search function to look up your favourite companies, operas, singers and conductors. We hope you enjoy the added value of this online feature. **OC**
—editorial@operacanada.ca

Opera in the News

Tracking Canadians at home & abroad

Appointments

Calgary Opera has announced the appointment of a new General Director and CEO effective January 2018. **Dr. Keith Cerny** comes to Calgary from The Dallas Opera, where he has been General Director and CEO since 2010.

“We are very pleased to welcome Dr. Keith Cerny to the position of Calgary Opera’s General Director and CEO,” said **Michael Brown**, Chair of the Calgary Opera Board of Directors. “After an exhaustive international search for the right candidate to take Calgary Opera to next level of growth, we believe we have found the perfect candidate in Keith, given his wealth of experience from an artistic, business and operational standpoint.”

In other Calgary Opera news, in late October the company announced the appointment of a new Resident Conductor and Repetiteur, Montréal native **Kimberley-Ann Bartczak**. A conductor, pianist and vocal coach, Bartczak was previously on staff at Opera on the Avalon and is an alumna of Vancouver Opera’s Yulanda M. Faris Young Artist Program.



Dr. Keith Cerny



Kimberley-Ann Bartczak

Company News

Canadian Opera Company General Director Alexander Neef has signed a new contract with the COC that extends his tenure as General Director through the 2025/2026 season. The COC’s current 17/18 season marks Neef’s 10th as General Director. COC Board Chair **Colleen Sexsmith** noted how Neef has significantly advanced the “company’s international profile and reputation, attracting the world’s best artists for significant roles” and that his renewed commitment to “leadership of the COC for the next nine years



Alexander Neef

ensures vital organizational continuity and sets the stage for the next phase of the company’s evolution.”

Competitions

A record 52 countries were represented in the 358 applications submitted for the May/June 2018 Concours musical international de Montréal (CMIM)—the highest number in the history of the Competition. Three hundred and three applications were made to the Aria division and 166 to the new Art Song division representing 163 sopranos, 42 mezzo-sopranos, 60 tenors, 62 baritones, 13 bass-baritones, 11 basses and 7 countertenors. *Opera Canada* will be on location in Montréal offering daily online coverage of the Competition from June 4-7.



CMIM 2016 winners (l-r) Hyesang Park, Keonwoo Kim, France Bellemare

Burnaby, B.C. mezzo-soprano Francesca Corrado and Chilliwack, B.C. countertenor **Shane Hanson** were the winners of the 2017 Metropolitan Opera National Council



Francesca Corrado



Shane Hanson

PHOTOS: JONATHAN ZIZZO (LEFT, TOP LEFT), ALAIN DUPERE (LEFT, TOP RIGHT), BO HUANG (LEFT, BOTTOM), ANTOINE SAITO (RIGHT, TOP), FRED LEE (RIGHT, BOTTOM LEFT), WATTS GRANT CREATIVE (RIGHT, BOTTOM RIGHT)

Opera in the News

(MONC) Western Canada Auditions held in Vancouver this past November. They will advance to the MONC Northwest Region Finals in Seattle, WA this coming March 2018.

On Nov. 1, 2017, the Canadian Opera Company presented its annual Centre Stage Gala featuring the Ensemble Studio Competition. The three top prize winners were Vaughan, Ontario mezzo-soprano **Simona Genga**; Ottawa bass-baritone **Joel Allison** and Gatineau, Québec soprano **Anna-Sophie Neher**. All three are expected to be considered as new recruits for the COC's 18/19 Ensemble Studio training program.



Simona Genga



Joel Allison



Anna-Sophie Neher



Sarah Cambridge



Natalie Image

Of the eight singers selected for San Francisco Opera's prestigious 2018 Adler Fellows young artist training program, two were Canadians: sopranos **Sarah Cambridge** (Vancouver, B.C.) and **Natalie Image** (Tsawwassen, B.C.). Toronto opera director **Aria Umezawa** sees her Adler fellowship extended for a second year, continuing to participate in all aspects of the program in addition to coaching Adler singers on their audition repertoire. Another Canadian, pianist/coach **Jennifer Szeto**—an emeritus of the Canadian Opera Company's Ensemble Studio—has just completed her year with the Adler program.



Aria Umezawa

AFC

The lifeline for Canada's
entertainment industry

The Actor's Fund of Canada (AFC), lifeline for Canada's entertainment industry, has announced that its Financial Wellness Program (FWP) is now open to all industry workers. This program helps entertainment professionals working in all aspects of film and TV, theatre, music and dance to build and maintain financial stability. Through the FWP, entertainment professionals have access to accredited financial counsellors who

understand the entertainment industry; one-on-one coaching sessions at Credit Canada; one-on-one sessions with a specialized financial therapist and, access to online courses in personal finance, business, technology and more through Lynda.com. These high-value and high-quality services usually have a fee attached, but through the AFC, they are free. To learn more, contact the AFC directly at 1-877-399-8392. **OC**

Artists on Stage



Danika Lorèn

Danika Lorèn hasn't always called Toronto home.

Originally from Saskatchewan, she wasn't raised in a busy city—it was quite the opposite, actually. “I grew up on a farm, and one of the few things we could do was take piano lessons in a nearby town. So I started with piano and then my teacher said to my mom—when she realized I was not very good at piano—that I should probably try singing,” she smiled. “So I went to the Saskatchewan Children's Choir and was with them for about ten years, and it sort of snowballed from there.”

Lorèn's transition to opera had never been a guarantee—until one specific production convinced her to follow through and make a career of it. After graduating from high school, she spent two years in the drama program at the University of Saskatchewan. During her studies, Lorèn appeared in productions with Saskatoon Opera, where one performance helped to make up her mind. “It was *La bohème* with Marianne Fiset as Mimì. I was in the chorus sitting backstage watching the last act, and was just so overcome with feelings,” Lorèn said. “That was the moment when I knew. I think I went home that night and started my research on [music] schools.”

She ended up choosing the University of Toronto, where she obtained a bachelor's degree in vocal performance and a master's in opera. Aside from her education, she left UofT with two new friends—Jennifer Krabbe and Whitney O'Hearn—who would later become co-founders, alongside Lorèn, of the Toronto-based Art Song collective Collectif. “It actually sounds a little magical,” she said, smiling, “[the idea] came to me on my birthday when a friend and I were hanging out and thinking about what would

make us really happy artistically, and that was to have a bit of control and do something that wasn't being done yet.”

Art Song, Lorèn says, is a corner of the singing world that's “sort of thought of as a dying thing. It's an art form that means a lot to me. I started talking to Jenn and Whitney and we put some projects together pretty quickly.” That was about two years ago—since then Collectif has performed several productions across Toronto and parts of Québec.

Aside from Collectif, Lorèn keeps busy as a second-year member of the Canadian Opera Company's Ensemble Studio, where she understudied two major roles in both of their fall 2017 productions—Zdenka in *Ara-bella* and Adina in *The Elixir of Love*. “Juggling them [Zdenka and Adina] has been really interesting, but it's a challenge that I'm

happy to have faced while I'm in the Ensemble, because I have so much support and I've learned so much from it.”

As exciting as it is to be on-call at a moment's notice for the COC, Lorèn admits that waiting for that call can be nerve-racking. “It's kind of a hold-your-breath moment all the time, but I just kind of live my life normally. I'm busy, but available—otherwise I think I'd go crazy just waiting.”

When asked what she does in her free time, Lorèn smiles longingly. “Free time?” she jokes, before continuing; “I have a bad habit of overbooking myself, or doing other creative work. I love to compose, I love to research Art Song, I love to play Batman Lego with my boyfriend,” she laughs. “Other than that I'm into yoga, which has been a really good balance for how hectic this [career] can be.” When choosing music, Lorèn looks to her friends and family for recommendations. “I like to taste what everyone else is tasting. I really like some indie bands—Little Dragon is a favourite of mine. I listen to a lot of current stuff to keep myself in the [present] time frame, because I'm so often in a historical mindset.”

When asked if there's anything she'd like *Opera Canada* readers to know about her, Lorèn laughs; “That's a good question... I don't know! I guess I'm a bit kooky but also, I hope, relatable? I've always just been encouraged to be me, and analyzing things too much is something that I try not to do.” Between the Ensemble Studio; Collectif (their latest production, *As a stranger*, a reimagining of Franz Schubert's song cycle, *Die Winterreise* toured to Québec in November) and her personal life, Danika Lorèn is one of the busiest rising stars on the Canadian opera scene. —Isabella Perrone

Artists on Stage

Canadian tenor Isaiah Bell is the proverbial multi-talented Renaissance Man. He possesses a beautiful lyric tenor which has won him kudos on both sides of the Atlantic. He is also a prolific composer, having written four operas including *The Lives of Lesser Things*, toured by Edmonton's Opera NUOVA. Currently he's in discussion with Tapestry Opera (Toronto) and Intrepid Theatre (Victoria), to produce a one-man show developed around his own music and personal stories. To be sure, very impressive for a singer of any age, let alone someone who's all of 32.

Bell was recently in Toronto making his COC debut in the cameo role of the Zimmerkellner in *Arabella*. Born in the northern B.C. town of Fort St. John, four hours south of the Yukon, Bell took piano lessons at eight, and singing lessons in his teens from his first voice teacher, Bev Bar-radell. He attended the University of Victoria where he studied voice with soprano Alexandra Browning and tenor Benjamin Butterfield.

Bell's professional operatic debut as the Mad Woman in Britten's *Curlew River* with Vancouver City Opera (2010) was a good luck charm, leading to a reprise of the role with Mark Morris in Tanglewood and at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Appearances in Britten's *Owen Wingrave* (Edinburgh) and as Albert Herring (Opera on the Avalon) speak to Bell's connection with the British composer. The tenor looks forward to one-day tackling Peter Grimes and *Death in Venice's* Gustav von Aschenbach.

Surely, he's too young to be thinking of characters like these? But as we chatted, I sensed Bell is an 'old soul,' possessing a serious-minded maturity that belies his age. While fellow students were going to pubs, Bell recalls sitting on a bus, all of 19, listening to Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder*. He has already sung Schubert's *Winterreise*, the Mount Everest of song cycles: "I've sung it twice, and will do it again." Isn't it unusual to sing it before having tackled Schubert's archetypal young man's cycle, *Die schöne Müllerin*? "I feel the character [in *Winterreise*] is young," Bell counters. "It's about young love. You don't have to be old to sing it."

On the other hand, he finds it more difficult to channel his energies into sunny, uncomplicated characters like Nemorino in *L'elisir d'amore*, even if it suits his voice. Bell prefers roles that give him a

chance to dig deeper. Albert Herring is a good example. Often portrayed as a simpleton, Albert is actually quite complex. A young man trapped and desperate, misunderstood by those around him, and a social oddball. Bell readily admits that his affinity for Albert reflects his own personal life journey: "As a young gay man growing up in a small town, it's easy to feel connected with a character who's stifled by his environment. You don't want to play [*Albert Herring*]

as a tragedy as it's happy in the end, but you don't play it as if you think it's a joke."

Until recently, most of his operatic performances have taken place outside Canada. But that is about to change. Bell returns to Toronto in April to make his Opera Atelier debut as Eurimaco in Monteverdi's *The Return of Ulysses*. And if his COC debut in *Arabella* was lamentably brief, the company is bringing him back this fall in a high-profile gig, the world premiere of *Hadrian*, by Canadian composer/songwriter Rufus Wainwright. Bell will portray the historical figure of Antinous, Hadrian's lover.

Hadrian will be his first world premiere: "I've always been a fan of Wainwright's work; he has a truly unique point of view. I've never been good at fitting into boxes, and I get the impression that the same might be true of him. I have high hopes for the project!"

While it's always exciting to create new roles, contemporary music can pose special challenges for a singer. Bell has an interesting

take on this issue: "In order to sing well, your body needs to be in control. If I'm singing something that's less grounded in tonality... I try not to retreat into my brain too much, otherwise the sound suffers. I try to integrate the music, to become so intimately familiar with it that it feels like it is a natural expression. Then I can hand over more control to my body to make it sound good."

I often ask singers, "what's the best piece of advice you have received?" Bell's answer was unique, and a surprise: "I rely on many people for guidance and support, but my favourite advice is from [Rainer Maria] Rilke, via Ben Butterfield — 'No one can advise or help you. No one.' Onstage, as in life, we have to do it alone. Coming to terms with that is both terrifying and empowering." —Joseph So

Isaiah Bell



Being a member of the Band of the Ceremonial Guard

in Ottawa was challenging for Charles Benaroya, first trombone for the Canadian Opera Company Orchestra. “Wool jacket, wool pants, big leather boots, leather and bearskin hat—and it is actually made of that—it’s all so hot!” he says with a smile. “Every so often the Guard would do joint parades with the RCMP, and the horses would be a bit skittish because they could smell the bear.”

Holding his COC position since 2012, Benaroya was previously second trombone in L’Orchestre Symphonique de Québec for four years. He initially joined the Band following his first year at McGill at the suggestion of his then-girlfriend (now wife), who was also a trombonist with Symphony Nova Scotia.

Benaroya entered basic training in May 2006; it lasted four weeks and consisted of classwork, drill lessons, exercise, basic combat and field lessons, and what he terms “lots of being yelled at.” He was in and out of the Canadian Forces from 2006 to 2015, in both full and part-time capacities as a member of various reserve bands in Toronto, Québec City, and his hometown of Montréal.

For a young musician in Canada, Benaroya says being part of the Band is not only a good way to earn a steady income during the summer season, but also great for both personal and professional connections. “I met a lot of people [there] who are [now] my colleagues in the freelance music world here in Toronto,” he notes, “and my roommate during the first summer at [Ceremonial Guard] would later be best man at my wedding.”

Musicians across Canada audition annually to be a part of the Ceremonial Guard’s Band, which plays live music for the Changing of the Guard ceremony on Parliament Hill in Ottawa; the Band also supports official government functions held throughout the capital region. “They don’t expect prior army experience,” Benaroya notes, “but there are so many musicians applying, they can set a high standard.”

Hot uniform aside, the experience also makes other considerable physical demands. “Being in a marching band is quite rough on one’s face as a brass player, and it really drove home the importance of taking care of my embouchure by maintaining a well-balanced, thorough practice routine.” Marching and playing simultaneously, he says, “took months of repair for me to get my sound back to where I wanted it to be.”

Sound affected him in a different way during his first season with the COC Orchestra when he played Richard Strauss’ *Salome* for the first time. His impression of soprano Erika Sunnegårdh, who performed the title role, remains strong, even four years later. “It was a huge orchestra, but even in the pit I could hear her clear as a bell,”

he remembers. “It was impressive. That was my first season, and I thought, ‘Oh wow, this is major!’”

Rehearsals for the Canadian Opera Company Orchestra usually number seven for each production, though for longer works (like Wagner operas), there can be up to ten. Benaroya arranges for the low brass section to meet regularly “so we can run through stuff. What we do in low brass, 95% of it is working with the other sections—it’s all about how chords fit together and how to balance them, and how to pass lines between ourselves.”

It’s an equal test to figure out how to best integrate his trombone playing with different singers and their individual styles. “Learning how to line up an attack on an instrument with how someone is going to say a particular consonant is really interesting,”

Charles Benaroya



he notes. “Tailoring how you articulate a note on a brass instrument, based on how someone will say a ‘t’ or a certain vowel, that’s the challenge.”

“Challenge” is a word some musicians may use to describe working with certain conductors; Benaroya, however, says it’s more about passion, and capturing the score most fully. Harry Bicket, who conducted Rossini’s *Maometto II*, and Paolo Carignani, who led Bizet’s *Carmen* (both for the COC’s spring 2016 season), were, says Benaroya, “polar opposites.”

“He’s very reserved and self-effacing,” Benaroya says of Bicket, “and incredibly deferential and polite and very gentle, whereas Paolo was really intense and in-your-face.” Carignani, he says, “made the trombone parts in *Carmen* more informed. He’s so energetic—bouncing off the walls and jumping, dancing! You had to match that. It’s good to have intense guys for works you play all the time [like *Carmen*]. . . then the music doesn’t become rote.” —Catherine Kustanczy **OC**

New Productions New Roles

Going Back to Her Roots

Winnipeg soprano Lara Ciekiewicz draws on her Slavic heritage for two major role debuts

By HOLLY HARRIS

Lara Ciekiewicz is waxing poetic in the wake of her recent role debut this past fall as Leoš Janáček's *Jenůfa* at Pacific Opera Victoria, co-produced with Opéra de Montréal and directed by Canadian film icon Atom Egoyan (see review p. 45).

"There are often these post-show blues, but this time when I got home, I felt very serene," reveals the Winnipeg-based artist. "I just felt gloriously humbled by what we all accomplished together, and realized that this production will always have a little piece of my heart."

Ciekiewicz, who self-describes her soaring, three-octave plus lyric soprano voice as "steel wrapped in velvet," is becoming one of Canada's most highly sought after singing-actresses.

This season, she makes two significant role debuts, including Janáček's portrait of an ill-fated village girl who is forced to grapple with infanticide and ultimately, forgiveness.

"It's been a huge pleasure working with Lara," said director Egoyan over the phone just prior to the show's mid-October opening—notably the first production he has directed in his hometown in 40 years. "She's incredibly inventive. She not only has a lovely voice, but she's a very astute actress and is able to give all sorts of inflections and contours to a really complex role. It's constantly alive for her."

Born to Polish-Ukrainian parents, Ciekiewicz drew on those roots for *Jenůfa*, her first Slavic role sung in the original Czech, featuring Janáček's idiosyncratic speech-directed melodies. Egoyan's artistic vision, inspired by an Apr. 2017 trip to Armenia as an election observer, blurred traditional, folkloric lines with a contemporary

setting. Ciekiewicz was dressed in a modern day skirt and blouse, juxtaposed with an 'old world' *babushka*.

"When I put that on for the first time, I almost cried. It felt deeply personal," says the singer, who also dusted off her Ukrainian folk dancing skills for the Act III's wedding day scene, and jokes about her ongoing Eastern European-flavoured love affair with "melancholic minor keys." "I also remember seeing these same characters in *Jenůfa* as people I grew up with in my Ukrainian-Catholic church family. When I first listened to Janáček's gorgeous choruses, it sounded like the folksongs I heard as a child."

And did anything surprise her working with Egoyan—Canadian arts royalty; two-time Academy Award nominee who first garnered international fame with his 1994 film *Exotica*? "He's incredibly humble," Ciekiewicz replies with palpable reverence, calling their working relationship "*simpatico*." "This is a guy who's at the top of his game, but at his very core, he's still, 'Let's just do the work.' He made us feel completely free to try new things," she explains.

"Atom had very clear pictures in mind of how he wanted to tell the story, and wanted us to really focus on the human relationships" the singer adds. "He was also very open to what we had to offer, and whenever he saw something that rang as 'truth,' he would give a little giggle, and I would say, 'Oh, he liked that.' Seeing something purely authentic became more important to him than keeping to whatever original plan was there. We also laughed a lot during rehearsals, and knew that we had to keep our spirits up on a personal level so that we could be vulnerable and explore the intensity of this very dark show."

Born in Winnipeg but raised in Springfield, MB—located approximately 40 kilometres east of the provincial capital—Ciekiewicz's love for music began organically when her mother would lull her to sleep playing not gentle lullabies, but grand orchestral classics like Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* and Dvořák's *New World Symphony* ("If you want to want your kid to be an opera singer, play them some romantic Russian music as a baby," she quips).

Fully intent on realizing her youthful dream of becoming a chiropractor, one of her two elder brothers posed a fateful question to his then 16-year-old sibling, asking if money were no object, what would she be?

"Without thinking, I blurted out that I would be a singer," Ciekiewicz recalls of that life-altering, 'aha' moment, realizing with a jolt that her passion lay not in manipulating bones and sinew, but expressing herself through song. Despite never having studied voice up to that point, she embarked on a Bachelor of Music degree



Lara Ciekiewicz in the title role of Pacific Opera Victoria's *Jenůfa*

PHOTO: DAVID COOPER

“I just felt gloriously humbled by what we all accomplished together, and realized that this production will always have a little piece of my heart.”



Lara Ciekiewicz in the title role of Pacific Opera Victoria's *Jenůfa*

through the University of Winnipeg's then-affiliated Concord College, first studying with vocal coach Ruth Ens before transferring two years later to soprano Henriette Schellenberg at the Canadian Mennonite University.

She furthered her studies at Edmonton's young artists training program, Opera NUOVA, where she first met vocal coach Michael McMahon, and later through summer programs at Banff, North Carolina's Brevard Music Center, San Francisco's Merola Opera Program, and at the Atelier Lyrique de l'Opéra de Montréal. She subsequently completed her Master's at McGill in 2008, where she studied with soprano Joanne Kolomyjec, McMahon and Opera McGill program head Patrick Hansen, who also directed her in three productions during her graduate years.

Ciekiewicz made her Manitoba Opera (MO) debut as the saucy chambermaid Paquette in their 2008 concert performance of Leonard Bernstein's *Candide*. Other MO roles have included Papagena in Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* (2011); Contessa in *Le nozze di Figaro* (2015), as well as her searing portrayal of the slave girl Liù in Puccini's *Turandot* (2015). Whenever in town, she continues her opera advocacy work on behalf of MO through Winnipeg's arts-friendly Seven Oaks School Division's B.E.E.P. (Balanced Experiential Education Program).

Her second notable role debut this year will be Tatyana in Calgary Opera's February production of Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* directed by Tom Diamond. Also her company debut, the singer will tackle its knotty Russian libretto based on Pushkin's verse novel with her customary verve and ironclad work ethic.

"I'm a balls-to-the-wall singer," the singer jokes, bursting into peals of laughter. "My teacher Joanne Kolomyjec would always say, 'Baby steps, do the work and have a plan,' and so I try to live that every day."

"Tatyana sits slightly lower than *Jenůfa*, so pacing that in my voice and riding the wave of the orchestra will be a challenge," the singer reveals of the role's musical perils, including Act I, Scene 2's long, 12-minute 'Letter Scene.' "But I feel that I have enough tools to

do whatever's asked of me, and know that any role will teach me something new both as an actor and singer—alone or with a colleague," she says confidently.

The versatile artist also adores musical-theatre, returning to Opera on the Avalon in St. John's this past November as Cinderella in Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods*, directed by another Winnipegger, Donna Fletcher. In fact, that company's Jun. 2016 world premiere of *Ours* by Canadian composer John Estacio, with Robert Chafé's libretto based on the 100th anniversary of the WWI battle at Beaumont Hamel, remains a career highlight.

Asked about her personal 'bucket list' of roles, the charismatic artist doesn't miss a beat. "I love *bel canto*, so I'd love to sing more Verdi. It would be nice to do a Violetta or Desdemona one day, and to have a go at Mimi. There are many roles that I'd love to perform, but ultimately I just want to sing. Do I want to perform in the biggest houses? Yes, of course, but ultimately making good art is what is most important. And good art can be made anywhere in all shapes and sizes."

One of her staunchest fans is her "biggest rock and supporter," husband Sheldon Johnson, MO's longtime production director whom she met in 2003 when performing in *H.M.S. Pinafore* for the Gilbert and Sullivan Society of Winnipeg—he was the stage manager and she, a chorus member.

"He keeps my heart full, my feet on the ground, and my perspective level," she says of Johnson. "I am so fortunate to have a partner who is there for me at every turn of this crazy life. That kind of love and support is a priceless gift."

As her star continues to rise, this homegrown artist's feet remain firmly planted in Prairie soil, with no imminent plans to move to a larger urban centre. When not onstage, Ciekiewicz enjoys gardening, long walks, "coffee and wine" and writing. Her ode to 'Winterpeg's' legendary, sub-Arctic cold snaps appeared in the Winnipeg Free Press in 2014: "Winnipeg, you are good for my artist's soul, and wherever my journeys may take me, your Prairie spirit will follow," she wrote with heartfelt sentiment. **OC**



Conductor Riccardo Chailly and the Filarmonica della Scala at the Berliner Philharmonie, Sept. 13, 2017

Letter from Berlin

In venues both historic and contemporary, Catherine Kustanczy experiences Berlin's annual Musikfest with its mind-boggling variety of concerts spanning Monteverdi to Ligeti

Berlin is a fantastic city for music lovers, and one of the very best times to visit is during the annual Musikfest, held for three weeks from late August to mid-September. Organized by the Berliner Festspiele in cooperation with the Berliner Philharmoniker Foundation, the 2017 edition hosted roughly 44,000 visitors who enjoyed over 30 concerts, from early music choral presentations to premieres by contemporary composers. An abundance of music was on offer, from the traditional to the quirky; and a number of renowned organizations took part, including the Staatskapelle Berlin (who opened Musikfest), the Monteverdi Choir and the English Baroque Soloists, the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra Amsterdam, and Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin among them.

The Philharmonie Berlin was home to many Musikfest concerts, giving audiences ample opportunities to experience its acoustic wonders. Opened in 1963, the home of the

Berlin Philharmonic is situated on the southern edge of the Tiergarten, Berlin's enormous city park, and is within walking distance of historic Potsdamer Platz. With a pentagonal design and asymmetrical features, the hall—designed by architect Hans Sharoun—is comprised of a main, 2,440-seat auditorium and a smaller 1,880-seat chamber hall. The Filarmonica della Scala, making its first appearance at the Musikfest on Sept. 13, offered a program filled with drama. Under the impassioned leadership of Riccardo Chailly, its first half featured Brahms' celebrated Violin Concerto in D Major, op.77 with Greek violinist Leonidas Kavakos. Its *allegro giocoso* section was interpreted somewhat seriously, losing some of the movement's intrinsic playfulness. Momentum thankfully returned in the evening's second half with a myriad of Verdi works, including compelling performances of the overture to *I vespri siciliani*, the *Stabat Mater* and the *Te Deum*, with *La forza del destino*'s overture as encore.

PHOTO: KAI BIENERT

The Berlin Philharmonic's performance the following evening in the same venue provided a fascinating stylistic contrast. With understated flair and elegance, the orchestra, under the careful guidance of conductor Marek Janowski, offered a thoughtful program touching on both the Renaissance and Romantic periods. Three orchestral preludes from Pfitzner's 1917 opera *Palestrina* and Bruckner's Symphony No. 4 ('Romantic') were presented with a beautiful balance between the grandiose and the meditative. The call-and-response structure of many passages within the Bruckner were performed with just the right amount of energy: sophisticated but not solemn; dynamic but not over-aggressive. The work's final movement was imbued with colour thanks to long, luxurious phrasing and a gripping *crescendo* of intensity that led to a shimmering finish.

Drama and intimacy were the cornerstones of the RIAS Kammerchor's program of Monteverdi led by Chief Conductor and Artistic Director Justin Doyle. Since 2017 marked the 450th birthday of Claudio Monteverdi, portions of the Musikfest programming were devoted to his works. RIAS Kammerchor's *Missa in illo tempore* and *Vespro della Beata Vergine* were performed under the program title, "Oracolo della Musica" ("Oracle of Music"). The Kammerchor (or chamber choir) was formed in 1948 and named after the US-run radio station "Rundfunk im amerikanischen Sektor" ("American-sector broadcasting"); they participated in the opening concert of the Berliner Philharmonie in 1963 and have premiered works by Aribert Reimann, Paul Hindemith, and Pierre Boulez, among others. One of the locales for their Musikfest concerts was named after Boulez and just opened in 2017; the other location was St. Hedwig's Cathedral, the first Catholic church built in Prussia after the Reformation (both heard on Sept. 16). Built in the 18th century and modelled on the Roman Pantheon, the grand cathedral was, until 1990, part of East Berlin. Its circular design and high, domed ceiling present a unique set of challenges for live music, which Doyle surmounted by paying special attention to volume, texture and diction in the *Missa*—yielding surprisingly delicate results.

Monteverdi's Vespers were every bit as beautiful, though the Pierre Boulez Saal (located around the corner from St. Hedwig's) presents its own hurdles. Opened in early 2017, the hall is the public face of the Barenboim Said-Akademie and was designed by architect Frank Gehry, with input from acclaimed acoustician Yasuhisa Toyota. With a seating capacity of 682, its cozy design belies its perfectionist nature; even the slightest intake of breath can be heard with absolute clarity. Musicians from the early music ensemble Capella de la Torre, choir members, tenors Thomas Hobbs and Andrew Staples, and sopranos Hannah Fields and Dorothee Miels were choreographed to perform in varying positions around the hall (a balcony, a vestibule, at the top of a row of stairs) while the instrumental ensemble maintained a base in its middle. This approach created acoustically interesting moments which satisfied on both musical and spiritual levels.

Korea's Gyeonggi Philharmonic Orchestra made its second appearance in Berlin since 2015 at the grand Konzerthaus Berlin under the baton of Shiyeon Sung, former assistant to James Levine at the Boston Symphony Orchestra. The Konzerthaus, originally known as the Königliches Schauspielhaus (Royal Theatre), is located in the cobblestoned Gendarmenmarkt area and opened with the premiere of Carl Maria von Weber's *Der Freischütz* in 1821. Heavy bombing during WWII left it severely damaged; the facility reopened in 1984 as the concert hall for the Berliner Sinfonie-Orchester, and in 1994 was renamed the Konzerthaus Berlin. In contrast to the more modern Philharmonie and the Boulez, the hall is stylistically reminiscent of an older, fussier era. Acoustically, it's every bit as splendid—something the Gyeonggi showed off through its expert performances of the work of Korean composer IsangYun, whose 100th birthday fell on the same day as their concert. Intimacy and claustrophobia co-mingled throughout Yun's *Réak* and *Muak* to create sonically electric moments. Japanese composer Toshio Hosokawa's intense *Klage* (premiered at the Salzburg Festival in 2013 with Austrian soprano Anna Prohaska) featured bell-voiced soloist Yeree Suh and effectively complemented Hungarian György Ligeti's *Lontano* (1967), with Sung balancing percussive elements and swirls of stringy texture.

Yun's work was also part of the Rundfunk Sinfonieorchester's powerful program at the Philharmonie on Sept. 17. Conductor Vladimir Jurowski led a tightly-coiled performance of *Dimensionen* before moving to Schoenberg's Concerto for Violin and Orchestra with soloist Christian Tetzlaff. The violinist combined technical virtuosity with true feeling, and injected the work with charismatic drama and eminent theatricality.



Korea's Gyeonggi Philharmonic Orchestra at the Konzerthaus Berlin, Sept. 16, 2017

Italian composer Luigi Nono's tribute to murdered Czech journalist Julius Fučík, *Notes from the Gallows* (comprised of diary entries), underlined relationships between the personal and the political. Nono, son-in-law to Schoenberg, dedicated his one act opera *Intolleranza 1960* to his father-in-law, from which the Italian's Fučík work is derived. Fučík was himself the namesake and nephew of a 19th-century composer known largely for his military marches. The younger Fučík was murdered by the Nazi regime in 1943. Performing spoken passages from the diaries, reciters Max Hopp and Sven Philipp delivered authoritative performances which led directly into Beethoven. Jurowski gave the famous Fifth a heavy reading that dramatically complemented the evening's politically-charged theme.

The orchestra of the Deutsche Oper drew the 2017 edition of the MusikFest to a dramatic close. Donald Runnicles led his orchestra through sweeping accounts of extracts from Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette-Symphonie dramatique* suite, as well as a poetic concert performance of the third act of Wagner's *Die Walküre*. Soloists Allison Oakes (Brünnhilde), Bryn Terfel (Wotan), and Anja Harteros (Sieglinde) gave wonderfully poetic performances, with Runnicles perfectly balancing vocal and instrumental drama, allowing a kind of dreamy reverie that echoed Wagner's themes of the divine and the human. Harteros' pillowy,

sensuous soprano; Terfel's oaken baritone and, Oakes' fresh soprano—together with the terrific stage chemistry of Terfel and Oakes—evoked an intriguing textural complexity that pointed up the tenderness of the Wotan/Brünnhilde relationship.

Music history came into special focus with a visit to the Staatsoper Unter den Linden, the State Opera House of Berlin, originally built in 1742. The theatre reopened in early October with Schumann's *Scenes from Goethe's Faust* conducted by Artistic Director Daniel Barenboim, featuring soprano Elsa Dreisig, baritone Roman Trekel, and bass René Pape. A renovation lasting eight years and costing 400 million euros has allowed the facility to connect its rehearsal spaces and auditorium via a 115-metre (377-foot) underground tunnel. The complex backstage area with its numerous lifts and computer-controlled stage equipment, belie its grand, old-world public areas, with refurbished velvet seats and gilded walls. The ceiling, featuring a spectacular chandelier, was raised five meters (16 feet) as part of the renovation to allow for better acoustics, and seating capacity has been reduced from 1,398

to 1,356 for improved visibility and comfort. Certainly one of the crown jewels of Germany's vibrant opera scene, the house is set to stage a variety of operas in 2018, including *Don Giovanni*, *La Bohème*, and *Ariadne auf Naxos*. **OC**



The 18th-century dome of Berlin's St. Hedwig's Cathedral



Auditorium of the newly-renovated Staatsoper unter den Linden, Berlin

PHOTOS: CATHERINE KUSTANCZY (LEFT); GORDON WELTERS (BELOW)

Letter from Buenos Aires

Leonard Turnevicius takes us to the opulent Teatro Colón, South America's operatic jewel box

Caruso, Muzio, Melchior, Callas, Crespín, Nilsson, Vickers, Quilico, Domingo and Pavarotti have all sung on its stage.

Saint-Saëns, Mascagni, Respighi, and Richard Strauss came to conduct or supervise local premieres of their operas. And its podium has also been mounted by Stravinsky, de Falla, Honegger, Villa Lobos, Ginastera, Menotti, Fritz Busch, Erich Kleiber, von Karajan, Bernstein, Boulez and others.

Visitors have included European royalty, American Presidents Roosevelt, Eisenhower, Nixon, Reagan, as well as former First Lady Michelle Obama and her two daughters.

And it's where Juan Perón, with First Lady Eva Perón at his side, made his first public appearance as president of Argentina in July 1946. The couple, to be sure, would show up there many more times, Eva in flowing gowns, glitterati and paparazzi in tow.

The theatre, of course, is the Teatro Colón, the pride and joy of not just the *porteños* (as denizens of this port city are known) of Buenos Aires, but of all Argentina.

This past July, I checked off the Colón from my bucket list, heading down to Buenos Aires during what was their winter holiday—*porteños* decked out in heavy jackets, scarves, and some even with gloves and winter hats in 17°C weather. But if their choice of winter dress gave this Canadian in short sleeves something to chuckle about, the Colón had me grinning from ear to ear on my four visits there in three and a half days.

Opened in 1908 after an eighteen-year construction period, the Teatro Colón, named after explorer Cristóbal Colón (Christopher Columbus) in honour of the country's ties to Europe, is a veritable palace for the arts. The present day Colón stands in the heart of the city, its entrance on Libertad Street, while its service entrance faces 9 de Julio Avenue, a major thoroughfare.

While much of today's downtown Buenos Aires is a concrete jungle with graffiti defacing many a building, the Colón is a feast for the eyes. Its magnificence is announced in the foyer with its



Salón Dorado, Teatro Colón

reddish Verona marble; yellow marble from Siena; white marble from Carrara; the grand staircase of Portuguese marble; stained glass windows imported from France and, thousands upon thousands of tiny floor tiles from Stoke-on-Trent, painstakingly and meticulously laid, piece by piece.

Mount the stairs to the Gallery of Busts, and you are greeted by Luis Trincheró's sculpture of Wagner. In the centre of the gallery is the White Parlour, the reception room for official performances. More treasures meet the eye in the Salón Dorado, the Golden Hall. Here, ceilings embroidered in twenty-four karat gold, and 500 kg Argentine chandeliers each with 222 bulbs, dazzle you from thirteen metres above. Elegant French furnishings, a gift from the King of Spain, dot the hall.

The elongated horse-shoe shaped auditorium is a true delight. The predominant colour is red, trademarked as 'Colón red,' and gold. There is seating for 2,487 patrons distributed throughout 632 orchestra stalls, three rows of boxes, two dress circles, a gallery, and the 'gods' or *paraíso* (paradise). There are separate standing room locations for men and for women, though in *paraíso* both genders can mix together. The floor, made of Argentine wood from the province of Misiones, used to be hydraulically raised to convert the auditorium into a dance hall for gala balls. For acoustical reasons, the placement of the floor is now permanently fixed. There are also ten *bañoire* boxes, covered by bronze grills, once reserved for families in mourning, now used as storage or radio equipment rooms.

Illuminating the auditorium is an enormous 700-bulb bronze chandelier. Unique to the Colón is the dome of the cupola, some 28 metres above the stalls, inside of which there is room for up to fifteen musicians whose music can float down from 'the heavens' as it were. The pit, which can be raised five metres to the height of the stage, accommodates up to 120 musicians. The stage itself, 34.5 metres by 35.25 metres, is among

the largest in the world. Its French-made curtain, 300kg each side, is closed with the aid of two liveried footmen.

Those two curtain attendants are but two of the Colón's 1,140 staff, 800 of them are permanent, the remainder on fixed and freelance contracts. The house orchestra, the 124-member Orquesta Estable del Teatro Colón, includes primarily Argentine musicians as well as some from other South American countries, a pair from the Ukraine and one Iranian-born violist.

The Colón is one of only two opera houses in South America, the other being Santiago's Municipal, at which costumes and scenery are made in-house. Its studios, housed in three floors underneath the plaza, contain over 80,000 costumes, 45,000 shoes, 36,000 wigs, and 30,000 hats.

As can be imagined, the Colón was a money pit from the get-go. The total cost of its construction cannot even be calculated, all the more so since the Argentine peso has shifted its value at least eight times since 1908. In 2010, a seven-year restoration process, which included re-padding the seats with horsehair just as they had been in 1908, was completed at a cost of US\$100 million.

But there's more to the Colón than meets the eye. The auditorium's acoustics are second to none, a pristine Nirvana for the ears.

My visits to the Colón this past July were book-ended by a well-argued reading of Mahler's Ninth Symphony with the very capable Orquesta Filarmonica de Buenos Aires under the Colón's artistic director Enrique Arturo Diemecke before a sold-out crowd, and a well-attended choral matinee by the top-notch Coro Tous Ensemble under Emiliano Linares.



Exterior, Teatro Colón



Auditorium, Teatro Colón



View from the entrance hall, Teatro Colón

In between were back-to-back evenings of *Der Rosenkavalier* with stage direction by Robert Carsen, advertised as a co-production between the Met, Covent Garden, and Turin's Teatro Regio. I wondered whether this was the same production I'd seen at the Salzburg Festival in 2004 with Adriaan Pieczonka as the Marschallin, where Carsen updated the proceedings to bawdy 1920s Berlin with Act III in a brothel.


To my surprise, the Colón staged the same production but with some differences. The scenery design was now by Paul Steinberg, and costumes by Brigitte Reiffenstuel. The Colón's Octavian did not enter on horseback like Salzburg's had, and there was no nudity. There was, however, some local flavour in the form of a dog-walker as well as an on-stage tango ensemble who mimed the offstage music.

The first night's international cast was anchored by Manuela Uhl's Marschallin, Kurt Rydl's formidable Ochs, and Jennifer Holloway's sympathetic Octavian. The following night, Guadalupe Barrientos's Octavian was the obvious standout in the all-Argentine cast. In the pit, guest conductor Alejo Pérez and the orchestra took more inspiration from the first night's cast than the second.

The theatre has four season ticket groupings for opera, two for ballet, and one for concerts. Prices range from US\$250 for stalls to US\$10 for standing room. Attendance is over 90%.

“...Teatro Colón, the pride and joy of not just the *porteños* (as denizens of this port city are known) of Buenos Aires, but of all Argentina.”


new like Wagner's *Die Liebesverbot*, incidentally given in full unlike the so-called 'Colón Ring,' that seven-hour Reader's Digest version of the tetralogy from 2013.

Canadians have left their mark at the Colón. Commercial recordings of Verdi's *Otello* with Vickers in the title role and Louis Quilico as Iago from 1963 plus a *Cav-Pag* with Vickers from 1968 are still available. This past November, conductor Julian Kuerti was in the Colón's pit for five performances of Dvořák's *Rusalka*. 

Ticket sales and monies from the very popular guided tours support the theatre as does the Government of Buenos Aires (CABA: Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires).

The Colón's opera season runs from March to December, and there are, on average, eight productions every year. Some, like this season's *Rosenkavalier*, are co-productions, and others are completely

INDIGENOUS *Voices* f c

A photograph of four Indigenous women standing in a dark, blue-lit environment. The woman in the center is wearing a white shirt and a patterned skirt, holding a large, light-colored fan. To her left is a woman in a dark coat over a blue top. To her right is a woman in a blue top, and further right is a woman in a patterned top and glasses. The background features large, dark, angular structures.

Until now, contemporary
Canadian opera has lacked
an Indigenous voice—
that is about to change

INDIGENOUS Opera



BY CATHERINE KUSTANCZY

(l-r) Heather Molloy, Marion Newman, Caitlin Wood, Rose-Ellen Nicols, Clarence Logan, Kaden Forsberg, Melody Courage in Pacific Opera Victoria's *Missing*



Elder Ka'nasohon Kevin Deer of the Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Territory as the Spirit of the Ancients in Highlands Opera Studio/ L'Opéra de Montréal's *Mishaabooz's Realm*

present onstage throughout the entire work, and described as “a silent chorus in protest, stand[ing] for the people for whom the opera has not provided a voice.”

Adam Gaudry is Métis and Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Native Studies and Department of Political Science at the University of Alberta. In an eloquently argued essay on his website, Gaudry wrote about his many reservations with both the opera and the Hinton production, the silence of the Land Assembly in particular. “While the performance [...] is itself powerful and the actors themselves project an immense physical presence on the stage,” he wrote, “the decision to

When the Canadian Opera Company presented Harry Somers’ 1967 opera *Louis Riel* in spring 2017, they made concerted efforts to include Indigenous voices at every step, from production to presentation.

At the time, the show’s director Peter Hinton commented in a press release that “the most considerable challenge in staging this opera is the Eurocentric tradition of opera as a form and its collision with the voice, culture and representation of Indigeneity in this history. It is a delicate balance of renewing the original spirit of the opera with contemporary perspectives in order to revise the opera’s colonial biases and bring forward its inherent strengths and powers.”

The production included what was called the ‘Land Assembly’, a symbolically-placed group of Indigenous men and women who were

keep Indigenous people—yet again—silent in almost all regards as white people trample over top of them, does little to change the underlying narrative of this work.”

Gaudry was part of a day-long symposium about *Louis Riel* held in Toronto last spring, one of many events organised by the COC in connection with the staging of the work. Gaudry says he views non-Métis works about Riel’s life “with a little bit of skepticism,” noting that “what’s always missing is the Indigenous voice.”

This lack of voice begs the question of whether the Eurocentric form of opera and Indigenous expression—via music, dance,

“Talking to elders, getting the language right, that was the biggest thing for me.”

-ANDREW BALFOUR-



PHOTOS: DEAN KALVAN (PREVIOUS PAGE); PIERRE-ÉTIENNE BERGERON (LEFT); GARRY ROBINSON (BELOW)



“When Indigenous people use colonial forms to tell Indigenous stories, that can be significant and layered.”

—ANDY MORO—

theatre, performance, and visual art—can, or should, ever connect. There are huge and important differences between works

written by a non-Indigenous person about Indigenous history, and works written, produced, and presented by Indigenous creators. As Gaudry wrote at the website activehistory.ca (which specializes in connecting the wider public with the work of historians as wells linking past and current events), simply featuring Indigenous content is not enough; though Gaudry wrote it within the context of university mandates, it's an idea that applies equally to culture.

“It is a decidedly colonial form,” notes Andy Moro about opera, “perhaps even more so today than in its earliest days, because of the elitism that surrounds it in Western culture.”

Moro is an award-winning designer who has worked with a multitude of Canadian theatre companies. A core member of the creative team at the Banff Centre's Indigenous Dance Residency, Moro, who is of Cree and European descent, is co-founder of ARTICLE 11, a company named after the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The company's focus, as he states, is “to develop work on our own terms and to create space for that work to be well-resourced and supported on every level.”

“When Indigenous artists use colonial forms to tell Indigenous stories, that can be significant and layered,” Moro says. “It can also be about using the most appropriate tools to communicate as widely and powerfully as possible.”

Moro worked as Set and Production Designer on *Missing*, an opera with libretto by the Métis/Dene playwright Marie Clements and music by Juno Award winner Brian Current. Presented by City Opera Vancouver and Pacific Opera Victoria in November 2017, the work's creation was guided by Aboriginal women and elders, and presented within the context of a ceremony led by elders, with cedar brushing and smudging available, and medicine bags presented to families at the conclusion. As Robert Jordan notes in his review for *Opera Canada* (see p. 43), the work “eschews familiar operatic conventions such as showy arias, huge choruses and a linear plot. It is a relentlessly probing meditation on how the murders and unexplained disappearances of at least eighteen women along the Highway of Tears and 1200 Canada-wide—most of them Indigenous—affect everyone in the victims' circles of life.”

In working on *Missing*, Moro says he was struck “by just how appropriate this medium [of opera] is, especially out here on

the coast: song, movement and story; excellence, discipline and respect; an open embrace of the spirit in highly skilled linear storytelling; music at the heart; gift giving. The proscenium aspect of this particular presentation is relevant to what I have been taught about Feast Hall traditions.”

Tradition, and learning about its various forms, played an important role in composer Andrew Balfour's work, *Mishabooz's Realm* (*Le Royaume de Michabous*), co-presented in Dec. 2017 by Highlands Opera Studio and L'Atelier lyrique de l'Opéra de Montréal. The Winnipeg-based composer, who is of Cree descent, is Artistic Director of Camerata Nova, a vocal group who perform Renaissance, contemporary, and Indigenous works. Balfour, who is also a vocalist, has composed chamber and orchestral works, and says writing an opera “was something I'd been wanting to do for some time.”

Throughout the compositional process, Balfour placed particular emphasis on linguistic details. “Talking to elders, getting the language right, that was the biggest thing for me,” he says. “I am Cree, and [*Mishabooz's Realm*] is Ojibwe-based; my most important [priority] was to make sure we got that right. The text we use in Ojibwe is really, really important.”

Balfour also prioritised working with the local community to connect with the landscape. “You can only Google and Wikipedia so much,” he notes, “and particularly when it comes to Indigenous culture or legend, it really is about the environment and the land you're on. I'm not familiar with the Eastern Indigenous First Nations—I'm a Westerner—so it was important for me to be out in Northern Ontario and Middle Ontario, that area around Muskoka and the Highlands. It was really important to be able to be out there.”

Valerie Kuinka, who is co-Artistic Director of Highlands Opera Studio with husband, tenor Richard Margison, was the Stage Director of *Mishabooz's Realm*. Indigenous collaborators and performers were always intended to be part of the work's creation, she says, and the finished work, which she hopes will tour schools, features three Indigenous performers, including Balfour himself on percussion and vocals, violinist Tara-Louise Montour, and drummer/singer Cory Campbell, who was also elder advisor to the production. The work's mythic basis, deeply enmeshed with Ojibwe spirituality, opens with what Kuinka describes as “creation from an Indigenous perspective. The connection to the environment is a big underlying theme—within this spirituality, everything connected.”

“I think we should be really focused on prioritizing Indigenous voices and allowing [them] to speak for themselves,” says

Gaudry. "...In a lot of ways, that involves making sure that key decisions are made by Indigenous people—so that's directors, lead actors, playwrights, composers, people in key decision-making roles. I think there are people already doing that, but I think very often, with larger productions, more effort and energy can be put into recruiting from the Indigenous arts community."

Carey Newman echoes the centrality of Indigenous-owned narrative. A member of Pacific Opera Victoria's Board of Directors, Newman, who is of British, Kwagiulth and Salish descent, is an active artist and sculptor, and studied voice at the Victoria Conservatory of Music and piano at the University of Victoria. He says it is vital for Indigenous people to tell their own stories, both in and outside of the classical realm. "When you think about the conversations around appropriation and those sorts of things, you want to make sure you are centering this properly around who is doing the storytelling," he notes.

When it came to *Missing*, Newman says that having Clements at the writing helm "meant that the story itself was coming from... I hesitate to say 'the right place,' but from an authentic place." That authenticity extended itself naturally to "finding artists to perform in it, casting that sensitively, who to include behind-the-scenes and bring on board." As he notes, "it's not standard practise to ask these questions as a Board Member; we're dealing with things at a higher level, like setting our seasons or accepting recommendations of our Artistic Director, but we're not directly involved with day-to-day questions."

The issue of how involved boards and administrations should be when it comes to involving Indigenous voices and presenting their works is closely tied to listening. "When organizations like

[Pacific Opera Victoria] and City Opera Vancouver engage in this kind of work, (which must extend beyond the availability of Canada 150/Reconciliation funds), it is important that they also listen to and support the way Indigenous artists work with each other and within this construct," Moro notes. "Silence is not an absence of input, it is listening, considering and reacting with the collective in mind. There is a lot of learning to be done—and trust is key. These two organizations have clearly endeavoured toward a truly reciprocal relationship, but it wasn't without hiccups. The important thing is not pretending they aren't happening."

Acknowledging how history impacts the present is equally important. "Indigenous people know their personal, cultural and social power—this isn't about being acknowledged or validated," Moro explains, "it's about uninhibitedly celebrating important storytelling, in a complicated context, directly on the very territory where the Potlatch ban was still an active Canadian Law well within the lifetime of most of the audience."

Giving audiences a visceral sense of history is of paramount importance. "For me, it's about the ability to make people feel things," Newman says, "for instance, when it comes to this topic in *Missing*, you see the articles in the newspapers and hear things in the news, but we don't connect with the human part of the story. We hear the numbers, but we don't feel things—and when we don't feel things, it's easy for them to not hold a place of importance when it comes to finding ways to change things. Maybe a few people, after they see this, will feel differently and will be ready to activate that personal feeling into change."

Moving that feeling into change is deeply tied to partnership with the Indigenous arts community, one that is, as Gaudry

PHOTO: DEAN KALYAN





“...it’s about the ability to make people feel things ... Maybe a few people, after they see this, will feel differently and will be ready to activate that personal feeling into change.”

—CAREY NEWMAN—

PHOTOS: MELISSA WALSH (ABOVE); PIERRE-ÉTIENNE BERGERON (BELOW CENTRE & RIGHT)

notes, “vital and well-established. It’s where people are doing this already, in every single medium—so there’s ways that can be supported better. Funding that would typically go to classical opera could be channelled to these new Indigenous operas, or whatever the medium is.”

“Opera is a confluence of disciplines designed to formally share the human condition,” observes Andy Moro. “That’s a romantic notion, because it is also a commercial form, heavily laden with historic and cultural affectations. [But] it is, like so many art forms across all cultures and communities, a sophisticated, crafted storytelling medium—and sophisticated, crafted storytelling is central to humanity.”

“Here’s the goal for me personally,” says Valerie Kuinka, “to see our art form as the incredible vehicle it is for change, and for growth, and for artistic expression, and for relevance. That’s the word that keeps getting bandied about these days: ‘Is opera

relevant?’ Yes! It [is comprised of] stories told through music and every possible means of theatre to enhance the story. How can that ever be irrelevant?”

For the first time, Andrew Balfour is hopeful about the position of Indigenous composers in Canada. “Twenty years ago when I started and wanted to be a composer, it seemed like I was kind of in the wilderness alone. There were lots of successful pop and hip hop artists, but in the classical world... I didn’t know of any other classical composers who were Indigenous. Now it’s a lot more prevalent. It’s opened up. I’ve definitely got the bug now!” **OC**

Catherine Kustanczy is a freelance arts journalist specializing in classical and opera coverage. Her work has been published in the *Toronto Star*, *National Post*, *Metro*, *Opera News*, as well as online at CBC Music, *Hyperallergic*, and *Mic*.

(Left, l-r) Kaden Forsberg, Caitlin Wood and Heather Molloy in Pacific Opera Victoria’s *Missing*; centre & right: Highlands Opera Studio/L’Opéra de Montréal’s *Mishaaboos’s Realm*; (centre, l-r) Andrew Balfour (Creator), Nathan Keoughan (Man), Lauren Margison (Woman), Tara-Louise Montour (Thunderbird/Sky Spirit); (right, l-r) Valerie Kuinka (Director), Andrew Balfour (Composer), Tara-Louise Montour (violinist)



Anna Caterina Antonacci
in San Francisco Opera's
Two Women.



Staging SEXUAL VIOLENCE

—when the fictional becomes *personal*

As the opera world faces a reckoning from the #metoo movement, we need to take a harder look at how it portrays sexual violence onstage

By NATASHA GAUTHIER

in

the summer of 2015, I was in the audience for the premiere of Marco Tutino's *Two Women* at San Francisco Opera. The work is based on the 1950s Italian novel *La ciociara*, which also inspired a film starring Sophia Lorén. Within a few minutes of the curtain going up, I watched the main character, Cesira, endure a graphic rape with her attacker, pants down around his ankles, thrusting his hips to Tutino's turgid score. The opera ends with another rape, an attack on Cesira and her daughter Rosetta by a large group of soldiers.

Opera is built on stories of assault, especially against women. From Don Giovanni to the Duke of Mantua; Scarpia to the Drum Major in *Wozzeck*, libretti are full of alpha male characters

intent on 'having their way' with the women around them (as it's so euphemistically described in the majority of program notes). How explicit this sexual violence is varies. But as directors become increasingly motivated by that elusive grail of contemporary relevance—and, more pragmatically, ticket sales—prudish, old-fashioned theatrical devices like allusion and metaphor are being replaced by R-rated scenes designed for maximum titillation and outrage.

These choices can backfire spectacularly. In 2015, a Royal Opera House production of Rossini's *William Tell* featured a gang rape that provoked boos and howls of protest, with *Guardian* critic Tim Ashley calling it "protracted and voyeuristic." The opening rape scene in *Two Women* felt gratuitous and cheap,

PHOTO: JASON HENRY

especially since the film version's encounter is consensual and transactional (and therefore more interesting).

But even when productions pull off the 'show everything' approach successfully—Paul Curran's acclaimed, brutally honest *Rape of Lucretia* for the Banff Centre in 2016 comes to mind—the process by which these scenes are invented and rehearsed deserves closer scrutiny.

The recent tidal wave of #metoo confessions and allegations has reached even the rarefied shores of classical music and opera. Decades of slow-burning rumours about James Levine finally exploded into an inferno. Hundreds of opera singers in Sweden and Denmark signed a manifesto decrying rampant abuse and misconduct in the industry.

In North America, singers have taken to social media to share their own stories of being sexually harassed and assaulted—at school by teachers, at master classes by coaches, backstage by conductors and directors, although few have been willing to name their assaulters. (Originally, this article was supposed to profile specific experiences, but the lingering reluctance of victims to speak on the record led to a change of topic.)

In the context of these revelations about offstage behaviour (and just how revelatory is dubious considering #everyoneknew), the portrayal of assault or even consensual sex on stage becomes a weighty question.

Several singers told me, on the condition of anonymity, it is not unusual to receive stage directions that have made them extremely uncomfortable, including nudity, mock BDSM, group make-out sessions, and simulated masturbation. These situations usually occurred at the beginning of their careers, a time where work is scarce and nobody wants to be seen as a complainer. Often, the direction came as a complete surprise, without prior warning or discussion. One young American singer told me she was informed matter-of-factly at rehearsal that, as one of the Three Ladies in an 'updated' *Magic Flute*, she would be appearing topless. When she objected, she was informed they could always find someone else.

An autocratic, punitive approach to pushing performers (and audiences) out of their comfort zones is, at best, disrespectful and objectifying. At worst, particularly for singers who have survived rape or abuse, it can be deeply traumatic. At the same time, audiences and artists are hungry for original ideas and intense emotions. How do opera companies balance the need for exciting, provocative, contemporary productions with the prerogative to protect and respect the performers?

Joel Ivany, Founder and Artistic Director of Toronto's Against the Grain Theatre, has given a lot of thought to exploring and presenting difficult themes in a way that makes singers feel safe and supported. His staging of Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking* opened at Minnesota Opera in late January. Like *Two Women*, the opera opens with a scene of unspeakable violence that sets off the dramatic chain of events.

"It's a difficult scene, there's no doubt," he says. "But the thing is that it's supposed to be horrific and disgusting. The creators of this opera wanted the audience to have no doubt in their minds

You're dealing with very intimate, vulnerable situations in rehearsal, so it's super important to constantly be checking in and seek consent for everything."

about 'did he do it or didn't he.' You have to show that this character is absolutely 100% guilty, because the audience is meant to go on the same journey of compassion and forgiveness that Sister Helen experiences."

Ivany notes wryly that in many ways, the opening scene of *Dead Man Walking* is no more shocking than what happens to Donna Anna in the first 15 minutes of *Don Giovanni*. "But somehow if it's sung in Italian, and performed in old costumes, that makes it OK."

Whether he's staging Mozart or a contemporary opera, Ivany says close collaboration with the singers is key to working safely through emotionally challenging direction. "For me, it has to be an open conversation. I make it clear that if at any moment anyone doesn't like where this is going, if ever you're uncomfortable, please speak up. You're dealing with very intimate, vulnerable situations in rehearsal, so it's super important to constantly be checking in and seek consent for everything: is it OK if he touches you? OK, now how about this? Do you need to take a break?"

Involving the singer in these decisions should be the default, not only ethically, but even from the purely self-serving standpoint of artistic quality: a singer who is tense and embarrassed, let alone frightened or triggered, is not going to deliver a good performance.

Ivany underlines the critical role company management plays in ensuring a safe environment for performers. "Stage management or someone from administration needs to be there from the beginning, to provide that third-party oversight. Opera performance is a weird bubble. You need someone from the outside who can say, 'Hey, I don't think this idea is OK.'"

Dan Kempson agrees that early involvement of the presenting company is a key factor in protecting singers from potentially harmful and exploitative situations. Kempson is a New York City-based baritone who left a promising career to pursue an MBA. He recently published a widely-read blog post, "Opera's sexual assault secret," describing his own experiences as a gay male dealing with unwanted, sometimes aggressive sexual advances from people in positions of power.

"It's a big issue when someone from higher up in the company doesn't show up until the last rehearsal, if at all," he says.

“The problem is that companies will often hire a general manager who either comes from the business world, so they see their job as just raising money and they don’t want to get involved on the artistic side, or they’re a former performer or director so they’ve lost any sense of perspective, of what’s normal. You really need leadership who can work with both sides.”

An even bigger, more pervasive barrier is the two-tiered system that exists not just in opera, but throughout the performing arts, where organizational staff are afforded HR resources and protections that are denied to contract artists.

“Opera companies need to start treating singers like valued human beings, instead of interchangeable commodities,” Kempson says. He notes that performers should be advocating on their own behalf when necessary, starting with educating themselves about their rights. “Even if you don’t have representation, if you have a signed contract, you usually have a lot more agency than companies would have you believe.”

Ivany echoes this advice. “Some equity agreements stipulate that if you do nudity, for example, you must be paid more.” In other words, you shouldn’t have to be a Netrebko or a Floréz to be able to stipulate in your contract what you will and won’t do.

Everyone I spoke to agreed that, as much as possible, companies have to be more up-front before casting, especially if they are considering a more avant-garde take on a traditional work. It’s one thing to audition for *GRINDR: the opera* with a notion of what might be involved. It’s another thing entirely to find at the first rehearsal that your Second Lady will have her girls on full display at the director’s whim.

When thoughtfully considered and sensitively rehearsed, a realistic portrayal of rape or assault that is appropriate to the libretto can have enormous dramatic impact, especially when amplified by the score. However, trivializing sexual violence, or

changing the narrative to one of seduction and consent, can be almost as detrimental and dishonest as exaggerating or inventing rape for pure shock value. “...Productions that show sexual violence for what it is will make [us] uncomfortable—but sexual violence should make...us uncomfortable,” wrote the musicologist Dr. Kassandra Hartford in her 2016 article “Beyond the Trigger Warning: Teaching Operas that Depict Sexual Violence,” published in the *Journal of Music History Pedagogy*. “That is to say, this kind of discomfort is productive and thought-provoking.”

Hartford goes on to signal another parallel problem—that of actual rape scenes being reimagined in a flirtatious, seductive tone, implying consent where non exists: “The alternative—productions that stage rape as scenes of passion—encourages audiences to consider the events as not-rape, and thus to accept a broader body of myths about rape that enable rape culture.”

Directors like Ivany and Curran are showing that staging uncomfortable scenes can be done in a way that delivers an emotional gut-punch to the audience while keeping the singers’ safety and professional experience paramount.

But what might really impact the way these artistic choices are made would be the hiring of more women as stage directors and in senior company management. After all, it’s in representation and the fostering of new perspectives that opera will become truly relevant and not just a tired race to see who can *épater* the most bourgeois with topless women and gang rapes. **OC**

PHOTO: DONALD COOPER

Natasha Gauthier is a classical music journalist based in Ottawa. She is the classical critic for artsfile.ca and former critic for the *Ottawa Citizen*. She also covered the classical music scene in her home town of Montréal for more than a decade, writing for *Hour*, *The Gazette*, *La Presse* and *L’Actualité*.



A scene from Royal Opera House, Covent Garden's *William Tell*

Denise Wendel-Poray contemplates the challenges of presenting opera on a silent stage in the V&A's latest blockbuster exhibition

OPERA

Passion, Power AND Politics



A VAST EXHIBITION, “Opera: Passion, Power and Politics,” the first in the new Sainsbury Gallery of London’s Victoria and Albert museum, retraces 400 years of opera history in the context of European culture and politics. Mounted in collaboration with the Royal Opera House it examines seven operas in the cities where they were first performed. The only exception is *Tannhäuser* (premiere, Dresden, 1845), here included in the Paris section given that its 1861 version was produced for the French capital. A final room wraps up the show with landmark operas written after 1945 such as Robert Wilson and Steve Reich’s *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) and George Benjamin’s *Written on Skin* (2012).

It’s a challenging topic for a museum exhibition—how is it possible to bring to life the art of opera through soundless, inanimate objects, sets, drawings and costumes? How does one convey its power without singers and the excitement of being in the performance moment? True, the rooms are dramatically lit: the bold writing on the walls is striking and, we have the advantage of hi-tech headphones that play musical excerpts or spoken commentary as we approach a particular exhibit. We see painted fans, opera glasses, diamond necklaces, chessboards, manuscript scores, musical instruments, some famous paintings...but the power of opera to move is absent.

I also have my doubts about the way the material has been organized, as well as which operas have been chosen.

The exhibition appropriately begins with Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, which premiered in Venice in 1643 during the decadent carnival season. Here, period paintings of noblemen, gamblers and courtesans depict Venetians of every cast. There are curious objects such as a pair of *chopines* or *zoccoli*: high platform shoes worn by ladies and courtesans to walk in the muddy streets of Venice without soiling their dresses. More directly relevant is the famous portrait of Monteverdi by Bernardo Strozzi and a manuscript of Act II. In our headphones, the opera's sublime final duet, 'Pur ti miro,' is heard.

The next stop is Handel's bustling London where his *Rinaldo* premiered in 1711. Here we find one of the show's centrepieces: a working replica of the opera's original stage set. As we approach it, we listen to an excerpt from the Chorus of the Mermaids, Act II's 'Il vostro maggio,' in which Rinaldo and Goffredo leave on a mission to save Almirena from the sorceress Armida. On stage, their journey is represented by a boat bobbing on the waves, as mermaids try to lure Rinaldo away. This type of complex staging, machinery and special effects were a hit with stylish Londoners of the day eager for lavish entertainment. An article in the catalogue by Canadian stage director Robert Carsen explains his approach to this opera. An expert iconographer, Carsen constantly references period costumes and historic events in his own productions. He has also been highly successful as a curator and exhibition designer, notably of two 2012 blockbuster shows in Paris—the Musée d'Orsay's 'Impressionism

and Fashion,' as well as 'Bohèmes' at the Grand Palais. In 2016, he was invited to design 'Painting and the Modern Garden: Monet to Matisse' at London's prestigious Royal Academy. Unfortunately, none of Carsen's usual magic touch for bringing objects to life is apparent in his artistic direction of this V&A show.

Next, we head eastward to Vienna, not to meet the great opera reformer Glück, but instead, rising-star Mozart for the 1786 première of *The Marriage of Figaro*, as well as a lesson on the Enlightenment. However, the quote chosen for this room from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 1758 "Letter to D'Alembert on the Theatre"—"...the stage is, in general a painting of the human passions, the original of which is in every human heart,"—is more related to Glück than to Mozart. More appropriate to the Rousseau would have been Glück's *Orfeo ed Euridice*—a radical operatic game changer, first performed at the Burgtheater in Vienna in 1762. Like the French philosopher's writings, it was a precursor to Romanticism and had a decisive influence on Berlioz and Wagner.

The show might have included Glück and met Mozart later on in nearby Prague for the 1787 premiere of *Don Giovanni* in the beautiful Estates Theatre as seen in the film *Amadeus* by Miloš Forman.

Regardless of missing passengers, our time machine rapidly accelerates to 1842, landing amidst the revolutionary chaos of Milan and Verdi's *Nabucco*. We listen to 'Va pensiero' in a semi-circular installation filled with 150 vertiginous photographs of Italian opera house interiors, photographed by Austrian artist Matthias Schaller. Then comes the timeless voice of Maria Callas as Abigaille singing of her eternal love for Ismaele.

Though our stop in Paris allows hardly a glimpse of the Grand Operas or operettas that were all the rage in the 1860s, our attention is duly drawn to an important event that divided Paris into two warring factions: Wagner's March 1861 premiere of *Tannhäuser*. It survived just three performances amidst mounting controversy and riots incited by the all-powerful and aristocratic Jockey Club. Two great champions of the work, Baudelaire and the still-life artist Fantin-Latour, are depicted in Manet's 1862 painting "Music in the Tuileries Garden" borrowed for the occasion from London's National Gallery. A statue of Napoleon III in the middle of the room seems to gaze disapprovingly at eight TV screens showing nude Venusberg scenes drawn from different contemporary productions of *Tannhäuser*.

The turn of the century finds us in that other Venice of Europe, Dresden, for the 1905 premiere of Richard Strauss' *Salomé*. We are reminded of the birth of Expressionism with the group of painters known as Die Brücke as well as some of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's nudes. There's a copy of Oscar



Replica of original stage set for Handel's *Rinaldo*, V&A 2017

INSTALLATION PHOTOGRAPHY: V&A PRESS



Manet's "Music in the Tuileries Garden" (1862), borrowed from the National Gallery for the V&A exhibition

Wilde's play, annotated by Strauss. Costumes by Salvador Dalí are a joy to see. An analyst's couch, placed beneath a video of the final scene from David McVicar's Royal Opera production of the opera reminds us that Freud is part of all this freely associated material.

There's a lot to take in—perhaps a little too much, and many of the pieces are only distantly relevant to the subject. None of the Brücke artists were directly involved in opera. For this we would have needed to take a train to Berlin and speed ahead to the late Weimar period with Bauhaus artists and the Russian avant-garde, as well as Giorgio de Chirico all working for the vibrant and controversial Krolloper under the direction of Otto Klemperer. It was the dawning of the dark era of Nazi censorship and doom. By 1933 those productions were deemed degenerate, Klemperer was fired, beaten up by brown shirts and the Kroll became the stage for Nazi rallies. Perhaps a connection between fine art and opera would have been better illustrated by the inclusion of this dark chapter of operatic history?

The exhibition's final opera is Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, first performed in Leningrad in 1934, and suppressed by Stalin two years later—another plunge into totalitarian horror. A reconstruction of Shostakovich's study and film footage showing the composer at the piano (also seen in William Kentridge's 2010 production of *The Nose*) are remnants of sorts.

A 1925 International Women's Day poster is the only reminder of the primordial role that women have played in the development of opera. Ballet and opera were the first professions opened up to women long before they were permitted to vote or attend university. Women became the real stars in these two domains but this is hardly recognized in the exhibition.

As a crash course in the world of opera, the curriculum of "Opera: Passion Power and Politics" lacks coherence and substantive material. In spite of a myriad of precious objects from the V&A's own collection, each of which is a delight to see, we sense that they are fillers. Overall, the show is pleasant but clearly not on the level of the V&A's fabulous ballet-based "Diaghilev" (2010), neither from the point of view of the exhibits nor the scenography. True, Picasso did not design for opera as he did for the Russian impresario's Ballets Russes, therefore depriving this V&A exhibition of a spectacular showpiece like the Spaniard's opening front cloth for the ballet, "Le train bleu." Unlike the success of that 2010 dance exhibition, the challenge of making opera come alive in a museum setting seems, here at least, to have been insurmountable. **OC**

Denise Wendel-Poray is a Canadian writer and critic holding degrees from Yale University and McGill University. Formerly an opera singer, she performed principal roles throughout Europe. She writes for ArtPress and the Wiener Kurier and lives in Paris.



Stortorget square,
Stockholm




Stockholm's new Royal College of
Music designed by AIX Arkitekter

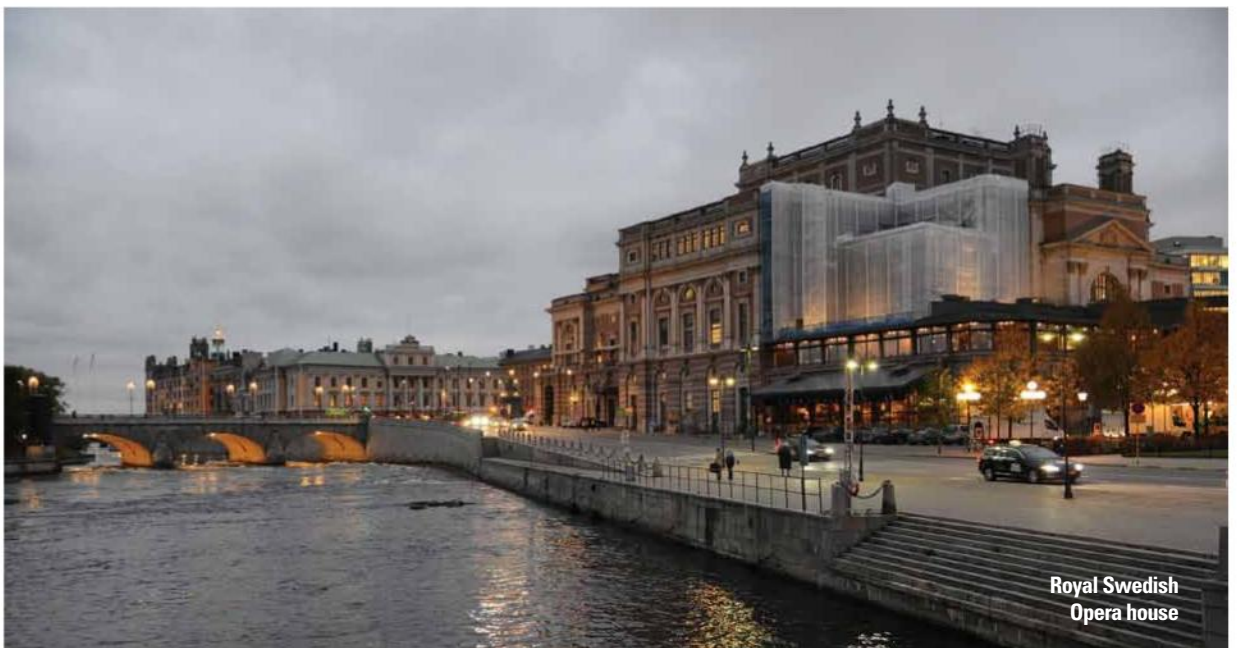


Stockholm 2017

An
International
Voice
Teachers'
Congress



University of Toronto voice instructor
Mark Daboll takes us on a journey of vocal
discovery through historic Stockholm



Pristinely and picturesquely situated on the outer arc of Europe's cultural capitals, and smack in the centre of Scandinavia, lies the 'Venice of the North': Stockholm. Stereotypes of seafaring Vikings and their Sagas from millennia past may sell the city to tourists, but for opera *cognoscenti*, Stockholm and Sweden's contributions are more associated with operatic history.



Swedish soprano Agnes Auer working with Finnish mezzo-soprano Monica Groop

Sweden has given birth to the likes of opera legends like Jenny Lind, Birgit Nilsson, Anne Sofie von Otter, Elisabeth Söderström, Astrid Varnay, Jussi Björling and Nicolai Gedda. In choral music, conductor Eric Ericsson is a giant. And if Sweden had not given us the iconic song writing team of Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus (ABBA); composer Max Martin (whose songs brought Britney Spears and the Backstreet Boys fame and fortune) and Marie Fredriksson (of the band Roxette), the last 40 years of pop music would have been robbed of many of its most memorable tunes.

icvt: an international gathering of vocal specialists

In Aug. 2017, Stockholm hosted the 9th International Congress of Voice Teachers (ICVT). Distinguished pedagogues, coaches and performing artists from five continents converged to further crack the codes that lead us to our best singing; knowledge that can be invaluable to our students—some of whom could indeed one day be the world's next big opera stars. However, each new 'singing sensation' doesn't emerge from a vacuum, but is the product of a team of tireless technicians and mentors, and the ICVT conference pays homage to those who painstakingly work to make the singer's job easier.

ICVT was founded through the desire to understand how the voice profession approaches the teaching of singing globally. First held in 1984, members of the North American based National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS), and the Association of Teachers of Singing in the UK discussed the organization of a regular joint gathering. ICVT has met every four years since 1987 in France, the USA, New Zealand, the UK, Finland, Canada (Vancouver, 2005), and Australia, and will gather once again in Vienna in 2021. Twenty-nine voice teacher associations worldwide are currently affiliated with ICVT, making it a major crossroads for the sharing of vocal information.

take a tour: the conference and the confluence

This year, ICTV took place at Stockholm's sleek and shiny Royal College of Music, a building so new its doors were officially opened just a few days prior to the conference's start. Of the 450 global delegates, ten were from Canada with the largest numbers representing Scandinavia, Central Europe, the UK, and the U.S. Enthusiastic attendees from Brazil, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, China, India and Singapore made the event feel truly international.

time for a tour

Following a Swedish-themed opening ceremony, participants were given some free time to explore or relax. At the heart of Stockholm is *Gamla Stan* (old town), a peninsula where the city germinated over seven centuries ago. The district is a maze of narrow, cobblestone streets leading in all directions, and at its nucleus we find the *Stortorget*, a public square heralded by two adjacent red and orange-façades—possibly the city's most photographed site. Heading to the Norrström Channel that faces the heart of Stockholm, one finds the Royal Palace (*Kungliga Slottet*), a section of which is open for public tours, including its Armoury and the Swedish Crown Jewels. Opposite the *Gamla Stan* on the banks of the Channel, stand a row of prestigious buildings including the Royal Swedish Opera, the Grand Hotel and the National Museum that rival in stately grandeur their counterparts in Paris, Geneva, or Edinburgh.

PHOTOS: (PREVIOUS SPREAD): COURTESY THE CURATED TRAVEL (TOP); COURTESY CAVERION CORPORATION (BOTTOM LEFT); JORGE LASCAR (BOTTOM RIGHT); (THIS PAGE) JOHN BAINES

dinner—nobel banquet style

A gala dinner officially opened the Congress that evening at Stockholm City Hall (*Stadshuset*), across from the old town, where Nobel Prize winners dine with Swedish royalty. Conference attendees enjoyed traditional Swedish fare in the expansive Blue Hall which houses the largest pipe organ in Scandinavia. Situated above is the spectacular Golden Hall decorated with mosaics containing some eighteen million tiles. As dinner was a stand-up affair, for which some regretted their choice of footwear, the format was an ideal opportunity to make new friends, meet other delegates, and network.

masterclasses at the congress

A much-anticipated highlight of ICVT are the international guest artist-teachers who appear in recital and/or play the role of master-class clinician. Each day featured at least one such classical vocal artist (along with singers of other vocal styles), including Danish baritone Bo Skovhus; Swedish baritone Håkan Hagegård; American tenor and teacher George Shirley (U Michigan, Ann Arbor); vocal pedagogue David L. Jones (Europe, US); Finnish mezzo-soprano and pedagogue Monica Groop (Sibelius Academy, Helsinki) and, voice teacher and author Janice Chapman (Guildhall, London).

A headline act at any such convention, masterclasses tend to vacillate from the fascinating to the predictable in presentation. Star opera performers who are suddenly thrust into teaching a singer in front of an audience will often tell you how daunting it is, particularly when the audience is made up of professionals from the field. Lacking a dedicated teacher's bag of tricks, vocal demonstration is typically the means through which the star guides the guinea-pig singer, but this approach is not always fruitful. The junior singer may not have access within his or her own instrument nor the current ability to define and respond vocally to what is being asked of them. A common conclusion drawn is that the role of Singing Teacher is a completely different skill set than that of Singer.

By contrast, master teachers and trained vocal technicians will naturally be more in their element in the masterclass situation. However, it shouldn't be overlooked that most great teachers also have their *own* slant, along with pet processes which may or may not succeed with the singer-student in the masterclass moment. I always admire the master teacher who publically acknowledges that he or she is only human too, and their solution may not be successful for that unique singing mind and body in the time allotted.

your pocketbook: stockholm may as well be switzerland

Although Sweden has been a long-standing member of the EU, it retains its own currency—the Swedish Crown (*Kroner*), and maintains a very high standard of living for its citizens, offering top ranked services from health to education. The downside for a traveler is that simple items (such as lunch) can be costly. If you are the budget conscious type, you might just lose your lunch when considering its exorbitant cost! Expect something as simple as a tuna fish sandwich and a small bottle of juice at a standard café to cost 150 Crowns (C\$25). Dinner entrées at modest restaurants will run close to double that, however seafood tends to be more reasonable and is always deliciously prepared.

A gin and tonic will likely be laced with strands of ubiquitous Swedish cucumber should you require a sedative to contemplate your next credit card statement, but again, expect to pay no less than 150 Kroner for that. As consolation, a trip next door to natural-resource rich Norway will almost *double* the expense listed above. Norwegians often cross into Sweden to shop for groceries and housewares, and purchase vacation real estate, all of which for them is a comparative bargain. Keeping the calculator at bay will ensure a happier stay.

a sample of the many seminars

A contrasting cornucopia of seminars were offered each day beginning at 9 a.m.; so many in fact, that four or five presentations were scheduled each hour. Since it was impossible to be in two places at once, there were times a quick exit from one and a quiet 'sneak-peek'



Conference attendees
at the Golden Hall;
Stockholm City Hall

into another was necessary, but added to the fun! This sampling reflects the remarkable variety of choices:

- singing and movement classes involving techniques derived from Feldenkrais, Yoga, Pilates and Alexander Technique
- repertoire classes on Russian, German, Swedish, Armenian, and Latin American art song
- updated research on training the countertenor voice; navigating the tenor *passaggio*; teaching transgendered voices; new singing strategies for Parkinson's patients; rehabilitating injured singers

Intermingled were more standard topics to refresh our teaching processes: how to use vocalizes effectively; innovative new learning strategies and, pedagogical techniques for diverse age groups. A giant of the profession (with the height of a true Viking), retired Professor Johan Sundberg author of "The Science of the Singing Voice," presented the latest research in vocal-acoustic science.

A plethora of topics in commercial/contemporary music genres (including music theatre, pop-rock, jazz, gospel, and Brazilian Bossa Nova styles) were offered to conform with changing market trends wherein classical singers are crossing over to other styles more often, and vice versa. Research data reflecting these trends (particularly as opera companies blend music theatre productions into their seasons) were presented in detail.

canadians in the game

Canadian pedagogues presented their own fascinating research. Dr. Vicki St. Pierre of Mount Allison University in Sackville, NB spoke on "28 Calories Per Aria: Energy Expenditure in the Opera Singer in Rehearsal and Performance." Toronto's Dr. Shannon Coates presented "Teaching Very Young Singers" offering informed and scientific approaches to address the increasing popularity and intellectual/physical developmental challenges associated with teaching children as young as the age of six.

talking shop and digesting deep thought

A random chat with a UK delegate led to a fascinating conversation about the European use of *constructivism*—a philosophy in education in which students learn through cognitive physical experience, or 'active learning'—as an educational format for teaching voice. As conversations naturally evolve, this prompted some generalizations about how British and European pedagogues view North American teaching. Then came the questions. Is 'passive learning' (the presumed antithetical process) therefore a North American phenomenon as it applies to singing? Do North American teachers rely too much on conveying only physiologically based technique and in the process produce robotic, factory-made acoustic sound machines with the ability to fill our typically oversized opera houses and concert halls, as opposed to inherently human vocal artists? Is one approach better than the other or in fact are they different

at all? These are questions voice teachers often ponder as we evolve and hopefully improve in our own daily work, just as we demand of our students.

a stroll and a visit to the vasa museum


For its size, central Stockholm is relatively compact, and provided you have good walking shoes to traverse the cobblestone streets, this is the most ideal way to see the city. From the *Saluhall* (Stockholm's premier food hall in the upscale Östermalm residential district) one can walk south on Sturegatan, passing boutiques laden with Orrefors crystal and other internationally known Scandinavian made products. Wrapping around the bay on the Strandvägan and crossing the first bridge, is a city park containing the Vasa Museum (*Vasamuseet*), home of the Vasa, a 17th-century warship. Due to the weight of her weaponry, she sank on her maiden voyage in 1628 while departing the city harbour, drowning many of her crew. The ship was discovered in the 1950s, subsequently salvaged and restored to her former glory, making this state-of-the-art museum a must-see.

stockholm serenades: icvt concerts

A trip to the House of Nobility (*Riddarhuset*) on the edge of the Old Town was the site of an historical concert with established singers of the Swedish and European opera scene, along with concert galas featuring new and rising Swedish talent at the Royal College of Music. Tickets to a performance of *Così fan tutte* at the Drottningholm Court Theatre were also offered for those staying in Stockholm beyond the congress. The Norwegian boy soprano Aksel Rykkvin gave a memorable interview-performance to delegates just prior to the ICVT closing ceremonies. His voice could be changing as I write this, but fortunately it is well archived now by major record labels.

hejdå stockholm—tills vi ses igen!

Goodbye and until we meet again...

In the midst of all the excitement and opportunity to learn from and commingle with other vocal professionals, I checked out of my hotel and wheeled my luggage to the airport express train, all the while pondering this great meeting of musical minds. Conferences like ICVT remind vocal professionals we must continually trace how we have evolved from 'then' until 'now.' Developing the unique skill set that constitutes voice teaching is undoubtedly the most endlessly rewarding of pursuits. 

Mark Joelson Daboll, M.Mus. is an Instructor, Applied Voice, University of Toronto Faculty of Music, and teaches privately at his Toronto studio. A former member of the COC Chorus, he is a popular presenter for the COC's Living Opera Program, avid recitalist, and masterclass technician. He has Swedish heritage, and is very fond of his Swedish relatives.

CALENDAR HIGHLIGHTS

For the most up-to-date listings of opera events across the country, visit *Opera Canada's* online [Calendar](http://operacanada.ca/calendar) at operacanada.ca/calendar

FEBRUARY

7 CANADIAN OPERA COMPANY, Toronto. Lebanese-Canadian writer Wajdi Mouawad's production of *The Abduction from the Seraglio* marks the opera's first COC staging since 1980 and the North American debut of Lucerne-born, Mozart tenor Mauro Peter as Belmonte.

MARCH

14 GLENN GOULD SCHOOL, Toronto. *Die Fledermaus*—Against the Grain Theatre's Joel Ivany directs, with a rare North American appearance by Canadian conductor Nathan Brock, *Kapellmeister* at Hamburg State Opera.

24 VOICEBOX/OPERA IN CONCERT, Toronto. World premiere of Victor Davies' score based on George Ryga's iconic 1969 play, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, recounting the story of a young First Nations woman in the city. The largely Indigenous cast features mezzo-soprano Marion Newman and baritone Evan Korbut.

27 TAPESTRY OPERA, Toronto. Canadian theatre innovator Morris Panych refashions his silent-theatre blockbuster, *The Overcoat*, into an opera with score by James Rolfe. A co-production with Canadian Stage and Vancouver Opera.

APRIL

14 CALGARY OPERA. Canadian soprano Ambur Braid makes her role debut as Tosca and effectively throws down the cards as she moves into the *lirico-spinto* fach. Canadian tenor Luc Robert, rarely heard in North America, is her Cavaradossi.

14 EDMONTON OPERA. Young Québécois director Oriol Tomas' new production of *Don Giovanni* features a stellar Canadian cast including Phillip Addis, Michele Capalbo, Miriam Khalil and John Tessier.

14 MANITOBA OPERA, Winnipeg. American soprano Angel Blue, who made a spectacular debut as Mimi at the Met this past fall, takes on Verdi's iconic courtesan in *La traviata*.

19 OPERA ATELIER, Toronto. A just-slightly-delayed commemoration of the Monteverdi 450 celebrations with *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria* starring Croatian tenor Krešimir Špicer in the title role and Canadian mezzo-soprano Mireille Lebel as his ever-faithful wife, Penelope.

19 PACIFIC OPERA VICTORIA. This ever-flexible, innovative company presents a rare Canadian staging of Handel's *Rinaldo* in a new production by Glynis Leyshon. Russian countertenor Andrey Nemzer sings the title role and Toronto singer Jennifer Taverner unleashes her luscious soprano on the villainous Armida.

25 TORONTO OPERETTA THEATRE. The opera world seems to be re-discovering Offenbach's delicious parody, *La belle Hélène*, with recent high-profile productions at Berlin's Komische Oper and Paris' Théâtre du Châtelet. TOT takes it on with up-and-coming mezzo Beste Kalender as the face who launched a thousand ships!

29 VANCOUVER OPERA. Veteran Canadian opera director Tom Diamond introduces a cast of Russian singers in a new production of Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*. **OC**



Demon, Edmonton Opera's *Don Giovanni*. Costume design by Deanna Finnman

Opera in Review



Andrea Hill
(Rosina) and Peter
McGillivray (Bartolo)
in Calgary Opera's
The Barber of Seville

CANADA

CALGARY

Calgary Opera opened its 17/18 season with a superbly comic, well-sung production of Rossini's perennial favourite—*The Barber of Seville*. Although the words and the music may be Italian, this new production was all French in style and tone.

Directed by Montreal-based stage director Alain Gauthier, the opera was updated to the early 20th century, with an all-in-one set redolent of Dalí and 1930s Paris-chic. In its treatment of comedy, the production resembled a Feydeau farce, with its precise timing, rapid throw-away gags, and an exquisite sense of balance and proportion—a clock-like mechanism, as the director commented in his notes.

A strong point of the production was Russell Braun in the title role of Figaro. Now at the peak of his career, Braun has just the right voice for the part: strong and resonant, with splendid top notes, firm in the bottom register, and able to deliver the important Italian patter elements in the text. Vocally, his was the strongest performance in the production.

Physically suited to the part, he was also a compelling dramatic presence, particularly in his famous entrance aria, which drew the strongest applause of any of the solo numbers on opening night. Dramatically, he was more playful (and more French) than how the part is often played, and there was an intelligence in his acting that went beyond simple stereotype—it was all very top notch.

As Dr. Bartolo, baritone Peter McGillivray didn't miss a trick in the handling of comedy, drawing from the role every ounce of fun and parody. Vocally, his slightly rough-hewn voice was perfect for the part. His solo at the top of Act II was exceptionally amusing. I have never seen an actor get so much out of a wig.

Tenor John Tessier was Count Almaviva. He sailed through the vocal challenges with ease, most notably in his opening aria. Dramatically, he also provided many laughs, especially as a mincing Don Alonzo in the aria scene in the second act; his impersonation of a singing teacher accompanying Rosina at the piano was hysterically funny.

Andrea Hill, the production's Rosina, was recovering from health issues on opening night, and despite fluent singing and fine vocal tone, she sounded less commanding than she might have been. But this was still a fine performance, with good rapid *coloratura* and commanding top notes. She was very much the equal of the other lead singers, especially in her famous opening aria, "Una voce poco fa."

The secondary roles were also well cast, notably Anne-Marie Macintosh as the servant Berta, who drew maximum comedic effect from her aria. She was very well received at the curtain call. Baritone Geoffrey Schellenberg (the Sergeant) and bass-baritone Aaron Dimoff (Don Basilio), both with experience in the company's Emerging Artists Program, acquitted themselves well, even if Dimoff was a bit outclassed vocally by his more experienced stage mates.

The men's chorus was woven into action with skill, using virtuoso umbrellas, a consistent theme in the comedy. Topher Mokrzewski was the conductor and led the orchestra with vigour. Despite a rather

flat-sounding overture, the orchestra contributed significantly to the total effect, with a well-crafted storm scene and an effective balance with the singers. Well-attended and much-enjoyed, the production offered a promising start to the post-Bob McPhee era of the company.
—Kenneth DeLong

EDMONTON

Canada has produced few large-scale, 'grand' operas, and **Edmonton Opera**, just recently emerging from almost fatal financial difficulties, has previously staged just one main stage 21st century opera, John Estacio's *Filumena. Les Feluettes* (*Lilies*), which centres on a gay love story, is radical not only in its newness, but also because it introduces Edmonton Opera patrons to what is still a (somewhat) controversial theme.

The risk of such a venture was obvious, but the now-stable company opened its 54th season of three productions on Oct. 21st with this departure from its standard assortment of operetta and opera chestnuts. The box office implications for this creative defiance remain to be seen, but the production of Australian composer Kevin March and librettist Michel Marc Bouchard's story of repression and social oppression of homosexual men in early 20th-century Catholic Québec was credible, serious entertainment, and even somewhat satisfying as opera.

Les Feluettes began as Bouchard's 1987 play of the same name, which was later made into a film, and now, an opera. Moving from one medium to another requires tough-minded editorial decisions about the strengths and limitations of the new vehicle. I suspect much of the poetic power of the original play remains in Bouchard's libretto, and the words are the opera's strongest artistic feature. Bouchard captures the warmth, the frustration, the treachery, and ultimately, the tragedy of the love triangle between Simon (baritone Zachary Read), Vallier (tenor Jean-Michel

Richer) and the repressed, jealous Bishop Bilodeau (tenor James McLennan). With a good playwright's flair for poetically rich language, the piece is powerful at this literary level, which can't be said for all traditional opera *libretti*.

Unfortunately, when you hear people murmur that they could have followed the structure of the work better if they'd read the synopsis first, you know you have a small problem. Audiences don't mind being confused by an intricate whodunnit plot; in opera not so much. A few cues for the odd temporal transition could be clearer.

The plot isn't really that complicated, but it does take place in two time periods, 1912 and 1952. In 1912, Vallier and Simon

Edmonton Opera's male chorus, playing the complicit inmates, gave a fine performance. The simple set by Guillaume Lord consisted of floor-to-fly prison bars that contained and symbolised the drama nicely. One especially effective scene, filled with real operatic tension, saw the men rhythmically slapping their belts on the stage floor to depict Simon's beating at the hand of his father, Timothée (bass Claude Genier), when he learns Simon has kissed a man.

Musically, *Les Feluettes* too often drifted without any distinctive character, especially in the first act. The Edmonton Symphony, led by Giuseppe Petraroia, seldom functioned as a dramatic contributor. Occasionally, a jolt of loud brass and percussion



Jean-Michel Richer (Count Vallier) and Zachary Read (Young Simon) in Edmonton Opera's *Les Feluettes*

fall in love, and the Bishop seethes; in 1952, the now old Bishop (Gordon Gietz) and Old Simon (Gino Quilico) are reunited on the pretence that the incarcerated Simon is on his death bed and wishes the Bishop, his erstwhile classmate, to hear his confession. The Bishop arrives at the prison, is taken hostage and forced to watch the inmates reenact past incidents. He re-watches Simon and Vallier fall in love and later, Simon's conviction for arson and Vallier's murder, a fate the Bishop orchestrated himself out of sexual resentment.

shot from the pit in a tense episode, but overall the music did workman-like service to the text, merely giving singers their pitches. In setting the libretto however, March did avoid the pitfall of angular writing in the recitatives, which can so often mar sung dialogue in newer works.

Given the prison setting, the whole cast was male. As a result, men sing female characters including Vallier's mother, Countess Marie-Laure de Tilley (baritone Dominique Côté) and Simon's fiancé of convenience, Lydie-Anne de Rozier

(countertenor Daniel Cabena). Cabena injected a welcome contrasting vocal quality into an otherwise masculine-dominant mix.

The principals were all solid, although Richer began a little tentatively. Gietz as the old Bishop in the opening and closing scenes sang with force and high emotion as he faced his past, his sexual dishonesty, and quite possibly his suicide at the end of the piece.

Edmonton Opera, in choosing this new work based on a still vaguely controversial theme, continues the bold direction it began with its successful spring 2017 production of *Elektra*. Including *Les Feluettes*, co-commissioned and produced by Opéra de Montréal in 2016 and Pacific Opera Victoria earlier last year, Edmonton Opera joins the movement to develop a home-grown opera-writing culture in Canada.

—Bill Rankin

LUNENBURG

The tiny town of Lunenburg, Nova Scotia is disproportionately rich in concert opera, with performances by outstanding guest artists and more than one locally based opera initiative. The **Lunenburg Academy of Music Performance** (LAMP), which gives young musicians an opportunity to study with acclaimed visiting and resident artists, invited the incomparable Italian mezzo-soprano Daniela Barcellona to

direct Rossini's *Tancredi*. Barcellona's mere presence in this town was cause for some celebration as her 9/11 flight had been diverted to Nova Scotia and she appreciated the gracious hospitality of a local family. As she told this reviewer, she is now considering residence in Lunenburg.

Tancredi, based on a play by Voltaire, charts the historic battle between the Byzantine Empire and the Saracens via the tangled personal conflict of two families. It is an excellent vehicle for vocal virtuosity with its many lengthy arias and duets. In concert performance, however, the complex plot is somewhat difficult to follow. *Tancredi* was Rossini's first *opera seria* which, following the conventions of the time, had to have a happy ending. Perhaps to challenge those conventions or preserve the integrity of Voltaire's play, Rossini provided an alternative, tragic conclusion. This was the version performed on Oct. 13th.

The powerful voice of tenor Jean William Silva (Argirio) erupted effortlessly and filled the hall. Mezzo-soprano Antonia Albores (Issaura), was equally impressive with a clear, confident sound. Soprano Erinne-Colleen Laurin sang the demanding part of Amenaide flawlessly, especially in its frequent coloratura flourishes. The most challenging role in the opera is that of Tancredi who has to sing several lengthy arias and four duets. The role was beautifully

performed by mezzo-soprano Maude Côté-Gendron, whose vocal agility and lower register coloratura were remarkable. There were two Orbazzanos: Joseph Trumbo and Giovanni Augelli, both of whom were notable. Roggiero is a rather small part but Marianne Moore let no one down in her final aria. Pianist Alessandro Vitiello could have stolen the show had the singers not been so well-prepared and vocally brilliant.

—Daphna Levit

MONTRÉAL

Nowadays, it seems even stagings of comic operas are enamored with minimalism, skewing toward a neutral palette of black, white, and grey. So how refreshing it was to revisit Catalanian director Joan Font and his maximalist *Cenerentola*, which explodes with all the colour and visual whimsy of a Gaudi mosaic.

This revival of Font's famous 2007 Houston Grand Opera production opened at **Opéra de Montréal** on Nov. 11th. Ten years later, the staging has lost none of its wacky appeal. It's still an eye-popping, technicolour spectacle, with an esthetic somewhere between Willy Wonka and mid-century modern artist Charley Harper (my date said it reminded him of the "It's a Small World" Disney ride, minus the annoying earworm).

PHOTO: WES RENAUD



Scene from Opéra de Montréal's *La Cenerentola*

In Font's concept (and Joan Guillén's sets and costumes) shocking pinks, acid greens, lemon yellows, electric blues and candy heart lavenders all happily coexist. Font keeps it from looking cluttered and garish by framing things with clean geometric shapes.

There's a pleasing geometry to Font's stage directions too. Instead of ignoring or glossing over the churning repetitions in Rossini's score, Font underlines their comedic effect through energetic choreography, having the singers spin or bounce in time to the oom-pah beat. Meanwhile, dancers in pointy rat masks and long tails cavort and scurry about, Nutcracker-style, sometimes observing the scheming, other times participating in it—at one point even working the thunder and wind machines during the Act II storm sequence. I found myself constantly delighted, charmed, and utterly entertained.

As the heroine, mezzo-soprano Julie Boulianne never put a foot wrong, sweet but with a solid core of iron will. However, her deep-ochre mezzo is perhaps a little serious for the role, and while her coloratura was impeccably tidy, I felt she was being cautious, just missing an element of razzle-dazzle. I wished she had gone for more speed, more variety, higher options—she certainly has the extension and technique.

American tenor Juan José de León was more problematic as the prince, Don Ramiro. Yes, he has glorious high notes—the C at the end of his Act II *cabaletta* was thrilling—but what came before wasn't always up to the same standard. His coloratura was slurred, his vibrato was often tight and too fast, and his habit of punching and spiking notes gave his phrasing a harsh, jagged feel.

Among the supporting roles, Vito Priante stole the show as Dandini, the valet masquerading as his boss. He combines a gorgeous, toasty, nimble baritone with

Gregory Dahl in the title role of Opéra de Québec's *Rigoletto*



supremely cheeky, confident comedic timing. Although not a true buffo—with a vocal colour that is on the lighter side of baritone—Pietro Spagnoli still got plenty of yucks as the greedy stepfather Don Magnifico; his “Sia qualunque” aria was a tour-de-force of rapid-fire vocal acting.

From their first ridiculous appearance in poofy, Michelin Man bloomers, Lauren Margison and Rose Naggar-Tremblay were perfectly detestable as the wicked stepsisters. Margison's clear soprano in particular carried easily over the ensemble and orchestra. As Alidoro, Kirk Eichelberger's amazing Dumbledore-worthy costume did not compensate for his stiff acting and flat singing.

In the pit the young Spanish conductor José Miguel Perez-Sierra showed refined attention to orchestral colour, but also a daredevil drive for speed, sometimes pushing the singers to the brink of intelligible diction. The woodwinds of the Orchestre Métropolitain sounded especially lively.

—Natasha Gauthier

QUÉBEC CITY

Presented in Québec City in October amidst the #metoo movement denouncing sexual abuse by people in positions of power, the unambiguous direction of Verdi's *Rigoletto* by François Racine was on point—should you laugh or be outraged to witness the Duke of Mantua use his power to freely seduce the wives and daughters of his courtiers (during his opening aria “Questa o quella”—“This one or that one”) and to proclaim in Act III that “La donna è mobile” (“Woman is fickle”)?

With its opening, funereal orchestral theme announcing *la maledizione* (the curse) that haunts the jester, Rigoletto, conductor Derek Bate drew from the Orchestre Symphonique de Québec all the musical diversity of Verdi's drama: from the hedonistic ball to the spectacular storm that ends in Gilda's death.

The scenes of debauchery, the abduction of Gilda and the sordid end she chooses in order to save the Duke she loves despite his lechery, take place on a set consisting of two turrets and a walkway which represent in turn the Duke's castle, Rigoletto and his daughter's modest home, or the somewhat shady *auberge*.

Gregory Dahl (Rigoletto), returning to the Québec stage after *Macbeth* and *Gianni Schicchi*, and Raphaëlle Paquet (Gilda) dominate the stage. Dahl, who plays the malicious fool and protective father in the first act, is profoundly moving in the two following acts. With his powerful and well-rounded voice and his compelling acting he renders Rigoletto into a touching and deeply human character. The coloratura soprano Raphaëlle Paquet, a familiar figure in Québec for the past 10 years thanks to *Starmania*, combined vocal flexibility and poise with finesse and conviction in “Caro nome,” as well as in the duets with Rigoletto and the Duke of Mantua. In the role of the



Erin Wall in the title role of Canadian Opera Company's *Arabella*

all. Her full, silvery, focused tone is perfect for Strauss's soaring vocal lines. She sang them with absolute security; going far beyond technical mastery to embody a fully rounded young woman on the cusp of a new future, with an unexpected 'der Richtige' ('right man'). Despite societal strictures to 'marry well,' you get the feeling that this *Arabella* has carefully considered her options (rejecting three well-bred, comically immature suitors) and is moving forward with what suits her best.

The 'der Richtige' in question is Mandryka; a Viennese outsider hailing from Croatia, owner of vast forests, and not afraid to wrestle a bear or two. Polish bass-baritone Tomasz Konieczny possesses the *physique du rôle* and the tireless, bright, soaring tone needed to conquer its punishingly high *tessitura*. Perhaps more comfortable at the bass end of his range, he did have to cut short a few of the role's higher excursions, and his German diction didn't always sound perfectly clear or idiomatic. But this is carping—Konieczny gave his all in an immensely appealing, generous portrayal.

COC 17/18 Artist-in-Residence Jane Archibald sang her first Zdenka, the 'sacrificial daughter' whose love for Matteo (one of *Arabella*'s hapless suitors) has disastrous repercussions when she tricks him into sleeping with her, pretending to be her now-fiancée older sister. Zdenka's big vocal moment occurs in the Act I duet with *Arabella* "Aber der Richtige," in which Archibald displayed newfound reserves of power and rich tone.

As Matteo, debuting American tenor Michael Brandenburg affected a hangdog demeanour that grew a little monotonous, and his slightly occluded tone prevented his very secure top range from ringing out clearly. Veteran Canadian baritone John Fanning made a welcome return to the COC; his many years of experience on international stages paying dividends in a highly detailed, yet subtle portrayal of the gambling-addicted Count Waldner.

One of the more bizarre plot elements involves the sudden appearance of The Fiakermilli, mascot at the Act II Coachman's ball. This high, *coloratura* showpiece of a role was sung with secure, pointed tone—and not a hint

Duke, tenor Steeve Michaud, though he could have been more nuanced, projects his voice with force, producing flawless high notes.

Some excellent Québécois singers played opposite this trio: Marcel Beau-lieu (bass) was solid and very convincing as Sparafucile; the increasingly busy baritone Marc-André Caron as Monterone; Geneviève Lévesque (mezzo-soprano) was a seductive Maddalena. They were supported by Michel Cervant (Ceprano), Judith Bouchard (Giovanna) and Marie-Michèle Roberge (Countess Ceprano). Other production highlights included the fine men's chorus prepared by Réal Toupin and Judith Fortin's costume designs.

—Irène Brisson, trans. by Kelly Gervais

TORONTO

Richard Strauss's *Arabella* (1933) had its triumphant Canadian premiere on Oct. 5th, opening the **Canadian Opera Company's** 17/18 season. It is one of those operas that comes saddled with a 'reputation,' often viewed as less than top drawer Strauss; hindered by creaky dramaturgy and an unfinished libretto due to Hugo von Hoffmansthal's premature death in 1929. Most of these curmudgeonly cavils were swept away by Tim Albery's straightforward

yet deeply human production, and by some truly outstanding performances.

Albery updated the original 1860s setting to Vienna in 1910, affording set and costume designer Tobias Hoheisel the opportunity to play with Secessionist textile designs, curly wrought iron and slim silhouettes for the gorgeous costumes. Unlike Albery's notoriously 'non-kitsch' 2010 COC *Aida*, the approach here was almost non-interventionist, with a focus instead on developing character and relationships. With his team of highly experienced singing actors he creates a world in which a desperate, bankrupt family can (almost!) believably pawn off their second daughter as a young man, in order to avoid giving her a proper, expensive introduction to society. One might have wished for a more probing deconstruction of a crumbling pre-WWI Viennese aristocracy, but Albery's conservatism was probably the right choice for an audience likely seeing this piece for the first time.

Even more than most title roles, *Arabella* is central—there is hardly a moment when she is not singing nor onstage. To date, Erin Wall has treated COC patrons to many wonderful portrayals—her Clémence in Saariaho's *Love from afar* (2012) was exquisite—but this *Arabella* tops them

of the dominatrix—by former COC Ensemble soprano Claire de Sévigné.

German conductor Patrick Lange seemed to have this score in his blood, boldly leading the COC Orchestra through its complexities and visibly cuing the singers with great care. The playing of Arabella's 'staircase entrance' music was a highlight—it's hard to imagine anyone who could resist its intense beauty with a dry eye.

It was discouraging to witness the exodus of patrons at intermission, and even more depressingly, before curtain calls. Although *Arabella* is quasi-standard repertoire in Europe, the COC took a risk by programming it as their season opener. Hopefully those audience members who remained and cheered the ensemble to the rafters will spread the word, encouraging the company to continue its exploration of post-*Elektra*, post-*Salome* Richard Strauss.

Donizetti's rustic *melodramma giocoso* (comic opera) *The Elixir of Love* returned to the COC on Oct. 11th for the first time since 1999, in a new-to-Toronto production by American director James Robinson. The action has been subtly 'updated' to the WWI period, taking place in Anytown, Canada (substitute Niagara-on-the-Lake for example) on a unit band shell set decorated

with the former Canadian flag, Union Jack-coloured bunting, 'Britain needs YOU' posters and the like. Costumes are all very small town, idealised, middle America and wouldn't be out of place in a production of *The Music Man*.

Its traditionalism was a little jarring in the context of many recent, more probing, concept-driven COC productions—Dmitri Tcherniakov's *Don Giovanni* and Claus Guth's *The Marriage of Figaro* come to mind. With the chorus positioned mostly statically on the band shell and principals interacting in a pleasant but predictable manner, it was clear Robinson did not intend to challenge his material, nor the audience in any undue fashion.

Donizetti's score is a delicious mixture of warm sentiment and outright buffoonery and for the most part, this cast delivered on both fronts. The three leads who form the love triangle—bumpkin Nemorino (tenor Andrew Haji; here, an ice cream vendor); ingénue Adina (soprano Simone Osborne; a.k.a. Marion the librarian) and bari-hunk Belcore (baritone Gordon Bintner; a preening army officer)—are all appropriately young, attractive performers. The trick however, is that Donizetti gives them deceptively difficult music to sing and all three were here making their role debuts.

Haji sang sweetly throughout in beautifully modulated if somewhat monochromatic tone. His rendition of the uber-famous tenor party piece, "Una furtiva lagrima" was the evening's musical highlight. His familiarity with the aria allowed him to utilise stylistically appropriate *rubato*, expanding and contracting the tempo to create an emotionally rich portrait of a man who realises his longed-for Adina might actually love him. As Haji becomes more familiar with the rest of the role, he will undoubtedly discover other opportunities for this kind of expressive 'give and take.' The brimmed cap that hid his face through most of Act I hindered his expression and overall, he could have physicalized his singing and acting more demonstratively.

Osborne used her glinting, bright tone to wonderful effect throughout this lengthy, challenging role. Possessing a lighter, lyric soprano, she had little difficulty projecting Adina's long-lined phrases and fast-moving *coloratura* into the large auditorium. Her portrayal was winning, avoiding the slightly hoydenish Adina of convention. If in the end her character didn't quite break free of the ingénue stereotype, she wasn't helped much by Robinson's 'don't disturb' brand of direction.

PHOTO: MICHAEL COOPER

Scene from Canadian Opera Company's *The Elixir of Love*



Bintner's Belcore was spot-on in his deployment of robust, well-projected, gorgeous vocalism used in the service of an appropriately pompous, self-absorbed characterization. The best example of this was in an Act II duet where Bintner's physical comedy hilariously underlined his repeated offers of "venti scudi" as an enticement to Haji's Nemorino to join the army. This scene demonstrated what was perhaps

her luscious, rich tone carrying beautifully over the choral ensemble that opens the opera. Her Act II scene with the female chorus when each 'suddenly' realises Nemorino is husband potential due to his recent fortune inheritance, was a musical and comedic highlight.

The internationally busy Canadian conductor Yves Abel made a belated COC debut eliciting lovely sounds from the COC

intelligent staging of *Arabella*, one might be tempted to reverse that judgement. Sometimes, so-called 'second-string' can trump a 'popular classic' given the right set of circumstances. —Gianmarco Segato

Opera Atelier's sterling series of performances restored Mozart's revolutionary classic *The Marriage of Figaro* to its required *commedia dell'arte* theatricality, exploding with kinetic charm and 18th-century wit across the intimate Elgin Theatre stage this past October. For director Marshall Pynkoski, it was yet another success for one of Canada's finest, most successful, and certainly well-travelled, opera companies.

Bolstered by superb singing by a stellar cast, this was Mozart infused at every musical moment by Pynkoski's considered direction; a warm yet scholarly interpretation from conductor David Fallis and, an authentic *ballata* astutely researched by dance mistress Jeanette Lajeunesse Zingg.

Douglas Williams was an athletic, kinetic Figaro who sang with his whole body as much as with his voice. He played a convincing foil to Stephen Hegedus who gave one of the subtler, if not quietly pathological, Count Almaviva performances you'll likely ever see, at once chilling as it was charming. Both baritones were equal in talent and execution, offering flawless lyricism, flexibility and three-dimensional humanity.

The women were splendid too. Mireille Asselin (Susanna), Peggy Kriha Dye (Countess Almaviva), and Mireille Lebel (Cherubino) offered fine characterizations that audiences warmed to instantly.

Memorable ensembles included the extraordinary bedroom confrontation between the Count and Countess in Act II and the sublime revelation of Figaro's true parentage in Act III. Both were conspicuously handled with surpassing expertise in direction and exhilarating performance quality.

But perhaps best of all, Pynkoski's *Figaro* actually made complete dramatic sense every step of the way, aided partly by Jeremy Sams' witty English libretto, but largely because the music was made to serve the dramatic interests of 18th-century theatrical norms and appropriate acting gestures.



Mireille Asselin (Susanna) and Mireille Lebel (Cherubino) in Opera Atelier's *The Marriage of Figaro*

lacking elsewhere—that hard-to-define, magic amalgam of music/acting/gesture that elicits spontaneous belly laughs from the audience.

As Dr. Dulcamara, dubious vendor of love potions that turn out to be little more than cheap Bordeaux, veteran British bass Andrew Shore certainly displayed his mastery of the role's comic shtick, but his big entrance aria revealed him almost voiceless from the start. He had difficulty summoning up enough tone to project over the orchestra, often resorting to a quasi-falsetto to save himself in his upper range. His fast-paced patter singing was more successful and dispatched with expert comic timing.

COC Ensemble soprano Lauren Eberwein was an enchanting Giannetta,

Orchestra. There were several moments of poor ensemble between the stage and pit however, mostly in concerted sections involving soloists and chorus. This mainly happened when Abel was pushing forward while onstage forces apparently resisted, a discrepancy that was no doubt remedied as the production settled into its 8-performance run.

As opera companies continue to struggle with ticket sales and introducing new audiences to the art form, it's intriguing to reflect on which of the COC's two 17/18 season opening productions might prove the best for an opera newbie. Conventional wisdom would choose this *Elixir* with its catchy melodies and an eye-pleasing production. However, given the stellar performances and

The libretto dipped liberally into insouciance and farce laced with innuendo but never too much so. Here, Christopher Enns as a slime ball Basilio was at his remarkable best.

In the 18th century, when comedy began to be censured for its 'debauchery,' there was a growing expectation for *commedia dell'arte* characters to become more coquettish and discreet, disguising hidden meanings through gesture. Taking their cue from this history, OA's production made smart use of acting and innuendo, such as in Cherubino's Act II cross-dressing scenes, conveying greater layers of meaning on the many disguised attractions lurking beneath Mozart's and da Ponte's complicated story-line.

Pynkoski's direction worked out every scene to its broadest potential and put us directly in touch with the Viennese-flavoured, comic theatre of Mozart's time. As a result, a fulsome acting style thrived universally throughout and with an intimacy that seemed to invite the audience's *Geist* directly onto the stage. And with Martha Mann's costumes of sedulous quality and

authenticity, the work achieved an all-important credibility, evincing a new *Figaro* experience in sharp contrast to the many tired and old productions out there today. Even highly-touted contemporary concept-directed performances would have a hard time competing with this one.

Perhaps most important of all was the relevance this ebullient, comic *Figaro* conveyed. In an age that witnesses the ever-growing calling-out of high-powered men over allegations of sexual harassment, OA's *Figaro* held a mirror up to contemporary times, displaying the perfect analog to the Count Almavivas we encounter today.

—Stephan Bonfield

VANCOUVER

Missing, is a co-commission between **City Opera Vancouver** (seen Nov. 3rd) and Pacific Opera Victoria where it moved on Nov. 17th for an already sold-out run. A courageous commission, yes, but also canny: COV and POV must have put out feelers into the ether that convinced them this was an opera whose time has come.

Set in Vancouver's downtown East side and along B.C.'s Highway of Tears—the Prince George to Prince Rupert stretch of Highway 16—*Missing* eschews familiar operatic conventions such as showy arias, huge choruses and a linear plot. It is a relentlessly probing meditation on how the murders and unexplained disappearances of at least 18 women along the Highway of Tears and 1200 Canada-wide—most of them Indigenous—affect everyone in the victims' circles of life.

In Métis-Dene writer/actor Marie Clements' unconventional libretto, a succession of seemingly unrelated scenes tumble along after each other, but then gradually and inevitably begin to cohere, deeply and powerfully, to reveal an inner logic. Under Peter Hinton's clear and sensitive direction, there was a dream-like quality in the pacing. Events unfolded in a not always linear and logical way and with a fascinating blend of English and Gitksan (the language spoken by the Gitksan Nation in the region around the Highway of Tears). Brian Current's minimalist score underpinned this dreamy



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essence admirably, though it could have used some extra bite at more emotionally intense moments.

The seven adroitly cast singers (no chorus) were accompanied by a seven-member ensemble conducted by Timothy Long (replacing indisposed COV Artistic Director, Charles Barber). Set and costume design by Andy Moro and Carmen Thompson were marvellously evocative of place and person in the narrative flow.

The story pivots about the gradual coming together of a young, white woman, Ava (soprano Caitlin Wood) and a Native Girl (eloquently sung by Métis soprano Melody Courage). They 'meet' on the Highway of Tears when Ava is in a horrific car crash and she 'sees' the murdered Native Girl, in the same spot. Gradually, by the opera's end, they reach reconciliation in a supremely poignant scene when the developed trust between them enables Ava to allow the Native Girl to hold her newborn child—a child the Native Girl will never have—while their voices bond in gentle, accepting harmony.

The primary roles are Ava and the Native Girl but the opera's catalyst is the surprisingly enlightened University Professor, Dr. Wilson, authoritatively sung by mezzo-soprano Marion Newman, who starts Ava on her journey. This involves Ava

losing her best friend, Jess (convincingly sung by mezzo-soprano Heather Molloy) but regaining a relationship with her boyfriend Devon (tenor Kaden Forsberg).

The Native Mother (of the Native Girl) is not a large role, but it is significant as sung with forthright gravitas by mezzo-soprano Rose-Ellen Nichols. In her keening, she voices not only her own mourning, but also a universal anguish, acting as the emotional beacon that the other searching souls turn to for their bearing.

The creators of *Missing* have forged a powerful story that tackles all the issues it should, head-on and unflinchingly. Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*, presented by Vancouver Opera this past spring, deals with similarly devastating losses. But *Missing* starts where the Heggie piece leaves off, going one step further to the healing and reconciliation that can come after bereavement. It needs to be seen and heard.

The Renaud Doucet-André Barbe production of *Turandot* that opened **Vancouver Opera's** season on Oct. 13th—a 2009 co-commission by six US opera companies from Seattle to Philadelphia—is well travelled and has been feted wherever it goes. Glittering with gold, dazzling with crimson and layered with Chinese symbolism, it creates

an exotic, compelling ambience for the sordid drama it supports.

Although director Doucet and designer Barbe are a Canadian team, VO's staging was this production's Canadian premiere and also marked the VO *and* role debuts of soprano Amber Wagner as Turandot and Argentine tenor Marcelo Puente as Calaf.

Wagner and Puente's freshness of approach was palpable but they were pitted against some formidable Puccinian obstacles: it is difficult to reconcile a twisted relationship psychology in which the character of Turandot exhibits almost nothing to warrant Calaf's utter infatuation with her, unless he is unswervingly attracted to murderously psychopathic women.

Puente made a dream Calaf: tall, suave and dashing with a clarion tenor voice, he clearly has a major future in this role. His voice may have had a slight metallic edge in its upper reaches but his rendition of "Nessun dorma"—the aria probably half the audience had especially come to hear—was vocally thrilling and elicited fervent audience response.

Wagner was a more prepossessing Turandot vocally than she was visually. Fortunately, those vocal chops can stand up to the best out there, making her a Turandot to be reckoned with. Her tone went from cold-blooded and savage in her

PHOTO: TIM MATHESON



Scene from Vancouver Opera's *Turandot*

first appearance to warm and vulnerable when she realizes she actually loves Calaf. It was an extraordinary transition.

The emotional core of *Turandot* for many is the slave girl Liù who loves Calaf simply, purely and unconditionally. It's difficult not to be swept away by her dire predicament while Calaf, oblivious to her affections for him, essentially ignores her plight. Soprano Marianne Fiset possesses the wide-ranging vocal attributes necessary to convey Liù's wrenching adoration for Calaf as well as the terror and defiance she displays in the face of her would-be executioners.

Ping (Jonathan Beyer), Pang (Julius Ahn), and Pong (Joseph Hu) were the amusing yet informative comic relief. The trio seems to function as court fools-to-be-taken-seriously, clad in such incongruities as gondolier and top hats and, thermal long-johns beneath brilliantly-coloured court robes.

The 64-member orchestra under Jacques Coulombe blazed through this familiar score with remarkable vitality while Leslie Dala's chorus has seldom sounded so resplendent.

A perfect *Turandot*? Not quite. But it had enough of the essentials—and the heart—to make it a thoroughly memorable and enjoyable one. —*Vancouver reviews by Robert Jordan*

VICTORIA

Janáček's *Jenůfa* is named for its main character, a naïve young countrywoman who has fallen pregnant out of wedlock by the handsome and dashing Števa. But it is clearly her stepmother, the Kostelnička, for whom the opera should be named when the role is sung and acted as well as it was by Emilia Boteva in **Pacific Opera Victoria's** emotionally draining, but hugely satisfying production (seen Oct. 12th and 22nd).

The deeply principled Kostelnička (church warden or sacristan in Czech) is the moral conscience of her village. Boteva began building the seriousness of her character as soon as the curtain went up, sitting quietly in a chair at the side of the stage, knitting her blood-red wool, but always aware of village life around her. It was clear she loves Jenůfa but is horrified, even before

she knows her stepdaughter is pregnant, by the young woman's fascination with Števa, the heir to the village mill, but also a drunkard and philanderer.

As innate seriousness turns to obsession, the Canadian-Bulgarian mezzo's already powerful voice became darker, rounder, more emotional. In voice, body and face, her turmoil was clear: a bastard child would disgrace the family and ruin Jenůfa's life, who even risks being stoned to death. So the stepmother drops the infant into the frozen river. As horrific as her crime is, Boteva's obvious, human suffering made the Kostelnička more than just the caricature of a wicked old woman.

As Jenůfa, clear-voiced Canadian soprano Lara Ciekiewicz hit her notes effortlessly and fluidly, but seemed to ride the surface of the emotions. Nothing, not the murder of her child nor somehow finding the grace to forgive his murderer, quite broke through the barrier of her charm. As sung by tenor John Lindsey, Števa too slightly missed the mark in both vocal and dramatic expressiveness. However,

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Colin Judson as Laca used his mobile, occasionally (and appropriately) raw tenor well, taking us with him as he moved from being Števa's bitter and impulsive half-brother to a suitable, loving husband for Jenůfa.

The brilliant set design by Debra Hanson—a single, monolithic structure,

own city is featured in an opera—right up there with Paris, Rome and Seville. So it's a shame that the thrill lasted only partway through *Rattenbury*, composer/librettist Tobin Stokes' chamber opera about the architect who shaped the very essence of Victoria through his B.C. Parliament

Francis Rattenbury betrayed his wife Florence with the half-his-age, twice-married Alma, eventually moving his mistress into the family home even while his wife refused to leave. The ensuing scandal ruined his social life and his career, forcing him to retreat home to England. But work didn't come, Ratz began to drink more, and Alma grew discontent. After she had a fling with the chauffeur (whose real name was Stoner, changed by Stokes to Stevens), the teenager, fuelled by jealousy and drugs, bludgeoned Rattenbury to death. The chauffeur was tried and sentenced to hang, at which point Alma stabbed herself to death.

That's a lot of story, and Stokes is determined to tell it all within a scant 80 minutes. The resulting work feels text heavy, with too much recounting of events and too little variation in musical line and structure. The opera works best when it moves from relating fact to imagining emotion. The section where Florrie, now living in the attic, interrupts the lovers to tell Ratz that God will judge him, and he later rather sweetly sings about how his home was not built for such strife, were standouts in this regard. So was the finale, where Ratz, hovering in the netherworld, accepts the blame for all the misery he has caused.

The set, by local architect Franc D'Ambrosio, cleverly used sections of the construction fabric from a recent renovation, printed with a life-sized image of the Empress Hotel, so that Rattenbury's wonderful early architecture loomed ominously over his sad decline. —*Victoria reviews by Robin J. Miller*

WINNIPEG

Manitoba Opera's latest production of *Madama Butterfly* (seen Nov. 18th) proved that the aching heart as expressed through art knows no racial or cultural divide; Puccini's immortal classic continues to stretch its poetic wings across the ages as it has done since its 1904 Milan premiere.

Last staged by the 45-year old company in 2009, the three-show run directed by Winnipeg's Robert Herriot also featured Tyrone Paterson leading the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra. A particularly strong cast of principals was led by Tokyo-born soprano Hiromi Omura who delivered



Kathleen Brett (Alma) and Richard Margison in the title role of Pacific Opera Victoria's *Rattenbury*

resembling part of a mill wheel, or perhaps more frighteningly, the slashing double blade of a *mezzaluna*—became a character in itself. Director Atom Egoyan's choice to place the opera in a contemporary world, where smartphones and Babushkas co-exist, came uncomfortably close to undercutting the reasons for the Kostelnička's desperation.

Nothing, however, could diminish the power of Janáček's music and its ability to cut directly to the heart. Conducted with perhaps just a smidgen too much control by Timothy Vernon, the orchestra reveled in the unconventional score, which mixes repeated motifs with swaggering, compulsive rhythms; melodic fragments with thick chromatic harmony.

It is always a bit of a thrill when places you know are featured in a movie: "I've been there!" you exclaim (hopefully to yourself). It's even more of a thrill when your very

Buildings, Empress Hotel and Steamship Terminal.

Co-produced by Pacific Opera Victoria and The Other Guys Theatre Company, *Rattenbury* was presented at POV's intimate Baumann Centre over eight performances in November. The production boasted an enviable cast: celebrated tenor Richard Margison as "Ratz", and well-known soprano Kathleen Brett as his second wife Alma, as well as two promising newcomers, mezzo Emma Parkinson in the double roles of Ratz's first wife Florrie and Irene the English housemaid, and baritone Tyler Fitzgerald as both the Mayor of Victoria and the handsome 18-year-old chauffeur who not only sleeps with Alma but also murders Ratz.

Yes, this is a melodrama, with everything a melodrama (or opera) needs—adultery, murder, a steamy Old Bailey trial—and it just so happens to all be true. The real-life

a masterful performance as the young geisha in a role she debuted in 2004. As she morphed from lovesick girl to a noble young woman who dies for honour, she displayed soaring, well-paced vocals throughout the notoriously difficult part.

Omura performed Cio-Cio San's aria "Un bel di vedremo" with limpid fragility and ringing high notes, trembling in anticipation as her husband's ship sails back into harbour. However, it was during her silent vigil awaiting Pinkerton's return during the exquisite 'Humming Chorus' where Omura's profoundly moving artistry spoke loudest, as every gradation of raw, vulnerable emotion flashed across her face—from hope to fear and love to loss; all beautifully lit by Bill Williams.

Her equal in every way, Canadian tenor David Pomeroy characterized a strapping Pinkerton, swaggering his way through his opening aria, "Dovunque al mondo," with its strains of the "Star Spangled Banner," and a chillingly proclaimed "America forever." Pomeroy set sail on his own harrowing narrative arc with port stops along the way that included the sweetly tender love duet "Viene la sera" sung with his new child bride, until becoming unmoored and wracked with remorse during Act III's "Addio fiorito asil."

Baritone Gregory Dahl was a nuanced Sharpless, the US Consul, urging Pinkerton to be cautious with Butterfly's heart; later caught in the lovers' downward spiral in the trio, "Io so che alle sue pene," sung with Pinkerton and Suzuki in a well-balanced ensemble.

Suzuki, portrayed by Japanese-American mezzo-soprano Nina Yoshida Nelsen in her MO debut, was Cio-Cio San's dedicated maid and confidant, harmonizing seamlessly with Omura in "Scuoti quella fronda," (the 'Flower Duet').

However, the production is not without flaw. Cio-Cio San—now Mrs. Pinkerton—remained resolutely Japanese in appearance, still dressed in a kimono during Acts II and III despite singing of her 'American house'—this visually weakened her character's transformation. And marriage broker Goro, (tenor James McLennan), who machinates the nuptials between Pinkerton

and Butterfly, appeared far too polite for a scheming plot driver.

Herriot's thoughtful direction created several tableaux of glorious eye candy, including Cio-Cio San's first entrance flanked by the MO Chorus of geishas, well prepared by Tadeusz Biernacki, who primly twirl their delicate parasols on the tiered set of sliding shoji screens designed by Patrick Clark for Pacific Opera Victoria. Herriot also injected fascinating layers of sub-text into the opera's dying moments, as each lead character—including mezzo-soprano Laurelle Jade Froese's Kate Pinkerton performed with sensitive compassion—suddenly reappears onstage to witness Butterfly's demise, now trapped in their own world of unspoken regret.

Despite those who might believe this 'East-meets-West' operatic butterfly should be permanently captured and pinned to a

board—archaic and irrelevant, to be shelved as a curiosity of the past on account of its old-fashioned 'orientalism'—MO's latest production proved that in the hands of a soaring cast, this great Italian love story still has wings. —Holly Harris

UNITED STATES

BOSTON

In this era rampant with 'director's opera,' there was a certain old-fashioned charm to **Odyssey Opera's** production of Donizetti's *L'assedio di Calais* (seen Oct. 28th), in which nothing would have raised an audience's eyebrow a century ago. On the shallow proscenium stage of Boston's Huntington Avenue Theatre, Dan Daly's painted flats and steps and strangely unutilized central door created a decent approximation of a 14th-century Calais household interior at the start of the Hundred Years' War,



Hiromi Omura (Cio-Cio San) and David Pomeroy (Pinkerton) in Manitoba Opera's *Madama Butterfly*

when the stalwart French were besieged by the implacable (until the finale) Edward III of England. Joshua Major's stage direction extended little beyond traffic control, though the repeated exchanges of the heavily swaddled infant son of Aurelio and Eleonora quickly turned comical, and the deployment of the final scene raised repeated titters—surely not the effect intended by Donizetti or his librettist, Salvatore Cammarano (or of Major himself, I imagine).

Still, it was an enjoyable evening—instructive, too, to hear and see this rarely revived opera in its not-quite American premiere (The Glimmerglass Festival had mounted its own production just three months earlier). Donizetti's trial run at the French *grand opera* style, albeit in Italian, is full of beauties (there's a wonderful duet, for instance, for the soprano and her trousered-mezzo husband), here presented complete except for the ballet, part of which served as an entr'acte between Acts II and III. Two of the three leading roles were exceptionally well served by a pair of Canadians, veteran baritone James Westman and the young soprano Lucia Cesaroni. Westman's occasionally age-weathered but still handsomely sturdy tones were aptly suited to Eustachio, the town's heroic mayor and loving paterfamilias; he had all the Donizettian vocal gestures down pat. And Lucia Cesaroni—an affecting actress, and a voice new to me—sang stylishly with a bright, vibrant sound that didn't exclude color or depth. She brought out the best in her stage husband, Magda Gartner, who looked and behaved more like a misplaced Hansel and whose good voice lacked a solid bottom and an ideally firm midrange. The supporting cast was suitably supportive; so was the small but enthusiastic chorus. Odyssey's general and artistic director, Gil Rose, led his fine musicians

with passion and punch. He's put together an ambitious season ("Joan of Arc and the Hundred Years' War" is its umbrella, with works by Tchaikovsky, Dello Joio, Honnegger and Verdi in addition to this one), and it deserves a bigger, more demographically varied audience than it got this particular Saturday night, which left this veteran operagoer—closer to the war's hundred years than to Joan's nineteen—feeling relatively youthful. —Patrick Dillon

NEW YORK

"Muddled" was *The New York Times*' assessment of **Metropolitan Opera's** new production of *Norma*, and if America's commander-in-chief were not a cultural dunderhead, he might as well cite this (in his words) "failing" paper's critique as an example of "fake news." I've been seeing Met

Norma since 1970, starting with the premiere of a Paul-Emile Deiber production far less notable for its static stagecraft than for the glittering pairing of Joan Sutherland and Marilyn Horne.

Thirty-one years later, John Copley's dreary successor was dead on arrival. It was in that production's final resuscitation that today's foremost Norma, Sondra Radvanovsky, took her first Met outings as Bellini's Druid priestess. She clearly deserved better (just as she did with Kevin Newbury's well-traveled Toronto/Chicago/San Francisco/Barcelona production in which she starred)—but with Sir David McVicar's new staging, pace the *Times*, she finally got it: the first *Norma* in my memory that succeeded fully as drama. That it did so without sidestepping the contours of Felice Romani's libretto wins McVicar extra

points: he gave us—in tandem with set designer Robert Jones—Romani's dark forest with gnarled Irminsul and altar stone; an "abitazione di Norma" that actually looked habitable. More importantly, the people within the sets were recognizably human, with a full range of human behaviors and emotions.

Radvanovsky, always an emotionally tactile Norma, dug even deeper here, abetted by deft touches from her clearly *simpatico* director. When, for example, her Norma announced her guilt with a softly haunting "Son io," she then sealed her fate with an impassioned kiss that seemed as surprising to Pollione as it was to an audience accustomed to normal *Norma* routine.

I won't pretend that on Oct. 3rd any of the principals was ideal, but all of them gave pleasure. Would either Joseph Calleja or Joyce DiDonato count Pollione or Adalgisa as a perfect fit? I doubt it, but still, both brought their special virtues to their roles, he with the sheer beauty and presence his



Lucia Cesaroni (Eleonora) in Odyssey Opera's *L'assedio di Calais*

PHOTO: KATHY WITTMAN

tenorial tone; she with her graceful mastery of *bel canto* niceties. Matthew Rose, a good enough Oroveso, failed to banish the rolling Italianate sounds of Pinza, Pasero, and Siepi from my mind's ear. Vocally, Radvanovsky has had happier Norma nights, but she delivered mightily all the same, with a notably improved acuity of diction amply balancing some blurry articulation and the occasional small glitch in her *pianissimo* orbit; once again, faults and all, she proved the most complete, complex Norma I've had the privilege to see. Carlo Rizzi conducted with surety of style and an admirable propulsion: this was, in the pit as on stage, a *Norma* that never lost sight of its goal.


For a far more cogent example of 'muddled,' I'd refer the *Times* to Bartlett Sher's production of *Les contes d'Hoffmann*, unveiled unhappily in 2009 and almost as unsatisfying in this, its third revival (seen Oct. 4th). I say "almost" because—despite my abiding dissatisfaction with Sher's wildly overbusy staging, with its multiple Olympias, its purposelessly up-and-down Antonia set, and (most flagrantly) its omnipresent, devil's-sidekick Nicklausse—this was the best performance it's gotten so far (better, perhaps, than it deserves). Vittorio Grigolo, typically magnetic in the title role, and Erin Morley, delightfully, elegantly high-flying as Olympia, were even better than they'd been in 2015; and Laurent Naouri, rubber of face but darkly firm of voice, reprised the finest quartet of villains Sher's show has seen. And almost all the newcomers were top-flight: Anita Hartig showed so enticingly lovely a timbre that I, too, might have coaxed her Antonia to throw health to the winds and sing; Christophe Mortagne amused charmingly in his four character-tenor guises; and Canadian bass Robert Pomakov offered a less showy versatility in his strong double duty as bluff tavernier Luther and anxious papa Crespel. Tara Erraught's success as Nicklausse was more equivocal: singing and acting neatly in music with a lower tonal centre than she finds fully comfortable, she suffered more than anyone else from Sher's errancies. Oksana Volkova was the vocally so-so Giulietta in a generally undernourished musicodramatic version of Act III, but



Sondra Radvanovsky (Norma) and Joseph Calleja (Pollione) in Metropolitan Opera's *Norma*





like everyone else she threw herself into the mix with enthusiastic conviction. Holding Offenbach's unwieldy swan song together (and offering welcome atonement for his complicity in Stefan Herheim's ghastly travesty of *Hoffmann* for Bregenz), Canadian Opera Company Music Director Johannes Debus served

up romantic ardour, spooky atmosphere, and beer-hall kick, as needed, from the pit; I've never known the 70-minute stretch of the Prologue and Act I to move with more aural variety and dramatic intent. All in all, it was, oxymoronically, a wonderful showing of a theatrically misguided show.



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Thomas Adès' *The Exterminating Angel* offers an intriguing paradox: in bringing to the stage a film that doesn't need music, Adès created music that doesn't need the script on which it's based. Luis Buñuel's cinematic classic is terse and droll, a drawing-room high comedy that with incremental oddity, runs amok. Adès' opera, longer (by half) and louder, perforce makes its own decisions about just how the story should sound. That his ideas wouldn't align with my own was, perhaps, a likely bet; but as it happened, on Nov. 7th, I was often fascinated by his aural world. Its varied, sometimes eerie sonorities (nine decades after its invention, the ondes Martenot, an early electronic instrument, still registers as spooky and strange); its almost frighteningly propulsive martial entr'acte; its occasional spells of tender lyricism (the doomed lovers' Act III duet is a prime example). Still, the score most often seemed to exist on its own, seldom enhancing Buñuel's surreal tale of an upper-crust supper party that no one is able to leave.

There were other problems, logistical ones. The opera had its premiere, two summers back, at Salzburg's Haus für Mozart, with a seating capacity of 1,485; it moved last April to London's Royal Opera House

(2,256 seats) before hitting the 3,800-seat Met—a progression surely not to its benefit: faces were hard to read, and the stage seemed remote even from a good centre-orchestra seat. Director Tom Cairns' text (written in collaboration with Adès) was intelligible no more than 50 percent of the time; and my frequent cross-cutting from the stage to the Met's back-of-the-seat titling system precluded a total immersion in the drama.

Adès can write beautifully for the voice, but most often he chooses not to; he's especially punishing to his sopranos, and in two central roles neither the harshly shrill Amanda Echalez (as the party's hostess) nor the dog-whistly Audrey Luna (as an opera-singer guest) offered much vocal pleasure; the fault wasn't fully theirs.

Of the other singers, two Canadian tenors stood out: Joseph Kaiser, a newcomer to the piece but a strong presence as the party's host. Frédéric Antoun was given a better chance to shine vocally, repeating the role he'd created as explorer Raúl Yebenes. To Antoun and the ever stage-commanding veteran Sir John Tomlinson belongs the distinction of the first scene of the opera—15 minutes into it—whose words I could actually understand. Sophie Bevan and David

Portillo made seductive musical poetry of their suicide duet; Iestyn Davies brought his character's neuroses effectively (and often amusingly) to the fore; and mezzos Alice Coote (another newcomer) and Christine Rice (a three-timer) were vivid in their important roles; both rose happily to their spotlit solos.

Cairns directed the show as if he knew what the librettist needed at every juncture—which as its author, he of course did—within Hildegard Bechtler's handsomely spare set. (Her complementary costumes hit just the right high-1960s pitch). Adès conducted, and he couldn't have asked for a better, more resonantly responsive orchestra than the Met's virtuoso ensemble. All the same, even before I saw the Met's show myself, I was advising friends to catch the HD telecast instead, where comprehension of the text might prove easier. Having seen it now in the house, I reiterate that advice: I don't think much will be lost, and there's plenty, to my mind, to be gained in intelligibility.

French opera can be as intoxicating as a *parfumerie*, but its fragrances can be just as palpable in their absence as they are when, stoppers off, they're wafting freely through

the musical air. The Met's latest revival of Massenet's *Thaïs*—a production first seen in Chicago in 2002, then imported to New York six years later—had me missing that Gallic 'je ne sais quoi' even as it was delivering, in general terms, a quite decent performance of the matter at hand. But despite a French conductor and tenor and a leading man with a proven expertise in the elusive art of shaping a French *mélodie*, all it took was a midnight listen (via YouTube) to a few minutes of a venerable Parisian recording of 1959, with Andrée Esposito and Robert Massard, to pin down just what was lacking in the Met's Nov. 15th performance. Brutally



(l-r) Joseph Kaiser (Edmundo de Nobile), Frédéric Antoun (Raúl Yebenes) and Sally Matthews (Silvia de Avila) in Metropolitan Opera's *The Exterminating Angel*

PHOTO: KEN HOWARD/METROPOLITAN OPERA



Gerald Finley (Athanaël) and Ailyn Pérez in the title role of Metropolitan Opera's *Thaïs*

cut as that old recorded version is, it offers by far the more complete *Thaïs*.

Intrinsic to its idiomatic fragrance is that both singers had the style in their blood. The Met's Ailyn Pérez, on the other hand, was coming to the role (like ex-courtesan Thaïs to the convent) as a novice; and while her lyric soprano is lush and lovely—at least below her uncomfortably blasted high Ds—her command of language and stylistic niceties is still far from ideal: she gave the impression she'd be happier singing either Musetta or Mimì, but couldn't decide which one. The wonderful Gerald Finley—similarly making a stage debut in his role as her would-be moral compass—proved a more complicated problem. Always a pleasure to watch, ever in the moment, and more compelling with every new scene, he's linguistically adept but wasn't yet fully attuned to the vocal nuances of Athanaël whose music in any case, is better suited to a lighter, headier sound than his.

French tenor Jean-François Borras, in his much smaller role as the hedonistic Nicias, proved just fine; so did French-Canadian soprano France Bellemare as his

slave Crobyle, joining in happy duet with Megan Marino's Myrtae and trio with Deanna Breiwick's charmingly high-flying Charmeuse.

Emmanuel Villaume conducted adeptly (with some gorgeous playing by David Chan in the famous violin "Méditation"), though it seemed to me the score wasn't coursing through his veins either; how else could he have countenanced Pérez's turgid account of Act II's "Dis-moi que je suis belle," so feverishly intense with Esposito under Albert Wolff, so sluggish and leaden at the Met? John Cox's staging (updated to a Hollywoodish *Mummy*-era Egypt) gets the job done well enough, in Paul Brown's good-looking sets. (Oops...I'm not supposed to mention Brown, who disavowed the production when it moved to the Met, so miffed was he when Renée Fleming chucked his costumes for glammed-up couture by Christian Lacroix). But even a *mise-en-scène* of Zeffirellian extravagance couldn't have offset the disappointing lack of aural perfume.

For most of its first act, Mary Birnbaum's staging of *La finta giardiniera*—Juilliard

Opera's season opener—achieved a distinction I hadn't thought possible: it had me actually enjoying this trivial, tedious piece of Mozartean juvenilia, full of precocious mimicry of gestures not yet intellectually or emotionally fully understood. I stubbornly persist in thinking that if the name "Mozart" weren't attached to this score—or to *Il sogno di Scipione* or *Mitridate, re di Ponto* or most of his other pre-*Idomeneo* operas—its interest wouldn't extend past a few musicologists and inveterate curiosity seekers. I'd seen it staged only once before—by New York City Opera in 2003—and it had bored me mightily then, despite director Mark Lamos's game attempt to impose on its inane plot some semblance of intellectual interest.

He didn't succeed; but Birnbaum managed to entertain me by taking, at least for a while, the opposite approach: she poked gentle fun at the opera's implausible conceit of a noblewoman who, stabbed and left for dead by her jealous fiancé, finds gainful employment as a gardener in the household of the town mayor—whose niece, it just happens, is the former fiancé's newly betrothed. Birnbaum helped clarify the

confusion by adding an amusing pair of serving women gossiping (in English, unlike the opera proper) before the overture began; and while I don't as a rule rejoice in staged overtures, this one's minimal musical interest was made more than tolerable by her droll tableaux of the variously lovelorn dramatis personae.

Then along came Acts II and III, and Birnbaum began to make good on her

17th, their second performance of the run) I wished I were hearing them in *Figaro* or *Don Giovanni*. The four gifted women all offered fine vocal material, in various stages of development, with Kathryn Henry as the second fiancée and Christine Taylor Price as a saucy chambermaid the most fully accomplished. The men, all winning comedians, were more evenly matched: baritone Jacob Scharfman as the pretend gardener's pre-

SAN FRANCISCO

During recent decades, John Adams has composed a range of highly successful operas, including the repertory standard *Nixon in China* (1987). More surprise then when *Girls of the Golden West*—in its **San Francisco Opera** world premiere—proved, on the whole, ponderous and dull (seen Nov. 24th). Certainly, a few moments of lyricism and soaring drama emerged,

but Adams' musical imagination was not fostered by Peter Sellars' verbose libretto. The pastiche of words were drawn from a number of historic writings, including miners' ballads (Adams writes loud, churning, minimalist music for them); Frederick Douglass' great speech, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?", but there are also passages by Alfonsina Storni, Mark Twain, and Shakespeare (a large chunk of *Macbeth*), as well as Chinese-Californian poetry of the period. The great words of Douglass are powerfully sung by Davōne Tines in the central role of the fugitive slave Ned Peters. Clarence (Ryan McKinny), a potent narrating figure throughout the piece, opens the work with Twain's (surely ironic) idealization of the 'population' of miners.

Passages from the lovely and insightful letters of the

highly educated Louise Amelia Clappe are joined by those from other period historians to set the narrative framework. The fine, compelling singer Julia Bullock, who dominates the opera as its ongoing narrator, is burdened with yards-on-end of flat *parlando* music. After that, she definitely deserves her grand moment as Lady Macbeth as well as the meditative, lyrical passage that touchingly closes the whole work.

And 'narrative' is the operative word here, for this is an opera in which actions are declaimed rather than shown. Adams and Sellars veer remarkably towards oratorio. Adams has written oratorios, while Sellars has staged those of Handel and Bach in operatic form. These experiences seem to



Tamara Banjesevic (Sandrina) and Charles Sy (Belfiore) in Juilliard Opera's *La finta giardiniera*

inserted program note, with its ominous talk of "the relationship of façade to depth... which (like the theater itself) is a paradigm of the conflict between appearance and reality." In other words, she started to take things seriously. It didn't work; and as the plot descended into ever lower depths of silliness, so did her staging collapse into ever more irritating gimmickry: scenes played on a nearly empty stage, in near-total darkness or in initially blinding light; a character entering from the audience, for no clear reason other than to liven things up; a hastily beaten retreat to Act I's parodic stylization for the finale. It was as if she'd simply decided to give up.

There was, as usual at Juilliard, a talented cast to appreciate, even as (on Nov.

tend-gardener servant and a capital pair of tenors. Joshua Blue hammed gracefully and sang nimbly as the clueless *podestà*. Charles Sy was seductively smooth and honeyed as the heroine's formerly knife-wielding ex. Sy—a singer not unknown to opera-savvy Torontonians as a dual winner in the COC's 2014 Centre Stage Competition—gave his considerable best to one of teenage Mozart's most unwieldy inventions: an Act II *recitativo accompagnato* that's as good as anything in the score, leading into the tritest of arias. Joseph Colaneri conducted the Juilliard Orchestra neatly and, like an indulgent elder, with a seeming affection for the youngster's score—and if he's the man responsible for the many cuts, I offer him my hearty thanks.

—*New York reviews by Patrick Dillon*

inform a markedly odd love scene between the anti-hero Joe Cannon (superbly sung and acted by Paul Appleby) and his prostitute lover Ah Sing (given an aria that shows off Hye Jung Lee's stratospheric soprano), in which each of the lovers tells the audience what happened, while sitting on their bed of passion.

One of the most vivid characters is the card dealer Ramón, sung lusciously by Canadian baritone Elliot Madore. He is given genuinely beautiful music (as Adams can do) and a series of truly convincing relationships with other characters. He profoundly loves Josefa (the lush and emotionally engaging J'Nai Bridges), his partner at the card table where they work hard to foster the miners' losses. They are blessed with a moving pastoral love scene early on, and become terrified actors in the brutal July 4th rampage against Mexicans, Chinese, Blacks, Chileans and Peruvians at the opera's climax. She stabs Joe Cannon, a caricature of a drunken gambling miner, as he rapes her, and is hanged by a kangaroo court. In the shadows of the surrounding terror, Bridges sings the most beautiful aria in the opera exquisitely, set to Storni's Spanish poetry.

Sellers directed a stripped down, cheap-looking production with the wings open and stage hands parading on stage—presumably meant to invoke Brechtian alienation from theatricality. And alienate it did! The Empire Bar had four neon signs and the miners in one scene sit on modern plastic folding chairs. The vast (historically accurate) redwood tree stump in Act II all but crowded the singers off of the stage. David Gropman's bare sets reinforce the spartan spirit, though Rita Ryack's historically-inspired costumes compensated by adding some actual visual interest.

Conductor Grant Gershon led the new and very complex score with apparent accuracy and undoubted energy—even commanding cow bells, snare drum, whip, and temple blocks. All singers, and much of the orchestra, were skillfully amplified by sound designer Mark Grey. However, this type of sound enhancement lends a uniformity of volume and texture that can become wearing across a long evening.

One may hope that Adams and Sellers will consider revising *Girls of*

the Golden West, though its deeply built-in reliance on deadening narration might point to a major overhaul.

—John Bender

INTERNATIONAL

AUSTRIA:VIENNA

Robert Carsen's stage instructions for his new production of *Wozzeck* at **Theater an der Wien** (seen Oct. 27th) might have read as Samuel Beckett's for *Waiting for Godot*: "A country road. A tree. Evening." In contrast to recent visually-charged productions, for example South African artist William Kentridge's sensational *Wozzeck* in Salzburg a few months earlier, the Canadian director's stage is empty: no video to evoke possible connections to past or future, collective unconscious, id or superego, iconography—just the gripping presence of extraordinary singers that Carsen directs with penetrating precision. For *Wozzeck*, Carsen puts the spotlight on the text, working with singers as he would with actors in a black-box theatre. Together with English conductor Leo Hussein, he derives intense dramatic effect by focussing on the relationship between

the text adapted from Büchner's unfinished play, *Woyzeck*, and Berg's expressionist score for *Wozzeck*.

From the start, one thing becomes clear: the stammering soldier Wozzeck is the sanest character in the piece. Austrian baritone Florian Boesch, also renowned as a *lieder* singer, approaches the part with the same concentration and beautiful tone and diction as he would in Schubert's *Winterreise*. His Wozzeck is a visionary poet imbued with dark lucidity. Vocally, the role poses no problem for him, he has the range and ample volume; we quickly take this for granted and become completely enthralled with his character.

Lise Lindstrom is a strong partner as Marie. Her qualities as a singer, the vocal focus and beauty of sound are infallible. But here once again we are galvanized by the vividness of her acting, like a Mike Leigh character, desperate, ill-fated—here hooked on heroine—her inevitable decline and destruction are devastating to watch.

The other characters are more stereotyped. Like apparitions in a bad dream, they are strangely one-dimensional and

Elliot Madore (Ramón) and J'Nai Bridges (Josefa) in San Francisco Opera's *Girls of the Golden West*



Florian Boesch (Wozzeck, below) and Aleš Briscein (Drum Major) in Theater an der Wien's *Wozzeck*



their statements absurd. There's not a single weak-link in the cast: tenor John Daszak, acclaimed for his roles in the operas of Benjamin Britten is ideally cast as the Captain; English tenor Benjamin Hulett lends beautiful vocal tone to Andres; Czech tenor Aleš Briscein is menacing as the Drum Major; French mezzo-soprano Juliette Mars is excellent as Margret and, as the Doctor, Viennese bass Stefan Cerny is perfectly sadistic.

Hussein at the helm of the Wiener Symphoniker maintains a constant dialogue with the trajectory of the action on stage, cross-referencing and weaving the leitmotifs into the narrative. His subtle and analytical style of conducting is especially effective in this chamber music version of Berg's orchestral score by Eberhard Kloke, which reduces the number of players from 90 to about 40. A highly dramatic colourist, Hussein superimposes phrases with mounting intensity, building to transfixing climaxes in the interludes and when the orchestra is in full throttle, we hardly regret the original version.

To conclude, there's no swampy lake for Wozzeck's final scene and death by drowning—no décor, no water, just a barren floor strewn with corpses of unknown soldiers. Wozzeck sinks in among them: "the poor people." He becomes once again Büchner's Woyzeck in a story unfinished and never-ending. —Denise Wendel-Poray

GERMANY: BERLIN

Barrie Kosky, Intendant (General Director) of **Komische Oper Berlin**, has built his company's considerable reputation on a series of highly regarded, outrageous, colourful productions such as their *Don Giovanni*, *Die schöne Helena* (Offenbach's *La belle Hélène*) and fabulous revivals of interwar German operettas like Oscar Straus' *Die Perlen der Cleopatra*. Debussy's sobering drama of familial dysfunction and abuse would seem to demand a less exuberant approach, as well it did in a compelling new production which opened Oct. 17th, seen on Dec. 2nd.

The ingenious, permanent set consists of a series of convex shells of diminishing

perspective, a traditional proscenium cut out of each. Characters shift on and offstage by way of a set of stage revolves, allowing the opera's numerous short scenes to seamlessly flow, one to the next. The production's first half references *film noir* and silent movies with its grainy, jumpy projections and dramatic lighting. Surely Kosky must have intended a Marlene Dietrich reference in the grotto scene where Mélisande sports a chic 1930s head scar as you can almost literally hear her declaim "I want to walk alone" in the German film icon's trademark accent.

In the second half, things turn unbearably violent, and we switch to the realm of *cinéma vérité* as the lighting palette becomes more stark, revealing the ugliness beneath the surface. The stage revolve is used to brilliant effect to reveal the 'family' frozen in an Addams Family or American Gothic-style portrait. After enduring the horrors of physical abuse and fratricide, Mélisande physically moves each character back to their rightful places in the 'portrait'—a desperate attempt to restore normalcy to an irreparable situation.

PHOTO: WERNER KMETITSCH

In a uniformly strong cast, the standout was baritone Günter Papendell as Golaud, absolutely uncompromising and compelling as the older brother who cannot contain his jealousy nor comprehend his young wife's unhappiness. Of all the singers, Papendell handled the reams of notoriously difficult text with the greatest command. The colour of the French language, while entirely determined by its distinctive vowels, still demands consonants be uttered crisply and cleanly to achieve maximum comprehension. Papendell achieved this and more by bringing the language alive with his deep understanding of its cadence, enlivening its sounds with well-considered dramatic intent.

The other performers fared less well in this respect. While soprano Nadja Mchantaf gave of herself unstintingly as a young woman trapped in a house full of male abusers, her astonishing physicality was not entirely equalled vocally. Beauty of sound often dominated textual clarity—a uniformly veiled tonal quality masked clear vowels which, coupled with missing consonants, resulted in a less than complete portrayal.

British baritone Jonathan McGovern's Pelléas enters as the nebbish younger brother to Golaud—there is no mistaking his low status in the pecking order of this household. Saddled with this characterization, it is a little difficult to understand why Mélisande is drawn to her husband's brother but then again, in this piece, none of the relationships are easily defined. McGovern's lightish, tenorial tone is well-suited to Debussy's cruel vocal demands which presented him no particular hurdles. If the last ounce of 'face' was missing from McGovern's portrayal, again it could be that his inflexion of the text was just a bit too uniform, resulting in a wash of sound that failed to unlock the libretto's full dramatic potential.

On the other hand, bass Jens Larsen intoned Arkel's seemingly benign lines resonantly, yet with absolute clarity. Kosky's repulsive characterization requires him to physically abuse a fully-pregnant Mélisande. Mezzo-soprano Nadine Weissmann delivers Genèviève's recitation of Pelléas' letter at the opera's start with great beauty of tone—she

is a concerned, but ultimately ineffectual presence throughout, unable to intervene in the abuse that infects her household. Boy soprano Gregor-Michael Hoffmann was astonishing as Yniold—in any production, always disturbing as Golaud's victim son/pawn/spy—here, a ruined, nail-biting mess who nevertheless sang with clear, carrying tone.

It is hard to imagine this was Canadian conductor Jordan de Souza's (Kapellmeister at the Komische) first time conducting Debussy's challenging score. His vocal accompaniment was always fully supportive yet never overwhelming. The pacing seemed just right and the sound was

lyric, there was nothing delightful going on inside Ireland's National Opera House, where the onslaught of Hurricane Ophelia (not Cahn's more benign winter snowfall) forced the cancellation of the dress rehearsal of *Medea*, the initial offering of this year's **Wexford Festival Opera**. As a consequence, opening night (three days later, Oct. 19th) was in essence its dress. The traditionally receptive Wexford audience entered the theater happy to grin and bear the occasional glitch (a blackout had affected the town's southern stretch just an hour before curtain, wreaking potential havoc with operagoers' evening dress and maquillage).



Jonathan McGovern and Nadja Mchantaf in the title roles of Komische Oper Berlin's *Pelléas et Mélisande*

allowed to bloom and *crescendo* in the dramatic orchestral interludes when required. Individual instrumental solos emerged with clarity and purpose.

Ultimately, this *Pelléas* succeeded on the strength of its dramaturgy—a concept fully of its time yet simultaneously timeless in the universality and applicability of its message. —Gianmarco Segato

IRELAND: WEXFORD

Oh, the weather outside was frightful on a mid-October Irish Monday; but bucking the next line of Sammy Cahn's beloved

But no extra rehearsal time could have rendered Fiona Shaw's production any less a disaster—by seeming consensus one of the worst shows ever to hit the festival stage. It was worrisome to read in advance, in the program book, about Shaw's problem with "how to animate the seven-minute overture": the logical answer, of course, being to let the orchestra animate it, exactly as Cherubini intended and his audience expected. Instead, Shaw provided an incoherent prequel (I think it was that) involving three children at distracting play, reducing the overture—a model of

classicism much admired by Beethoven—to background music. When the opera proper began, things got even worse, with a hen party in a modern gym, Glauce and her sweat-garbed gal pals on massage tables and rowing machines, and party crasher Medea lamely menacing her rival with a plastic spray bottle of household cleaner.

Andrea Grant, surely did their best to honor aurally what was being savaged by Shaw.

Grant was, atypically, one of the few Canadians aboard for Wexford '17. Another was fellow répétiteur Tina Chang, whose music directorship (from the keyboard) of Rossini's *La scala di seta*—one of the three daytime *Shortworks* programs presented

concurrently in Dublin. It was a tribute to the enterprise of artistic director David Agler, now in his 13th year at the Wexford helm, and a Canadian in all but his official passport (on which he's still working). He's the risk taker responsible for the festival's big hit of 2013, Jacopo Foroni's *Cristina, regina di Svezia*, and this year he excavated another Foroni work, the *semiseria*, *Margherita* (1848), and it was a delight. But Agler saved his best for last: Alfano's woefully underrated *Risurrezione* (1904), after Tolstoy, was given a near-perfect realization by director Rosetta Cucchi, conductor Francesco Cilluffo, and a splendid cast led by the remarkable Anne Sophie Duprels, palpably under the long-suffering skin of the many-mooded Katiusha, and Gerard Schneider, vocally and dramatically a fully worthy partner as the equally flawed, equally penitent Prince Dimitri. If Hurricane Ophelia and *Medea* did their worst to knock this punky, special festival off its feet, Alfano's aptly named opus showed it standing tall in full artistic glory. —Patrick Dillon

Niamh White and Anne Sophie Duprels (Katiusha) in Wexford Festival Opera's *Risurrezione*



Cluttering the stage with irrelevant, trivial business (so many toys; so much suitcase packing and furniture moving!), the unmusical Shaw exhibited an insulting disinterest in letting the opera unfold on its own, far better terms. An admired Medea on the spoken stage, she should stick to acting.

Orchestrally and vocally, it was a happier evening, though both pit and the many fine voices had a hard time competing with Shaw's dramatic obstacle course. Lise Davidsen, the rapid up-and-comer in the title role, boasts a gorgeously glowing dramatic soprano, but she stubbornly adhered to a dynamic range of *mezzoforte* and louder, and sang with little rhythmic or verbal acuity. Still, Stephen Barlow, the conductor, along with the invaluable répétiteur

amid cramped seating in Whites Hotel—proved the afternoon's high point. The staging was amiably messy and the singing variably amiable, but Chang's pianism was a wonder, somehow capturing the tangy variety of a Rossinian orchestra along with the music's breakneck zest; even her lightning-fast page turns seemed crisply perfect. In another of the short works, Roberto Recchia's adeptly stripped-down *Rigoletto*, Canadian baritone Steven Griffin made his mark as a modern-suited, domino-masked Marullo.

And in the best of the three, the world premiere of Andrew Synnott's double-headed *Dubliners*, Wexford offered a pair of James Joyce adaptations easily the peers of the Abbey's chaotic *Ulysses*, playing

UNITED KINGDOM: LONDON

Comparisons between the **English National Opera's** new production of Verdi's *Aida* (seen Oct. 3rd) and the recent Salzburg Summer Festival's star-studded show, with main attraction Anna Netrebko making her début as the Ethiopian princess, are unfair but inevitable given the time frame. Taking into consideration the inequalities—most notably that the ENO functions on a fraction of the budget of the gilded festival—it is interesting to observe that these productions have similar strengths and weaknesses and fall into the same pot-holes scenically. Happily, in both venues, Verdi's music is served by superior conducting and remarkable singing.

At the ENO, the evening begins with the elegantly incisive conducting of Keri-Lynn Wilson. Comparing this relatively young woman conductor to veteran Verdi specialist Riccardo Muti (Salzburg) is not as unfair as one might think. Like Muti, she masters effects throughout that bring a freshness to the score. In the overture, she daringly separates phrases, later weaving them together into a silken tissue of sound.

PHOTO: CLIVE BARDA

She passes from the intimate to the epic proportions of the work masterfully, with careful attention to the singers, always keeping a close rein on the orchestra—granted not the Vienna Philharmonic—but excellent players.

Sadly, Phelim McDermott's production like that of Shirin Neshat's in Salzburg, is not up to the level of the music and ultimately fails to make the monolithic drama come alive. At the Austrian festival, the Iranian artist's complete lack of experience in opera helped explain her ineffectual staging. However, Olivier Award-winning McDermott, highly successful with his previous stagings of Philip Glass's operas *Satya-graha* and *Akhnaten* for the company, strangely reveals none of the off-beat originality he is noted for, nor even a hint of his usual directorial bravura. For example, there is no apparent attempt to elucidate the love triangle of Aida, Amneris and Radamès which is so central to the piece; rather, their interactions are inert and stereotyped. It is no help that Edmund Tracey's staid, awkward translation petrifies each phrase in mid-flight—proof once again, if more were

needed, that it's high time the ENO drop its 'English only' policy.

In Salzburg, Neshat's staging was static but her experience as an artist produced stunning visual effects, notably in slow-motion video portraits as well as her sensitive fine tuning of Tatyana van Walsum's costumes. Unfortunately, there was no such consolation in Tom Pye's extravagantly ugly sets for the Coliseum stage nor in Kevin Pollard's garish showcase of costumes.

But when it comes to insipid choreography Salzburg and the ENO are right on par. In this grandest of grand operas, the danced sections are often problematic. The Priestesses' Scene in Act I, scene ii, and the grand Triumphal Scene in Act II, can either be pitfalls or an opportunity to bring new perspective. In Salzburg, Thomas Wilhelm's choreographies were clichés of modern dance and at the ENO, the London-based acrobatic group Mimbire, in particular in the dance of the virgin priestesses, delivered a proliferation of unspeakable kitsch.

But all comparisons end when it comes to singers for if Salzburg may be the Vahalla of operatic divinities, ENO is the fertile soil

for less-renowned, but equally impressive vocal talent. In the title role, American soprano Latonia Moore triumphed throughout with beautiful shimmering tone, effortless range and dramatic presence; the Scottish soprano Eleanor Dennis was a stunning revelation as the High Priestess and, powerfully-voiced South African baritone Musa Ngqungwana gave one of the most gripping performances of the evening as the ferocious Ethiopian king, Amonasro.

Well-known to ENO audiences, Welsh tenor Gwyn Hughes Jones fulfilled promise with beautiful tone and dramatic presence as Radamès. Granted, no newcomer, mezzo-soprano Michelle DeYoung's Amneris conveyed warmth and nobility, though her diction was regrettably marred by strange oblong vowel sounds; once again she, like the others, would have been far more at ease singing in Italian.

Be it the summits of Salzburg or at the slightly more down-to-earth ENO, both these productions fell so short of the music it would have been preferable to close your eyes and listen to Verdi! —Denise Wendel-Poray **OC**

PHOTO: TRISTRAM KENTON

Latonia Moore in the title role of English National Opera's *Aida*



Opera at home

Reviews of CDs and DVDs

CDs

IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE HEGGIE

Pentatone PTC 5186 631



Jake Heggie tackles a syrupy, weepy subject for his latest opera after the great acclaim that greeted his intense but still weepy *Dead Man Walking* (2000)—a work that essentially launched his career as an opera composer. I've seen Frank Capra's perennial 1946 fantasy comedy-drama film version of *It's a Wonderful Life* countless times over the years, and couldn't get the scenes out of my head while listening to this. While I find Heggie's two-act treatment sophisticated and entertaining in a musical theatre sort of way, and while it might find a niche as a Christmas offering, it's not the kind of opera I see myself returning to for repeated listening. This retelling of the film is just too literal and predictable.

Commissioned and co-produced by Houston Grand Opera, San Francisco Opera (where it will be staged in the fall of 2018) and Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music, it is presented here in a live recording from the Houston premiere in December 2016, conducted

by the company's artistic and music director, Patrick Summers. The recording was released to coincide with Christmas 2017.

Director Leonard Foglia's production has a colourful look, judging from photos, and is wisely set in the period of the film. Any other historical setting would be absurd, of course, since the story hinges on protagonist George Bailey's financial troubles in the folksy all-American town of Bedford Falls during the Great Depression and WWII.

As we all know, George contemplates suicide on Christmas Eve but, thanks to the intervention of his guardian angel, Clarence (cast in the opera as a female, Clara), is reminded of all the lives he touched and how different his hometown would have been if he had never been born. He is joyfully reunited with his family at the end. The story is one that tugs the heartstrings in a timeless way, and a reminder that we all should be grateful for the important things in life.

Librettist Gene Scheer adheres very closely to the film script, with alterations here and there. Some lesser characters do not make appearances in the opera, as would be expected. And in a different take from the film, Clara shows George what the world would be like without him by taking him through a series of doors and portals into imaginary times. In that scene, Heggie makes striking use of an eerie, cavernous

acoustic and spoken dialogue (no music). Strangely, all of the children in the opera speak but never sing.

But the singing cast is very fine indeed. Clara's role is taken with great aplomb by the luscious-sounding American soprano Talise Trevigne. William Burden's attractive tenor is ideally suited to the part of George Bailey; baritone Rod Gilfry offers rich tone and fine characterizations in the dual roles of Mr. Gower the pharmacist and Mr. Potter, the selfish, money-grubbing banker; and Andrea Carroll, a successful resident artist at the Vienna State Opera, shows off a beautiful, lyrical voice that is appropriately youthful for the role of George's childhood sweetheart, Mary (who when we first meet her as an adult is just 18).

Canadian baritone Joshua Hopkins sounds glorious as George's war-hero brother Harry, blending impeccably with the celebrated American tenor Anthony Dean Griffey as Uncle Billy in Act I, Scene 7, when Harry returns home and introduces the family to his new wife, Helen. I found it one of the opera's most memorable scenes, as I did the lovely, nostalgic duet of George and Mary that closes Act I.

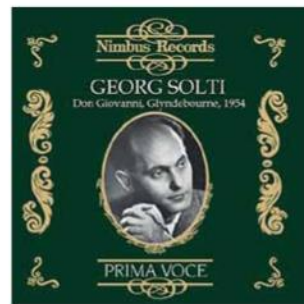
Heggie's score is elegant and distinctively American (Bernstein and even Gershwin come to mind at times), with evocative harmonies and a transparent texture throughout that allows all of the voices to come through

with great clarity. This is very much an ensemble piece, with no true arias but many duets, trios and quartets, and making generous use of the Houston Grand Opera Chorus, which sounds marvelous. Summers leads his forces with great care and sensitivity. Some will find the ending, which has the entire cast on stage to sing "Auld Lang Syne," a bit cheesy.

—Rick MacMillan

DON GIOVANNI MOZART

Nimbus 7964



Don Giovanni is one of the most famous operas in the repertoire, and certainly one of the most beloved. On stage, the 1787 opera has invited a wide array of interpretations: suave, cruel, seductive, comedic. Outside the myriad of opinions revolving around what makes for an ideal staging of the work, there are equally strong ideas on what makes for an ideal recording.

While no single presentation can satisfy every taste, there are a select few which make for intriguing listening, as both historical documents and memorable artistic statements. This release from Nimbus Records featuring Sir Georg Solti is both of these things. The record-

ing marks the Hungarian maestro's sole appearance at Glyndebourne where in 1954, he led nine performances at the famed British opera festival. Its fifth presentation was recorded, re-issued in Sept. 2017 by Nimbus as a three-CD set in their Prima Voce series.

The sound on the recording retains its original warm analogue tone, though there is a strangely low playing volume; it's worth the effort to crank up the knob in order to fully enjoy the nuances Solti affords the score, in both tone and tempo. He takes the "Viva la libertà" section near the end of Act I at a majestic tempo, while the Don's famous "Fin ch'han dal vino" aria earlier in the Act is presented at breakneck speed, though the notably acid string accompaniment moving in and around bass baritone James Pease never obscures his loving, crisp diction. Solti leads the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and Glyndebourne Festival Chorus with a driving momentum, linking scenes and providing a gripping narrative congruity that makes the clear vocal characterizations of the performers all the more exciting.

Pease's Giovanni is elegant and sensual at once; the American singer rolls consonants with flair and elegantly modulates his voice (particularly through "Deh! Vieni alla finestra") in a way that clearly emphasizes the character's noble title while underlining his licentiousness. The Leporello of German baritone Benno Kusche is a thoroughly comical figure here, with plenty of farci-

cal vocal playfulness in his recitatives; it makes for an entertaining listen, though the one-note approach wears on the ear and robs the music of its poetry, to say nothing of deadening the character's appeal. Canadian tenor Léopold Simoneau fares much better, delivering a Don Ottavio of distinction and poetry. His performances of both "Dalla sua pace" and "Il mio tesoro intanto" are absolute show-stoppers, revealing a luscious tone and bloom.

Also included in the recording is a collection of Mozart arias by Italian bass Italo Tajo with the Orchestra Sinfonica di Torino della Radiotelevisione Italiana, conducted by Mario Rossi. Tajo's elegant diction and legato lines, combined with his deeply musical approach (especially evident in the concert aria, "Per questa bella mano") show him to be a far more nuanced artist than the *buffo* roles he's chiefly remembered for.

All in all, Nimbus Records has given fans a thoroughly satisfying reissue of a special performance from the vaults of operatic history. —Catherine Kustanczy

DUETS ROLANDO VILLAZÓN & ILDAR ABDRAZAKOV

Deutsche Grammophon 479 6901



This new disc marks the continuing collaboration between Canadian conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin and Mexican tenor Rolando Villazón on the Deutsche Grammophon label. Their first was a live recording of the 2008 Salzburg Festival *Roméo et Juliette*. Since then, the two have collaborated on several Mozart operas, including *Don Giovanni*, *Così fan tutte*, *Le nozze di Figaro*, *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, and *La clemenza di Tito*. Now, they are joined by the distinguished Russian bass Ildar Abdrazakov, in his first recording for the DG label.

As duet albums go, this one is unusual in that it features a tenor and a bass. Tenor-baritone duets are plentiful, but one needs to look hard to find suitable material for a tenor and bass. The 'duets' here, drawn from French and Italian operas, are not true duets but scenes. One exception is the Nadir-Zurga duet "Au fond du temple saint" from *Les pêcheurs de perles*. That said, this duet is meant for a tenor and a lyric baritone, not a bass. It's a matter of taste to be sure, but to my ears, the respective timbres of Villazón and Abdrazakov are so different from each other, that it takes some getting used to.

Villazón burst onto the operatic scene in 1999, winning second prize in Operalia. At the time, I remember being totally enamored by his New York City Opera Rodolfo in *La bohème*. He went on to enjoy an international career, particularly noteworthy for

his collaboration with Anna Netrebko, the two were anointed as a *Traumpaar* (dream couple) in publicity material. Sadly, in a few short years he ran into vocal problems that led to surgery in 2009 and a change of repertoire. He dropped the heavier spinto roles and returned to Mozart. The sound is now leaner, with less volume and he divides his time between singing and directing.

On this disc, Villazón sings with his usual warm, ingratiating tone. In lyrical passages, it remains lovely, with his usual vivid characterization. The naysayers like to point out his many vocal mannerisms, but frankly that's nothing new—these little touches are what make him distinctive. More problematic is the voice itself. It has lost its former glory and can sound pressurized. A good example is the final high forte of the *Pearl Fishers* duet where there's a noticeable slow vibrato. Ildar Abdrazakov, for his part, sings with a solid, well-modulated bass, with sufficient gravitas but also nimble enough to tackle fast-moving passages.

At 61 minutes, the disc is relatively short. Its 'bon-bons' are chosen to showcase the singers in their respective native tongue. Villazón opts for the warhorse "Granada," sung as a tenor-bass duet (no doubt a first on disc!) but without applause, it seems a bit over-the-top. Even more melodramatic is Abdrazakov's choice of "Ochi chernye" (Dark Eyes). Nézet-Séguin

Opera at Home

and the Orchestre Métropolitain de Montréal pull out all the stops and give it the grand treatment.

Through it all, the high-flying Nézet-Séguin is the ever-supportive maestro, always with his singers, in rather middle-of-the-road readings of these chestnuts. He knows his hometown orchestra like the back of his hand—the release coincides with their first European tour, to such cities as Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Hamburg and Paris. The two singers will also be taking this program on the road to Prague, Berlin, Munich, Paris, Vienna and elsewhere. The recorded sound is excellent, and the booklet chockful of bromance photos. A fine album—perhaps not quite for the ages—but no matter, their fans will lap it up! —Joseph So

POÈME POUR MI/ TROIS PETITES LITURGIES

MESSIAEN

Seattle Symphony: SSM1016



The Seattle Symphony under its Music Director Ludovic Morlot delivers impressive performances of these two quasi-religious works by the devout French master Olivier Messiaen, both to texts penned by the composer.

Poème pour mi (1936–37)—which takes its title from the tone “mi” in the solfège system and the highest string on the violin, and which

also served as the affectionate nickname Messiaen gave his first wife, Claire Arrieu—is a setting of nine poems on the institute of marriage and Christian faith. Sadly, Claire suffered a brain injury near the end of WWII and spent the remainder of her life confined to a psychiatric hospital, passing away in 1959.

The work was originally designed for piano accompaniment, but this reading of the composer’s orchestral version brings out the unique colours and harmonies that are a hallmark of his style. Paul Schiavo, writing in the CD booklet program note, rightly points out that much of the orchestration “reflects Messiaen’s lifelong vocation as a church organist.” Soprano Jane Archibald brings exceptionally beautiful tone and phrasing, as well as perennially clear annunciation, to these mystical songs. She seems ideally suited in a work that exploits her enormous range. Just magical.

Messiaen composed the other piece here, *Trois petites liturgies de la Présence Divine*, in 1944, shortly after his release from a German prison camp. He designed it originally for performance by a women’s choir, along with piano, percussion, string orchestra and ondes Martenot. Morlot has chosen to use the Northwest Boychoir in place of the female chorus, resulting in some less-than-perfect intonation here and there. It’s an evocative work, suggesting, as the composer pointed out, the sonorities of a Balinese gamelan in the blending of ondes Martenot (called upon for some eerie glissando passages) with celesta and vibraphone.

The chorus engages in some chant-like singing and the piece incorporates elements of the composer’s fascination with birdsong.

In all, this is an attractive, if short disc at just under 60 minutes.—Rick MacMillan

INSPIRED BY CANADA/NÔTRE PAYS

AMICI CHAMBER ENSEMBLE

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This being a year of celebrating all things Canadian, the Amici Chamber Ensemble is doing its part by releasing *Inspired by Canada/Nôtre Pays*. Given that the Amici artists are all classically trained, a disc devoted entirely to Canadian music of the pop and folk genres may seem surprising. As explained in the liner notes, these songs define Canada as a culture and a nation, not to mention many of the songs hold special meaning to the four artists. The project is “a love letter to the country we call home.”

I confess that I’m not a huge pop-folk fan, but even as a casual listener, I recognize two thirds of the tunes. Iconic songs such as Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah,” or the hit song “The World is Waiting for the Sunrise” composed by 12-year old wunderkind Ernest Seitz come to mind. All pieces receive fresh arrangements by Serouj

Kradjian. Scott Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag,” would seem out of place here, except that Kradjian cleverly Canadianizes it by melding it with “Maple Leaf Forever” to create the “Maple Leaf Forever Rag.” Besides giving it a delicious arrangement, the classically-trained Kradjian shows in no uncertain terms that he plays a mean jazz piano!

In addition to the Joplin, there is another non-Canadian work, “49th Parallel Prelude” by Ralph Vaughan Williams. Its inclusion seems appropriate given the CD was launched on Remembrance Day weekend. This piece honours the many men and women who served our country. A memorable moment occurred at the launch concert, when Kradjian introduced the “Underground Railroad Songs.” They tell the story of African American slaves escaping from bondage to the Northern States and Canada. Kradjian, an ethnic Armenian from Lebanon, told the audience on Nov. 11, exactly 30 years ago, his own family escaped war-torn Lebanon for a new life in Canada. It was a very special, heartfelt moment.

Of the 16 works on the disc, 14 include the gleaming voice of soprano Mireille Asselin. Of Acadian heritage from New Brunswick, Asselin finds special resonance in “Un Canadien errant,” which commemorates those who were displaced by the Great Upheaval between 1755–64. A big Edith Piaf fan, the soprano pours her heart into “Le vieux piano” written by Claude Léveillé for Piaf. The song includes some declamatory passages out of the comfort

zone for a high soprano, but Asselin handles them with aplomb. Another recognizable tune is “Red River Valley,” beautifully sung by Asselin, who dedicates it to her fiancée, tenor and Manitoban Chris Enns.

The recorded sound is fine, although in some of the songs, the vocalist is somewhat recessed and appears to struggle to be heard. The disc comes with informative liner notes, two nice colour photos of the recording sessions, artist bios, and some, but not all, the song texts. No matter—it’s a hugely enjoyable disc and highly recommended.
—Joseph So

BREATHE JAMES ROLFE

Centrediscs CMCCD 24517



This new CD of music by James Rolfe on the Centrediscs label contains three works for voices and a small “early instruments” ensemble. Two—*Europa* and *Aeneas and Dido*—were written as companion pieces for Toronto Masque Theatre performances of the similarly titled works by Pignolet de Montéclair and Purcell. The third, *Breathe*, was written for Trio Mediaeval and the Toronto Consort.

Breathe is a setting of words by Anna Chatterton and Hildegard of Bingen on the theme of the four elements. It feels quite meditative with high voices (Suzie

LeBlanc, Katherine Hill and Laura Pudwell) weaving patterns with the band. It’s rhythmically inventive, almost jazzy in places but always quite ethereal.

Europa sets Steven Heigh-ton’s text about the re-en-counter of Europa and her betrothed, Hiram, thirty years after her abduction by Zeus. The style is ‘baroque.’ The singers—Suzie LeBlanc and Alexander Dobson—use minimal vibrato which fits with the instrumentation. This piece is more ‘driven.’ The music propels the narrative forward relentlessly but it still has a yearning, romantic quality.

Both pieces are conducted by David Fallis with members of the Toronto Consort and were recorded recently at Revolution Recording. The sound is crisp, clear and entirely appropriate.

The longest piece on the disc—*Aeneas and Dido*, to a text by André Alexis—deals mainly with Aeneas’ inner life and motivation; a theme that gets short thrift in Nathum Tate’s libretto for Purcell. At the heart of the work is a sort of tragicomic dream interlude where Aeneas (Alexander Dobson) encounters Mercury (Teri Dunn) and a goat (Vicki St. Pierre). They bring him back to his sense of duty and destiny. This is flanked by slightly awkward conversations between Aeneas and Dido (Monica Whicher) about their feelings, though Aeneas reverts to almost Virgil-like bluff heroism in his final dismissal of the smoke from Dido’s pyre.

Musically, the major difference here is the use of a chorus that plays the classic

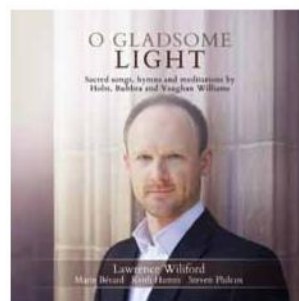
role of commenting on the action while providing an extra dimension to the sound world. *Aeneas and Dido* is also musically more abrasive than the other two pieces though still largely tonal and quite accessible.

Larry Beckwith conducts a seven-piece band on a recording made at the Glenn Gould Studio in 2009. Again, as always with GGS recordings, the sound is very clean and clear.

Full texts and much more are provided in the accompanying booklet. —John Gilks

O GLADSOME LIGHT LAWRENCE WILIFORD

Stone Records LC20371




O Gladsome Light is a collection of sacred songs, hymns and meditations by Ralph Vaughan Williams, Gustav Holst and his pupil Edmund Rubbra. They are performed by various permutations of Lawrence Wiliford, tenor; Stephen Philcox, piano and Marie Bérard and Keith Hamm, respectively Concertmaster and Principal Violist of the Canadian Opera Company Orchestra.

The disc kicks off with Holst’s *Four songs for voice and violin*, op. 35. They are quiet, meditative settings of anonymous medieval devotional texts and pretty much set the mood for the rest of the recording. The Rubbra songs that follow are similar

in style and mood. This is perhaps accentuated by the accompaniments which are intended to mimic the harp. In this, and a second set of Rubbra songs, there is a strong ‘Celtic twilight’ influence that does little to up the energy level. The same might be said of Holst’s “The heart worships”, another meditative number.

Things do get a bit livelier with Vaughan Williams’ *Four hymns for tenor, piano and viola*, which set an eclectic group of devotional poems. The accompaniment is much denser and more dramatic and makes fuller use of the potential of the piano. The two solo numbers by Rubbra for violin and viola respectively also add some much needed contrast.

I can’t fault the performances. Wiliford sings beautifully in what one might call the ‘Aldeburgh style’. It’s light, sensitive and every word is clearly audible. I think it does the music full justice. His collaborators are equally sensitive. What I might question is how many people would want to listen to an hour of music all very much in the same, quiet emotional space. Perhaps it’s more a disc for dipping into.

The recordings of the vocal numbers were made at Grace Church on-the-Hill in Toronto and have a resonant, churchy, acoustic that is perfectly appropriate to the music. The same is true of the two instrumental pieces recorded at St. John Chrysostom in Newmarket. Full texts and a great deal of useful explanatory material is included in the accompanying booklet.
—John Gilks 

The final word

Review: Measha Brueggergosman, *Something Is Always On Fire: My Life So Far*
Toronto: Harper Collins, 2017. 310 pp. \$33.99



Ordinarily speaking, few artists would want to write a memoir at the relatively tender age of forty. But then there's nothing ordinary about Canadian soprano Measha Brueggergosman. Judging by her new book, intriguingly titled *Something Is Always On Fire*, she has packed a lot of living—and singing—into those forty years. Born Measha Gosman in 1977 to parents Anne Eatmon and Sterling Gosman in Fredericton, New Brunswick, the young Measha sang in the choir of her local Baptist church where her father was a deacon. As a teenager, she took voice lessons from Mabel Doak and Wendy Nielsen, before moving to Toronto to study with Mary Morrison at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Music. After graduation, Brueggergosman went to the Robert Schumann Hochschule in Düsseldorf, Germany to complete her training under the tutelage of Canadian soprano Edith Wiens.

I first heard Brueggergosman in 1999 when she was a student at UofT Opera, as Madame Lidoine in Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites*. Her voice was already remarkable; a full lyric soprano of volume and richness, with an instantly recognizable timbre. As a student, she was chosen to create the title role of *Beatrice Chancy*, a new Canadian opera by James Rolfe. Her promise was so great that I wrote a profile on her for *Opera Canada* in 2000 when she was only 23, a very young age to be featured. She swept four of the five awards in the Montreal International Vocal Competition in 2002. Her career trajectory remains remarkable, in both classical music and popular culture.

But her life is far from a fairytale story, as is made very clear when you read this book. For 300+ pages, she gives us an intimate glimpse into her personal journey. It opens with a dramatic Prologue, about her emergency surgery to repair a ruptured aorta in 2009. The rest is divided into four sections, the first of which, "Who Am I and Why?" details her growing up in the Maritimes in a loving Christian family; her longstanding issue with weight and, her formative years as a UofT opera student. "What Do I Want and How Do I Get it?" covers her sojourn in Germany and her first exposure to overt racism; early career successes and setbacks and, the joys and heartaches of married life with her husband Markus.

A more difficult read is the third section, "What's Holding Me Back?" Here she goes into a post-mortem of her failed marriage and infidelities, with names omitted to protect the (not so) innocent. She also lays bare her lack of financial acumen and trying to reconcile her Christian values with her less-than-Christian behaviour. For the typical reader, it probably comes across as quite shocking. The soprano fully admits to being "an incredibly flawed individual." My take away afterwards? She's only human. It's her fans who put her on a pedestal. Just because someone can sing, doesn't mean they achieve perfection in other areas of life. As the saying goes — "she may sing like an angel, but angels have feet of clay."

In the last section, "Why Am I Here?" she goes deeper into the heartbreak of losing the twins she was carrying, and the grieving process afterwards. Through it all, it was her faith that sustained her, as evidenced by the copious Scripture quotes. Penning the memoir likely served as a cathartic experience for her, a means of assessing the past and gauging the future. Instead of linear storytelling, it's quite conversational and episodic in style, in almost a "stream of consciousness" manner. Those wanting musical details of the nuances of role preparation, her thoughts on the great pieces in her repertoire, anecdotes of working with colleagues etc. will be sorely disappointed—it's simply not that kind of a memoir. It's a heavy read, yet it's also full of hope. It underscores her resilience, her honesty and her embracing the future. An unexpectedly worthwhile read. —Joseph So **OC**



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