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WINTER 2021

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By Samuel Barber

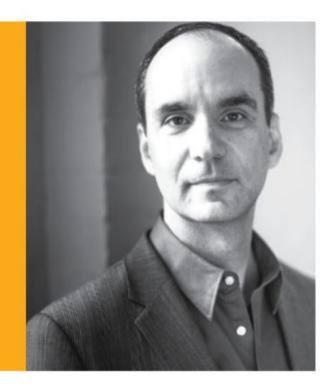
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## NOTEBOOK BY GIANMARCO SEGATO



Opera in Canada seems to be in a very 'in between' phase right now pandemic-wise.

This issue includes reviews of live performances from Winnipeg and Montréal...the first we've had in a long while. Vancouver Opera just opened...and as our Take Note section indicates, things look promising for the coming months. But as we go to press, large companies in Austria and Germany have gone back into full lockdown after a brief autumn 'return to normal.' Hopefully omicron won't mess up plans at home.

It's early days, but there's disturbing financial news from even the biggest state-funded European companies like Frankfurt and Paris. Former COC General Director Alexander Neef reports that in Paris, subscriptions have fallen 45%, as well as a further 20% revenue loss due to the absence of foreign ticket buyers. Frankfurt's Intendant, Bernd Loebe, cites a loss of 6,000 subscribers. North American companies probably depend even more on the support of season ticket buyers...and that revenue stream was already waning pre-pandemic. It follows then, that it's now even more important for

our companies to engage their keenest supporters (read: subscribers) with their core, 'live' product. Catherine Kustanczy has more to say on 'live' vs 'digital' and where it's landed us in a Canadian context in this issue's Final Word.

But an even more pressing question is raised in Denise Wendel-Poray's report from Europe's big summer festivals. Most of them were able to present their usual, impressive array of international casts and cutting-edge productions. Nothing wrong with that, and somewhat reassuring in the current wobbly state of affairs. But as she observes...last year's universal call for more equity, diversity and economy was mostly missing.

On the homefront, there are early, encouraging signs that companies are following through on the wholesale renewal of the opera industry called for in the past few years. The Canadian Opera Company just announced that in 2022, they'll present Teiya Kasahara's *The Queen in Me*, the soprano's brilliant questioning of the constraints of conventional opera roles and their reliance on gender and sex stereotypes. And as we see in Bill Rankin's feature, Edmonton Opera has prioritized diverse points of view in their big pandemic project.

In Canada at least, I think we'll start to see more of this type of programming, especially with groups like Amplified Opera and Opera InReach in the mix. But diverse casting and repertoire is probably the easiest, most public-facing way organizations can signal where they stand. What remains to be seen is if boards of directors and administrators will do the harder work of standing up for equity, routing out misogyny, homophobia and racism. Or will those pandemic-era calls fade away as we gradually emerge from this crisis? **OG** —editorial@operacanada.ca

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Jakub Józef Orliński (Orpheus's Double) & Joshua Hopkins (Orpheus) in Metropolitan Opera's *Eurydice* (see review p. 48) **рното**: Marty Sohl/Met Opera

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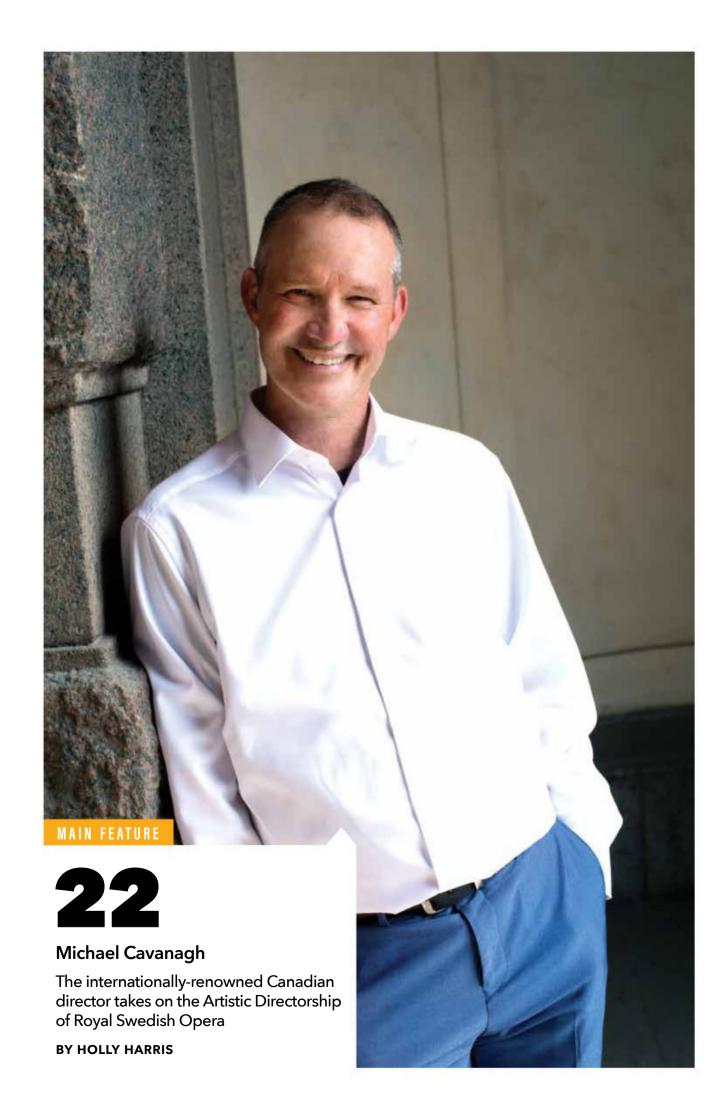
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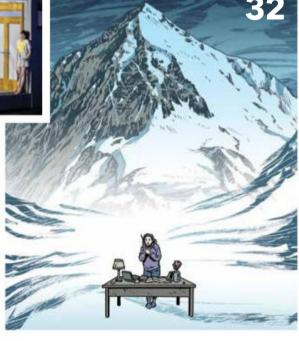
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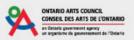
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#### TAKE NOTE

#### JANUARY



#### Calgary Opera

Calgary Opera makes a lighthearted return to live, mainstage opera with *The Merry Widow*, premiering Jan. 29th. Directed by Omer Ben Seadia and conducted by Tania Miller, this sumptuous belle époque staging previously appeared at Vancouver Opera in late 2018. In Calgary, an all-Canadian roster features Aviva Fortunata, Andrew Love, Colin Ainsworth and Jacqueline Woodley.

#### Opéra de Montréal

Verdi's *La traviata* opens Jan.

29<sup>th</sup> in the much traveled, cross-Canada copro inspired by Josephine Baker. In Montréal, Québec soprano Marie-Josée is Violetta, Kosovo tenor Rame Lahaj sings Alfredo and Canadian baritone James Westman is Germont.

#### FEBRUARY

#### Canadian Opera Company, Toronto

For its first mainstage offering in two years, the COC presents Puccini's Madama Butterfly in Brian Macdonald's traditional 1990 production, this time revived by young Canadian mover and shaker, Aria Umezawa. The cast includes





#### **Edmonton Opera**

For its first foray back to 'big live' opera, EO re-opens with a perennial favourite, Puccini's La Bohème, starring Miriam Khalil (pictured), Lara Ciekiewicz, Andrew Haji and Peter Barrett as the central quartet. François Racine directs, and Peter Dala is on the podium, opening Feb. 5<sup>th</sup>.



#### Vancouver Opera

The quintessential *verismo* opera, Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*, doesn't get as much stage time as it used to, especially in Canada. VO gives it a welcome revival, in a concert version opening Feb. 12<sup>th</sup> starring Othalie Graham (pictured) as Santuzza, David Pomeroy as her faithless lover Turridu and Gregory Dahl as Tonio.

#### Pacific Opera Victoria

POV's new *Carmen* was another pandemic-delayed production that finally sees the light of day on Feb. 23<sup>rd</sup>. French mezzo-soprano Aude Extrémo makes her company debut in the title role, alongside Canadian tenor Adam Luther as Don José and soprano Lauren Margison as Micaëla. Designer Olivier Landreville gives the show a 1930s Seville setting while Sylvain Genois's costumes are inspired by historical documentaries of the Spanish Civil War.





# MARCH

#### Opéra de Montréal

La beauté du monde will finally have its pandemicdelayed world premiere on Mar. 19<sup>th</sup>. After the successful 2016 operatic adaptation of his 1987 play Les feluettes, librettist Michel Marc Bouchard returns to the musical theatre stage with composer Julien Bilodeau for an epic tale about the rescue of artwork from the Louvre, set in Nazi-occupied Paris. The starry Canadian cast includes Philippe Sly, Julie Boulianne (pictured) Marc Hervieux, Isaiah Bell and Layla Claire.

#### APRIL

#### Manitoba Opera, Winnipeg

With Rossini's La cenerentola, MO showcases rising Winnipeg mezzo-soprano Lizzy Hoyt (pictured) in the title role, soprano Andrea Lett and mezzo Pascale Spinney as her stepsisters, American tenor Andrew Owens as Prince Ramiro, baritone Peter McGillivray as Don Magnifico and bass-baritone Stephen Hegedus as Alidoro. The production, directed by Rob Herriot and conducted by Tyrone Paterson, opens Apr. 2<sup>nd</sup>.





### Élisabeth Boudreault's international career took flight, against all odds, during the pandemic.

Originally from Saguenay-Lac-St-Jean, the 26-year-old soprano first appeared on stage at the age of 9, taking part in Québec Issime's hit production of *Décembre*. She continued to perform with the company for many years while singing pop and writing songs for her own pleasure.

Soon after taking her first classical voice lessons in high school, she started singing small roles with the Société d'art lyrique du Royaume and made her debut at 16 as Lisa in *La sonnambula*. A recent McGill graduate from the class of Aline Kutan, she finished her degree a semester early in order to make her European debut as Barbarina in a production of *Le nozze di Figaro* by acclaimed film director James Gray at Opéra national de Lorraine in Jan. 2020.

"I was lucky. During my third year at McGill, an important French casting director happened to be in Montréal to hear some young singers. One of them ended up being sick and had to cancel so I took their audition slot and got offered a few engagements in Europe."

As the run of *Figaro* ended in Nancy, she was already rehearsing with the same company for Handel's *Alcina*, in which she was set to sing the role of Oberto. France shut down after the first performance.

"I was faced with an important decision: should I stay in France or should I go back to Canada? We were all convinced that things would get back to normal in three weeks so I decided to stay with my boyfriend in London until I could go back and finish our run."

All things considered, staying in Europe turned out to be the right decision. After

months of cancellations and waiting around for things to improve, she received a call from the casting director who got her her first gig in Nancy.

"A pregnant colleague who was scheduled to sing Gretel decided to cancel for health reasons. The same casting director who hired me for Barbarina had moved to a different company in Strasbourg and thought of me. It just so happened that I was nearby, available and ready to sing the role. Once again, it was luck."

That run of performances ended up getting canceled due to a new wave of COVID-19 but the production was filmed and shown on French television over the holidays. It was later streamed on the internet and garnered critical praise for the young Canadian soprano.

A few months later, in July, she made her Aix-en-Provence festival debut, again as Barbarina, surrounded by a star-studded cast and then reprised the role in October for a third time in Luxembourg alongside fellow Canadian soprano Florie Valiquette, who was singing her first Susanna.

Still very attached to her Québec roots and hoping she'll be able to perform back home soon, Élisabeth is currently settled in London where she plans to focus on her career in Europe.

"I'm about 30 minutes from Covent Garden and 2 hours by train from the Palais Garnier in Paris. I can easily get to meetings with casting directors and auditions all over Europe. There's also something to be said about the size of houses here. I was surprised to see how many colours one could use when singing in a smaller theatre. Artistically, I find that very interesting."

#### **Speed Round with**

ÉLISABETH BOUDREAULT

#### WHAT ARE YOU CURRENTLY READING?

I'm halfway through
War and Peace—it's a real
commitment!

#### WHAT WAS YOUR FAVOURITE PANDEMIC BINGE?

My boyfriend and I just finished watching *New Girl*, we loved it.

#### WHAT SKILL WOULD YOU LIKE TO HONE?

I would like to continue getting better at German. I've studied the language for two years, but I need to practice more.

#### WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE RECIPE?

I love preparing tourtières!
During the holidays last year, I
was Facetiming my sister, my
mother and my grandmother
from London and we
prepared them together.

#### AISLE SEAT OR WINDOW SEAT?

Window, always!

#### LETTER FROM EUROPE

**Denise Wendel-Poray** takes us on a whirlwind tour of 2021 European summer opera festivals...but midpandemic, is it more-of-the-same?

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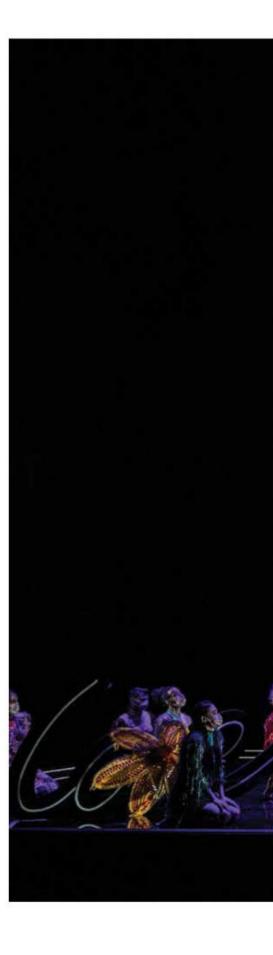
#### SHYLY BUT SURELY, EUROPEAN SUMMER

festivals were back in 2021, albeit with varying sets of rules depending on the country, province, or city. Some required proof of vaccination and/or a recent PCR test. In other cases, an antigen test sufficed with some festivals setting up their own testing centres nearby. My tour began with the Munich Opera Festival at Bayerische Staatsoper, the oldest festival in Europe founded in 1875 by then General Director Karl von Perfall, featuring operas by Mozart and Wagner. In recent and pre-pandemic years, opera-goers could enjoy a diversified repertoire of works over five weeks, from the end of June to July 31st. This year, the program was understandably sparser, with venues—in keeping with German social distancing rules—filled to less than 50% capacity. Under those conditions, managing to get a ticket for the Jun. 29th première of Tristan und Isolde starring Jonas Kaufmann and Anja Harteros seemed nothing short of a miracle. Fans had waited years to hear the two superstars take on these pinnacle roles, many doubting, especially in the case of Kaufmann, whether this ultimate challenge would not be his nemesis. To my ears, not only is he fully at ease in the role, but one has rarely heard such dignified singing, such plentitude, such mastery in any role or on any stage—Kaufmann is a once-ina-century phenomenon. Harteros is an atypical Isolde, the voice is supple, and though there might be more powerful voices, she has volume enough, and the tone is always beautiful, never pushed, which is not the case for many of her colleagues. She sings the "Liebestod" like a Lied, yet each note reaches the rafters of this

historic hall where the work was first performed in 1865—perhaps by a similarly lyrical voice.

The next day I flew to Paris and caught a TGVtrain for the opening of the Aix-en-Provence festival where I was met with a Marriage of Figaro featuring a rowdy, juvenile cast directed by the new Vienna Volksoper Intendant, Lotte de Beer—their joy at being back on a stage was palpable. Staged at the outdoor Théâtre de l'archevêché, the colourfully gaudy set features a master bedroom, a living room, and a laundry room with a lot of romping from one to the next. Cherubino (Lea Desandre), ends up spinning in the drum of the washing machine before singing "Non so più," a giant phallus protruding from under her sweatsuit. Julie Fuchs sings a charming Susanna while either trying to foil the repeated suicide attempts of the depressive Countess (an excellent Jacquelyn Wagner) or shun the sexcrazed, on-the-spectrum count, Gyula Orendt. Oddly, the second half feels like a different production altogether: a transparent cube, white neon, luminous letters, and a huge knit sculpture midstage. Is some moral or message being relayed? Then, Barbarina and Marcellina appear dressed in woolly outfits with dangling phalluses. I'm guessing, but could they be evoking feminine resistance to power or perhaps, a promise of non-genre utopia as one critic suggested?—it was a long day.

I was better rested for a seriously funny *Falstaff* on Jul. 1<sup>st</sup> by Barrie Kosky. The Australian director is truly a comic genius, delivering a slapstick, but also reflective, melancholic production. Avoiding the typical characterization of Falstaff as a fat, unkempt, unsavoury character, Kosky makes him more complex and, finally, more



human. As portrayed by the excellent Christopher Purves, he is a loner, nostalgic for his days as a great seducer, and still wanting to believe in his former charms. The first scene opens with Sir John cooking, naked under his apron. Between Act I and II, recipes are suggestively read from Auguste Escoffier's *Culinary Guide* (meant to be erotic...these moments are absolute cringe and unnecessary). Purves is in good company with Stéphane Degout as Ford and Juan Francisco Gatell as Fenton. The female quartet is excellent, especially Giulia Semenzato's sparkling Nanetta. In the pit, Daniele Rustioni heads the

orchestra of Opéra de Lyon, relishing each note of Verdi's last opera.

In retrospect, the Jul. 2<sup>nd</sup> *Tristan und Isolde*, directed by Simon Stone, was perhaps the low point of the summer. But to be honest, seeing it almost back to back with the Munich *Tristan* hardly played in its favour. As in his Salzburg *Medea*, Stone uses the classic drama as a pretext to tell the tale of a modern upper-class relationship undermined by routine, deceitfulness, and adultery—the result is predictably banal. There are some successful moments, notably during the scene of the philtre, where the couple's penthouse

Scene from Festival d'Aix-en-Provence's *Le nozze di Figaro* 







apartment is turned into a turbulent sea—a tour de force by video artist Luke Halls. But in the second part, the plan doesn't work anymore; the love duet and King Mark's monologue just can't be coaxed into Stone's 'Bobos in Paradise' scenario. The curtain call was greeted with a chorus of loud, unanimous booing.

But Stone made a triumphant return the following evening (Jul. 3<sup>rd</sup>), with the world premiere of Kaija Saariaho's opera *Innocence*. In contrast to his inept demystification of Tristan, here Stone's trademark hypernaturalistic staging explores and intensifies this modern tragedy involving a mass shooting at an international school in Helsinki. The main action takes place at a wedding party in a restaurant, punctuated with flashbacks to ten years earlier and the disaster experienced by the survivors: six students and a teacher. It soon becomes evident that there is a fatal connection between past and present: the groom (Markus Nikänen) is none other than the shooter's brother, and his parents, (French soprano, Sandrine Piau, and Finnish bass-baritone Tuomas Pursio), desperate to get on with their lives, have kept the dark family secret from the bride (Iranian soprano, Lilian Farahani). Finally, the waitress (Czech mezzo Magdalena Kožená), the mother of one of the victims, reveals the truth.

That same day, a matinée marked the premiere of Combattimento, La théorie du cygne noir at the jewel-box Jeu de Paume theatre. With Monteverdi's Il combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda as a starting point, Baroque specialist Sébastien Daucé conducted, and director Silvia Costa imagined a "reconstructed baroque opera," which would bring together lesser-known flourishes of Monteverdi's contemporaries: Luigi Rossi, Francesco Cavalli, Giacomo Carissimi, Tiburtio Massaino, and Tarquinio Merula. According to Costa, the unifying thread is "a journey of emotional states." A journey brilliantly interpreted by the eight singers and twelve instrumentalists from the Lyon-based Ensemble Correspondances, who, in addition to being specialists and soloists of the Baroque repertoire, are well-trained actors with a vibrant team spirit.

My next stop was Salzburg, where I was grateful to catch the last performance of Robert Carsen's *Il trionfo del Tempo e del Disiganno* by Handel on Aug. 17<sup>th</sup>, initially staged for the Whitsun Festival in June. Most directors (with the exception of Warlikowski, who directed the work at Aix in 2016) would not even consider tackling a piece that illustrates a theoretical dilemma but Carsen relishes in it. In sum: three allegorical characters, Time (Charles Workman),

L: Christopher Purves in the title role of Festival d'Aix-en-Provence's Falstaff; R: Scene from Salzburg Festival's Don Giovanni



Enlightenment (Lawrence Zazzo), and Pleasure (Cecilia Bartoli), try to win over a fourth—Beauty (Regula Mühlemann). Time and Enlightenment seek to save Beauty and convince her to throw over Pleasure for more enduring values. Carsen proposes two distinct parts: the first transposes the action to the superficial and glamorous world of fashion. The second, more interior and melancholic, features the aria "Lascia la spina, cogli la rosa," (more famously used as "Lascia ch'io pianga" in Rinaldo), one of the most sublime moments of the evening. Bartoli's interiorized, deeply felt interpretation of it, accompanied by the Musiciens du Prince-Monaco orchestra headed by Gianluca Capuano, is breathtaking. Finally, Bartoli has the last word: Pleasure is the joy of giving to others and is timeless.

Krzysztof Warlikowski's production of *Elektra* (Aug. 18<sup>th</sup>) begins, as is his custom, with a prologue. We see women in black, barefoot

with Queen Clytemnestra amongst them, while the shrillness of nocturnal crickets fills the arcades of the Felsenreitschule. A video shows little Elektra picking up the axe that killed her father and then, Strauss's most savage work can begin. But in contrast to most directors who make Elektra (here Lithuanian soprano Ausrine Stundyte) a wild, flailing fury, with this prologue, Warlikowski reveals her young and vulnerable femininity she is a victim. In contrast, her sister Chrysothemis, usually the voice of measure and reason, is the wild one, dressed to kill in a jacket open over a red bra and pink leather skirt. I had the good luck to hear Asmik Grigorian in the role, who only sang three of the six performances, alternating with her début as Senta in the new Flying Dutchman in Bayreuth. The great British baritone Christopher Maltman is a magnificent Orestes, particularly moving in the recognition scene. Staged like a love duet—an atypical decision

#### BEST OF THE FESTIVALS

#### MUNICH

Stay at the cozy Hotel Opéra in St.-Anna-Strasse, just a 10-minute walk from the opera. Visit the Pinakothek der Moderne specializing in post-1900 art, including works by the "Brücke" and "Blaue Reiter" groups.



#### AIX-EN-PROVENCE

Château La Coste is a delightful day trip, just 15 minutes away—an international art destination and organic winery offering syrah, cabernet, sauvignon, and vermentino varietals.

#### BAYREUTH

The small Hotel-Restaurant Bergmühle is perched on a scenic river in the town of Neudrossenfeld, just 15 minutes outside of Bayreuth. Its simple restaurant is the well-guarded secret of opera insiders such as the Wagners for late, post-opera dinners.

#### SALZBURG

Jog along the Salzach river and stop at the edgy Salzburger Kunstverein contemporary art gallery run by its stalwart Canadian director, Séamus Kealy.

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Anja Harteros & Jonas Kaufmann in the title roles of Munich Opera Festival's *Tristan und Isolde*  for Warlikowski—it is one of the most beautiful scenes in the production, completing the whole gambit of emotions in Strauss's masterpiece, brilliantly conducted by Franz Welser-Möst at the helm of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra.

The following day at the crack of dawn I took a train to Bayreuth to witness Austrian artist Hermann Nitsch's "Malaktion" in conjunction with a concert version of *Die Walküre*. After the cancellation of the 2020 season due to the pandemic, the management of the Bayreuth

Festival decided that the new Ring entrusted to the young Austrian director Valentin Schwarz would be postponed until 2022. As a result, only the aforementioned *Flying Dutchman* would be featured this year, alternating with revivals of *Die* Meistersinger and Tannhäuser. As a consolation, a project called "Ring 20.21" consisted of commissioned works in various artistic genres that "reflect, comment on, continue, or experiment in new ways." Included were a musical theatre piece entitled "Das Rheingold - Immer noch Loge," composed by Gordon Kampe to Paulus Hochgatterer's libretto, directed and realized with puppets by Nikolaus Habjan and performed in the Festival Park as well as a fabulous multimedia work by American artist and filmmaker Jay Scheib that one could experience in 3D in front of the Festspielhaus. Viewers were encouraged to put themselves in Siegfried's shoes and take a swipe at the dragon. More serene was a sculpture by Japanese artist Chiharu Shiota inspired by Götterdämmerung that could be viewed in the Festival park.

For Nitsch's *Walküre*, the stage is a pure white room that is gradually doused in paint by his "Actors," emptying bucket after bucket from the top of the vast backdrop and letting it drip towards the bottom, while other Actors splash paint across the floor. According to Nitsch, the colours are chosen in accordance with the mood and tonality of the music. Copiously booed at the premiere, at least by this third and final performance, there was enthusiastic applause when the 83-year-old Nitsch appeared for his curtain call.

Aug. 20<sup>th</sup> started with a turbulent train ride plagued with delays on my way back to Salzburg just in time to see *Don Giovanni*. Planned well before the pandemic, this long-awaited production brought together Italian visual artist and



For Nitsch's *Walküre*, the stage is a pure white room that is gradually doused in paint by his "Actors," emptying bucket after bucket from the top of the vast backdrop and letting it drip towards the bottom, while other Actors splash paint across the floor. According to Nitsch, the colours are chosen in accordance with the mood and tonality of the music."

director Romeo Castellucci and the firebrand Greek conductor, Teodor Currentzis. As could be expected, Castellucci veered towards an abstract interpretation of Don Giovanni's tragic demise. The unique set, the white interior of a church bathed in hazy light, is spoliated of all its artworks before the overture even starts. I never suspected Castellucci could have such a sense of humour, and I've seen almost all of his productions, not just in opera. Is this the result of nearly two years of pandemic madness? Objects dropped inexplicably from the flies—a sudden downpour of basketballs, a real car, and a grand piano—smashing onto the stage below! Don Ottavio dawns ever-weirder costumes, including that of a Norwegian polar explorer with his white poodle—just one of a bevy of live animals that make random appearances.

However, the supper scene has nothing humorous about it as Giovanni (Italian baritone David Luciano) is left alone in his agony, stripped naked and writhing around in white paint. There is little explanation for the 150 women dressed in enough light coral gauze to wrap the Arc de Triomphe, other than that the *air de temps*, after a period of constraint, is to celebrate the ineffable and the unnecessary.

Finally, the Aug. 21<sup>st</sup> *Tosca* premiere was like old times, with the extraordinary pomp and circumstance one only sees in Salzburg, unequaled for its visible and ostentatious class privilege. Limousines unload the spectators in front of the doors, *paparazzi* placed forward while bystanders, kept at a distance on the opposite sidewalk, watch the fascinating spectacle. Apart from Anna Netrebko, an exceptional Tosca, the old Martin Sturminger production is routine, and she seems completely bored with it.

This 'business as usual' was disappointing after all the promises of change, diversity, economy of means and new creations we have heard about over the last year. Of these big festivals, only Aix has kept its word regarding diversity, younger audiences and performers and unusual venues, such as Pierre Audi's newly commissioned work L'Apocalypse Arabe by Samir Odeh-Tamimi at the Luma Foundation in Arles. Without this kind of commitment to change, chances are next season's festivals will propose the same all-time favourite operas sung by star singers to packed houses at prices only the rich can afford.

Scene from Bayreuth Festival's Die Walküre



### Pop quiz

• • •

VOICE LEADING by Lucia Cesaroni

...Discuss the state of music education in our country. Cite examples and show your work.

How is it that a singer's perspective on the opera industry has rounded on education? Isn't this someone else's job? The classical music industry in Canada is tiny and shrinking. To offer solutions, we must attack the problem holistically. We've looked at the importance of moving artists into leadership, bringing their skill set and creativity to bear on casting, management and big picture paradigm shifts. We've discussed mentorship as an efficient way to prepare them. The *skills pipeline* as my corporate colleagues call it—the entry point, into whose gaping maw we pour 17-year-old talent—is a university education, usually culminating in a master's degree.

Owing to the depth and breadth of this training system, of educators working within it, and its ramifications for the future, our topic deserves a more fulsome treatment—the 100-piece band and its corresponding Schenkerian analysis. So, we'll start here by asking the questions, whip ourselves into a froth, and save data analysis, interviews and answers for the next issue.

There, we'll more deeply examine music program enrollment versus jobs prospects, academic degrees versus vocational training, and the problematic, endless student cycle. From undergraduate to graduate to summer programs and young artist programs, we have created a cul-de-sac of student singers, forced to remain so well into their 30s, with little practical stage time and ill-equipped for the current industry. So next time, we'll get into all of that...

While many issues surrounding opera education currently need re-examining, many more, to my utter delight, deserve a follow-spot, downstage centre for applause and inspiration. There's a lot of really good news. I've had the pleasure to 'solve the world's problems' via Zoom with the leaders of the four major opera programs in Canada. All four are themselves musicians, which perfectly fits my brief as

they say on *British Bake-Off*. Two are conductors and two, international sopranos. Full disclosure—Adrianne Pieczonka, now Voice Chair at the Royal Conservatory—is a hero and mentor of mine. Then there's Sandra Horst, conductor, COC Chorus Master and Director of Musical Studies at UofT Opera, Patrick Hansen, Director at Opera McGill and Nancy Hermiston, Chair of UBC's Voice and Opera Divisions. They laid out their programs, growth and teaching philosophies. I had a lot to learn and they graciously taught me.

And they're ALL pioneering new, interdisciplinary projects, from collaborations in music psychotherapy through to industrial design. Industrial! Design! Most notably, Hermiston has secured a 3-year, \$600,000 research grant with UBC Neuroscience to study singers live, in performance. She is singing my song: we must measure and articulate our skills with objective data wherever possible in order to prove our worth and make our case in a wider world that perceives artists as unserious and increasingly irrelevant. We must make our subjective space more and more objective. Immediately.

How positively *Canadian* that we aren't shouting (singing?) these truly groundbreaking projects from the rooftops. Few insiders, never mind the public at large, know they exist. A false modesty, a high aversion to risk exists in Canadian opera that stifles and discourages bold plans like these, as if unselfconsciously cheerleading and promoting them would be gauche or \*gasp\* too American. Canadians need to hear about the meaningful work and added value these institutions are creating. This is *diversity of thought*. From the beginning of their singing lives, students could be interacting and building with neuroscientists, engineers MBAs and proving with hard data how and why opera matters outside of opera. This is how we don't die. This is how we adapt. And just like our fabulous death scenes, demonstrate why we've lasted this long.

# RUBIES 2021 RETURNS



For the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary edition of the Rubies, *Opera Canada* celebrated four Canadian artists who have dedicated their careers to forwarding the art of opera at home and abroad. The 2021 Rubies were awarded to tenor PAUL FREY, director SONJA FRISELL, baritone ALLAN MONK and soprano ERIN WALL.

Featured performers were tenor Andrew Haji, mezzosoprano Allyson McHardy and COC Ensemble Studio artists bass-baritone Alexander Halliday and soprano Charlotte Siegel all accompanied by pianist Rachael Kerr.

Hosting the event was baritone John Fanning and Canadian opera icon, tenor Ben Heppner, narrated video tributes to each honouree.

Thank you to all our sponsors and patrons including Marjorie and Roy Linden for sponsoring Erin Wall's award as well as Andrew Haji's appearance; Kris Vikmanis and Denny Creighton for sponsoring Paul Frey's award and Suzanne & Tony Cesaroni for Sonja Frisell. Thanks go to sponsors Stephen Clarke/The Stratton Trust, Pamela Austin, J. Peter & Hélène Hunt, Eva Innes & David Medhurst, Robert Morassutti, Dr. Michael & Mary Romeo, David Speers, James Warrillow and the Canada Council for the Arts. Our special thanks to event sponsor BMO Financial Group and Nada Ristich, BMO's Head, Community Giving for their ongoing, generous support and to venue sponsor, the Canadian Opera Company.



Rubies 2021 performers: soprano Charlotte Siegel & Alexander Halliday, both members of the COC Ensemble Studio, with pianist Rachael Kerr



#### **Paul Frey**

Canadian tenor **PAUL FREY**, enjoyed a career as one of the opera world's most sought after singers from the 1970s to the early 2000s. He was especially celebrated for his interpretations of the lead tenor roles in the operas of Richard Wagner. Back in April, his biographer Nancy Silcox celebrated his contribution to Canada's opera life on the occasion of his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday.

#### Read the full interview at operacanada.ca/the-rubies

"I was doing well financially and I was busy," he reflects, but he still felt frustrated. "I wanted to be at the front of the stage, not in the chorus," he recalls. Frey moved closer to the operatic career he desired when the Canada Council selected him in 1977 as one of six Canadian singers offered an opportunity to audition at a number of European opera houses. Six auditions saw six rejections for Paul Frey. Finally acknowledging failure, he resigned to return to Canada. "It was only because I couldn't get a flight home that I decided to finish what I'd started—the seventh audition at the opera house in Basel, Switzerland," he recalls. Whether it was the Canadian's relaxed—and resigned—mindset, or that he was exactly what Basel was looking for in a house tenor, Frey left the audition with a two-year contract.

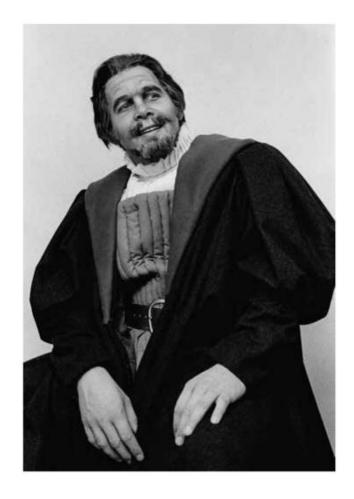
#### Sonja Frisell

sonja frisell is one of those Canadian artists who really made her career outside of Canada, directing opera productions at the world's leading houses (La Scala, Metropolitan Opera, La Fenice, Covent Garden) with the world's top artists. In October, Wayne Gooding interviewed Frisell from her home in Portugal.

#### Read the full interview at operacanada.ca/the-rubies

Throughout her career, *Aida* continued to sound like a leitmotif. Frisell remembers remounting at least four productions, including one by Zeffirelli, besides her own originals in Rio de Janeiro, San Francisco and New York. This last, for the Metropolitan Opera, undoubtedly gave Frisell her widest audience. After its premiere in 1988, it stayed in the Met's repertoire for just over 250 performances until its retirement in 2019. Along the way, it was broadcast on radio, on television—in 1989, the telecast earning her an Emmy Award citation—and more recently through digital streams and on the Met's Live in HD cinema presentations; it is the second-longest running Met production after her mentor Zeffirelli's *La bohème*.





#### **Allan Monk**

Over his more than 30 year career, baritone **ALLAN MONK** established himself as one of Canada's most prolific, and beloved, artists. From his musical theatre beginnings to a long association with The Metropolitan Opera, Monk relished being on stage no matter how lofty or modest the role. Fellow Calgarian Bill Rankin sat down with Monk recently to reminisce about his distinguished career.

#### Read the full interview at operacanada.ca/the-rubies

In 1972, Monk had a small role in a San Francisco production of *Manon* that featured Beverly Sills and Nicolai Gedda. As a kid, he'd worn out a Gedda recording, he loved the Swedish tenor's sound so much. And there he was singing with the master. Monk's response was the same as it continued to be throughout his career. He learned his craft on the job, and Gedda was just one early opportunity to absorb the best ways to practice his art. "I'm standing on stage, and I'm watching Nicolai Gedda, and I'm watching him sing, and you would think he was just telling you what the temperature was outside or what he had for breakfast. He was not exerting. He had wonderful craft. He could sing with ease."

#### **Erin Wall**

Canadian/American soprano **ERIN WALL (1975-2020)** enjoyed an illustrious, 19-year international career, sadly cut short when she passed away in her prime at the much-too-young age of 44 in October 2020. Erin graced the cover of our Winter 2020 issue in which Joseph So paid tribute to her incredible artistry.

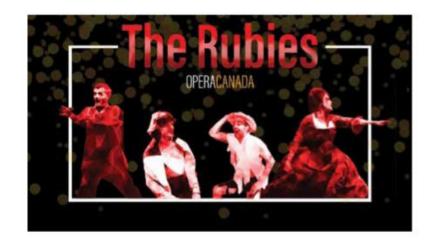
#### Read the full profile at operacanada.ca/the-rubies

It was at [Lyric Opera Chicago's] Ryan Center that Wall met Lyric's then music director and principal conductor Sir Andrew Davis. "I remember her audition very well," Sir Andrew recalls: "I was blown away by the beauty of her sound. She joined the program and studied with my wife [soprano Gianna Rolandi]." The proverbial big break came when Wall stepped in on short notice as Donna Anna for an indisposed Karita Mattila at the Lyric's opening night Don Giovanni. "It was a huge hit; everyone was raving and the critics went crazy!" says Sir Andrew.



## WATCH THE 2021 RUBIES AT







One of Canada's most internationally-busy opera directors takes on the role of a lifetime as the new Artistic Director of Royal Swedish Opera BY HOLLY HARRIS



**ROM THE CANADIAN HEARTLAND** to the northern climes of Scandinavia, Michael Cavanagh has waited a lifetime to helm one of the world's most venerated opera houses. That dream came true in Oct. 2019 when he was announced as the newest Artistic Director of the 278-year old Royal Swedish Opera, with his five-year tenure beginning in earnest this fall.

The Winnipeg, Manitoba-born director, 60, hit the ground running after arriving in Stockholm on Aug. 16<sup>th</sup>, taking over from RSO's General Manager of nearly 12 years, the legendary Swedish mezzo-soprano Birgitta Svendén. Founded in 1773 by King Gustav III—his murder in his own theatre in 1792 inspired Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera*—the "Kungliga Operan" has showcased Swedish operatics legends such as Jussi Björling, Nicolai Gedda, Jenny Lind, and Birgit Nilsson. The company includes both opera and ballet divisions with the nearly 500-year old Royal Swedish Orchestra as its backbone, now led by its new American Music Director Alan Gilbert, appointed Jan. 2020.

"It's a huge honour and I just feel so much gratitude, and also this enormous sense of responsibility for this job" says the effervescent Cavanagh over the telephone from San Francisco where he recently directed the second installment of his three-year, albeit pandemic hijacked, Mozart/Da Ponte cycle for San Francisco Opera. His 1930s *Cosi fan tutte* opened after Nov 21<sup>st</sup> (see review, p. 50) and he'll return in June for the cycle's finale, a darkly post-apocalyptic *Don Giovanni*, having negotiated with his new Swedish company to fulfill his free-lance contracts with SFO.

"Honestly, this is what I got into this business for in the first place," the indefatigable director replies when asked about his grueling pace that includes daily transatlantic meetings between 6–9 a.m., before all-day Mozart rehearsals and followed by several more hours of evening email catch-ups. "I want to tell stories in a fun and interesting way, and it's wonderful to be back [live]," he states.

As one of Canada's most sought after directors, the prolific Cavanagh has helmed more than 150 productions at over 32 com-





Michael Cavanagh's 2016 Royal Swedish Opera production of Nixon in China



Birgitta Svendén in the title role of Hans Gefors' *Christina*, Royal Swedish Opera, 2006 panies in Canada alone, as well as serving as Edmonton Opera's Artistic Director from 1998-2001. He made his Covent Garden debut in 2006 with Serbian-Canadian composer Ana Sokolović's *The Midnight Court*, prior to notably directing the world premiere of her *a cappella* chamber opera *Svadba* for Toronto's Queen of Puddings Music Theatre in 2011.

A defining Cavanagh moment was his daring staging of John Adams' *Nixon in China* that was Vancouver Opera's cultural contribution to the 2010 Olympic Games. The show later travelled to Kansas City in 2011 and San Francisco in 2012, before crossing the proverbial pond to Dublin, Ireland in 2014.

Nixon became Cavanagh's calling card, catching the eye of Svendén who was in the Irish capital seeking a production of the Adams opera, but at the time, unfamiliar with the Canadian director's work. She brought the production to Stockholm where it received raves at its Oct. 2016 debut, resulting in an invitation to return to direct an all-new RSO Aida in Mar. 2018.

Svendén was an internationally acclaimed Wagnerian mezzo, and RSO was her cherished artistic home from 1994-2010 before she took on her managerial role there in 2010. When she began to contemplate retirement (newly appointed Fredrik Lindgren begins his tenure as CEO in July 2022), she extended an invitation to Cavanagh to consider taking on the plum position of Artistic Director. Though his interest was piqued, he was initially reticent as an "outsider," uncertain if a Canadian could—or even should—helm a major European house.

"I was told that it's actually good I'm not a European, and that they wanted me for this fresh perspective, and a North American perspective," he shared, gratified by the warm welcome he received this summer from his new colleagues.

Cavanagh, who speaks "some German," has leapt into learning Swedish with a tutor. Even though English is certainly a *lingua franca* in Sweden, he is staunchly committed to eventually speaking his adopted



country's native tongue. For the foreseeable future, he will embark on a "two city, two country and two continent" relationship with his wife of 24 years, Canadian soprano Jackalyn Short, who teaches voice at Western University.

Cavanagh's appointment involved an arduous, nearly two-year process of interviews and in-person and virtual presentations, in which he shared his short, medium and long term vision with members of the selection committee—who all happily remembered Cavanagh from *Nixon* and *Aida*—as well as literally 100s of the company's administrative staff. He confesses to have been in a "state of disbelief" as his name kept making each cut, finally getting the nod in Oct. 2020, a career-defining moment which was simply "hard to believe."

"The production...was clear and powerful and at the same time had a very detailed work with the characters which made them very human...What I had seen in Dublin was that Michael could handle big productions; use the full space of the stage, and still put the artists in focus."

-BIRGITTA SVEDÉN



Having played a leading role in bringing Cavanagh to the RSO, Svendén recalls being hit like a thunderbolt after seeing *Nixon*: "The production...was clear and powerful and at the same time had a very detailed work with the characters which made them very human...I remember the powerful scenography in red, and that it did not 'kill' the artists; it made them stronger which could have been the opposite. What I had seen in Dublin was that Michael could handle big productions; use the full space of the stage, and still put the artists in focus," she elaborates.

Svendén feels Cavanagh is a strong fit for the Scandinavian company: "I wasn't specifically looking for a Swede, as for me the art of opera is international and it's all about artistic views, visions for the company and good leadership which is built upon experience," she affirms. "I felt that Michael has the right personality for our company being very positive and pragmatic. Michael has a very strong...vision for how to work and include the society and community. We need to get out of our [opera] house more often, meet the public, and the children where they are before we can be sure they will come to us... He also understands the complexity of managing an opera company: including the responsibility of economy, employees, political issues, climate, sustainability, inclusiveness...all the questions that you have to work on apart from having a great artistic vision. I will gladly follow his work for the next coming years," Svendén says confidently.

Born into an artistic family of European heritage, Cavanagh, whose late father was a founding member of the Manitoba Opera Chorus, first cut his operatic teeth performing in the MO children's chorus. He sings praises for his Prairie roots, as well as his mentor, the legendary "father of Western Canadian opera" and MO's inaugural Artistic Director, Irving Guttman, who took the fledgling director under his wing to teach him the

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Christina Nilsson (Aida) & Ivan Defabiani (Radames) in Michael Cavanagh's 2018 Royal Swedish Opera production of *Aida*  rigours and ropes of running an opera company.

"Irving was a giant, and such a committed visionary for Winnipeg as well as for Western Canada," Cavanagh recalls. "He had this incredible knowledge and an incredible ear for voices, and when I wanted to begin directing, I told him, 'This is a crazy idea, but what do you suggest?' And he said, 'let's get to work."

MO's General Manager and CEO Larry Desrochers, who hired Cavanagh to direct the company's 2016

productions of *Falstaff* and Carlisle Floyd's *Of Mice and Men*, offers his own insights about the former Winnipegger's RSO appointment.

"One of Mike's greatest strengths is his outgoing nature. He is a people person, and that has served him well as a director," Desrochers explains. "Casts like to work with him, and having been a singer, he understands their needs onstage. He's also very good at working with the chorus. It takes skill, patience, diplomacy and humour to keep 60-plus people engaged and rowing in the same direction while staging a production, and Mike is a master at this."

At RSO, Cavanagh will program and cast 10-12 operas per year ("I'm responsible for everything that hits your eyeballs," he quips). Four of those will be brand new productions and the remainder, revivals with all-new casts. World premieres are also firmly on Cavanagh's radar, with a plan to commission emerging Swedish "voices," including composers, librettists, designers and directors of all ages for an annual mainstage production, promising to generate plenty of community buzz for the state-run organization.

He will also direct the occasional RSO show himself as part of the company's 110-120 nights of opera staged annually, which represent about half of a sum total of each season's 200-plus performances including opera, ballet and orchestral concerts.

Cavanagh will collaborate closely with Gilbert, the Grammy award winning conductor and former Music Director of the New York Philharmonic, as well as his other RSO teammates: Royal Swedish Ballet Artistic Director Nicolas Le Riche, and Ellen Lamm, Artistic Director of Young at the Opera, the company's education and outreach division, as well as continuing to confer with Svendén.

One burning question on many lips right now is whether or not Cavanagh will infuse his programming with operatic content and artists from his homeland. The director artfully sidesteps the query.

"This is the national opera company of Sweden, so my first priority and responsibility is to the Swedish voices," he replies. "However Canadian artists and content of an international calibre is absolutely something that will be welcomed. My mandate is to simply think as an international guy, who is responsible for a national opera company with a European aesthetic. It's all about balance." He says that programming such a large number of productions each season—the company presented six operas between September and December alone—will help him to strike that critical balance: "It gives me a chance to put in a little bit of everything that his wonderful art form has to offer," he states.

Audience development is also paramount, including supporting the Young at the Opera division with its full line-up of child and youth-friendly activities, including its *Skapande skola* (*Creative School*) program, as well as throwing the opera house's doors open for "Kids' Saturdays," school holiday activities and family days.

Cavanagh will spearhead the company's auspicious 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary next season, with a special gala event planned for Jan. 18<sup>th</sup>, 2023 commemorating the official calendar date King Gustav granted his royal charter in 1773. At an age when many begin to contemplate their golden years enjoying opera from the other side of the footlights, Cavanagh has only revved his career into higher gear.

"I can't wait to fully experience a European sensibility from the inside out, and just revel in a complete embrace of the operatic art form," he enthuses when asked what he most looks forward to as he settles into his new tenure. It's the role of a lifetime: "I've already had a taste of it. I've dipped my toe in those waters but now I get to take the plunge."

**HOLLY HARRIS** is a Winnipeg-based arts journalist who has served as classical music/opera/dance critic for the Winnipeg Free Press since 2004.



## Opera, sustainability & reconciliation

**Sara Schabas** explores how Canadian opera is becoming more mindful of its carbon footprint as informed by Indigenous peoples' relationship to the land

#### While an opera singer's life may be full of grandiose

aspirations to better the world one aria at a time, keeping our lives eco-friendly can be a challenge. Operatic sets and costumes are often created with wasteful materials and not repurposed, and it is nearly impossible to make an operatic career by staying in one place, with top level singers travelling for up to ten months of the year. Yet as the opera world reckons with its history of systemic discrimination and colonization, some members of the Canadian opera community are also beginning to do their part in the climate crisis, both by working towards sustainability and lowered emissions, and through efforts towards reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.

Maintaining an international career is generally considered a benchmark for success in the opera industry. But in 2021, some singers are making ethical choices regarding how much travelling they're willing to undertake. The Swedish mezzo-soprano and mother of climate activist Greta Thunberg, Malena Ernman, forgoes planes entirely when travelling to her top-level engagements. Magali Simard-Galdès, a Canadian soprano who has performed leading roles with Opéra de Montréal and Oper Köln in Germany, admits that when she has to choose between two gigs happening simultaneously, she chooses the local one

in order to reduce her carbon output. When her career requires her to take flights, she makes sacrifices in her day-to-day life to offset her impact.

"I do 'zero waste,' I don't eat meat anymore, I don't have a car, I have a 450-square-foot apartment," she explains. "So when I look at carbon budgeting, technically, I can fly twice a year to Europe." Canada-based Simard-Galdès believes that in the future, there will be a trend away from intercontinental careers, except for singers of true celebrity status. "Whenever I see a European flying over for two days for a concert, I always wonder if there was really no one here who could have done that job. But at the same time, it's hard to turn down a gig because it's going to pollute too much," she admits.

As climate activists know, it's hard to pin the fate of the environment onto the shoulders of individuals or even more so, artists, who are generally not top earners. If the operatic industry truly wants to reduce its environmental impact, change needs to come from large companies, backed with governmental and donor support.

When looking for inspiration, Canadian opera companies can look overseas, where many companies are taking steps to become more climate neutral. Milan's famed Teatro alla Scala is in the process of



Pacific Opera Victoria's hybrid electric van with cast of *The Flight of the Hummingbird*, students & teachers at Happy Valley Elementary School, Victoria



"Environmental sustainability is very much at the forefront of a lot of the healing that we need to do as an industry and as a nation."

-AUTUMN COPPAWAY

installing solar panels in its new office tower, and the company's opera house now uses LED light bulbs and smart lighting in order to reduce its footprint. The Sydney Opera House achieved its goal of carbon neutrality three years ago, while other companies

including Opéra de Lyon, Sweden's Göteborg Opera and Tunis Opera are now collaborating to create productions that promote a circular economy, helping to eliminate waste and to share resources.

In Canada, companies are beginning to follow suit. Shared co-productions have long been a fixture, but new efforts are being put in place to reduce waste and use sustainable and recycled materials. This past year, Vancouver Opera used repurposed lumber for its production of *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, and by early 2022, VO will be the first Climate Smart Certified performing arts producer in Canada, working towards specific targets to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions.

Autumn Coppaway, VO's Technical Director, spearheaded the company's environmental efforts and believes that taking small steps can make a huge difference in fostering a culture of sustainability. "I started Vancouver Opera on composting when I first

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Jan van der Hooft (Bear), Evan Korbut (Owl), Sara Schabas (Dukdukdiya/ Hummingbird) & Simran Claire (Bunny) in POV's The Flight of the Hummingbird, 2020

got here," she describes. "That led to a lot of people looking into green thought processes."

VO's approach to sustainability now involves the entire company. "Climate Smart looks at the totality of the company's input," Coppaway explains. "It starts you on an inventory, through which you can include finance departments who can ask, if I ship something by rail or if I ship it by road, it reduces my Greenhouse Gas Emissions and it's only a thousand dollars more. That kind of approach in a larger organization tends to move faster than just saying you want to reduce your paper consumption."

Both Pacific Opera Victoria (POV) and VO are also working to reduce their emissions when it comes to transporting artists and audience members. They recently invested in expensive hybrid electric vans to transport their touring cast of *The Flight of the Hummingbird: A Parable for the Environment*, which POV also used for their pop-up concerts during the pandemic and is considering using to transport audience members. Rebecca Hass, POV's Director of Community Engagement, has also been working to create zero impact events, as with her 'Voices in Nature' outdoor concert series.

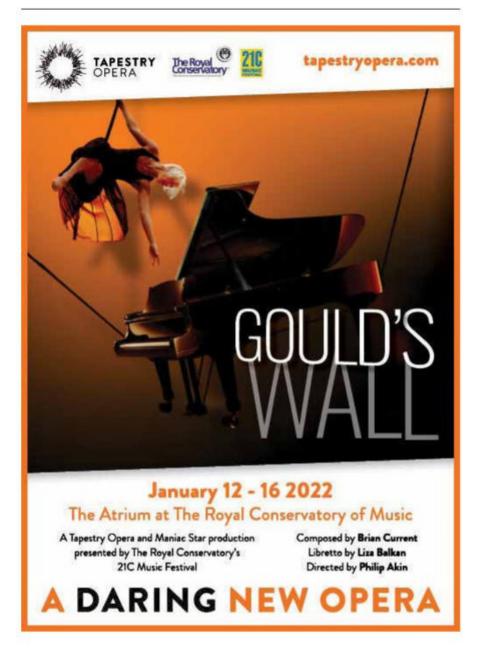
The pandemic has been a time of cultural reckoning and reform for the operatic community, and many companies are now taking steps to better represent the diverse peoples and values that exist across Turtle Island. In this vein, POV is looking to Indigenous knowledge for guidance in how to be more environmentally conscious, incorporating environmental stewardship into their Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Reconciliation initiatives. "You can't talk about Indigeneity and Indigenous worldview and not talk about land," Hass remarks. "That is the lens that we can bring to these efforts. How are we looking at the territory and how are we caring for this land? It's a little different than just looking at climate change; we're also looking at the relationship to land, which is more community-oriented. Building those relationships is reconciliation."

Coppaway, who is Anishnaabe Ojibwa from the Curve Lake First Nation Reservation in Ontario, agrees that tying environmental stewardship into these discussions makes a lot of sense. "Environmental sustainability is very much at the forefront of a lot of the healing that we need to do as an industry and as a nation," she says. "You can't create a sustainable way if the people involved are not feeling that they have a voice in it. It takes everyone to create change." Coppaway also points out the importance of cultural sensitivity and

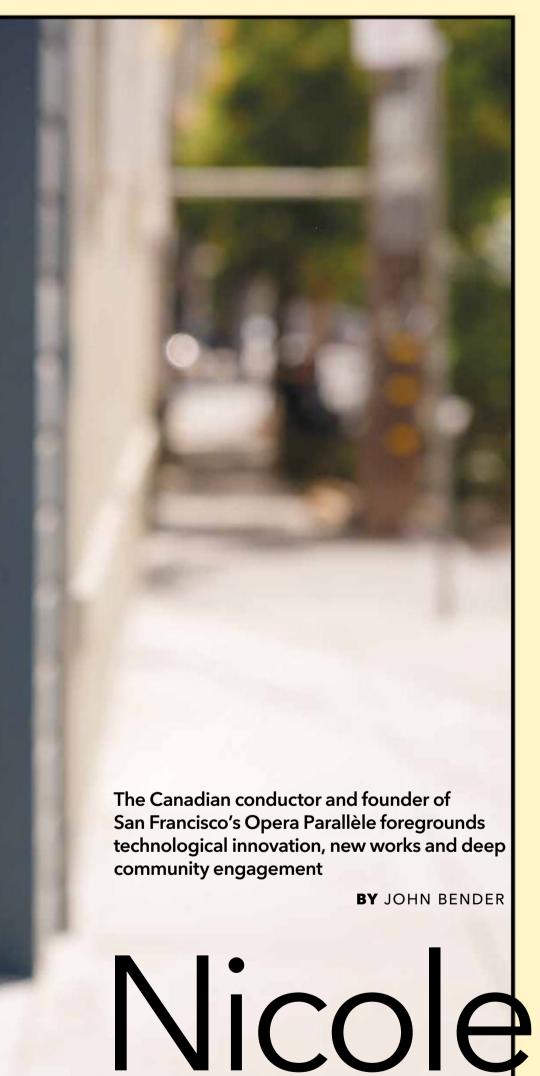
recognizing different peoples' personal relationships to land when dealing with environmental issues. "Culturally, we are trying to move forward," she remarks. "Part of that conversation should be regarding our environment and some of it should be regarding our social environment as well."

In the opera *The Flight of the Hummingbird*, which is based on a Peruvian Indigenous parable, Dukdukdiya, a hummingbird, inspires the animals in the forest to help her put out a forest fire, dousing it with one drop of water at a time. Much like Dukdukdiya and the animals in the forest, the Canadian operatic community's commitment to helping the environment will require cooperation, listening to one another, and small but impactful steps, with all parties doing what they can to help in the climate crisis.

**SARA SCHABAS** is a Dora-nominated, Tkaronto-born soprano, writer and advocate who has sung leading roles with Vancouver Opera, Pacific Opera Victoria, Tapestry Opera, Dayton Opera and Loose Tea Music Theatre.







imaginative founder and General and Artistic Director of San Francisco's adventurous Opera Parallèle (OP), might seem to have been a prophet least honoured in her home country of Canada.

Until recently, that is, when she conducted George Benjamin's *Written on Skin* in early 2020 'just before the pandemic' performances at Opéra de Montréal, a company to which she will be returning in 22/23. She hopes, "now the ice is broken," that further Canadian engagements may follow. In fact, she had to decline one such gig—an offer to conduct Calgary Opera's 2019 production of Joby Talbot's *Everest*, the staged premiere of which Paiement led in 2015 as Principal Guest Conductor at Dallas Opera.

Everest is enjoying a unique online afterlife in the form of a digital graphic novel thanks to Paiement and her long-term collaborator Brian Staufenbiel—an afterlife that speaks volumes about her fundamental commitment to the avant-garde and to new media. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Paiement and Staufenbiel, OP's Creative Director, reimagined Talbot's work from scratch. Their medium is highly stylized in the manner of a comic book, or today's graphic novels. But as in film, they have come up with surprisingly expressive imagery derived from motion-capture devices that were stuck right on the performer's faces as they sang and acted in a recording studio. Talbot's score was rendered entirely with digitized 'instruments' based on audio samples of actual ones, before all the visible and audio elements were assembled into a homogeneous whole. As Paiement says, "the score is absolutely all of the original music. No re-orchestration. We worked extremely hard to keep the soundworld the same. I conducted the 'electronic version' and we captured my *tempi* and my balance." The precise placement

Paiement

of each relative timbre required hours of concentrated studio effort. A cartoon-based electronic opera for the television screen might seem sterile and technological, but the final work deeply touches the heart when encountered in large format with good sound (watch until Jan. 16<sup>th</sup>, 2022 at: https://operaparallele.org/everest).

Everest tells the story of the 1996 catastrophe in which eight people died on that graveyard of a mountain, including Rob Hall, an experienced New Zealand guide, and Doug Hansen, his American client undertaking a second attempt at ascent. In its digitized version, the opera, with libretto by Gene Scheer, fuses Rob (Nathan Granner) and Doug's (Hadleigh Adams) central story with that of Rob's pregnant wife Jan Arnold (Sasha Cooke) far away in New Zealand.

In the opera's finale, Rob, facing death on a frozen ledge, is brought together with Jan by satellite telephone for a deeply moving farewell. Talbot envelops it all with ghostly choruses of the many who have died on Everest, while anchoring the action in reality with sounds like short-wave broadcasts. The ending might seem sentimental, but the work engages hard ethical puzzles, as Rob, who possibly might have saved himself, weighs obligations to his failing client with those to his own family. The stylized visual form of OP's digital version paradoxically actuates these weighty moral concerns while also reinforcing the emotional impact of the work.

Paiement's creative response to the current pandemic conditions for working and viewing opera is typical of her varied and flexible approach to how the artform needs to reflect today's world experience. OP's 21/22 season includes two works that emerged from deep engagement with San Francisco's underserved communities, and treats questions dealing with human rights and immigration. As Paiement explained, "we had to decide the season in April, so we tried to find

projects that could be done in varied spaces, or digitally, if something happened with Covid-19."

Harriet's Spirit is OP's new opera for youth, with music by celebrated jazz bassist Marcus Shelby. Revised and newly orchestrated for the company's 21/22 season, Harriet's Spirit originated in a 2018 workshop production at San

Francisco's African American Arts and Cultural Society by Hands-On-Opera, a company which offers children the opportunity to create, and perform opera. The story centres on a young girl who confronts bullying, inspired by her discovery of 19<sup>th</sup>-century anti-slavery activist Harriet Tubman. The piece's OP premiere took place Nov. 2021 at the Bay View





Opera House, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Masonic structure that is the city's oldest theatre, now a hub for African-American culture.

In winter 2022, OP will premiere *Sophia's Forest*, a new opera about a nine-year-old immigrant's imaginative adaptation to the traumas of civil war, presented in the vast spaces of San Francisco's landmark Grace Cathedral. Composer Lembit Beecher's

Top: Christabel Nunoo (Modesty) & Tiffany Austin (Harriet Tubman) in Opera Parallèle's Harriet's Spirit, 2018; bottom: Mark Simmons film still illustration from Opera Parallèle's Everest, 2021

The score is absolutely all of the original music. No re-orchestration. We worked extremely hard to keep the soundworld the same. I conducted the 'electronic version' and we captured my tempi and my balance.

NICOLE PAIEMENT



Waiting in the wings after a Covid-19 postponement is a revision of *Harvey Milk*, composer Stewart Wallace and librettist Michael Korie's opera set in 1970s San Francisco, dealing with the 1978 double murder by city supervisor Dan White

of gay activist and fellow city Board of Supervisor, Harvey Milk, and Mayor George Moscone. Following runs in Houston and New York, the opera reached San Francisco in 1996 after a reworking by composer and librettist, but it remained heavily scored, with substantial choruses. OP is streamlining the score into two acts and, in general, lightening its texture.

A defining hallmark of Paiement's company ever since its first production in 2007—a revised edition of Lou Harrison's *Young Caesar*—has been the re-scoring of, mainly, new or somewhat recent operas into versions for modest theatres, usually for smaller orchestras and often with fewer singers than the originals. The new version of Harrison's work, for instance, was orchestrated by the Canadian John Rea. Paiement is careful to gain the rights that will allow these new scores to be performed by other companies. Such ventures have included not only Modernist classics like Berg's Wozzeck and Virgil Thomson's Four Saints *in Three Acts*, both also re-orchestrated by Rea, but also more recent works such as

John Harbison's *The Great Gatsby*, Bernstein's *Trouble in Tahiti*, and Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*. In my experience, the new *Gatsby* brought compactness and real energy to a work that originally had seemed rather dispersed.

Paiement began professionally as director of ensembles at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she remains the Edward A. Dickson Emeritus Professor and winner of the Eminent Professor Award. Viewed in retrospect, her career seems to circle ever outward from Santa Cruz, towards her creation of Opera Parallèlle in San Francisco, to a shower of local engagements and creations that include conducting the premiere of Jake Heggie's opera If I Were You, the first work ever commissioned by SFO's Merola Opera Program for young singers. This orbit includes a substantial presence at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, where Paiement is the Jean and Josette Deleage Distinguished Chair in New Music.

The widening circle of demand for her conducting talents has extended from leading Mason Bates's *The (R)evolution* of Steve Jobs in Seattle, to Heggie's Dead Man Walking at Lyric Opera of Chicago, to Washington National Opera and the Glimmerglass Festival. Future international appearances will encompass Opéra de Montréal of course, but also English National Opera, London's Barbican Centre, along with concerts in Palermo. April 2022 will see her return to Dallas Opera for Bizet's Les pêcheurs de perles, which, if not quite part of the standard repertory, signals her wish to pay more attention to works from the more distant past—even a return to the field of her dissertation, Baroque opera.

When asked how she is received as a woman, often standing up in front of orchestra's unfamiliar with her work, and more often than not, leading brand new operas with seemingly rebarbative scores, Paiement says simply that any conductor commands respect if she immediately



shows complete mastery of the pages before her. This means knowing these works by heart, written as they are with their varying clefs, representing notes and noises from across the entire tonal spectrum. The *maestra* says she usually finds herself immediately 'hearing' the sounds represented by the written notes of a complex score—with only very occasionally having to resort to her Yamaha baby grand.

For all of her current travels, Paiement remains solidly committed to Opera Parallèle and the San Francisco community. She does not wish to be a conductor who 'parachutes' into productions already prepared by assistant conductors and chorus masters—or, as in the older opera tradition, when famous singers stepped in overnight and became, in effect, their own conductors. Any successful conductor might say something like this, but Paiement's record of minute and sustained involvement in the preparation of the works she presents points to her sincerity. *Everest* depended upon

intense collaborative development and workshop engagement. She has been devoted for four years to *Harriet's Spirit*, including costumed workshops that led to significant revisions. *Sophia's Forest*, with its experimental sound sculptures and ecclesiastical setting, has involved continual workshop study, ongoing even now in a space with similarly ample resonance. OP's recently expanded administrative and musical staff will help free up Paiement to continue such intensive preparation, and to devise new repertory for the company.

For Paiement, art is a way of living with other people. Surely, her richly collaborative approach finds roots in her profoundly musical Québécois family. She learned to read notes before words. The piano her father gave her mother for their first anniversary centred their sparsely furnished household, and she often would retreat from dinner to join her sister in the four-handed playing her parents enjoyed. Popular songs joined those from

"la France profonde" in sing-alongs while riding in the car. Her father's favourite, "Auprès de ma blonde," dates back to the armies of Louis XIV fighting in Holland. She learned several instruments growing up, and considered studying architecture before moving onto conducting, though she says she still views a score as a kind of architectural rendering. On the advice of teachers, she entered the Eastman School of Music as the only woman in their conducting program. The president of Eastman took her "under his wing" and, when an advertisement appeared for her career launching post at Santa Cruz, he offered crucial encouragement. That she ventured west into the unknown says everything about her bold, open-minded, forward-looking embrace of opera.

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other arts organizations, feared irrelevancy as Covid emaciated its public profle. The company had offered some opera-in-a-parking lot virtual programs over the pandemic year 2020, but when local utility provider Epcor unveiled a new fund with a mandate to support arts projects in the city, then-EO general director Tim Yakimec began brainstorming ways the company could utilize this funding to develop new projects to share with its audience and nurture artistic talent in such hard times.

The company had never been a commissioner of new work, but Yakimec saw an opportunity to venture in that direction in a fruitful, if modest, way with the help of the fund. The result was The Wild Rose Opera Project, a series of four new, short operas composed by four composers with connections to Alberta. They assigned current go-to librettist, internationally-renowned Grand Prairie native, Royce Vavrek, to write all the texts. He has been commissioned by companies in America and Europe, large and small, to write libretti for numerous composers, including an adaptation of George Saunders' innovative novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* for the 2025 Metropolitan Opera season. The budget for the Edmonton project was about \$100,000, half of which Epcor contributed.

"What are we going to do to stay connected with our patrons and our public?" was Yakimec's question in the spring of 2020. He'd met Vavrek in the new works forum at the 2016 Opera America conference in Montreal, and reached out to him in the summer of 2020 with the proposal for The Wild Rose Opera Project. They discussed prospective composers and established that the overarching theme of the pieces would be mental health, an

initiative Epcor was supporting. And they wanted composers with Alberta connections. The four they enlisted were Vivian Fung, who was born in Edmonton and now lives near San Francisco; John Estacio, who has been based in Edmonton for almost 30 years; Bryce Kulak, another Edmonton native now based in Toronto; and Torontonian Ian Cusson, who has recently done several opera projects at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity.

All four composers said in interviews that they had wanted to work with Vavrek, but the EO project was their first opportunity. All four said they hoped that their mini operas could be further explored in future collaborations, and Cusson and Vavrek have already set to work expanding their short work.

Each piece is 10-15 minutes long. Three feature just piano accompaniment by the company's répétiteur, Leanne Regehr, while Fung's is set for soprano and a variety of percussion, played by Toronto-based Ryan Scott. Two feature soprano soloists, and two include a male and female character. Cusson's piece also features a chorus of five.

The theme of mental health is treated from a variety of perspectives. Cusson's music engages Vavrek's distillation of Thomas King's novel *Indians on Vacation*, where depression and self-loathing are central issues. Estacio explores a gay man's turmoil over his identity, and the consolation he gets from an unconditionally accepting pet. Fung's is built on a family history drenched in the effects of trauma and its PTSD aftermath, and Kulak's musically glosses the mental state of a woman with dementia as her daughter remembers and reflects upon their lives.

Vavrek gets his inspiration where he finds it. "There have been ideas that have been given to me, and there have been some I've provided. I don't know if there is an ideal. My preference is for great ideas, wherever they come from," he said in an interview from the Banff Centre where he was working with Cusson to expand their Wild Rose 13-minute contribution.

In Estacio's *Farmer and Dog*, written for mezzo (Megan Latham) and bass-baritone (Peter Monaghan), the composer and the librettist shared personal histories growing up gay in a rural environment. Vavrek has been tapping his agrarian roots for some time. "I really loved the idea of exploring my childhood landscape," he said of Estacio's ten-minute lyrical piece.

"I'm really doubling down on the farm environment. I'm developing a number of projects that deal with the agrarian," he said, "whether it is *Proving Up* (his 2018 collaboration with Missy Mazzoli—see our review, Summer 2021, p. 57) or a new opera called *Broadview* Christ, which is semi-autobiographical, that I'm writing with Julian Wachner. It's part of my cultural heritage, so getting to engage with John [Estacio] on a piece where he brought the idea of a man confiding in a pet," appealed. Including a faithful pet was Estacio's idea. The composer has become the owner of two French bulldogs, and has learned to appreciate the simple spontaneity and relentless good nature of his two, fourlegged companions. Giving a voice to that spirit, up against its owner's psychological distress, became the motivation for his Farmer and Dog.

"It's the story of a dog who's living with a single man who's dealing with his homosexuality and trying to gradually come out, and the dog observes that there's something about his human that's struggling and tries to provide support in the way a dog can," Estacio said. But notwithstanding the seriousness of the mental health theme, Estacio didn't want the piece to be all doom and gloom. He told Vavrek, "I don't want this to be a terribly dark story. I want it to touch on the themes that we need to touch on, but I don't want it to be entirely dark, and he agreed with that."

For his part, Vavrek didn't want a piece featuring a singing dog to veer toward the bathetic. "It's not really a goofy conceit. It's actually quite a sophisticated one. The language that the dog has is quite heightened. I thought it was a unique opportunity to give language to a pet in a very unconventional way," he said. In the end, Vakrek brought the farmer, and Estacio brought the dog, and both were happy with the result.



Company of Indians on Vacation





There have been ideas that have been given to me, and there have been some I've provided. I don't know if there is an ideal. My preference is for great ideas, wherever they come from.

- ROYCE VAVREK



In Cusson and Fung's case, they gave Vavrek the starting point for his words. Cusson suggested he look at King's sometimes comic novel about a middle-class, aboriginal couple on holiday in Prague, and Vavrek drew out three illustrative scenes that explored the male protagonist's mental difficulties. His wife, Mimi, sung by Marion Newman, nudges Bird (baritone Evan Corbut) towards some equanimity as he wrestles with his several demons, whom she's named. The chorus also gives them voice.

Fung has been collecting an oral family history about her relatives' escape from the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia in 1975, the year she, herself, was born. Told from the perspective of a child, and modeled on a cousin who also grew up in Edmonton after her family's escape, *Grover and Friends/Alarm*'s two scenes move "from light to dark," she said. In the first, the child is watching Sesame Street, but her feelings of dread seep in to colour her innocent experience. In the second, her horrific history is triggered when a false alarm screams through her apartment.

"It has a lot to do with trauma and the effects of displacement and events that have shaped my family, including me and my life."

Grover is scored for percussion and soprano (Toronto's Xin Wang), and was written along with other instrumental works after Fung's exploratory visit to Cambodia in 2019. Percussionist Ryan Scott built some of the instruments himself. A companion instrumental piece—the percussion quartet, (Un) Wandering Souls—became a kind of soundtrack for a documentary directed by Cambodian Oscar-nominee Rithy Panh, drawing on archival footage from that barbaric period in Cambodian history.

Fung is Canadian, and her true musical heritage is Western. She left Edmonton for Juilliard at 17, and despite her Chinese ancestry, she claims no special connection to Asian musical traditions. But the work with "unusual percussion" does try to evoke a feeling of the place to which she is attached through her extended family's traumatic experience. (Percussionist Scott spent months searching for bowls that were tuned to ten different pitches.)

"I wanted to evoke something that was not quite Western, but I'm not going to pretend, because I was born and raised in Canada, that I have that in my blood. I'm evoking that through my lens. For me, this is a new chapter in exploring my family history, but also that connection to travelling to Cambodia and that idea of exploring my past," she said.

Fung had discussed working with Vavrek for several years, and this first collaboration could be the beginning of a larger creative exchange. She feels that in *Alarm*, the librettist has brilliantly evoked the fraught history and stories of innocence and triggering she shared with him.

"Royce did such a wonderful job with being emotionally sensitive to the material, and being able to distil the experience in two scenes," she said.

Bryce Kulak left Edmonton 16 years ago to perform in Mirvish's Toronto production of *Lord of the Rings*. He had been a successful child actor, musician and aspiring composer from an early age. In fact, he sought out the guidance of Estacio as a teen.

He has composed for many years for an assortment of projects, but opera is not a genre he'd spent a lot of time with professionally. In fact, when asked how much opera, writ large, he'd written before *Badlands*, his answer was, "None, I would say."

He'd sung in a few local opera productions as a boy, and performed in EO's 2005 production of Ullmann's *Emperor of Atlantis*, just before moving east. He is also a classically trained pianist with considerable performance experience. When EO invited him to contribute to its project, he had no qualms, though. "I don't second guess myself," he said. "I trust myself to come up with whatever I need to come up with. I think you could take quite a lot of my work and transform it into the opera world."

Kulak's *Badlands* explores a mother-daughter relationship that seems to be coloured by the older woman's growing dementia. In its three scenes, mezzo-soprano Catherine Daniel delivers a score that evokes the arid, hoodoo-shaped landscape of Southern Alberta. Kulak requires the singer to "muffle the sounds of the [piano] strings... to press the [shower] curtain into the strings as they vibrate 'til all the sound decayed."

Vavrek brought Kulak the idea of a woman in a mentally confused state from his reading of a Samuel Beckett one-hander called *Not I*. Beckett's character gropes agitatedly in a torrent of verbiage for some foundational notion of herself. Her *Badlands* counterpart nurtured her daughter once, and the daughter remembers time they spent in hoodoo country, but now she cares for her declining parent, learning to cope with the woman's precarious mental state.

The Wild Rose Opera Project was rehearsed at EO's all-purpose facility over three days in mid October, and then on Oct. 21 and 22, was filmed in concert format at the Jubilee Auditorium, the company's home venue. The results were distributed online on a staggered schedule:



Far L: Leanne Regehr (pianist) & Catherine Daniel (Daughter), Badlands; L: Evan Korbut (Bird), Indians on Vacation; Below: Xin Wang, Grover and Friends/Alarm



Indians on Vacation (Nov. 19), Grover and Friends/ Alarm (Nov. 26), Farmer and Dog (Dec. 3) and Badlands (Dec. 10) and can be viewed at edmontonopera.com.

Tim Yakimec left EO in June; in November, the company announced Joel Ivany as their new Artistic Director.

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CANADA

## La voix humaine/The Telephone

MANITOBA OPERA, WINNIPEG

Manitoba Opera turned to the humble telephone to mark its auspicious return to live performance this fall, with its double bill and notable company premieres of two one-act operas ringing as true now as when first penned mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In its first production in two unprecedented years without a live audience, on Nov. 5<sup>th</sup>, MO featured the debut of local stage director Jacqueline Loewen, with the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra artfully led by conductor Naomi Woo (MO debut) unusually positioned on stage allowing for greater, COVID-19 friendly physical distancing.

Poulenc's *tragédie lyrique*, *La voix humaine*, quickly became a showcase for Winnipeg-based soprano Lara Ciekiewicz. The gripping 40-minute work that premiered at Paris' Théâtre national de l'Opéra-Comique in 1959 chronicles the

emotional unraveling of the simply monikered character Elle, as she bids a final farewell over the telephone to her five-year lover on the eve of his wedding to another.

After first dashing onstage in her 50s-style satiny white party dress to answer her jangling phone—and barely recognizable in her dark bouffant wig—Ciekiewicz immediately embarked on Elle's emotional trajectory, crafting a wholly believable, achingly human character on the brink of suicide.

Her flawless performance included lasersharp declamation of Jean Cocteau's French libretto and spot-on intonation, matched by an equal ability to shade a rainbow of tonal colour into her vocalism, with an impeccably controlled dynamic palette delivered with thoughtful, clear intention.

Several key moments resonated in particular, such as Elle's crumpling to



Johnathon Kirby (Ben) & Lida Szkwarek (Lucy) in Manitoba Opera's *The Telephone* 

the ground after hearing her unseen/ unheard lover "tell" her he is to wed tomorrow. Ciekiewicz successfully walked the tightrope of instilling empathy for her character's suicidal ideation without resorting to maudlin melodrama.

Some of the opera's more shocking moments could have been exploited even further. Elle suddenly ripping off her wig as she sang of "lies" truly fascinated—a sort of peeling away of her protective carapace, suggesting an entirely new backstory that unfortunately lost momentum. Elle's cobra-like wrapping of the phone cord around her neck, although it ramped up the eroticism of the moment, could have instilled even greater danger when she later anthropomorphized the phone as her lover. There is no doubt this stellar singing-actress could—and would—have chilled us to the bone if given freer rein. At the opera's harrowing climax, Elle severs

the cord from the unit, a presumed act of self-empowerment and liberation from her callous lover, but this also felt overly safe.

The other half of the program featured Menotti's *opera buffa*, *The Telephone*, featuring Winnipeg soprano Lida Szkwarek as Lucy opposite Toronto-based baritone Johnathon Kirby as her aspiring fiancé Ben.

Loewen transported the roughly 20-minute 1947 opera to 21<sup>st</sup> century times, with Lucy gossiping and prattling away, not on a traditional corded telephone as Ben attempts to propose marriage, but on her mobile, ringtone-happy, selfie-snapping smartphone.

Szkwarek delivered a confident, assured portrayal, both sweetly innocent and blissfully clued out about Ben's growing exasperation en route to catching his train. Her nimble vocals easily handled Menotti's quicksilver stylistic shifts and her sparkling *coloratura* added further texture to the composer's rarely heard orchestral score.

Her opening aria "Hello! Oh, Margaret, It's You" was an early highlight, bookended by her final romantic duet with Kirby as they seal their deal with a kiss—capped by a "love you!" mirroring Elle's heartbreaking admission to her lover at the end of her decidedly darker journey in the Poulenc.

Kirby's booming baritone provided comic fodder throughout, however his mugging and reactions to Lucy's series of phone conversations, once again, could have been pushed further to create an even larger-than-life persona à la pop-up commedia dell'arte street theatre.

Despite these few tentative misfires, MO is to be commended for weathering the storm as it confidently moves toward a full production of Rossini's *La Cenerentola* in April.

— HOLLY HARRIS

#### Le Flambeau de la nuit/ Riders to the Sea

OPÉRA DE MONTRÉAL

Opéra de Montréal's long delayed and long anticipated return to live performance was a strong double bill on the theme of watery death: Ralph Vaughan Williams's *Riders to the Sea* followed by the world premiere of *Le Flambeau de la nuit* by composer Hubert Tanguay-Labrosse and librettist Olivier Kemeid. This was a brave choice after a year of loss, and the right one, an affirmation that contemporary opera can be a way of feeling through our shared pain.

Co-productions, like this one with Ballet-Opéra-Pantomime (BOP) and I Musici de Montréal chamber orchestra, and featuring the Atelier Lyrique young artists, have often tended to be better designed than on the company's mainstage (smaller budgets can have this perverse effect). But perhaps the pandemic has finally broken

and when it cannot, and what it means for those who remain. Vaughan Williams minimally adapted *Riders* from John Millington Synge's relentlessly tragic play about a family in the Aran Islands who lose all eight of their men to the sea. This is a world where home is where you wait for bad news. The story centres around the mother, Maurya, sung with some timidity by Allyson McHardy, who can't say goodbye to her last living son because she sees the ghost of his brother riding with him down to the sea. Would he have survived if she'd only said "Godspeed you"? Sisters Nora and Kathleen are still fighting against the inevitable, which their mother has either accepted or is somehow causing, and so they move more, and rail in



OdeM's proud tradition of trapped-in-the-90s staging. Both operas were directed by Édith Patenaude, who comes from theatre, and they shared an austere set by Patrice Charbonneau-Brunelle with the collaboration of Styl'Afrique Coop: a central square surrounded by shapes draped in sooty cloth, like a landscape in mourning. It was surgically lit by the outstanding Julie Basse, in whose hands the lighting was like a character throughout. It felt less like a double bill and more like a chimera, with the dusky end of *Riders* flaring up into the beginning of *Flambeau* with the flick of a switch.

*Flambeau* was conceived to dovetail with *Riders* and both works struggle with questions of when death can be avoided,



Scene from Opéra de Montréal's Le Flambeau de la nuit

their sod-roofed cage. Nora was sung with pleasant tang by Sarah Dufresne, and Kathleen by the crystalline Andrea Núñez.

After Vaughan Williams' swells and gusts, and the leaden irony of *Riders* final line, "We must be satisfied," *Flambeau* begins in silence with a distant fire on the horizon. After the gentle transition it's soon apparent that we're in a completely different musical world, which grows slowly, first with a kind of plainsong that passes in and out of dissonance, coming together and apart against a spartan drum, until we're in a

#### REVIEWS

declaratively contemporary soundscape of textures: wooden block strikes, shivering whistles, squealing violins, frightening and pitiful sounds. Words exist between sound world and narrative, and there is indeed a story: a group of refugees flee from fire and war towards the treacherous safety of water and a foreign land beyond.

A shrouded chorus narrates action in unsettled, almost unstructured scenes between the four

refugees on the boat—sung by Núñez, Lucie St-Martin, Matthew Li, and Mishael Eusebio—who are fleeing with a smuggler (McHardy). A mother, poignantly sung by Sydney Frodsham, convinces the smuggler to also take her and her daughter—played by a young woman whose name is sadly missing from the online cast list—because the little girl will bring them good luck. She does, they make the crossing and even survive a storm, but at a terrible price. And now we are very far from the offstage death in *Riders*. We see the body and we hear about its final mouthful of foreign soil.

The opera addresses us directly as "those up there," so distant that we can react to such horrors selfishly and without compassion. It's shockingly visceral after *Riders*, which is far away from us in time and sung with a lovely but strange Irish phrasing, but the pairing is so well wrought that it feels like a new and totally contemporary whole. This is a rare achievement for any art but especially for an opera today.

## *L'orangeraie*

CHANTS LIBRES, MONTRÉAL

This new opera makes much more sense once you learn the librettist had absolutely no idea what he was talking about, and that this was, in fact, the whole point. Playwright Larry Tremblay comes out and says as much





Nicholas Burns (Amed) in Chants Libres' *L'orangeraie* 

in the play on which the opera is based: "I dared to write a play about war despite complete ignorance of what it involves, of what it provokes. What business did I have doing that?" Following this line of thinking leads to a debate about whether it's ever appropriate to put limits on artists' imaginations.

But that would be taking the bait. Instead of engaging in an hypothetical 'dorm room' argument over cultural appropriation, this stale work doesn't actually raise these questions, not unless, at least, you are professionally obliged to research it. L'orangeraie was already a book (2013) and a play (2016) and Chants Libres has now brought it to the opera stage. It tells the story of twin brothers, Amed and Aziz, who lose their grandparents to an artillery strike. The local militant tells the boys' father that he must avenge this act by picking one son for a suicide mission. Since Aziz has an incurable disease, this should be an easy choice—to a Western utilitarian, perhaps but the twisted morality of these strange characters means that only a 'real' sacrifice counts, so the healthy son has to die. How barbaric! Then their mother intervenes and the boys switch roles. The final third of the opera hinges, dramatically, on whether the surviving brother will act in an American

play about child violence. Probably it's supposed to be clever self-reflection.

It is a perverse achievement to make such bland art in a piece about child suicide bombers who must connive with each other so that the 'right one' dies. But *L'orangeraie* is weak theatre hamstrung by placelessness and wooden stereotypes. The only country that's named is America—where without a hint of irony we're told there is "no war"—while

the characters all have Arabic names. Characters, mind you, without desires, dreams, jokes—without any extraneous individual qualities, really, except the bare minimum to be recognizable types in a puppet play about radicalization as imagined by a Montréal professor who has read a column in the New York Times.

The staging completes the cartoonish picture with sanitized and abstracted Sesame Street ruins, while composer Zad Moultaka's music offers a slightly more interesting world that wavers between restless intrusion and bathetic simplicity. The sound world consists of a sharply divided patchwork of malevolent droning in the chorus, squeaking and pinging like an overwound clock mechanism, with plenty of spoken dialogue for even more contrast. The libretto often felt declaimed, as if it were written against the music, which could be an attempt at irony, though frankly, it's hard to tell. The effect is an opera moving in sometimes refreshing and sometimes grating lockstep between scenes where singers struggle against threatening, semitonal musical eddies, and others, where their voices stand gloriously, impossibly alone with the purest supporting harmonies It worked best for countertenor Nicholas Burns as Amed and soprano Nathalie Paulin as the boys' mother Tamara; their shared clarity and shapeliness of phrasing were the only hints of genuine emotion in this lumpy, vain melodrama.

Covering up mediocrity with political claims is a worn-out old trick. We shouldn't fall for it.

— MONTRÉAL REVIEWS BY LEV BRATISHENKO

## Angel

OPERA ATELIER, TORONTO

The singing in Opera Atelier's latest production—a filmed version of a new, 70-minute opera called *Angel*—is wonderful. And the score by Canadian composer and violinist Edwin Huizinga is an interesting, contemporary take on familiar Baroque sounds, beautifully played by Toronto's Tafelmusik under the leadership of their Music Director Elisa Citterio. But the rest of it is an overly busy, confusing and, much as I hate to say it, ultimately rather dull muddle.

*Angel* premiered at Toronto's Bell Lightbox and online on Oct. 28<sup>th</sup>, and is available for streaming until Jan 3<sup>rd</sup>. The issues with the opera begin with the text. To create *Angel*, Huizinga, with the assistance of Christopher Bagan, set to music a

series of selections from John Milton's 17<sup>th</sup>-century epic poem *Paradise Lost* and the 20<sup>th</sup>-century verse of Rainer Maria Rilke, translated from the German with great sensitivity by Grace Andreacchi.

At first it seems that Milton's story of the biblical Fall of Man will rule the day as the increasingly interesting tenor Colin Ainsworth sings, as one of the production's three Angels, the very first lines of *Paradise Lost*. Lucifer, powerfully sung and acted by bass-baritone Douglas Williams, soon tumbles down from on high, declaring that it is "better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven."

The story of Adam and Eve then unfolds through two stunning segments based on poems by Rilke. The first, led by the magnificent Measha Brueggergosman (the second Angel) and supported by the Nathaniel Dett Chorale, introduces Adam before Ainsworth takes up Eve's side of the story. In the second segment, the Biblical first couple (baritone John Tibbetts and soprano Meghan Lindsay) come to realize both the beauty of their love and the terror of their fate.

From here, the production stalls, falling into a string of scenes without any obvious

connection and a couple of new characters (soprano Mireille Asselin and baritone Jesse Blumberg, both terrific) identified only as Virgin and Angel and a dancer (Tyler Gledhill) who seems to be significant but we don't quite know why. Of course, linear storytelling is not a requirement for great opera, but since *Angel* started with what felt like a clear plot, it's confusing to have it disappear. Separately, the combination of music and text for each scene is powerful but there is no forward motion, no sense of continued drive to a cathartic conclusion.

Not making the audience's job any easier is the combination of Marshall Pynkoski's stylized stage direction overlaid by the equally stylized work of film director, Marcel Canzona. That he filmed *Angel* largely in black and white with only the occasional shot of colour is probably okay, but the addition of other overly familiar filmic tropes like slow motion and superimposition offer little added effect, and the extensive

Scene from Opera Atelier's Angel





use of a hand-held camera is hard on the eyes, especially since the production is very, *very*, darkly lit.

As with all Opera Atelier productions, Angel gives equal weight to dance. Ensemble numbers, choreographed by Jeannette Lajeunesse Zingg, are nicely danced by the company's own troupe, but far too pretty to have any real impact. As a 21<sup>st</sup>-century creation, why not put less emphasis on traditional Baroque dance, with its limited movement vocabulary and ankle-length gowns that hide the women's legs, diminishing their power next to the men? Landing one movement on each beat is pleasing to the eye, but it lacks depth and tells no story on its own. Even Gledhill's self-choreographed solo work is mostly in the same 'pretty' category.

The fall of Lucifer is a sweeping tale about war, death and destruction. Taking the darkness and power of Milton's famous lines, and blending them with Rilke's mystical poetry to tell a small part of the larger story, is truly interesting. With some tweaking of the text and a different, less muddled staging this could have been a hit.

— ROBIN J. MILLER

#### UNITED STATES

#### Carmen

HOUSTON GRAND OPERA

Houston Grand Opera had to cancel the end of its 20/21 season because of the pandemic and instead presented a series of digital productions, recitals, and aria concerts. Returning to live, in-person performances on Oct. 22<sup>nd</sup> in Wortham Theater Center's Brown Theater, the company launched its 21/22 season with *Carmen*. I kept thinking

there hasn't been as much dancing in Bizet's opera since the great Alicia Alonso turned it into a ballet.

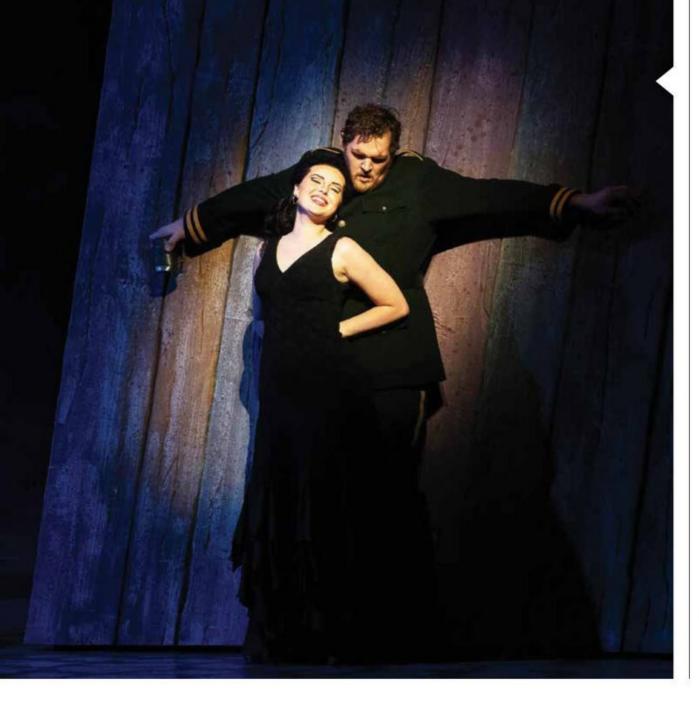
For the revival of a 2014 co-production with Lyric Opera of Chicago, associate director Stephen Sposito and associate choreographers Ashley Elizabeth Hale and Marty Lawson recreated Rob Ashford's original staging and dances, and Michael James Clark duplicated Donald Holder's lighting.

The footwork started with the opera's prelude. A shirtless dancer in a bull's-head helmet squared off with men in matador costumes and reappeared any time danger or fate menaced Carmen. He and a lone bullfighter even had a balletic, cape-swirling corrida off to the side during the doomed lovers' fatal final duet. In addition, 12 other dancers strutted their often tango-spiced stuff in the second-act tavern scene and elsewhere. And the boys' first-act marching chorus was replaced by a small platoon of uniformed soldiers doing a kind of balletic close-order drill.

Montreal native Carolyn Sproule, who was Mercédès in HGO's 2014 staging, made an elegantly potent heroine. Her fresh mezzo-soprano deployed easy top notes and some softly insinuating phrasing but also a weak bottom register; some resinous mid-range tone lent her singing effective bite, however. Tantalizingly, Sproule's *femme fatale* projected an air of regal dignity, and she imbued Carmen's flirtatious taunting with a nice playfulness.

Richard Trey Smagur's tenor is more diffuse and cushiony than pointedly clarion, but Don José's *fortissimo* outbursts were powerfully voiced, and his deployment of a handsome *mezza voce* in the José-Micaëla duet and the Flower Song (which he ended softly, as Bizet indicated) was most satisfying. His José was also touchingly shattered when confronting Carmen in the final scene.

Heidi Stober's Micaëla enjoyed a soprano both limpid and round. Soprano Raven McMillon piped prettily as Frasquita, and





Carolyn Sproule (Carmen) & Richard Trey Smagur (Don José) in Houston Grand Opera's *Carmen* 

mezzo Sun-Ly Pierce was a clear-toned Mercédès. Carmen's bandit band was sturdily completed by baritone Luke Sutliff (Dancaïre) and tenor Ricardo García (Remendado), and bass William Guanbo Su and baritone Blake Denson boomed perhaps too stoutly as Zuniga and Moralés, respectively. As Escamillo, Christian Pursell (the only cast member not a current or former member of the HGO Studio training program) contributed a velvety bass-baritone and stylishly smooth phrasing.

The music director of Chicago Opera Theater, conductor Lidiya Yankovskaya, balanced rhythmic snap and thrust with supple lyricism.

David Rockwell's simple sets consisted of curved stone or plank walls for the first scene, angular slabs resembling marble or glacial ice for the mountain pass scene, and another curved wall representing the bull ring in the last act. Julie Weiss's costumes set the action in the 20th century, with some twists. Colour was downplayed until the tavern scene, where Carmen had on a bright red skirt, and especially the final act. Male choristers wore black or light gray business suits, but the women were adorned in oddly formal getups. The cigarette girls sported sometimes comically elaborate hairdos and floor-length black gowns suitable for a ball at Morticia Addams's house. But for the last-act crowd scene and procession of the bullfighters, the matador outfits and gowns, with cleverly manipulated yards-long trains, were dazzlingly awash in colour.

— WILLIAM ALBRIGHT

## Fire Shut Up in My Bones

THE METROPOLITAN OPERA, NEW YORK

Well, the Met is back in action. and that's good. The performance of Terence Blanchard's *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* on Oct. 13<sup>th</sup>, the fifth of eight in a nearly soldout run, was my first venture into the 'big house' at Lincoln Center in 19 months—the longest I've been away from it since I initially set foot there in the summer of 1967. So my return to the Met was laden with nostalgia, its emotions transcending the



inconveniences of long proof-of-vaccination lines, no refreshments, and 185 minutes of mask wearing in a tightly packed house.

They transcended, too, the merits of the evening's centerpiece, which I wanted to like a lot more than I actually did: it's a worthy effort, but hardly the near-masterpiece that some have touted it to be. Its historic credentials can't be denied: the Met's first Black composer, first Black librettist (Kasi Lemmons), and first Black director (Camille A. Brown, who co-directed with James Robinson and also devised the dances), as well as the largest Black cast this side of *Porgy and Bess. Fire Shut Up in* My Bones was inspired by New York Times columnist Charles M. Blow's same-titled memoir, tracing his small-town Louisiana childhood and haunted young adulthood; I haven't read it, but I can't imagine that its 228 pages don't tell its tale more grippingly than Blanchard's and Lemmons's overstuffed, underpowered three-hour show. (When a cast list offers characters named "Destiny" and "Loneliness," you can bet you're in for at least a dollop of pretension.)

This is Blanchard's second opera, and it's full of promise, but he may need another turn or two at the bat before he knocks one out of the park. By then, perhaps, he'll have learned how to set text more idiomatically,



Chris Kenney (Chester), Will Liverman (Charles) & Walter Russell III (Char'es-Baby) in The Metropolitan Opera's Fire Shut Up in My Bones

less opaquely—how to make the words flow and swing with a natural rhythm, not bury them in instrumentation or encourage their 'elocution' by opera singers with bad habits of English diction. In the Met's cast, both baritone Will Liverman, as the grown-up Charles, and soprano Latonia Moore, as his pistol-packin' mama, were remarkably unintelligible much of the time; and when, on occasion, the audience erupted in laughter that I didn't share, I assumed they were reacting to the back-of-the-seat Met Titles, not to words they actually heard and understood from onstage. Blanchard a multiple-Grammy-winning jazz man—is adept at creating an ear-catching array of evocative sounds; time and again, he'll set the right mood for a scene—but then fail to chart the moment-to-moment drama within it. The scenes that register with the greatest immediacy —Act II's opening homoerotic dream ballet and rousing, gospel-choral baptism, Act III's percussive stomp-and-shout fraternity hazing—seem self-contained: they add little but time to the opera's dramatic thrust.

And truth be told, I wasn't much moved by the grown-up Charles, especially in the stolid, one-note person of Liverman, whose vocal quality can't be denied but who brought little urgency or specificity to his character's plight. Time and again he was upstaged by the child he shadowed, Walter Russell III as his younger self, Char'es-Baby—being a winsome twelve-year-old does give a performer a certain advantage. Moore deployed a lush voice and a strong stage presence to offset her poorish enunciation, and the imposing Angel Blue, towering over Liverman, made some beautiful sounds as Destiny, Loneliness, and (yes, a real person!) Greta, though she and Moore sounded too timbrally alike for ideal effect: Blanchard would have done better to set them apart as contrasting vocal types, with the mother's role assigned to a deep-voiced mezzo. The rest of the large cast, including a trio of substitutions, did their jobs admirably; Robinson and Brown kept the action afloat within Allen Moyer's motile panels and Greg Emetaz's mood-enhancing projections; and Yannick Nézet-Séguin in the pit proved (or at least sounded) the master of the score's myriad musical styles—and wore his motley-patterned shirt with flair ("Joseph's dreamcoat," the gent in the seat to my right aptly dubbed it). The Met, in fact, gave its generous all to the production even if that all was essentially too much: its massive auditorium is four times the size of the space where Fire was created, in St. Louis in 2019, with what seems to have been a trimmer score and a better-balanced cast. The evening ended with a clamorous standing ovation, but happy as I was to have the Met up and running again, I felt no inclination to join in.

## **Eurydice**

THE METROPOLITAN OPERA

"I always liked words," reminisces a wistful Eurydice, title heroine of Matthew Aucoin's new operatic retelling of the classic mythic tale, its words crafted by playwright Sarah Ruhl. "Words and books and stories. Words were my music. But . . . Orpheus never liked words. He had his music." That's an in-a-nutshell statement of a problem facing this conflicted, dead-on-herwedding-day bride, recollecting their relationship from the Underworld: she's a bookworm, he's a musician.

It's a problem faced, too, by the audibly gifted Aucoin, Orpheus to Ruhl's Eurydice, in creating a musical world for her terse, verbally evocative play of 2003. Ruhl's play inspired him, he asserted in an interview before the opera's premiere in Los Angeles in 2020: "You tap almost any word, and there are wells of emotion underneath it. It's aware of what it cannot say, and that invites music to complete the sentence." But did Ruhl's shapely sentences really need completion? And if Aucoin was so inspired by her words, why not let an opera-house audience hear more of them? Those wells of emotion erupt orchestrally more often than they do vocally, and much of *Eurydice* is so thickly scored that the vocal line is obscured and the words inaudible. (Projecting the text onto the scenery presents a portentous clue that much of it won't be easily comprehensible.) Too often, and perhaps wrongly, I felt that Aucoin, like Orpheus, just doesn't like words; he has his music.

In fact, many of the best parts of Eurydice are purely orchestral: the sonically enticing prelude and the witty wedding dance are two early-on examples. But in between there's a patch—a crucial patch, introducing us to the thenhappy couple—in which, at least on the night I attended (the third performance, Nov. 30<sup>th</sup>), the singers themselves, let alone their words, had a tough time asserting themselves. That was intermittently true at The Metropolitan Opera throughout the evening, especially for its hardest worker, soprano Erin Morley in the title role, but also for that fine Canadian baritone Joshua Hopkins, as the somewhat clueless Orpheus (a surprisingly smallish role), and for today's favorite countertenor pinup, Jakub Józef Orliński, playing Orpheus's godlier, winged (and mostly shirtless) double, a role (mis) conceived by Aucoin to supply a "halo"

around the baritone's voice: the gimmick might work in a much smaller house, or on a recording, but in the uncongenially jumbo-sized Met it simply failed (pun optional) to register.

Aucoin had better luck writing for his expert high-tenorial Hades, the amusingly horned-and-tailed Barry Banks, and for the wry trio of Underworld-guarding Stones, Big, Little, and Loud, drolly embodied (in their wonderfully fanciful costumes by Ana Kuzmanic) by Ronnita Miller, Stacey Tappan, and Chad Shelton. Their scenes clicked because their words largely came to the fore.

So, especially so, did those of Canadian bass-baritone Nathan Berg, a Met debutant a week earlier, as Eurydice's dead but still doting Father, navigating the mixed pains and pleasures of remembrance and of being reunited with, yet unrecognized by, the daughter he loves. Buoyed by Aucoin's most consistently considerate scoring, and the opera's most intriguing role, Berg supplied *Eurydice*'s emotional core: his final scene, in which he bathes in the waters of Lethe (a shower stall, in Daniel Ostling's clean, eye-entrancing designs) to forget the daughter he's just sent away, was heartbreaking.

Morley, looking charming in her Poppins-esque getup of overcoat, bonnet, suitcase, and umbrella for her rainy arrival in the Underworld, sounded lovely whenever the music let her. So, with far less to do, did the tousled-haired Hopkins. Yannick Nézet-Séguin, when not overzealously augmenting Aucoin's worst (i.e., singer-defeating) compositional instincts, conjured wonderful sounds and noises from the ever-brilliant Met orchestra. And Aucoin surely deserves credit for inventing them: despite his pronounced nods to the Glass/Adams musical lexicon, the best of his score evinced what I hope will develop into a clearly Aucoinian voice. And thanks to director Mary Zimmerman (whose operatic work, often reviled, I've pretty consistently enjoyed) and to her splendid design team, the show was easily, happily watchable. Is it strange, then, that at evening's end, I left the Met hoping that

someday I'll encounter onstage, incomplete sentences and all, Ruhl's ur-*Eurydice*?

--- NEW YORK REVIEWS BY PATRICK DILLON

#### **Fidelio**

SAN FRANCISCO OPERA

Ludwig van Beethoven's *Fidelio* always ends to thrilling effect, no matter the exact qualities of any given performance. And thus it played out with San Francisco Opera's new production, robustly conducted by its new music director Eun Sun Kim (seen Oct. 17<sup>th</sup>).

The audience erupted with enthusiasm at the finale, perhaps as much with joy at sitting in the opera house again—a kind of liberation—as for the traits of this current rendering. The company in fact reopened in August with *Tosca* but the 'return to live' still remains fresh for many people.

Elza van den Heever stood tall as Leonore, the wife who, disguised as a youth named Fidelio and working in a dreadful prison, saves her husband Florestan from the profound dungeon where he languishes at the tyrannical hand of its governor Don Pizarro.

A lot of van den Heever's fame rests on spectacular *bel canto* performances at The Metropolitan Opera. Here, with Leonore, she is moving into heavier vocal terrain. The voice remains beautiful, gracefully produced, and dramatically engaged, as in her ravishing first-act arias, the linked "Abscheulicher!" and "Komm, Hoffnung, lass den letzten Stern." Her lovely tone seemed stretched only at the most strenuous moments in the dungeon and the exultant final duet.

Canadian soprano Anne-Marie MacIntosh, one of the company's 2021 young-singer Adler Fellows, sang Marzelline, the daughter of Florestan's good-natured, if greedy, jailer Rocco. Her frustrated, comic love for Fidelio threads along until the climatic revelation of the boy as heroic wife.

The opera begins with Marzelline in duet with her persistent suitor Jaquino (impressive Adler Fellow, Christopher Oglesby); she subsequently charms us with the piece's first aria about her secret love for Fidelio, and then launches the first-act quartet. This is a large role, often assigned to more established singers. MacIntosh's bright, clear voice and lively presence more than held the stage.

The production, directed by Matthew Ozawa in settings by Alexander V. Nichols and costumes by Jessica Jahn, blatantly tied the opera to modern authoritarian prisons complete with chain-link fence cages and acres of glaring fluorescent lighting. The action takes place within a giant, stage-filling chromed steel cube that rotates to reveal the prison's offices, cells, and mountains of bureaucratic file cartons. The props locate the action somewhere around the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, with period-correct office furniture, desk lights and water coolers. Costumes varied from a smart blue dress for MacIntosh to stiff bullet-proof vests for

Anne-Marie MacIntosh (Marzelline) San Francisco Opera's *Fidelio* 







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Nicole Heaston (Despina) in San Francisco Opera's *Così fan tutte* 

Rocco, Leonore, and the guards. Florestan's cell walls rapidly flashed black and white videos of the prison in twelve panels. The effect from the audience was likewise a kind of intense visual torture.

Within the limits dictated by the monolithic setting and by ruthless cuts in the German dialogue, Ozawa managed to bring the characters to convincing life. These limits unfortunately included the prisoners being released not into a courtyard for their brief, ecstatic moment of freedom, but rather, into narrow corridors. Jammed together, they sang of fresh air, the supply of which was hard to imagine.

Russell Thomas is a fine singer who is also moving towards a heavier repertoire with roles like Florestan. He may still not be ready as he never settled into Beethoven's, at times, extreme and tortuous vocal writing. His appeal still carried him to a grand ovation.

Greer Grimsley, who portrayed a fine Wotan here just three years back, may have dwelt too often on that strenuous role, for his Don Pizarro was more barked than sung. James Creswell took on Rocco with grace and conviction. He was especially convincing in his refusal of Pizarro's demand to murder Florestan. The still deeper bass of Soloman Howard commanded the opera's final scene as Don Fernando, representing Beethoven's Enlightenment ideals.

All ears were surely tuned to Kim's approach to this fearsomely difficult score. The company's new *maestra* took fast *tempi* from the start, leaving little room to build momentum. It sometimes seemed that the units of the score were being squared off separately, rather than merging as elements in an unfolding musical architecture. Thus the tense cohesion essential to a profoundly compelling version of *Fidelio* remained absent.

## Così fan tutte

SAN FRANCISCO OPERA

Mozart's paradoxical *Così fan tutte* has puzzled critics since its belated return to the standard repertoire prior to World War II, having remained virtually unperformed for more than a century before.

San Francisco Opera's new staging by Canadian Michael Cavanagh (seen Nov. 21st) tilts towards broad comedy rather than to the more sublime, serious threads woven under the work's surface. The excellent conductor Henrik Nánási's at times breakneck *tempi* underlined Cavanagh's brisk, complexly choreographed stage action. The slow moments became unfortunate casualties, especially the dreamy, throbbing Act I farewell, "Soave sia il vento," but also the final ravishing quartet.

Lorenzo Da Ponte's libretto is pure opera *buffa*. It had long been deemed immoral because its slender plot hinges on a cruel secret bet by two gentlemen with their cynical mentor that the steadfast love of their ladies must surely preempt any change of heart. The role play demanded of both the men and women leads to a troubling, false sincerity that slides into the real, with a considerable dose of disorientation and even transformation along the way. As Elizabeth Schwarzkopf, the ultimate recorded Fiordiligi, said in 1979, "Have you not heard of people being in love with two persons at the same time?" It is no accident that some productions, like this one, do not return the lovers to their original line up.

This slight plot—more amoral than immoral—forms the scaffold that enables Mozart's profound musical exploration of the infinite psychology of romantic love. Love's every nuance, instability, sincerity and every feigned expression take on magical, musical form before us. When one of the men (Guglielmo) learns that his lady has switched to his friend (Ferrando), he sums up Mozart's picture of love as "un gran perché"—a huge question mark. Mozart captures it all. *Così* is about the essence of life.

In Cavanagh's ongoing SFO Mozart/Da Ponte trilogy, *Le nozze di Figaro*, *Così*, and *Don Giovanni* are relocated from Europe to the mid-Atlantic region of America—yes, America. In *Figaro* (reviewed in OC Winter 2019) the classes jostled in a new Georgian manor house just rounding out construction in 1786. This house becomes the opulent 1930s Wolfbridge Country Club for *Così*, while *Don Giovanni* (coming in summer 2022) will witness its decay during some dystopian future.

In this *Così*, the Georgian framework offers an inventive cornucopia of luxurious 1930s settings by Erhard Rom, with a wooded locker room for the men, a ladies' workout room with authentic looking period exercise machines, salons for breakfast and tea, billiard room, badminton court and swimming pool. Bright and varied period costumes by Constance Hoffman complete the picture of a refined leisure class who engage in continual changes of clothes.

The great Italian bass Ferruccio Furlanetto anchored the cast as the string-pulling Enlightenment rationalist, mentor to the heroes, and (in this staging) manager of the club. His every vocal and physical gesture brought Don Alfonso to vivid life. Nicole Heaston as Despina, his companion in crime, amusingly waltzed through her antics as resistant maid and, in disguise, both as an uproarious quack doctor curing the supposedly poisoned heroes with magnetism and as the congested notary purveying a false marriage contract.

Nicole Cabell encountered the towering vocal demands placed on the dominant sister Fiordiligi and emerged with real honours for vocal agility and conviction. She does not, however, fully command the deepest notes of the tortuous, mockheroic "Come scoglio," nor the tessitura of her later, touching aria "Per pietà" which lies ungraciously low for her. Mezzosoprano Irene Roberts, as the more giving sister Dorabella, fully controlled her less showy, yet still virtuoso music. Both floated responsively through countless delightful fine points of the staging: inventive but not openly contrived.

Cavanagh puts the two heroes through physical acrobatics that all but match those Mozart wrote for them vocally in the score. Again, the lower, baritone role of Guglielmo seems less flashy, though laden with technical demands and requiring conviction in his bare, grudging acceptance of his reversal in love. John Brancy sang admirably in the more elaborate passages, while gracefully avoiding the barking that sometimes overtakes baritones in this role.

Ben Bliss as Ferrando brought the performance to its vocal high point and to show-stopping applause with the gorgeous tenor aria "Un' aura amorosa." And his tall stature did not prevent him from taking acrobatic spins mid-air. He, in effect,

*Ariadne auf Naxos* for Gran Teatre del Liceu (seen Oct. 4<sup>th</sup>).

More cabaret than Broadway, Mitchell's adaptation is a revelation. A piquant and satirical interpretation of Richard Strauss's *commedia dell'arte* concoction, it perfectly represents the theatre, with all its vanities, its anguish and its historical acceptance of eccentricity and unconformity.

The libretto by Hugo von Hofmannsthal was complemented with additional dia-

Johanni van Oostrum (Ariadne) & David Pomeroy (Bacchus) in Gran Teatre del Liceu's *Ariadne auf Naxos* 





led an outstanding ensemble to a performance worthy of the ovations it received.

-SAN FRANCISCO REVIEWS BY JOHN BENDER

#### INTERNATIONAL

## Ariadne auf Naxos

GRAN TEATRE DEL LICEU, BARCELONA

In 2016, *The Guardian* observed that the idea of Katie Mitchell producing a successful comedy was "as unthinkable as her directing a Broadway show." Unexpectedly (and for some arguably), the unthinkable has happened in the British director's

logue by British playwright Martin Crimp, who has collaborated with Mitchell on previous productions, including *The Seagull* (2006), *Pains of Youth* (2009) and *Written on Skin* (2012).

With this rendering, he and Mitchell have created a bridge between various worlds—front and back of house, high and low art, old fashioned and modern, lighthearted and melancholy—while exploring themes of class, gender and what it means to be in love.

Ariadne auf Naxos is a play within a play, set in the home of wealthy aristocrats, here represented by an eccentric, cross-dressing couple who host the evening festivities and, like the Gods, set unfathomable rules. The

opera and the comedy planned for the evening's post-dinner entertainment must be performed together, with ever more strict deadlines.

As the prologue to the performance unfolds, the stage, which features the interior of a handsome Georgian home designed by British scenographer Chloe Lamford, is divided into two parts: on the right is where the opera is performed and to the left is the audience.

Behind this, the backstage dramas, costume changes and tedium are played out, acting as a link between both universes and establishing a dialogue between one side and the other.

Mitchell's rendition is resplendent with pitch-perfect 21<sup>st</sup>-century characters, from the streetwise and coquettish Zerbinetta, sung by the Spanish soprano Sara Blanch, who sported a Rolling Stones t-shirt and later a delicate rose-coloured dress that lit up in glorious LED kitsch, to the prancing dancing master, Spanish tenor Roger Padullés, a vision in pink and grey, tottering on high heels, who, when leading his troupe in a yoga-inspired warm up, elicited genuine peals of laughter from the audience.

The young composer, sung by the Irish mezzo-soprano Paula Murrihy, marks a shift from the traditional male pants role character. As Mitchell notes in the program, "in a moment when we want to see more female composers working on the stages of operas, to balance the dominance of male voices, it seems an act of madness to put a body of woman inside a convention of man."

At first unaware, then furious that the premiere of her opera will be followed by a comedy, when the young composer is charmed by Zerbinetta into accepting a compromise, the gender switch brings an unexpected tenderness and sizzle to the scene.

This tenderness is echoed by an elegant Ariadne, expressively played by South African-Dutch soprano Johanni van Oostrum, whose rich, emotive voice and deliberate, lethargic movements offered a gorgeous contrast to Zerbinetta's lightness.

Abandoned by her lover on the desert island of Naxos and living alone with three

nymphs, van Oostrum's vocalism evoked tears as she sang of her deep love for Theseus and of the profound despair of her abandonment, its injustice made even more painful by her evident pregnancy—another plot twist introduced by the director.

The elegance of the nymphs, Naiad, Dryad, and Echo, played by Sonia de Munck, Anaïs Masllorens and Núria Vilà, was also notable. This grace was starkly contrasted by their slow-motion scenes (a Mitchell hallmark), where the slapstick aspect of the opera was ludicrously captured. It highlighted the multiplicity of roles these women play—and the audience's simultaneous discomfort and pleasure in seeing these three beautiful muses transformed into comic figures.

The opera climaxes in Ariadne's birth scene; truly an awful parody (as only it could be). After she gives birth, the deeply depressed mother cannot bear to look at or touch her newborn, introducing a darker layer of complexity to the character, who can sometimes come off as a bit heavy and intense with her endless, seeping sadness.

Although controversial, Mitchell's addition of motherhood and Ariadne's subsequent rejection creates an opportunity for an uneasy contemplation of the representation of women in opera, who have hardly led the battle for gender equality over the centuries.

The opera's resolution, in which the barren nymphs, the crossdressing woman aristocrat and the forever young and beautiful Zerbinetta come together to take care of the baby while energetically attempting to bring Ariadne out of her bleak melancholy felt awkwardly burlesque, and yet also pleasingly inevitable.

Enter the god Bacchus, played by Canadian tenor David Pomeroy. After quietly roaming at the back of the stage throughout the opera, seen but rarely heard, he played his role to Wagnerian perfection, evoking a quintessential heroic male figure. His character becomes a tragic comedy, like a Captain Kirk in the #MeToo era, who somehow has been overshadowed and outpaced by the events surrounding him.

— AMANDA KELLY

## A Midsummer Night's Dream

DEUTSCHE OPER BERLIN

This fall, Deutsche Oper Berlin revived its 2020 production of Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by American director Ted Huffman (seen Oct. 10<sup>th</sup>; originally staged for Opéra national de Montpellier in 2019) bringing one of the greatest English language operas to the Berlin public.

Fairies, craftsmen, and royals traverse a moonlit forest. The fairies facilitate nature. The craftsmen rehearse a play to be performed at the wedding of Theseus, Duke of Athens (Padraic Rowan) and his conquered bride, the Amazonian Queen Hippolyta (Davia Bouley). The young royals blunder in and out of love, provoked by Oberon (James Hall), the Fairy King, his high-flying assistant Puck (the acrobatic Jami Reid-Quarrell), and a flower potent as Cupid's bow.

Bass-baritone Patrick Guetti, as Bottom the weaver, the prima donna of the craftsmen, towers over the troupe with his long, muscular, dancerly frame. When he wanders from his friends and is turned into a donkey by Oberon, he's more stallion than ass with his balletic grace. Guetti is a talented physical actor and can convince the audience with his brays and kicks, even without the advantage of a traditional donkey's head.

Vocally, he makes a massive sound that stays loud throughout the evening. Anything high is accessed through force. A roughness ends up dominating the natural beauty of his sound and precludes subtlety, obscuring Shakespeare's words, and limiting the comedy to the physical.

Perhaps Huffmann's sliest directorial touch was to have the fairies add a spritz of flower juice in Helena's (Alexandra Hutton) eyes as she, in a brief respite from the madness, consoles Hermia (Karis Tucker) with fond memories of their school time. Helena almost breaches their platonic bond as she draws Hermia closer and closer and rubs her back sensually as the music turns tender. Then





Scene from Deutsche Oper Berlin's A Midsummer Night's Dream

Oberon snaps his fingers, the potion deactivates, and their fight erupts again.

There's much to love too in the show's visual world. Fog hangs in the air. The stage, lit in a deep blue that gradually brightens as day approaches, has minimal set pieces. Generally there is no more than a lilac cloud that looks pulled from a Dali painting, a whimsical ladder that narrows as though continuing into the cloud, and a waned, yellow, glowing moon.

There is plenty of admirable singing from this cast too. Canadian coloratura soprano Jane Archibald commands as Tytania. Her voice has remarkable consistency and beauty throughout its wide range. Only in her first aria, "Come, Now a Roundel" does she swell in and out of each long note putting lumps in the phrases. Otherwise, her singing is immaculate and her demeanor noble. As Oberon, Hall sings with an effortless, clear, balanced tone. As an actor, he resists the temptation to merely play the cunning manipulator. Rather, he seems more fatherly, curious, and caring, if slightly bumbling.

The orchestra lead by Markus Stenz plays tensely in some of the most tender scenes such as the lullaby sung by the fairy chorus that grandly eases Tytania to sleep. The final fairy chorus is full of grandeur, wonder, and grace. This production should enchant Berlin audiences for years to come.

## Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny

KOMISCHE OPER BERLIN

Written at the tail end of the dysfunctional Weimar Republic, the administration that preceded Germany's Third Reich, Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht's *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* tells the story of a decadent pleasure town founded to profit from mankind's excesses. A new production by the company's Artistic Director, Barrie Kosky, premiered this fall at Komische Oper Berlin (seen Oct. 9<sup>th</sup>).

A gang of women emerges from a pit in the floor. Mahagonny's workforce. The women drape themselves on each other as their leader Jenny (Alma Sadé), her hair matted, croons their credo of nomadic lives as whores. Sadé slims down her voice for Jenny's funeral dirge, the "Alabama Song," even imbuing it with a hint of roughness as she floatingly describes the moon.

As Mahagonny has grown, it seems to have drawn an undiscerning, sunburned vacation crowd in knockoff Hawaiian shirts. Only when the opera's protagonist Jim (tenor Allan Clayton) and his three friends arrive, having made a small fortune lumberjacking in Alaska, does the town begin to shift to something more sinister.

Jim is a bit of a sad sack. Sweaty and unkempt, he quickly becomes discontent with a life of leisure-for-hire. When his friends try to convince him of the benefits of life without hardship, he reacts by advocating all out anarchy.

Only when a hurricane, brought to life by a piercing timpani solo, threatens to destroy the town does Jim gain popularity. As the inhabitants cower in fear, Jim pleads his nihilistic case and immediately changes from outcast to hero. It's an abrupt shift in the action and not entirely believable since Clayton hasn't yet revealed much charisma. However, the more the tenor is able to unleash his vocal fluidity, the more forceful his characterization becomes.

Money, food, sex and fighting rule the day in Jim's lawless Mahagonny. Like a quickie carnival ride, each gent drops a coin in one bucket, spits his gum in the next, rinses his hands in another, and bounces



his way through the floor to the whores. On fight night, Jim's friend Joe (Tijl Faveyts) has his face bashed in by Trinity Moses (Jens Larsen), one of Mahagonny's founders. His corpse slides into a makeshift grave as the men bounce away, smacking their chewing gum with blind satisfaction.

Jim finds himself broke, a state punishable by death in Mahagonny. As the court decision nears, onlookers fulminate into the Kosky Hop, the director's device for peak crowd excitement. With their hands at their side, they pop up and down as a unit, like a giant board of whack-a-moles. The hop always unsettles me, whether in Kosky's well-travelled *Carmen* or his recent *Salome*. This production offers the most foreboding version of the dance, presaging the Third Reich that so infamously manipulated crowds.

The production's most powerful scene is imbued by Kosky's respect for Brecht and Weill's signature theatrical style which maximizes the impact of music and text over histrionic distraction. Jim and Jenny stand alone, side by side, Jim blinded and sentenced, Jenny defeated. They affirm whatever love they have for each other by intoning, "Kiss me, Jimmy," and "I kiss you, Jenny" as the orchestra obliterates the audience with Weill's most aching harmonies. The two do not kiss but simply turn and leave.

The Mahagonnians have created their own hell on earth. A foreboding trio featuring clear-voiced Canadian tenor Adrian Kramer warns of the arrival of a judgemental God who appears in the form of a wiry-armed, bobble-headed stuffed monkey driving a remote controlled go-kart with a speaker blaring biblical warnings. A sort of absurdist burning bush, 'God' appears in so ridiculous a form that even the lost souls of Mahagonny, and likewise the audience, realise something is deeply amiss, forcing us to wonder when our own monkey-in-a-go-kart will arrive to bring man's self-destruction to a punishing halt.

#### Norma

OPER FRANKFURT

What gives a revival of an operatic staple longevity? There are productions, like Barrie Kosky's *Carmen*, perpetually in repertory at Oper Frankfurt, that are driven by choreography and could probably succeed with any cast of professional singers. Or the Zeffirelli *La bohème* at The Metropolitan Opera, that plays like a Disneyland ride with its charming sets and ebullient crowd scenes. And then there is Christoph Loy's 2013 *Norma* currently in revival at Oper Frankfurt (seen Oct. 3<sup>rd</sup>). Aesthetically ascetic and demanding of its singers it still seems destined to stick around.

Loy's production enlivens Bellini's opera through disciplined storytelling. Norma, a druid queen, has had two children with Pollione, a Roman general whose army is slaughtering druids en masse. When she discovers Pollione has taken up with her young disciple Adalgisa and plans to leave



Ambur Braid (Norma), Dshamilja Kaiser (Adalgisa) & Stefano La Colla (Pollione) in Oper Frankfurt's *Norma* 

for Rome with her, she must decide what will happen with her kids.

With a vignette during the musical interlude that begins the second act, Loy adds a moment of heart-rending tenderness before what is perhaps the most dramatic turning point of the piece. It's dinnertime. Norma's quarters are a floor underground, hidden beneath the main druid hall. Norma sits her children at the table and, meeting their eyes with loving glances, slices bread for their supper. Her oldest son, who has been especially despondent, softens into a slight smile at her modest attempt at normality. After dinner they all embrace. Norma gently leads her children to their room, a floor further underground; the bunker-like dwelling symbolic of the depth of secrecy Norma has built into her family's life. Both Norma's children and the audience have momentarily forgotten the family's predicament and even seasoned opera goers have forgotten what comes next. Swiftly, Norma turns her back on the trap door to the children's room and lunges for the kitchen knife. Will she murder her children to save them from a crueler fate at the hands of the Romans?

In such scenes and throughout the work, Loy demands a style of acting about as close to realism as *bel canto* opera can handle. A worthy challenge for any actor and one that Canadian soprano Ambur Braid, who has recently grown into some of opera's most emotionally demanding roles, meets.

As Braid grows more accustomed to singing major roles on a major stage, she is finding a calmer vocal technique and greater economy to her acting. She trusts that she need not telegraph Norma's every thought with operatically proportioned gestures. Some of the tensest moments occur with Braid eerily still, on-guard, like a predatory cat, calculating furiously in her mind. When Norma's composure finally ruptures, her congregants turn hysterical and war breaks out.

Most of the cast takes a similarly methodical approach to their characters. Stefano La Colla, a seasoned tenor whose top never quite opens, chillingly underplays Pollione as a man resigned to the consequences of his decisions. Shoulders slightly hunched, he sings appeasing phrases to Norma with a sigh. No wonder she hurls a chair at the wall in frustration. He remains unremorseful until the moment before his sacrificial demise when he defends Norma's honour and declares his love to her. His face loosens, his chest rises, and his voice soars with pride.

As Adalgisa, Dshamilja Kaiser, gradually crumbles over the course of the evening once she learns of her new Roman lover's connection to Norma. Kaiser's most extraordinary vocal moments come in the duet cadenzas between priestess and spiritual leader where she translates her devotion into musical expression. Lying behind her leader, Kaiser matches Braid's breath and phrasing with great sensitivity. Their combined voices emit a concentrated spectrum of vibrations that overwhelm the ears with pressure from the tone's sheer volume.

Both cast members from the Oper Frankfurt Studio (essentially the young artist wing of the company) hold their own. Carlos Andrés Cárdenas (the Roman, Flavio) sings elegantly and lyrically. His timbre has a whisp of virility that should make him beguiling in lead roles. Karolina Bengtsson also has a lovely technique and timbre and is a charming, stable presence as Clotilde, Norma's maid. Only Andreas Bauer Kanabas (the druid patriarch Oroveso), a staple at Oper Frankfurt, seems out of place. Not for any vocal flaw. Rather his gestures are exaggerated and stock and would suit a broader production.

The orchestra gives a clean reading under Erik Nielsen's direction. The maestro's approach is concise, controlled, and metronomic. The pit moves the show along, if somewhat dispassionately.

The production does seem to avoid the religiosity of the druids. They have no identifying rituals. Only gleeful blood lust against the Romans unites them, but what beliefs they are protecting, one couldn't say. Nonetheless, the production deservedly seems destined to remain a mainstay of Frankfurt's future seasons and exemplifies the best of repertory opera.

— REVIEWS FROM GERMANY BY JEREMY HIRSCH

## Jenůfa

ROYAL OPERA HOUSE, LONDON

Claus Guth's new production of Janáček's *Jenůfa* for London's Royal Opera House captivated the audience from the start (seen Oct. 9<sup>th</sup>). Or perhaps it's more accurate to say that the spell was cast by Michael Levine's design and James Farncombe's lighting. The curtain rose slowly on a black wall of horizontal slats, with narrow slivers of light and glimpses of the cast moving beyond it revealed row-by-row from the bottom up. It sounds like a simple effect, but it was very much an audience talking-point at the first interval.

When the slatted wall itself rose, Act I's 'mill' (here more of a workhouse) was revealed as a large, cold space with beds lined up in regimented uniformity around the side and back walls. When the workers emerged from the dormitory beds to dress for their shift, their movements

Scene from Royal Opera House's Jenůfa





were as mechanically synchronised as the whirring of the machinery conjured up by the score. The implication of a prison environment was carried through in the second act when the metal bedsteads were set on their sides to form the Kostelnička's house, clearly resembling a cage. And in the last moments of the opera, Jenůfa and Laca stepped forward while the slatted wall descended behind them—they had escaped.

Guth played throughout with the contrast between an open landscape the entirety of the ROH stage—and an enclosed society. As the Kostelnička lamented the entrapment that Jenufa's illegitimate baby has caused them both, the shadowy figures of townspeople appeared in the background, the women church-bonneted and conspiratorial, while a dancer dressed as a sinister dark bird climbed onto the house to perch on the roof. Having the women literally point accusing fingers at the Kostelnička was among a few tautologically heavy-handed moments in the production (repeating what the libretto has already told us), but this was by and large an intelligent, thought-through vision of the drama, with director and designer in harmony.

What's more, this fine production was blessed with a cast that did it, and Janáček's music, full justice. The Lithuanian soprano Asmik Grigorian was magnificent in the title role. This, her Covent Garden debut, had been pandemic-delayed since 2019, but was well worth the wait. Technically she was flawless and produced a beautiful sound throughout. Yet at the same time she conveyed the complex combination of strength and vulnerability at the character's core and lived Jenůfa's wrenching emotional journey.

Twenty years ago the Finnish soprano Karita Mattila sang the role of Jenůfa on this same stage, to considerable acclaim. This time she gave a deeply affecting portrayal of the Kostelnička. Her voice has softened with maturity while retaining its individuality and evenness of tone. Though some of this role lies lower than ideal for her (at least, in the absence of

more sensitive conducting—pianissimo seemed not to be Henrik Nánási's thing), one wouldn't have wanted anything to dissuade her from taking it on. She exuded plenty of authority in her early scenes as the stern pillar of the establishment, but from the outset suggested a person deliberately suppressing tenderness in all that word's meanings. The transition into a character racked with fear and guilt, believing herself forced into making terrible decisions, was completely achieved and unforgettably moving.

Both of the tenor principals—Nicky Spence as Laca, Saimir Pirgu as Števa—had the rich undertones without which Janáček tenors can become uncomfortably strident over the course of an evening. Neither lacked penetration when needed, however. The Albanian Pirgu in particular had a laser-like focus, and strongly portrayed the outwardly charismatic but inwardly shallow character. The Scottish-born Spence coped much better with the vocal demands of the role

than he did with the physical acting, too often making Laca seem merely stupid. The crucial slashing of Jenufa's face didn't convince as either a clumsy accident or a moment of angry passion. Elena Zilo, as always, gave a vivid performance as the grandmother, unafraid to lace her voice with acid when called for, and David Stout played the Foreman with nuance and personality.

The Hungarian conductor Henrik Nánási obtained some authentically pungent timbres from the ROH orchestra (the double reeds especially affecting) but seemed keen to emphasise the stylistic inconsistencies in the score rather than trying to reconcile them. The Tchaikovskian first half of Act II was sentimentalised and the subsequent picking up of the ostinatos and crunchy bass chords more typical of later Janáček was gawky in effect and flabby in rhythm. That apart, this was an intense and rewarding evening of powerful music theatre.

#### **PHOTO CREDITS**

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P. 6: (clockwise from top L): Wikimedia Commons; Eri Nakamura by Chris Gloag; *Bohème* shot: Harder Lee Photography; *Traviata*, Opéra de Montréal. P. 7: (clockwise from top L): Othalie Graham by Tina Mackenzie; *Carmen*, Pacific Opera Victoria; Lizzie Hoyt by Simeon Rusnak; Julie Boulianne by Julien Faugère

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## OPERA AT HOME

#### **AUDIO**



#### **Das verratene Meer**

HENZE Capriccio C5460

#### HANS WERNER HENZE LEFT

a large body of work on his death in 2012, including 21 completed stage operas, three radio operas, three specifically tailored for children and 11 ballet scores. You'd never know the centrality of theatre to his composing, however, from the currency of his works. His operas have enjoyed relatively few productions in North America (and hardly any in Canada), though some, including Die Bassariden, Der Prinz von Homburg, Der junge Lord and Elegie für junge Liebende, have enjoyed continuing traction on European stages. Henze's operas have fared considerably less well in the contemporary repertoire globally than those of, for example, Benjamin Britten, who was an admirer of the younger composer and whose Aldeburgh Festival generously featured his music over the years.

This release is the audio track of a Dec. 2020 livestream from the Vienna State Opera of Henze's Das verratene Meer, translated in the CD booklet in the composer's own commentary as The Sea Betrayed, though rendered in the Grove Dictionary of Opera as Treacherous Oceans. Quite apart from Grove's switch from the singular to the plural, there's a curious ambiguity here; the booklet renders the sea as a victim, the dictionary more as a perpetrator. It is, to be sure, an ominous, ever-present, indifferent character in the work, mainly summoned in the orchestra as a lowering force that shapes the destinies of the human characters. In this respect, its kinship to Britten's Peter Grimes is manifest.

Henze's opera is based on Japanese author Yukio Mishima's 1963 novel, *Gogo No Eiko*, familiar in translation to western readers as The Sailor Who Fell From Grace With The Sea. Prior to this Vienna production, there were already two versions of the opera. The original, commissioned by Deutsche Oper and premiering in Berlin in 1990, had a German libretto by writer Hans-Ulrich Treichel. The piece was not then very successful, but received a new lease on life when conductor Gerd Albrecht persuaded Henze to revise it for a 2003 concert performance in Japanese in Tokyo as Gogo No Eiko. This second version would in turn receive its stage premiere at the 2010 Spoleto Festival (the Germanborn Henze lived in Italy for most of his adult life) conducted by Canadian Opera Company Music Director Johannes Debus. This recording presents a posthumous hybrid, essentially *Gogo No Eiko* back in German with some of the differences from the original score restored by Vienna's creative team, conductor Simone Young with stage directors Jossi Wieler and Sergio Morabito.

Denise Wendel-Poray's review (at operacanada.ca) of the livestream for this magazine was positive, and this audio release confirms her assessment. That you hear a live performance is evident from the stage noises, though the digital clarity makes the recording sound studio-made, which effectively it was as a digital livestream from an empty opera house. Its clarity, however, gives often-thrilling

voice to the huge instrumental forces in Henze's densely textured score; the supercharged orchestra with lots of percussion runs a bewilderingly wide stylistic gamut-from jazzy coloratura and serialism to the natural sound of construction equipment. Henze's music is carefully crafted here, both in terms of large-scale structure (the opera plays out in 14 scenes linked by short orchestral interludes) and in finer detailing such as the way major singing roles are given their own individual character by different styles in different sections of the orchestra. This release is worth it for the rare treat of hearing the Vienna State Opera Orchestra at full throttle in a big, masterful contemporary score, with Young in deft and sympathetic control on the podium.

There's much to admire in the vocal performances, too. Danish baritone Bo Skovhus brings gravitas and musicality to the often-declamatory music for Ryuji, the sailor who falls from grace, and German soprano Vera-Lotte Boecker sounds effortless in the highlying role of the frustrated and lonely young widow, Fusako, who falls in love with the sailor. The principal character, however, as Henze saw the drama, is Fusako's young son, Noboru, here living in a committed and engaging performance by Canadian tenor Josh Lovell. Now a member of the Vienna State Opera ensemble, Lovell has some of the most affecting

music in a score that hardly proceeds on long, lyrical lines. The Victoria-born tenor anchors the performance in his portrayal of the impressionable young adolescent's shifting emotional states and his ambivalent, sexually charged relations with his mother and Ryuji. Noboru is also identified as Number Three, one of a gang of five disaffected kids forcefully led

Vera-Lotte Boecker (Fusako), Bo Skovhus (Ryuji) & Josh Lovell (Noboru) in Vienna State Opera's Das verratene Meer by Number One (American bass-baritone Erik Van Heyningen, a member of Vienna's newly minted Opera Studio for young artists), and also including Korean-American countertenor Kangmin Justin Kim (Number Two), German baritone Stefan Astakhov (Number Four, also from the Opera Studio) and German bass-baritone Martin Hässler (Number Five).

The voice types of the gang members may sound odd for such a young group (Noboru is explicitly identified as a 13-year-old in the score),

but the opera, like Mishima's novel, is more impressionistic and expressionistic than realistic. And that, I think, is a weakness with this audio-only release. The story line is clear enough, but it's not dramatically engaging. Without a visual element, the work seems cold, calculating and overly cerebral, the characters of Ryuji and Fusako especially sketched rather than fully drawn. In the excellent booklet accompanying the release (including artists' biographies, a full, multi-text libretto, and extensive materials on the genesis of the opera), Henze talks of Noboru being part of "a puerile but ideologically deadly secret cult, made up of a hand full of bratty, precocious, and spoiled namby-pambies of whom nothing good can come, except wickedness." That's vivid and suggestive, but listening to the music alone hardly summons such an explicit picture. And while there is wickedness in the plot-Act I ends with Noboru smashing a kitten's head, Act II with the gang poised to murder and dismember Ryuji-the audio experience alone is not visceral.





This is a worthy and, in many ways, excellent document of a little-known work, but both Henze and the opera would surely have been better served by a DVD of the livestream.

--- WAYNE GOODING



#### enargeia

EMILY D'ANGELO
DEUTSCHE GRAMMOPHON 486 0536

#### **DEBUT ALBUMS FROM YOUNG**

singers usually play it fairly safe but mezzo-soprano Emily D'Angelo's is anything but. Her new album, enargeia, on the Deutsche Grammophon label is bold indeed. All twelve tracks on the album feature works by contemporary female composers, though with a nod to the medieval Hildegard von Bingen. The accompaniments vary from solo cello to orchestra augmented with electric guitar, electric bass and drum kit. Singing style varies from austerely classical to verging on rock opera.

This could come off as pretentious but it doesn't. Rather, it convinces as a well thought out program by a very intelligent and thoughtful musician with the self-confidence to challenge the orthodox. The organising principle lies in the album title. 'Enargeia' is a classical Greek term that means the quality of extreme vividness, radiance or presentness. Each piece on the album, and its text, contributes to that sense.

The tone is set with the opening number, Icelandic composer Hildur Guðnadóttir "Fólk fær andlit" (in an arrangement by Jarkko Riihimäki). A couple of repetitive phrases in Icelandic about mercy and forgiveness are floated in pure tone over an austere accompaniment of strings and winds. The effect is hypnotic. And there's more Guðnadóttir later. Her "Líður" is similar in overall feel but has the added sonorities of bass clarinet, double bass and electronics.

American Sarah Kirkland Snider is represented by two very different kinds of music. There are two settings of Hildegard von Bingen: "O virtus sapientae" and "Caritas," arranged for string quartet (plus harp on "Caritas"). The first carries on the meditative mood of the first track but the second is busier and slightly troubling; a theme that will develop throughout the album. The other Snider tracks are taken from her song cycle Penelope (text by Ellen McLaughlin) which riffs on Homer's *Odyssey* to explore the trauma of war and PTSD. The style here is much less

'classical' (though not nearly as redolent of synth pop as the original album!) with the final number, "The Lotus Eaters," sounding like it could have come from a rock opera.

The final composer represented is Missy Mazzoli with excerpts from both Vespers for a New Dark Age (text by Matthew Zapruder) and Song from the Uproar (texts by Royce Vavrek and arranged by Riihimäki) plus "A Thousand Tongues" to a text by Stephen Crane. There's also a setting for voice, cello and synthesizer of von Bingen's "O frondens virga." In various ways and very different styles these works all explore the nature of religious truth, past and present. The styles vary from the sparsely accompanied plainchant-like setting of the von Bingen to the busy, unsettling and much more vocally dramatic "This world within me is too small" from Song from the Uproar.

The striking thing about the performances here is D'Angelo's rock solid technique across rather a wide range of styles. Some of the von Bingen settings leave the voice very exposed and demand great clarity of tone and diction. Other tracks require a much more raw sound, above all in "The Lotus Eaters" where D'Angelo is much freer as she switches into 'rock dialect': t's become d's and so on. If that wasn't enough, she conducts the opening track herself.

The core of the accompaniment is provided by das freie orchester Berlin conducted (mostly) by Jarkko Riihimäki or the Kuss Quartet, each on occasion supplemented by soloists playing instruments ranging from glockenspiel to electric guitar. As noted, many of the works are given in arrangements by Riihimäki, possibly because the originals were designed sonically as concept albums rather than for concert performance, and so the sound here is often a little more 'classical' than on the original releases. In any event it's all very accomplished.

The album was recorded in Berlin's Jesus-Christus Kirche and the Kirche zum Heiligen Kreuz. The natural acoustic seems quite resonant and there's some clever sound engineering going on in places to get a soundspace appropriate to each track. The disc comes with full texts and a very thoughtful program note by D'Angelo.

In the end what impresses about this album is its ambition and the skill with which that ambition is realised. It's a carefully curated program of music by some of the most exciting contemporary female composers, thematically arranged in a thought-provoking way. D'Angelo reveals herself here as not just a prodigiously talented young singer but a musical mind of some depth.

— JOHN GILKS

#### **VIDEO**



#### **Platée**

RAMEAU Unitel 804804

#### RAMEAU'S PLATÉE IS A RATHER

cruel satire on appearance and perception. Jupiter woos the unattractive swamp nymph Platée in order to prove to Juno how ridiculous her jealousy is. Platée is led to think that she is so beautiful that Jupiter will marry her...only to be mocked and deflated when the crowd turns on her.

Robert Carsen decides to use the narcissistic setting of Paris Fashion Week as his vehicle for exploring the central themes of the opera. Jupiter is conceived as Karl Lagerfeld (complete with fluffy and very mellow Persian cat); Juno is Coco Chanel. The settings include the mirrored showroom at Chanel and Coco's hotel suite. Throughout, mirrors and reflective surfaces are used to reinforce the narcissism. The production premiered in Paris in 2014 with Lagerfeld in the audience and providing feedback! This recording, though, was made in Dec. 2020 at Vienna's Theater an der Wien.

Whether Lagerfeld watched from a more Olympian perch is a matter for surmise!

Rameau described the work as a ballet bouffon and as one would expect, dance plays a very important role. As he has done in previous Baroque productions, Carsen uses a choreographer who can provide high energy, modern movement. In this case it's Nicolas Paul who gives his group of ten dancers some very difficult moves, including an orgy and a backward cakewalk which they accomplish with aplomb.

This staging is also another partnership between Carsen and William Christie and his Les Arts Florissants. There are few conductors who understand the required style as well as he does and he has a band that can deliver for him. He also tends to pick singers with a good grasp of the French style, and that's certainly the case here. Many of them are also required to interact with the dancers so they need to be good movers too.

Two performers exemplify this. Marcel Beekman as Platée is splendid. He's a true hautecontre with an excellent sense of Baroque style. He does some beautiful singing but can still pull off the ridiculous "Quoi, quoi" froggy noises. He manages to move like a woman of a certain age too. He's ridiculous but quite credibly ridiculous. Soprano Jeanine De Bique as La Folie is amazing. She sings beautifully while fully integrating into some serious choreography. Throw in a busy beaver Cyril Auvity as Mercury, a booming and very convincingly Olympian Jupiter from Edwin Crossley-Mercer and a brief, but funny, hissy fit from Emilie Renard as Juno and it's looking pretty good. The rest of the cast are excellent, as are the very busy Arnold Schoenberg Chor.

Video direction by Davide Mancini is admirable. This is a very hard production to film with lots of dark scenes and a plethora of reflecting surfaces but it ends up looking very smart. The Blu-ray picture and sound are first class. To round things out there's half an hour of rather good interviews with members of the creative team plus Marcel Beekman.

To sum up, this is another successful example of Robert Carsen's approach to the Baroque; a contemporary setting, high energy choreography and the true Baroque sensibility of William Christie. If you enjoyed Carsen's Les Boréades or Semele you'll probably have fun with this.

#### Ciboulette

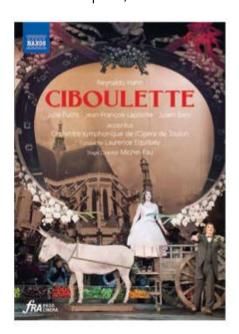
--- JOHN GILKS

**HAHN** NAXOS 2.110697

#### A CABBAGE, A SACK OF FLOUR,

and a letter delivered on a tambourine: these are the things that ensure a happy ending for Ciboulette, the title heroine of Reynaldo Hahn's delightful operetta hit of 1923, who in three elegantly tuneful acts progresses from vegetable-marketing farm girl to toast of the Parisian musichall stage. If you detect a whiff of

a Cinderella story, well, you're not wrong; and if Ciboulette doesn't wind up with a prince, she does nab a handsome young aristocrat of definite means, and if she doesn't enjoy the magical talents of a fairy godmother, she does benefit from the skilled matchmaking and career-launching services of one Monsieur Duparquet. In a charmingly sentimental twist, he turns out to be none other than Henri Murger's bohemian hero Rodolphe, now middle-aged and, like the rest of his erstwhile garret mates, a civil servant, but still mourning the loss of his beloved Mimì: when he narrates his story, the orchestra gently flirts with, but doesn't actually quote, "Mi chiamano Mimì." There's an earlier intimation, too, of La Bohème, when the capricious Zénobie-like Musetta in Puccini's opera-hurries one suitor off on a bogus errand so she can reunite with another; and when she passionately embraces her mustachioed captain, there's a direct



lift of the "Toi! Vous!" opening of *Manon's* Saint-Sulpice duet. There's a hint of *Die Fledermaus* as well, at Act III's posh gala, with

Duparquetshowing up newly selfstyled as a baron, like Eisenstein playing marquis at Orlofsky's ball, and Ciboulette now a mysterious, masked Spanish señorita to rival Rosalinde's masked Hungarian countess.

But Ciboulette doesn't lean on these allusions; with the lightest of feet it stands perfectly well on its own. My first encounter with the score came via the great Régine Crespin, lending her unique timbre and style to two of the leading lady's numbers. When I discovered the whole work, it was a little jarring to move from the big, warm, sexy voice of Crespin to the chirpy (but charming) Mady Mesplé, on EMI's recording of 1982; but that's the kind of soprano usually cast in the role. Here, in Opéra Comique's fleet 2013 staging, Ciboulette is the endearing Julie Fuchs: lightvoiced, yes, but with a little less glare, more warmth and depth, to her tone. That fine tenor Julien Behr, looking very young and very dapper, is a near-perfect Antonin, the trying-to-reform playboy who wins Ciboulette's heart (and she his) as, in two disarming duets, they make believe they're brother and sister (Act I) and a country steward and his new fiancée (Act II). There's no duet in Act III, but it's clear that once the curtain falls, further pretense won't be needed.

Jean-François Lapointe inhabits the pivotal Duparquet beautifully, both vocally and dramatically: the role's creator, Jean Périer, was Debussy's first Pelléas twenty-one years earlier, and Lapointe, too, was once a distinguished Pelléas, before moving

on to Golaud the year after this production was filmed. Though maybe a little too young, he otherwise fully convinces as the once-upon-a-time Rodolphe; there's a touching trace of tears in his eyes when he recalls his adored Mimì. With one exception, the secondary roles are all finely filled, with such notables as that early Les Arts Florissants stalwart Guillemette Laurens, as Ciboulette's country aunt; Jérôme Deschamps, then the head of the Opéra Comique, as the impresario presenting the newly refashioned Ciboulette; and best of all. Bernadette Lafont, icon of the cinematic nouvelle vaque, as the fortune-telling fish monger who sets the three conditions for the heroine's happy ending. The odd man out is Michel Fau, who appropriates the last-act role of the Countess de Castiglione for his own unamusingly over-the-top drag routine. Luckily for viewers, he does a much better job as the production's director, delivering a stylish, generally ungimmicked show, its handsome vintagemovie feel abetted by his quartet of designers, Bernard Fau and Citronelle Dufay (sets), David Belugou (costumes), and Joël Fabing (lighting). Laurence Equilbey is in firm but affectionate charge of her own chorus, Accentus, and the Orchestre Symphonique de l'Opéra de Toulon. Hahn saved his catchiest tune for last, an infectious valse, and it's a fair bet that when the onscreen audience at the Opéra Comique raise their voices in a reprise, home viewers will feel the pull to join in, too. CC — PATRICK DILLON





Has the primacy of 'live' been lost in all the digital hype asks Catherine Kustanczy

#### LIVE PERFORMANCE COMES

with details. Vaccination passports, temperature checks, masks, and questionnaires are all part of an evening (or afternoon) out. Classical companies have been dealt a particularly severe blow to their fragile financial ecosystems, ones which depend heavily on sponsors and patrons for continuance. Since March 2020 there has been a sharp increase in digital offerings, and as disease variants, winter weather, and varying rules concentrate like weeds along the winding COVID path, it remains to be seen just how much more digital opera will be on offer.

Whither live performance, then? Some Canadian companies have made efforts to keep audiences engaged in ways that move beyond staring at a monitor. These organizations have used the small window afforded by decent weather to keep patrons (read: supporters) engaged in a real-life way. Manitoba Opera offered touring garden performances; Tapestry Opera (in Toronto), took its talent into a traveling van; The Musical Stage Company (also in Toronto) held a series of outdoor concerts in backyards and on residential porches. The lack of clarity from respective governing bodies, together with a patchwork of requirements for gatherings, has contributed to audience nervousness, even as auditoriums reopen their doors. A recent performance of *Svabda* by Ana Sokolović, presented at the Royal Conservatory by students from The Glenn Gould School's vocal program, was offered live to an appreciative audience that included soprano Adrianne Pieczonka. The National Ballet of Canada opened their 21/22 season to a busy Four Seasons Centre audience with a mixed program that included Balanchine's Serenade (with a live orchestra playing the Tchaikovsky score). One got the feeling the audiences at both events were hungry: yes, they had partaken of whatever digital presentations they could, but no amount of virtual finery could (or would) persuade them that the live corollary wasn't, in fact, *the* prime attraction.

It seems incredible one should even have to explain the centrality of the live experience to the performing arts, much less feel one has to somehow defend it (and in the pages of an opera-dedicated magazine, no less). Does live matter to Canadians? Or, as many polls suggest, is the fear really too great? Such dread might well have been allayed through more creative use of outdoor venues, and indeed by taking advantage of Canada's small window of nice weather. Why the Canadian Opera Company did not utilize this time to perform al fresco across the GTA remains a mystery; why Against the Grain Theatre did not use their considerable creative power to offer unique outdoor stagings is equally perplexing. Changing leadership hierarchies aside, what sadly missed opportunities to generate goodwill publicly, to train audiences to feel safe in live performance settings; to demonstrate to newcomers and old hands equally, that both forms of patronage matter, as a means of continuance, and as an energetic form of inspiration. One hopes for better days, and yet.

Questioning the value of a wholesale embrace of digital as the end-all, be-all solution for the performing arts in Canada, sans live corollary, has been entirely missing from our cultural landscape. This fact is perhaps reflective of the paucity of good cultural writing and debate in an age where one is supposed to applaud every mediocre effort and automatically stand up for far less. Without a live element, and without placing that element at the centre of one's being as a performing arts company, one may well be sacrificing coveted new audiences and isolating established long-term patrons. Re-engaging audiences implies supporting companies which, one hopes, give an actual damn about live; seriousness about safety measures goes hand-in-disinfected-hand with seriousness about the artform. Wish for 2022: big companies, please give a damn.

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#### **MEZZO-SOPRANO**

Marjorie Maltais Marion Newman Maria Soulis

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Scott Belluz Daniel Cabena

#### **TENOR**

Jacques Arsenault Jean-Philippe Lazure Ernesto Ramirez Asitha Tennekoon

#### **BARITONE**

Clarence Frazer Dion Mazerolle Jorell Williams

### **BASS-BARITONE**

Giles Tomkins

### **STAGE DIRECTOR**

François Racine

416.892.4382 kathy@domoneyartists.com domoneyartists.com JAN 12 – 16 | 2022 Gould's Wall Tapestry Opera Caitlin Wood, Housewife

JAN 29, FEB 2 & 4 | 2022 The Merry Widow Calgary Opera Clarence Frazer, Bogdanowitsch

FEB 5, 8 & 11 | 2022 La bohème Edmonton Opera François Racine, Director

FEB 23, 25, 27 & MAR 1 | 2022 Carmen Pacific Opera Victoria Marjorie Maltais, Mercedes

Jacques Arsenault, Remendado Dion Mazerolle, Morales

MAR 8 & 9 | 2022 Carmen Orchestre classique de Montréal Ernesto Ramirez, Don Jose

MAR 19, 22 & 25 | 2022
Cosi fan tutte
Edmonton Opera
Jennifer Taverner, Fiordiligi
Caitlin Wood, Despina
Asitha Tennekoon, Ferrando
Clarence Frazer, Guglielmo
Giles Tomkins, Don Alfonso

APR 2, 6 & 8 | 2022 La Traviata Calgary Opera Giles Tomkins, Dr. Grenvil



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