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## **Julie Nesrallah: A Natural Talent** by Marjorie Clegg

*On a sunny afternoon at the end of August, I had the good fortune to chat with Julie Nesrallah about her new life in Ottawa. Below are the questions I asked and a summary of her answers. I hope I have captured some of her passion and excitement.*

***Welcome back to Ottawa! How does it feel to be back home?***

Life is “nothing but good” now, and part of that is being back in Ottawa. With a great deal of support and many friends here, Ottawa holds a special place in her heart. She loves this city and appreciates its loyalty to her.

***Did you ever imagine that your career in music would have taken the turn that it has?***

“NO!!”

***How did it come about?***

Returning from a short trip to New York, Julie found many email messages waiting for her, including two from a head-hunting agency: someone (who turned out to be Robert Cram, former principle flutist of the NAC Orchestra) had put her name forward as a potential host of a radio show at the CBC. A very surprised Julie explained that she was leaving for Vienna within a few days – a much anticipated opportunity to train in Europe on a Canada Council grant – but agreed to talk with the agent the next day; that talk turned out to be an informal interview for what Julie initially thought was probably an occasional one-hour show.

She was shocked to discover that the job was host of the CBC national flagship classical music program. The agent said he’d be in touch soon; “soon” turned out to be the next day, a request for a demo – impossible, since at this point Julie was leaving for Vienna in less than 36 hours!



**Life is “nothing but good” now, and part of that is being back in Ottawa.**

So she went to Vienna, got to her flat, and started unpacking. Within minutes, the phone rang, with Bill Stunt of the CBC asking her to come to Toronto right away for an audition. Though not scheduled to return to Canada for many months, Julie agreed to a special trip at the end of April.

By the time she returned from lunch (and a successful shoe-shopping expedition) after that one-and-a-half hour audition, Julie found a message at the hotel telling her that she had been short-listed and asking her to stay in Toronto for another audition. This time, she was given some feedback on the first one and could build on what became evident to everyone: a natural talent for broadcasting.

Following the second audition, Julie returned to Europe to continue her training. Four weeks later, she was coming back to Vienna from a trip to Innsbruck and was once more welcomed home by a ringing phone: a conference call with Mark Steinmetz, Director of Music at CBC Radio. Fully expecting a “thanks, your demos were great, BUT...” conversation, Julie was

surprised into speechlessness by the news that she was being offered a one-year contract. “Are you serious?” she asked; they were indeed!

***What can you tell me about your new program?***

Julie hopes to put her own stamp on her show by concentrating on the human stories attached to the music she will be introducing. Commentary will, however, be very brief—

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# Opera Lyra's *Figaro* by Murray Kitts

Let me say at the outset that this opera is one, more than any other, that I have known and loved during my lifetime. That said, you must also know that I really don't expect any production of Mozart's masterpiece to come up to my expectations. On the other hand I believe that with a work of such towering genius as this one any production is worth attempting and a certain amount of pleasure can almost inevitably be derived from it.

Certainly there was much fine singing from Caitlin Lynch as the Countess, Adriana Zabala as Cherubino and to a lesser extent from Mariateresa Magisano as Susanna, unfortunately inaudible from time to time. Both Robert Gierlach as Figaro and James Westman as the Count possess good powerful voices. This Figaro was full of fun and full of tricks but I was disappointed that his great aria denouncing womankind did not express genuine anguish at his supposed betrayal by Susanna. The Count, at best, was presented as a rather poor specimen of the ancien régime in manner and bearing, not at all helped by his costumes. Gregory Atkinson as Doctor Bartolo and Geneviève Després as Marcellina gave strong comedic interpretations of their characters. Peter Blanchet as both the pander, Don Basilio, and the notary, Don Curzio, exhibited the skill at comedy that 27 years on stage has brought to his performances. Newcomers Christina Tannous as Barbarina and Marc-Antoine d' Aragon as the drunken gardener Antonio both show great promise in their operatic aspirations. Incidentally, the NCOS Board has just made a substantial contribution to Opera Lyra's programme to encourage young singers such as these.

The sets from the Opéra de Montréal was dominated by things to come - the revolution, the rights of man, etc. But there was little indication of a coming catastrophe for the aristocracy in this production. The comedy was generally well presented but I found the interplay between Cherubino and the Countess at times overdone. Stage Director Glynis Leyshon included numerous deft touches to the action. However, I found the entrance of people during Figaro's "Non piu andrai" merely to shift the scenery at the end of the act distracting and a blunder. Lighting Designer Harry Frehner skillfully used changes in lighting at several points in the opera when the participants were reflecting inwardly on what had happened.

## President's Message

Perhaps it was the influence of the balmy breezes on the deck of the Pflug's country house where we held our meeting, or maybe it was due to the fine food and drink consumed at lunch. More likely it was the splendid financial report from the treasurer which convinced the NCOS Board to raise the Brian Law Scholarship to \$5,000 instead of the boost to \$4,000 planned earlier. And the second prize would then go to \$3,000. Really though, I believe that our members and supporters have been so generous in contributing to the scholarship because of the progress and success of former contestants and winners. The latest news is that Joyce El-Khouri has won a \$10,000 scholarship from the George London Foundation and our latest winner, Yannick-Muriel Noah, also received a prize of \$1,000 in the same competition. We've heard from Joshua Hopkins about his winning the Prix d'Honneur at the Verbier Festival and one can hear Julie Nesrallah every week day on what is left of the classical programs on CBC Radio 2. We started with a \$1,000 annual scholarship and now it's \$5,000 every two years. Truly amazing!

Besides the full production of *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Opera Lyra is offering a concert version of Thomas' *Hamlet*. With everyone rushing to get an early seat for the Met simulcasts, don't overlook the excellent productions from Covent Garden and other leading European operas houses at the Empire Theatre. Finally, we are presenting as our first Opera alla Pasta presentations one of Rossini's last operas *Le Comte Ory* in a Glyndebourne production which is quite hilarious. Don't miss it.



There is little for the chorus to do in this opera but they did it well. The NAC orchestra was as usual superb under Christoph Campestrini. The positioning of the Countess' aria before, not after the Act III sextet, has become controversial but it did not cause any break in the continuity. I always regret the omission of Marcellina's and Basilio's arias from Act IV but the opera is long and these are not a necessary part of the action.

In general, then, this was an entertaining evening well-received by a capacity audience. My favorite recording of the opera is on Decca with a marvellous cast led by Cesare Siepi with Erich Kleiber conducting the Vienna Philharmonic (Decca 466 369-2) and there is an amazingly good recent DVD from Covent Garden (Opus Arte OA 0990 D).

("Julie Nesrallah..." continued from Page 1)

leaving most of the broadcast for the classical performances selected. There is certainly no question about her enthusiasm for her new employer and the work she will be doing.

### **What about your music career?**

The opportunity to work at the CBC couldn't have come at a better time. Julie's opera career is poised to take off. Her training in Europe, a new high-powered agent in New York City and Brussels, and vocal support from fans such as the National Endowment for the Arts representative (who called her "the best live Carmen he'd ever seen," "fantastic," and "world-class") are leading to great promise for the future.

The CBC is very much aware of Julie's desire for a career in opera and they have been extremely accommodating and supportive. Wanting a performer at the helm of the classical music program, they are happy to make allowances for existing performance commitments and any "career-altering" opportunities which may arise during the year.

The job, therefore, allows Julie to expand her experience in broadcasting while continuing her singing. In fact, the national and international exposure on the CBC will very likely help her opera career.

### **What is on the horizon?**

For those wondering where they can see Julie perform, check the box below for some performances coming up this year.

... And of course, we can listen to her from Monday to Friday – wherever you might be in Canada. Either on the radio or on your computer, Julie's voice will be there for us.

- September 20: Kingston Symphony Opera Gala (with Richard Margison!), Kingston
- October 19: *Panache!* concert with harpist, Caroline Leonardelli, at Rideau Park Church, Ottawa
- November 15: Recital with Jean Demarais, piano, and guests, at Southminster Church, Ottawa
- December 17: Ottawa Bach Choir Christmas Concert, St. Jean Baptist Church, Ottawa
- January 18: Ponticello recital with Joan Milliken, piano, Gatineau
- April 17: *Elijah*, Brussels, Belgium
- April 27: Recital, Paris, France

## **Opera Alla Pasta — Sunday Afternoon at the Opera**

All video showings begin at 2 P.M. at St. Anthony's Soccer Club  
and are followed by a delicious meal. Cost: \$15

### **October 5**

Rossini

## **Le Comte Ory**

Glyndebourne production

Call 613-830-9827 by October 2 to reserve.

### **November 2**

Giordano

## **Fedora**

1996 Met production with Domingo and Freni

Call 613-721-7121 by October 30 to reserve.

In 2009: Donizetti's *Don Pasquale* on February 15 and  
Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Tsar's Bride* on May 3

## Opera at Chautauqua by Vera-Lee Nelson

The Chautauqua Institution, on the shores of Lake Chautauqua in southwest New York State, has been an American Institution since 1874. During its 9 week summer season it is a gated community with a program dedicated to Arts, Education, Religion and Education.

As part of the Arts components, the Chautauqua Institution has a resident Opera company which was founded in 1929. It is the oldest continuously active summer opera company in the United States. The opera performances are housed in Norton Hall, a wonderful purpose built Art Deco theatre seating 1367. Currently there are four opera productions mounted each year, with one performance in each of eight weeks.

This year the operas were *Così fan tutte*, *The Cunning Little Vixen*, *La Traviata* and Kurt Weill's *Street Scene*. The aim of the opera company is to build tomorrow's audience and also to nurture development of creative staff and production personnel. All operas are sung in English by a mix of seasoned performers and young artists in training.

This year we were there in week 8 so the opera we attended was *Street Scene*. There are, of course, discussions as to whether this is an opera or a musical. There are others in this genre and although *Street Scene* offers an agreeable experience, it does not share the compelling theatre or the memorable signature song of its predecessor, Weill's 1928 *Threepenny Opera* with the unforgettable *Mack the Knife*. One cannot help but think of the power and the magnificent Gershwin music of *Porgy and Bess*, set in the same period and again featuring more stories of ordinary working folk. Although now accepted as legitimate opera it was not until 1976 that it was accepted as such when it was performed by the Houston Grand Opera. *Street Scene* in our opinion could not have created such a breakthrough.

At Chautauqua, the staging was wonderful – the street scene featured windows of the flats of the apartment building on 3 levels and opening as the plot re-

quired. The bulk of the action took place on the street in front of the building. Given the limited scope of the staging the singers were required to act and perform to their limit to present the story. Weill's plots present no surprises and the tragedy unfolds as predictably. The piece offers dance, singing, dialogue, arias and presents blues and jazz as well as operatic singing. For the purposes of the Chautauqua Young Singers program,

this piece of musical theatre offers a wide range of opportunities to the very large cast of characters who appear on the street.

The Manhattan neighbourhood of the 1930s

sets the scene for this family drama involving a wife and mother involved in an affair, her daughter who is being courted by a married man and a young man in the apartment and the husband and father of the two women. Ordinary events of street life unfold, an eviction, a birth, ice cream cones on a summer evening and then the tragedy of the inevitable shooting.

After a full summer of training and experience the young performers were singing at their peak. Unfortunately the orchestra came near to drowning out the singers. It is hard to comprehend how this could happen in this space where they had worked all summer. To compound the problem, there are no surtitles and with the loud orchestration it was often difficult to follow the intricacies of the plot.

The standards of production at Chautauqua Opera are high, and the involvement with young artists is exciting. People are usually there for a full week, chosen by the theme of that particular week featuring lectures, classes and various types of entertainment, classical and popular. The choice of opera is dictated by the schedule but is usually a wonderful part of the week. Although we would not have chosen this particular production, we feel it is always worthwhile to support young performers. Their talent, training and enthusiasm make opera at Chautauqua an important part of the whole Chautauqua experience.

The standards of production at Chautauqua Opera are high, and the involvement with young artists is exciting.

# Eureka Moments – an opera lover is born

by Vera-Lee Nelson

It happened in London, on one of those late winter evenings that are indescribably English. Darkness had already fallen and we decided to take refuge in a small Italian restaurant in Covent Garden while we decided what to do after a long day in the city. The lights reflecting in the rain speckled puddles outside the windows seemed to suggest that something warm, comfortable and indoors was the way to go. My husband John has always been a big ABBA fan and *Mamma Mia* was playing nearby. He suggested we go to the theatre and try for tickets. But I had another idea.

John and I had reached a musical accommodation since our marriage some years before. I loved classical music and journeyed to Toronto once a year to go to concerts and take in the opera with an old friend. Together we subscribed to the POPS concert series at the National Arts Centre. It became a family joke, John would exclaim “I know that toon” when he heard a familiar piece of classical music. Otherwise he liked contemporary easy listening music, which I referred to as “John’s elevator music.” These soothing but innocuous sounds emanated from the CD player in his basement workshop during the day.

But that night in London, an opportunity presented itself. We were very near the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden and I had noticed that there was a performance that very night. Being a kind soul and a loving husband, John took pity on me and agreed to go if there were seats available. It was to be *La Cenerentola*. I assured him he would have no trouble following the story line(!) and the Rossini music was sure to be pleasurable. We took our place in line and sure enough there were seats available. As is his habit, John asked for the “best seats available” but after I administered a swift kick to his ankle, he took notice of the prices and settled for something rather less. In fact the seats were amazing. The restored Royal Opera House has seats in the Grand Tier and in the last of the three rows the seats are normal sized but high, like comfortable bar stools with backs, and offer great comfort to men over six feet in height. Tall John settled in with far more comfort than he was used to in a theatre.

And Don Ramiro? Juan Diego Florez himself. His brilliant tender tenor voice, with his effortless high C’s, along with his truly prince charming looks, was set to charm even the most reluctant of opera attendees.

The performance began and John took note of the surtitles! No evening of suffering through unintelligible sung words then. Besides, the performance was a delight, a rather campy version of the Cinderella story set in the 1950’s that did not entrance the critics but was just the thing for a novice opera attendee. As Cinderella polished the stylized radiator and her ugly stepsisters pranced around in multicoloured foam hair rollers, who could help being just a little enchanted themselves? Of course the Rossini music helped, as melodic as one could hope for in one’s first opera experience. And Don Ramiro? Juan Diego Florez himself. His brilliant tender tenor voice, with his effortless high C’s, along with his truly prince charming looks, was set to charm even the most reluctant of opera attendees.

John thoroughly enjoyed himself and when we arrived home in Ottawa he suggested we get tickets to the next Opera Lyra production! That spring we attended the 2003 spring performance of *Un Ballo in Maschera* by Giuseppe Verdi, another great beginner choice. By the next season we were subscribers and supporters. For his birthday I gave John a copy of “Opera for Dummies.” Although the Dummies books may be sneered at, they are written by experts in the field, with a jocular approach which makes it is easy to grasp the plot and highlights of the music for individual operas. As well it provided an explanation of most of the basics that are helpful to enjoy operatic music and performances. This book proved to be an excellent gift for a beginner and was well thumbed in the coming months.

With the advent of the Metropolitan Opera: Live in HD series at the cinema, John is thoroughly hooked. He will not miss a Saturday afternoon performance. As well he loves the “Opera Alla Pasta” Sunday afternoons organized by the National Capital Opera Society and together we

strongly support local opera through Opera Lyra.

Nowadays, the sounds emanating from the downstairs workshop are lively, beautiful and definitely operatic!

# Brush Up Your Shakespeare!

And I don't mean Stratford! This year, in keeping with General Director Michael MacLeod's concept of themed seasons, Glimmerglass Opera (GGO), offered four operas inspired by Shakespeare. All were presented in new productions, with John Conklin, in his swan song as Associate Artistic Director, providing a brilliant evocation of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre as a two-level wooden Tudor style skeleton involving galleries and moveable staircases and columns as the stage set for all four works. The operas were Bellini's *I Capuleti e I Montecchi*, Handel's *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*, Wagner's *Das Liebesverbot (The Ban on Love)*, and Cole Porter's *Kiss me Kate*.

We started off with a beautiful performance of Bellini's 1830, pre-Berlioz and Gounod take on the *Romeo and Juliet* tragedy, to a very different libretto by Felice Romani, which is based on earlier Italian sources than Shakespeare's. This results in a simpler, pared down story, with fewer characters, including Tebaldo as a conflation of Tybalt and Paris and no nurse to support Giulietta, the sole woman in this harsh male-dominated world. James Schuette clad the cast entirely in black leather, relieved only by Giulietta's white gown, Romeo's red coat, and Lorenzo's brown suit. The severe simplicity of Conklin's Elizabethan theatre, modified to an asymmetrical form to signify the unbalanced world, was interestingly lit by Christopher Akerlind. To reinforce the tragic tone director Anne Bogart and choreographer Barney O'Hanlon moved the chorus menacingly, while the principals' "park and bark" arias were done with style and flair. However, a few directorial decisions were puzzling: why did Giulietta tear off her wedding dress and throw it to the floor? (fortunately she had a fetching under-slip to sing in!); why did the men fight with long wooden staffs and not swords - for safety or to obviate having to teach the skill? - and how did Giulietta actually die? British conductor David Angus, using a facsimile of the original manuscript, revised and cleaned up the playing score, so that Bellini's beautiful melodies shone through. Angus ensured that the bel canto style was adhered to and that all participants - soloists, chorus and orchestra - performed in top form. Tall bass Christopher Akerlind as father Capellio and baritone Soon Young Park as Lorenzo provided stead-

fast support in the Capuleti camp. Canadian tenor John Tessier, who has sung with Opera Lyra Ottawa, was a marvellous Tebaldo, hitting the top notes and adapting his lovely tone beautifully to the bel canto style. When it was announced that mezzo Sandra Piques Eddy, who has sung with the Met and Canadian Opera Company (COC), was indisposed, we wondered how Emily Richter would do in her place as Romeo - but we needn't have worried! - you wouldn't have known it was a substitution! She sang well, strutted about appropriately, and had good chemistry with Giulietta. In that role soprano Sarah Coburn, a lovely Lucie in *Lucie de Lammermoor* at GGO, shone, her coloratura perfect for Bellini's long lines and high notes, and her blond good looks ideal for the part. This was an extremely well sung opera, a delight to hear and see and an exemplary production for GGO's first Bellini opera.

That evening we had another treat in Handel's most popular work - his treatment of Julius Caesar and Cleopatra. The story, closer to Shaw than Shakespeare, is quite convoluted, involving Cleopatra's power-hungry brother Tolomeo, who kills Pompey, Caesar's former enemy; Pompey's widow Cornelia and son Sesto, who swears to avenge Pompey; and aides Achilla and Nireno. It all ends happily with Cleopatra freed from Tolomeo, who is then killed by Sesto, and Caesar and Cleopatra declaring their love and Caesar proclaimed as Emperor. The formal stately Baroque opera seria form was matched by a classical symmetrical arrangement of Conklin's set elements. Director Robin Guarino set the action in World War II and to the basic set were added appropriate elements such as a campaign tent for Caesar and an elaborate curtained four-poster bed for Cleopatra. Gabriel Berry supplied fascinating and colourful costumes ranging from Italian jackbooted military uniforms to Egyptian dress to stunning gowns for Cleopatra. Robert Wierzel illuminated it all splendidly to complete the visual feast. Of course, a first class Baroque conductor, David Stern, was brought in to lead the musical forces, an outstanding group

## by Shelagh Williams

of singers, and a baroque orchestra with theorbo and harpsichord for continuo. The only baritone role, Achilla, was well acted and sung by handsome Jonathan Lasch; Canadian mezzo Lucia Cervoni brought to the role of the widow Cornelia both an intense stage presence and a fine voice; and the young Sesto was strongly and feelingly sung by tiny mezzo Aurhelia Varak, a not unusual casting. Since in Handel's time high voices were the rage, in this production we heard two excellent countertenors, with Nireno, Cleopatra's confidante (and probably eunuch) well sung by Anthony Roth Costanzo. The second countertenor, Gerald Thompson, whom we have seen as Bertarido in *Rodelinda* at the COC, sang Tolomeo, a role he has already sung at the Met. He sang marvellously and with an edge, but he reminded me of King Farouk in his flamboyant outfits, and when he went over the top in malevolence, he was almost funny! In the title role, originally written for a castrato, we had a thrilling young mezzo, Laura Vlasak Nolen. She exuded confidence and power, put down Tolomeo with amusing stage business, and soon had us forgetting totally that a woman was on stage, all the while singing convincingly and magnificently! As Cleopatra, Russian soprano Lyubov Petrova was simply stupendous, singing her lovely music beautifully and alluringly, her red hair and slim figure always set off with seductive gowns - Caesar didn't have a chance! When good direction and acting combine with visual treats and fantastic singing of beautiful but taxing music, it just doesn't get any better - the 3 ¼ hours flew by!

*Das Liebesverbot*, based on *Measure for Measure*, was presented in a provocative Nicholas Muni "Eurotrash" type production, which I dislike, so see Ute Davis's review.

For something completely different, we finished off with Cole Porter's witty *Kiss me Kate*, based on *The Taming of the Shrew*. GGO's first Broadway musical did not disappoint, thanks to good performances throughout and voices which needed, and got, no amplification - and Kate's final speech sounded much better sung! The story is a play-within-a-play of a company of itinerant actors put-

ting on *The Taming of the Shrew* and so the Conklin Elizabethan structure was ideal for the Shakespeare excerpts yet adapted well with nimbly lowered flats for the modern scenes. Dubliner Jane Cox's skilful lighting and Romanian Anka Lupes's colourful costumes ensured a lively and interesting show. Director Diane Paulus kept the action flowing and cleverly set the show in Cooperstown, where normally "Too Darned Hot!" would be appropriate, but this summer was cold and wet as in Ottawa, and we and the cast were nearly freezing! Maestro David Charles Abell led the well-known numbers in Porter's score with such vivacity I wanted to sing along! The four principals were well chosen, combining good looks and physiques - not a 2-ton Tessie among them! - with superb singing, acting and dancing - three are members of Actors Equity. As the young couple Lois Lane and Bill Calhoun playing Bianca and Lucentio in *Shrew*, mezzo Courtney Romano and David Larsen - no range specified - were suitably energetic and entertaining, although perhaps Lois need not be quite so scatterbrained! The story really hinges on divorced couple Lilli Vanessi and Fred Graham, superbly played by soprano Lisa Vroman and baritone Brad Little, who are reunited in spite of their love-hate relationship to play Kate and Petruchio in *Shrew*! Adding to the many complications are two mobsters, played by tenor Michael Mott and baritone Bradley Nacht, who stole the show with their "Brush up your Shakespeare", which they encored, in top hats and canes, with an entirely new "Brush up your Opera", referring to the current GGO operas by name! If there was a weakness, it was in Darren Lee's choreography, but it may have been the best he could wring out of his chorus of young opera singers, who were definitely not dancers. The principals, plus baritone Damian Norfleet, leading "Too Darned Hot" as Paul, certainly danced up a storm! With such a good production and such great music and lyrics to enjoy, we finished up singing the catchy tunes all the way home!

For their 35th anniversary season in 2009, GGO has chosen the theme "Women We Love" with Verdi's *La Traviata*, Rossini's *La Cenerentola*, and Menotti's *The Consul* - plus four Sunday morning performances in August of Purcell's hour-long *Dido and Aeneas*.

# A Taste of EUROPEAN OPERA

by Ute Davis

## 1. MUNICH, home of the Bavarian State Opera

Photo: Ute Davis



Since we had never been inside this lovely, classical opera House with its impressive exterior and a magnificent interior, we decided to get tickets for *Norma* with Edita Gruberova and Elina Garanca, part of the Summer Festival. Little did we know that when Gruberova sings, tickets sell out two years in advance. We established box office opening time and gave it an extra hour. Right on cue we had return tickets in our hot little hands, for which we paid face value, to the last Euro, in cash, with time to spare for a relaxed dinner at an outside restaurant across the square from the opera house.

*Norma* was staged, starring Gruberova in the lead, and Garanca as Adalgisa. The production was traditional which suited the baroque house. The orchestra played well. We very much enjoyed Gruberova who is in late career, but found Garanca quite outstanding. We ran into Kent Nagano in the hallway and had a lovely chat. He was, unfortunately, not conducting that night.

Following the intermission we returned to our seats only to be told that “a cast member is indisposed and is being examined by a physician; there will be a short delay”. It subsequently proved that Gruberova had fainted and they had no cover, nor could they find one to jump in at such a late hour; surprising for a major house like this.

Act 2 finally commenced one hour later with no apparent harm done to the diva.

## 2. ARENA DI VERONA

For years our friends and relatives, whether opera fans or not, raised one superior eyebrow when we confessed that we had never seen a performance in the Arena di Verona. Thus, when we found that we would be driving through the city for the third time this summer, we booked a two night stop and had no problems obtaining tickets via the internet.

Our first evening was *Tosca*, with the show starting at 9:15pm just as the sun went down on a gorgeous day. Since one sacrifices somewhat in sound quality with these open-air settings one hopes to be compensated by the spectacle of a huge stage and amazing props. Not so much this night, since *Tosca* does not lend itself to “over the top” scenery. The full moon decided to make up for it and slowly moved over the tall structure from which *Tosca* “flung” herself. Actually, in this production, she simply walked sideways behind a wall. Something of an anticlimax!

*Aida*, our second night at the Arena, started off with a bang. Being vulnerable to the weather became apparent when a line of Ottawa style thunderclouds passed over with extensive electrical activity. The start was delayed by half an hour due to the threat of lightning. Since the oval of the arena is intact and the walls very high, a tall crane is used to lift in all major scenery such as the huge sphinx statues for *Aida*, so a lightning strike becomes a serious possibility. All props not needed on any given night appear to be stored on the street outside the Arena, allowing close-up inspection.

*Aida* is superbly suited to the setting of the rebuilt arena with wonderfully spectacular scenes involving giant statues and hundreds



Photo: Ute Davis

of chorus and extras. I lost count of the number of animals in the victory parade!

It is understood that sound amplification has to be used in these outdoor conditions, resulting in some loss of sound quality. Visual gain for sound loss.

The casts were good, the orchestra excellent. A local favourite is a muscular lady who comes to centre stage to call patrons back to their seats at the end of each

interval by rhythmically striking an enormous gong. As the opera proceeded, again the full moon rose slowly and splendidly above the huge wall behind the stage. This is a truly impressive sight, and just a small part of what makes opera different at the Arena di Verona.

The only fly in the ointment are these very late starts, which can be made even worse by uncooperative weather, which left us tottering back to our hotel at 1:00 in the morning, although due to hit the autostrada just a few hours later, to make it to Innsbruck the next day.

### 3. SULMONA, Centre for Opera Studies in Italy

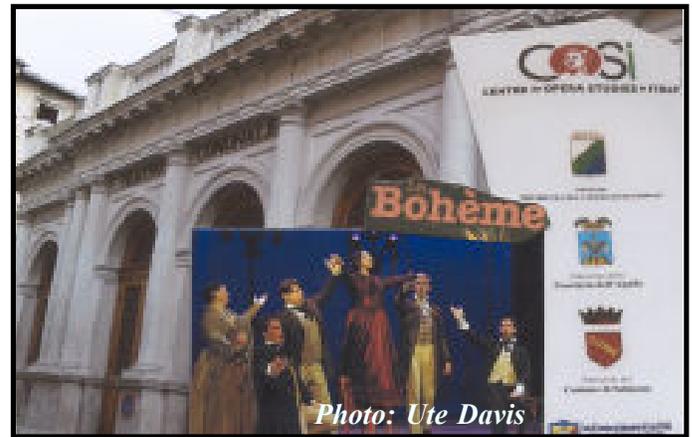
Between Pescara and Rome the Dolomite mountains reinforce the centre of Italy. Sulmona is located in the heart of this Abruzzo region, within easy reach of the fantastic beaches of Pescara to the east and almost as close to Rome in the west. With a population of 40,000 Sulmona offers a perfect balance between quiet, small-town Italy and vibrant medieval city. The old town is historic with the upper floors of many buildings extending over the sidewalks which are open to the street by multiple arches, giving them a picturesque cloistered appearance.

The birthplace of Ovid, the city is home to a lovely opera house, recently restored. This Teatro Comunale is named after a local opera singer of reknown, Maria Caniglia (1905-1975, famous for her *Tosca*, *Aida*, *Adriana Lecouvreur*).

Our reason for visiting was C.O.S.I. – not fan tutte, but the Centre for Opera Studies in Italy. This most interesting program for young singers and musicians was recently founded by Darryl Edwards, of the University of Toronto. The school runs a five week course each June/July and uses a variety of expert teachers, mostly from Canada. Individual lessons, studio and fully staged performance, masterclasses, voice studios; even pilates, to teach relaxation to singers, are part of a day-long routine. There are 12 hours of Italian language classes per week, and the benefits were immediately apparent, as I observed the students chatting in fluent Italian with the locals, prior to the performance. Thus we found ourselves in a pretty and well maintained, intimate baroque opera house of the size preferred by Europeans. Our host, the talented young Canadian Christina Tannous, who had recently sung Mimi for Pellegrini opera and is now a member of the Opera Lyra Artists Studio, was sitting with us having just completed the course and sung “Musetta” the night before. The music was well looked after by conductor Judith Yan, the staging and costumes, simple, but effective. The stu-

dents were almost all from Canada and sang and acted particularly well.

Performances at the Teatro Comunale are free to all who wish to attend. Understandably, the house was full!



Following the performance of *La Bohème* we met some of the coaching staff of C.O.S.I., including Wendy Nielsen, Brian McIntosh, Patrick J. Raftery and Darryl Edwards, the latter two having acted as judges for our Brian Law Scholarship Competition in the past.

We were impressed and pleased with the performance and came away wishing Darryl Edwards success in this very worth-while venture.

## A North American First: *Das Liebesverbot* (The Ban on Love) by Ute Davis

Coincident with the end of the Bayreuth season, marked by the staging of Wagner's last opera, *Parsifal*, and the end of an era with the retirement of Wolfgang Wagner, we return here to early Wagner, courtesy of Glimmerglass Summer Festival. Richard Wagner's first stage work, *Die Hochzeit* (The Wedding) 1832, is mainly lost. *Die Feen* (The Fairies), his second, remained unperformed until 1888.

The Shakespearian *Das Liebesverbot*, his third unsuccessful work was staged once in 1836 at Magdeburg where Wagner was the Intendant, the man in charge. The public was not amused. He decided to fund a second performance himself, but cancelled it at the last minute, when he observed the audience from behind the curtain arguing and fighting over this unpopular production before it had even begun. His first opera of importance appears to be the Meyerbeerian *Rienzi*, followed by the popular *Der Fliegende Holländer* (The Flying Dutchman). The rest is history.

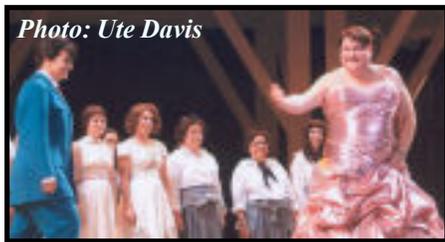
(continued on Page 10)

("Das Liebesverbot..." continued from Page 9)

*Das Liebesverbot* is based on Shakespeare's "Measure for Measure" and this production is set in fascist times. Friedrich, the Regent ruling Sicily, outlaws Carnival, closes nightclubs and declares all immorality illegal. Following a dramatic purge by the morality police, Claudio is found guilty of impregnating his fiancée Julia, and sentenced to death. He convinces his sister Isabella to leave her convent to come and plead for him. Friedrich is aroused by her pleas and agrees to release Claudio if she will meet him that evening and become his mistress. Isabella persuades her convent friend Mariana, the wife Friedrich discarded years ago, to substitute for her at the assignation. Her seduction is then disclosed to reveal the hypocrisy of Friedrich's rule, whereupon the embarrassed Friedrich pardons everyone and the resumption of the celebration of Carnival produces a lively and colourful finale to the comedy.

The foremost feature of the opera is that the music is pleasant and melodic, clearly indicating Italian (particularly Bellini) as well as several other influences associated with composers of the day. The 1930s setting, including references to Hitler and a lot of bump and grind, staged effectively by Nicolas Muni, worked very well and did not prove offensive, but rather humorous and enjoyable. The orchestra played well under the baton of Corrado Rovaris.

The voices, especially those of the impressive sopranos Claudia Waite as Isabella and Holli Harrison as Mariana were powerful and Wagnerian. Bass Kevin



Glavin, the comic relief and assistant to Friedrich, was funny indeed and demonstrated superb acting, supported by a good voice, capable of many different intonations. Bass-baritone Mark Schnaible (Friedrich) had a surprisingly compelling, clean voice. His diction was impeccable, especially noticeable since that of virtually all other singers was so poor that audience members with fluent German were referring to the English surtitles after noticing syllables and even half sentences missing. All this, after Glimmerglass employed Irene Spiegelmann, the MET German diction coach. The Glimmerglass production is the first fully staged version of *Das Liebesverbot* ever on this continent; I do hope this amusing and entertaining work will be seen again in North America.

After a record breaking 57 years on the throne at Bayreuth, the 89 year old grandson of Richard the composer, Wolfgang Wagner, agreed to step down at the end of August as the chief of the world's oldest and most prestigious summer music festival.

His brother and co-producer Wieland died in 1966; this left Wolfgang in sole charge for the next 42 years. His second wife Gudrun, the mother of his youngest daughter Katharina, 30, died suddenly late last year. This deeply affected him; after all he "expected his appointment to be for life" with Gudrun poised to help Katharina take over "the family business" after his death.



Katharina was seen to be too young to be trusted with the running of the Bayreuth Festival. The operas she has produced during the last few years induced such a negative reaction, that people decided she was clearly not the heir apparent. Her recent attempt at *Die Meistersinger* was sold as a computer version on the internet for \$ 75.00, a one time shot, no download. The German public decided that anyone who hates *Meistersinger* as much as she does, should not be allowed near it. This controversial production will be offered as a DVD soon. As a clever move, Katharina aligned herself with her 63 year old step sister Eva Wagner-Pasquier, who has been an artistic advisor to the MET.

Just to complicate the issue further, Gérard Mortier, the 64 year old past Intendant of La Monnaie, Salzburg, Ruhr Triennale and La Bastille, presently poised to take over New York City Opera, joined Nike Wagner in an application for the position. Nike is the 63 year old daughter of Wieland and has established respectable credentials while running her own festival in Weimar, the Perelinages.

In a very recent decision, the "Stiftungsrat", ruling body of the Bayreuth Festival, announced that the succession will go to Katharina and Eva, who will take over on 1 September 2008.

## Summer Opera Lyric Theatre by David Williams

Summer Opera Lyric Theatre (SOLT) was founded in 1986 and has produced an Opera Workshop, in Toronto, every summer since 1988. Founder and General Director Guillermo Silva-Morin has developed an educational program "whose main goal is to recreate the professional interpretive process with a focus on the lyric theatre". For an eight week period, some 33 young artists have music and staging rehearsals and participate in Master Classes designed to assist in their career development. The artists range from those with limited experience to those who are already capable of performing small roles with main stage opera companies. Some previous participants in these workshops have been Joseph Kaiser, Joshua Hopkins, Krisztina Szabo and Frederique Vezina.

The workshop culminates with a week of performances of that year's chosen operas. In 2008, the three operas were *Semele*, *Lakme* and *Vanessa*. Over two weekends each opera was performed four times with alternating casts for each opera. *Vanessa* and *Semele* were performed in English and *Lakme* in French with English surtitles and some dialogue. The operas are performed with piano accompaniment, well costumed and with simple scenery and staging. Allowing for the varying experience and training of the artists, all three operas were performed well and we found them most enjoyable. This is an excellent way to see three operas in a weekend - check their website at [www.solt.ca](http://www.solt.ca) for details of next year's programme.

## Events You Could Have Enjoyed!

In June **Ottawa Pocket Opera (OPO)** staged two delightful one-act operas, utilizing mainly younger singers. General and Artistic Director David MacAdam was not only stage director and designer but, in Vaughan Williams' *Riders to the Sea* based on the mournful Irish play by J.M. Synge, also sang the important role of the last remaining son. Fortunately, *Gallantry, a Soap Opera*, by Douglas Moore, which followed, was a hilarious spoof of a 1950's TV soap opera! Many of the singers sang in both operas, with Sara Brooks at the piano for both. This was a welcome chance to hear two seldom seen operas well performed by up-and-coming and established local singers.

At the **Shaw Festival** in Niagara on the Lake, Stephen Sondheim's *A Little Night Music* was a splendid unmiked production in the intimate Court House Theatre, with Goldie Semple in the lead role, and an excellent cast. I enjoyed it much more than I expected for a Sondheim work! At the main Festival Theatre, Leonard Bernstein's *Wonderful Town*, based on *My Sister Eileen* was, in a word, wonderful! The Shaw's use of their newly renovated Festival Theatre, with an orchestra pit and large stage allows for lavish, full-scale productions of major musicals, and this one was a hit!

At the **Stratford Shakespeare Festival**, *Cabaret*, with its great tunes and dancing and only "Canadian" salaciousness, made good use of the recently renovated Avon Theatre, now the venue for all its musicals, to ensure a most excellent and enjoyable production.

- Shelagh Williams

Last summer **Opera Under the Stars** was the first concert presented in the new performance venue located in front of the War Museum in Lebreton Flats. It was an overwhelming success! That success was repeated this past summer with another memorable evening of opera highlights. This concert was appropriately dedicated to the memory of Richard Bradshaw, former General Director of the Canadian Opera Company and the conductor at last year's concert. This year, an enthusiastic audience, estimated at 10,000, was thrilled by Richard Margison, tenor, and Measha Brueggergosman, soprano, supported by the NAC Orchestra under the able direction of guest conductor, Alain Trudel, and the Opera Lyra Ottawa Chorus. In addition to a great concert, July 17, 2008 was a perfect evening and, best of all, it was all free!

The Kingston Symphony Orchestra opened the beautifully refurbished Grand Theatre in Kingston with a **Grand Opera Gala** on September 20. It was a concert of well-selected opera arias, duets and ensembles performed by four exceptional Canadian singers - Joni Henson, soprano; Bruce Kelly, baritone; Julie Nesrallah, mezzo soprano and world renowned tenor, Richard Margison. The orchestra, led by conductor Glen Fast, was in fine form and clearly happy to be performing in its new venue. All in all, the very appreciative audience was treated to a magnificent evening of music and a chance to celebrate with the performers afterwards.

- Tom McCool

# Opera Within Reach

## Ottawa

### Opera Lyra Ottawa

*Hamlet* by Thomas October 26, 2008  
2pm at Dominion Chalmers United Church

*Cinderella, OLO Studio Production* Dec. 13 &  
14, 2008 at the NAC

Information: 613-233-9200 x221  
[www.operalyra.ca](http://www.operalyra.ca)

### Orpheus Society

*Fame* by Margoshes and Levy  
Nov. 14 -23, 2008

Performances at Centrepointe Theatre.  
Information: 613-580-2700  
[www.centrepointetheatre.com](http://www.centrepointetheatre.com)

## Montréal

### L'Opéra de Montréal

*La Fanciulla del West* by Puccini  
Sept. 20, 24, 27, 29, Oct. 2, 2008

*Les Pecheurs de Perles* by Bizet  
Nov. 1, 5, 8, 10, 13, 2008  
Performances are in Salle Wilfrid-Pelletier at Place des  
Arts. Information 1-514-985-2258  
[www.operademontreal.com](http://www.operademontreal.com)

### Opera McGill

*Thesee* by Lully  
November, 2008  
Information: 1-514-398-4547

## Toronto

### Canadian Opera Company

*Don Giovanni* by Mozart  
Oct. 5, 8, 11, 15, 18, 20, 23, 26, 28, 31, 2008

*War and Peace* by Prokofiev  
Oct. 10, 14, 16, 19, 22, 25, 29, Nov. 1, 2008

All performances are at the Four Seasons Centre.  
Information: 1-800-250-4653 [www.coc.ca](http://www.coc.ca)

### Opera in Concert

*Roberto Devereux* by Donizetti  
October 4 & 5, 2008

*La Vestale* by Mercadante  
November 30, 2008

Performances at the St. Lawrence Centre  
Information: 1-800-708-6754  
[www.operainconcert.com](http://www.operainconcert.com)

### Opera Atelier

*The Abduction from the Seraglio* by Mozart  
Nov. 8 to 15, 2008.  
Elgin Theatre, 189 Yonge St.  
Information: 1-416-872-5555  
[www.operaatelier.com](http://www.operaatelier.com)

### Opera Ontario

*The Magic Flute* by Mozart  
October 30, November 1, 2008

Information: 1-905-526-6556  
[www.operaontario.com](http://www.operaontario.com)

# Events You Should Enjoy!

## Opera Lyra Ottawa Guild

Definitely The Opera will be showing Verdi's *La Traviata* (October 14th) at Library and Archives Canada. Information: 613-233-9200 Ext. 334

## Ooh La La Opera

Ooh La La Opera will present *The Scent of Scandal* at the NAC 4th Stage on October 2nd and 3rd.

Information: 613-947-7000.

## Ottawa Pocket Opera

Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* abridged and Stravinsky's one act opera *Mavra*. November 7th & 8th at 8 pm, St. Matthias Anglican Church.

Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors* with the Canadian Centennial Choir. December 6th (location TBA) at 7:30pm; December 7th, 3pm at Orleans United Church.

Tickets: 613-569-7888.

## Cathedral Arts

Cantabile, The London Quartet presents an Evening of Great Singing on October 3rd at Christ Church Cathedral. Information: 613-567-1787

## Ottawa Baroque Consort

Soprano Ann Monoyios will sing at St. Giles Presbyterian Church on Saturday, November 8th at 8 pm. Information: 613-730-2977

## Marriage of Classical Music & Classical Literature

is a course in Carleton University's Learning in Retirement (LinR) program. The course consists of a study of masterpieces in music which are derived from great classical works in literature. The course participants will first explore the literary works, such as Shakespeare's *Romeo & Juliet*, then the musical masterpieces inspired by them.

Thursdays, October 9 – November 13

1:30 P.M. - 3:30 P.M.

Additional Information: [carleton.ca/cie](http://carleton.ca/cie),  
613-520-6624

## Saturday Afternoon Radio from the MET

November 29 *La Damnation de Faust* (Berlioz)

December 6 *Tristan und Isolde* (Wagner)

December 13 *The Queen of Spades*  
(Tchaikovsky)

December 20 *Thais* (Massenet)

December 27 *The Magic Flute* (Mozart)

January 3, 2009 *La Boheme* (Puccini)

January 10 *La Rondine* (Puccini)

## MET Opera at the Movies

The Metropolitan Opera will be presenting the following operas at your local cinemas. Contact your local cinema for showtimes.

October 11th, 2008 *Salome* (Strauss)

November 8th, 2008 *Doctor Atomic* (Adams)

November 22nd, 2008 *La Damnation de Faust*  
(Berlioz)

December 20th, 2008 *Thais* (Massenet)

January 10th, 2009 *La Rondine* (Puccini)

## Opus Arte Movies

Empire Theatres will present the following operas. Contact your local cinema for showtimes.

September 27 & 28th, 2008 *Cavalleria Rusticana & Pagliacci* (Teatro Real, Madrid)

October 25 & 26th, 2008 *Don Giovanni* (Royal Opera)

November 29&30th, 2008 *Don Carlo* (Royal Opera)

December 6 & 7th, 2008 *The Adventures of Pinocchio*  
(Opera North)

# Career Recognition for Soprano Maria Pellegrini

by Ute Davis

When Maria Pellegrini was honoured with the CAVALIERE dell'ORDINE al MERITO della REPUBBLICA ITALIANA in October 2007 by the Italian Ambassador Gabriele Sardo at his Aylmer Residence, word was soon passed back to the folks in Pescara, Italy, where she had grown up. Local operaphiles drew this to the attention of city authorities and together they organized a concert in her honour, in which they invited Maria to star. This took place 16 July 2008.

It was a beautiful evening, warm and clear. An appropriate open-air setting, Ex Aurum, consisted of a large courtyard, surrounded by a circular 3-story building, and with a stage set off by stone steps and ballustrade on each side.

Maria sang a selection of Italian operatic favourites with the talented piano accompaniment of Nicola Iannielli. The concert was well rounded out by solo and duet performances from baritone Luigi Cirillo, tenor Graziano Benedetto and soprano Maria Antonella Cirillo. All sang well and their admiration for the star of the evening was clear from their gracious treatment.

The audience was delighted with the concert, none more than the Pescara official who thanked Maria Pellegrini and presented her with a beautiful turquoise necklace. The mayor of Pretoro (a mountain town some 50 kms inland where Maria was born) also spoke and presented Maria with a large floral bouquet.

Another highlight of the evening for Maria herself, was the attendance of her very first voice teacher, Caterina Columbo. Now 100 years old and in a wheelchair, the lady proved extraordinarily young in mind and spirit and clearly revelled in the opportunity to talk to her now famous, former pupil. It was heartwarming to see the enthusiasm and pure pleasure the people of Pescara take in the successful career of one of their own. Major credit has to be given to Emilia de Cesaris, the producer, for an excellent evening of entertainment, which was enjoyed by locals and "overseas tourists" alike.

