

Newsletter • Bulletin

Spring 2014

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Opera Lyra Ottawa's 2014 -15 Season

The opening opera of OLO's 30th Anniversary Season will see Tyrone Paterson return to conduct Puccini's *Tosca* on September 6, 8, 10, 13, 2014.

Michele Capalbo - Floria Tosca
David Pomeroy - Mario Cavaradossi
Todd Thomas - Baron Scarpia
Guy Montavon - Stage director



The second main stage opera will be Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* conducted by OLO's interim artistic director, Kevin Mallon, on March 21, 23, 25, and 28, 2015.

James Westman - Count Almavia
John Brancy - Figaro
Mireille Asselin - Susanna
Wallis Guinta - Cherubino
Nathalie Paulin - Countess Almavia
Tom Diamond - Stage Director



OLO's opera for the young and the young at heart will be an abridged version of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* on October 25, 26 and November 1, 2014.

Do not forget to see OLO's *Madama Butterfly* on April 19, 21, 23 and 26, 2014 - starring Shu-Ying Li as Cio-Cio San and Arminè Kassabian as Suzuki.

OLO's Garden Party will be held at the Residence of the Italian Ambassador, June 17, 2014.

OLO Guild's Fashion Funraiser will be held Tuesday May 13, 6:00 to 9:00 p.m. at Shepherds Store in the Trainyards.

President's Message

I am delighted to report that our good friend and frequent jury member, Richard Turp, has included special praise for the Brian Law Opera Competition and its "past laureates", to use his phrase, in an article entitled Program Notes in the winter edition of Opera Canada. His main point is that, although much value is naturally placed on Young Artist Programs organized by opera companies, competitions such as ours have helped to uncover the talents and to stimulate the careers of some of the most successful young Canadian singers today. His remarks on Meghan Lindsay, our winner in the 2013 Competition, are worth quoting. She "showed fabulous technique and poise, innate musicality, a limpid legato and sense of style as well as a touching sensibility in operatic selections by Bellini, Weber and Puccini." What a wonderful tribute. The word from those in attendance at Victoria Opera's *Ariadne auf Naxos* is that Arminè Kassabian's performance as the Composer was excellent. We will all get to hear her ourselves as Suzuki in *Madama Butterfly*. I haven't seen all the Met simulcasts up to date but I don't think *The Nose* or the mixed-up production of *Prince Igor* are going to turn the opera-loving public away from their favourites. Popping up in the poppies will never replace the splendour of the savage and seductive ballet as the great choreographer Fokhine set it to Borodin's magnificent score. Elizabeth Meller should be thanked for uncovering the 1985 Covent Garden production of Verdi's magnificent

Don Carlo shown at our last Opera alla pasta which was enjoyed by a small but appreciative audience who regretted Elizabeth's absence due to illness. The next showing on March 30th beginning at the usual time of 2 pm is a funny, colorful production of Mozart's *The Abduction from the Seraglio*. I will take reservations at 613-830-9827 up to March 27th as Elizabeth is still dealing with a very painful infection.

In the same issue of Opera Canada mentioned above there is a photo of Gerald Finley in his role as Alfonso in *Così fan tutte* eating a banana. Discussing a Glyndebourne production of *Don Giovanni* in which he was required to kill the Commendatore by bashing in his skull with a stone, Gerald once told me that singers just did what the director required them to do. In this staging from Salzburg Gerald dies on stage having drunk poisoned wine. At least he was spared the ignominy of eating a poisoned banana.

Don't forget to keep up-to-date with your membership and to be generous in your contribution to the Brian Law Competition Fund.



Annual General Meeting

The NCOS AGM will be held on May 25 after the showing of *Tosca*. The meal will immediately follow the AGM.

Newsletter Editors

David T. Williams & Tom McCool

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A Different School for Lovers

by Ute Davis

The libretto and superb music of *Così fan tutte* were basically the same as we have heard many times before, as recently as July 2013 in San Francisco, but this production was radically different. Director Atom Egoyan set the opera in a private high school where Sir Thomas Allen plays Don Alfonso as the biology professor. Allen provided a master class in acting with superb comedic timing, beautiful Italian diction, especially in the recitative and even Italian “body language”. This quality of suave cynicism is rarely seen in such a convincing fashion and, while in no way stealing the limelight, Allen is acting his role all the time he is on stage. This level of artistic perfection is very rare but I have previously observed it in another role (Count Almaviva) when sung by our patron, Gerald Finley.



photo by Michael Cooper

Dahl

Allen

The students were led by Layla Claire as Fiordiligi and Wallis Giunta as Dorabella. This shows the very high level in casting at the COC. You may remember General Director Alexander Neef was casting director at Bastille Opera and in Salzburg under G. Mortier for many years. Both these young ladies proved totally convincing from their braided tresses through their youthful figures to their knee socks and polished high school shoes. Both proved vocally stellar in performance with Claire showing a glorious upper register which drew applause for her major arias, particularly *Come scoglio*. Toronto critic Robert Harris accurately describes Wallis Giunta as “an adorable Dorabella, earthier, sexier, and more willing than her sister, beautifully acted as well as sung”.

Their boyfriends were competently played and sung, but, frankly not in the same league. Paul Appleby’s



photo by Michael Cooper

Gleadow

Appleby

Giunta Claire

Ferrando showed some attractive features but his voice sounded occasionally strained while Robert Gleadow sang a good Guglielmo but suffered by comparison with the Philippe Sly performance in San Francisco last year. It was very pleasing to see the return of Tracy Dahl who proved to be a delightful Despina showing her experience and expertise in this comedy role. The chorus of other pupils was competent if not outstanding, however their appearance, parading across the stage, each with a model galleon on her head, proved more of a distraction than augmentation during *Soave sia il vento*. By the way, Claire and Giunta blended their voices in a way which can only be described as sublime.

Although I found the production overall delightful and radically different from the many I have seen before, it is open to some criticisms. As an admirer of Frida Kahlo I would question the appropriateness of the two large portraits of her, used as a major feature in the backdrop. Also the dissected human heart in one of the images was frankly over the top and the on-stage use of scissors was simply wrong since there is a haemostat in the picture. Fortunately I adore colourful and brightly lit butterflies which were profuse throughout.

Despite my criticism of some of Mr. Egoyan’s touches, I was sufficiently captivated, even mesmerized that I never once looked up at the surtitles and am prepared to call this my favourite *Così* ever. I strongly believe that *Così* is one of Mozart’s three greatest operas. Johannes Debus and the COC orchestra reinforced this opinion with their flawless presentation.

see p12 for a review of the COC Ensemble performance

An opera buffa and an operetta in Vienna by Marian Cumming

Lots of intrigue, mistaken identities, great ensembles, romance, fun and games and nobody dies! Not your usual fare! The opportunity for a trip to Vienna over New Years was hard to resist. We again joined Act 1 Tours, an excellent company primarily specializing in opera tours, but this time with a twist. In addition to opera, it included tickets to the Ball at the Hofburg Palace and to the New Year's day concert at the Musikverein.

Vienna is a city with many pedestrian-only streets and where one can easily get to the main sights on foot. Christmas lights were everywhere, beautiful chandeliers, crowns and ornate swags draped from one side of the street to the other. Throngs of locals and tourists, young and old, mingled in the brisk outdoors, speaking a multitude of languages. On December 31 band stands were set up in practically every major square and outdoor celebrations went on well into the early morning. The Ball, previously known as the Kaiser Ball but renamed Le Grand Bal, was spectacular. The venue was magical with its sweeping staircase, crystal chandeliers and richly decorated ceilings and wall panelling. There were multiple ballrooms, each with its own live orchestra playing, mostly Strauss waltzes and polkas. Dinner was delicious, how they managed to serve hundreds of people at the same time still remains a mystery, and the food was piping hot! Dancing went on until the wee hours of the morning, interrupted only by the presentation of debutantes and cavaliers and a short entertainment program in the main hall.

Most of you will have listened to and seen the New Year's day concert from the Musikverein on PBS, so I will not dwell on it too much. The concert starts at 11.15 a.m. and those with tickets arrive much earlier to soak in the beautiful atmosphere that is the concert hall with its outstanding floral arrangements, beautiful gilt ceiling and cosmopolitan audience. Of course those present did not get to see the ballet,

always a part of the televised version, but being in the hall listening to the superb Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra under the direction of Daniel Barenboim was unforgettable. Maestro Barenboim is always very animated and fun to watch. (Having taped the concert we realized that only the second half of the concert was actually broadcast, which is a pity.) Audience members are allowed to help themselves to the floral decorations at the conclusion of the concert. Many exited the hall happily carrying armloads of flowers.

The Wiener Staatsoper, a 19th century renaissance-style building, is located on one of the main thoroughfares, the Ringstrasse, in central Vienna. It features arches, a verandah and two riders on horseback on the main facade of the loggia. The building was heavily bombed during the second world war, but fortunately the front main lobby and the beautiful marble staircase with its statues, medallion and portraits were not affected. The rest of the theatre was redesigned and enlarged after the war. The vast intermission halls, their vaulted ceilings and walls decorated with 22-carat gold leaf, connect to frame the main staircase. The auditorium was reduced in size due to stricter building codes and fire regulations, the central chandelier was replaced by a ring of crystal lights, but the traditional red, gold and ivory colours were retained.



photo by Marian Cumming

An opera buffa and an operetta in Vienna (continued)

Rossini composed *La Cenerentola* at the age of 24, and completed it in a period of three weeks. He must have worked day and night to produce such beautiful melodies, ensembles and comic situation in such a short time. In the current production by Rolf Glittenberg, the action is transferred to 1950 in a tiny fictitious nation in the Mediterranean called San Sogno. The ruler is a slightly eccentric prince (Don Ramiro) who collects expensive cars which he stores in one of the halls of his palace. Jacopo Ferretti's libretto follows the original Cinderella story fairly closely, except for the shoe being replaced by a bracelet and the absence of a pumpkin turning into a carriage drawn by white mice. Part of the action takes place in the dilapidated mansion of Don Magnifico. The curtain rose to show a narrow corridor with five cupboards in the background and two salon-type hair dryers on either side of the stage. My first reaction was that we were in for a strange evening! Happily, that it was not, but it was different! The scenery was used to great effect as the insides of the cupboards revealed various rooms, e.g. a bedroom (with Don Magnifico tucked upright into a sleeping bag), a kitchen, a washstand, etc., which added to the comic intent of the piece. The colours were muted, and the covers on the furniture were faded. In contrast to the other part of the action, in Don Ramiro's Palace, the scenery was painted a warm yellow with a damask back-drop, and two sports cars, one a bright orange and the other a pale blue. (The happy couple drive off in one of these cars at the end.)

The comic timing of the entire cast was flawless, it was funny but the singers did not resort to grotesque caricatures. The costumes (designed by Marianne Glittenberg) were very much reflective of the 50s, inspired by Fellini movies perhaps? With the exception of Cinderella's dowdy blue and white flowered house dress, the rest of the costumes were bright, flowery summer dresses with ankle-length wide flowing skirts. Cenerentola, or Angelina, as she was called by her step-father and step-sisters, was sung by American soprano Vivica Genaux. From our second row seats, we would never have guessed that she is in fact 44 years old – she was able to portray a very credible young girl. She has a very warm pleasing voice, closer in timbre to a soprano than a mezzo. Don Ramiro was sung by tenor Dimitry Korchak, who was well matched

with Genaux and he comfortably switched between being the prince or his chauffeur, as did Vito Priante as Dandino. This opera calls for three bass singers, Dandino being one, the other two were Alessandro Corbelli as Don Magnifico (suitably haughty) and Ildebrando D'Arcangelo as Alidoro. Their ensembles produced a nice rich sound. The step sisters, Clorinda and Fisbe were sung respectively by Sylvia Schwartz and Juliette Mars, dropped the wicked witch persona for eye-rolling and shoulder-shrugging. The conductor Jesus Lopez-Cobos and the Vienna State Opera Orchestra added to the success of the evening with their superb musicianship.

It is a New Year's day tradition in Vienna for both the Staatsoper and the Volksoper to present their version of Strauss's *Die Fledermaus*. This time we opted for the Volksoper production. The Volksoper is housed in a castle-like white structure built in the late 19th century, about a 10-15-minute cab ride from the city centre. It is a cozy theatre, if in need of a bit of a spruce-up, which seats about 1200. The entire cast was obviously having a "ball".

There is a lot of recitative in this operetta and our limited German did not allow us to appreciate the repartee, particularly during the jail scene, which was obviously very funny given the audience's reaction (no surtitles here!). A fellow sitting behind us, who obviously understood the jokes, was trying to explain them to his companion, but unfortunately we couldn't hear him clearly enough – this is probably one of the few times when a louder whisper would have been welcomed! However, we were able to enjoy the rich scenery, colourful costumes, good acting and professional singing, which were all very satisfying. Morten Frank Larsen as Eisenstein and Kristiane Kaiser as his wife Rosalinde were equally devious, and Beate Ritter as Adele and Klaudia Nagy as her sister Ida were sufficiently manipulative. Robert Meyer as Frosh the jailer did not overplay his part but the delivery of his lines was obviously spot on. Kurt Schreibmayer as Frank the prison director, Thomas Paul as Alfred the tenor and would-be lover of Rosalinde, Marco di Sapia as Dr. Falke and Annely Peebo as Prinz Orlofsky rounded out the main cast. All were consummate performers whose voices blended well, the champagne flowed and the orchestra, conducted by Rudolf Bibl, competently supported the excellent cast on stage. What better way to start the new year than with an all-Strauss day of fun and frolic in one of the most beautiful cities in the world? Winter in Vienna was the ultimate experience!

Florida Grand Opera's *Nabucco* by Marian Cumming

During a recent trip to Florida, we were fortunate enough to happen upon one of two performances of *Nabucco* by the Florida Grand Opera at the Broward Centre for the Performing Arts in Ft. Lauderdale. The FGO is in its 73rd season with five operas of eight performances each, six in Miami and two in Ft. Lauderdale.

As we know, *Nabucco* was Verdi's first great success. It is a historical drama set in 587 BCE and centres around the struggles of the Hebrews at the hands of foreigners, with a love triangle and intrigue thrown in for good measure. The underlying story mirrored the occupation of the north of Italy by the Austrians at the time of its debut at La Scala in 1842. And it is partly for this reason that the plot resonated with the audience of the time and why the famous "pensiero" chorus became so popular and adopted as an unofficial anthem during Italy's Risorgimento. The production and set design were by Thaddeus Strassberger. The scenes of the Temple of Solomon and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon were sumptuous with large pillars, greenery and painted panels. The costumes, particularly the women's, were a mass of colour in reds, purples, blues, greens and yellows with ornate head-dresses and flowing veils. It made for quite a sight.

The role of Nabucco was sung by Cuban baritone Nelson Martinez, making his FGO debut. He has good technique and has a pleasing voice. Abigaille was sung by Susan Neves (Maria Guleghina sang the role

in the Miami performances). Neves owns this role having sung it over 230 times all over the world, including in New York (Met), Montreal, Verona, Berlin, Vienna and Paris, to name a few. This is not a role for the faint of heart, and she carried it off very well. She has a powerful voice, well-nuanced and flexible. My favourite singer in this performance was the young American bass-baritone Kevin Short in the role of Zaccaria, also making his Florida debut. Short has a beautifully rich, well-modulated voice and is secure from top to bottom. The roles of Fenena and Ismaele were sung by Mabel Ledo and Martin Nusspaumer respectively. Ledo's mezzo-soprano was a little thin and nasal but her technique was flawless. Nusspaumer, from Uruguay, is a product of the company's Young Artist program and seems headed for a promising future. Minor roles such as Anna, Abdallo and the High Priest of Baal were all sung by graduates of the Young Artist's program. This is obviously a company which enjoys great support in the area allowing it to nurture and promote young promising singers. The orchestra and chorus were in fine form. Conductor Ramon Tebar made sure that the singers and chorus were never drowned out. The singing of *Va Pensiero* was particularly moving, garnering loud applause, for which the audience was rewarded with an encore in which it was invited to participate and further encouraged by the

words being projected on the surtitle screen. An exercise in breath control but great fun!

The performance was preceded by a free lecture for ticket-holders followed by a talk-back after the performance with members of FGO's senior staff. Surtitles were available in both English and Spanish. All in all this was a great production. The theatre was about 95% full and most of the audience seemed to be season subscribers.

It is heartening to see smaller opera companies thrive.



photo from FGO

“Movember” in Cape Town by Lesley Robinson

Cape Town Opera wrapped up its 2013 season with a production of Rossini’s *Barber of Seville*, presented in collaboration with the University of Cape Town Opera School. The production was billed as a “hair-raising contribution to ‘Movember’”, the month-long campaign of fundraising and awareness-raising for men’s health issues.

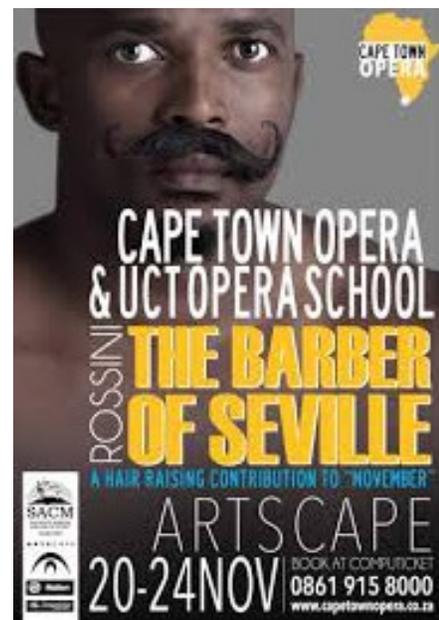
Two student casts alternated performances and provided a joyful and energetic rendition of Rossini’s beloved romp. Unfortunately the performance we attended did not feature Bongwiwe Nakani (mezzo-soprano), Thesele Kemane (bass-baritone) and Makudupanyane Senaoana (tenor), all of whom we saw in the summer of 2012 when they participated in the Glimmerglass Young Artist Program in Cooperstown, NY. Senaoana and Kemane also feature in a film by Julie Cohen about three rising opera stars from the University of Cape Town Opera School. The film, entitled *Ndiphilela Ukucula: I Live to Sing* (the title is in Xhosa and English) will be screened at the Opening Night Gala of the 2014 American Documentary Film Festival in Palm Springs, California.

The production toys with the question of whether to cast a mezzo or a soprano as Rosina by alternating Boningwe Nakani (mezzo) and Noluvuyiso Mpofo (soprano) in the two casts. Mpofo’s performance had a youthful zest and sparkle, which complemented the flavour and sizzle of the setting. The colourful and delightful production was set in 20th century Cuba, contributing exoticism and spice to the backdrop. Figaro, having accumulated an abundance of debt in Seville has emigrated to Cuba, where he has opened a combination bar and barbershop to take care of his customers’ every need. Doctor Bartolo has bought a house just across the street, where Rosina is locked up under strict supervision. The production design was the result of a collaboration among young people of various design disciplines, involving students from the Surface Design School of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. The set revealed alternately a Cuban street scene, Figaro’s bar and barbershop complete with portrait of Che Guevara, and the interior of Doctor Bartolo’s house.

Rossini’s score is full of Spanish character and this is emphasised by the move westwards. The guitar

serenade in the first act is a comfortable fit for the entire Spanish-speaking world and Rosina’s singing lesson provides an opportunity to incorporate some additional New World flavour. The fast-paced overture that we know and love contains lots of nervous anticipation of the action that is to come, but no thematic material from the opera which follows; it was actually written for something else. The original overture to *The Barber of Seville* was lost, but it is said to have contained much of the Spanish flavour that might have fit well with this production; we shall never know. The Cape Town Pops orchestra performed admirably under the direction of Kamal Khan, internationally renowned conductor and Director of the Opera School at the University of Cape Town.

This production celebrates the cultural warmth and diversity that makes South Africa exceptional. The youthful cast and creative team represent the rich cultural mix of this complex society and inspire hope for a bright future for the arts in South Africa.



Arminè Kassabian Triumphs in Pacific Opera Victoria's *Ariadne Auf Naxos*

Pacific Opera Victoria's *Ariadne Auf Naxos* met with critical acclaim. Of particular interest to us were the highly complimentary comments made about our BLOC winner Arminè Kassabian.

Kevin Bazzana (Times Colonist) wrote - *mezzo Arminè Kassabian, singing with both beauty and strength, makes us love the ardent, idealistic young Composer (a trouser role).*

Erin Anderson (CWmagazine) was equally effusive - *Mezzo-soprano Arminè Kassabian dominates the prologue with her amazing vocals and spot-on acting. Dazzling as the young composer, she displayed incredible power and precision - her voice could push an audience against the backs of their seats. Regrettably, she doesn't appear post-intermission.*

Bernard Jacobson (Seen and Heard International) paid Arminè the highest compliment - *And the Composer - my goodness! It was astonishing that so petite a singer could produce so voluminous and luscious a tone. The Canadian mezzo Arminè Kassabian was making her role and company debut, and I cannot imagine any way in which her performance could have been improved upon. In*

any case, this is a young singer with a talent so exciting that I am sure she has a major career ahead of her.

These three reviewers also made positive comments about the other cast members: Suzanne Rigden (Zerbinetta), Colleen Skull (the Prima Donna/ Ariadne), Roger Honeywell (Bacchus), Joseph Schnurr (Dancing Master), John Brancy (Harlekin) and the nymphs (Virginia Hatfield, Evelyn de la Haye and Aidan Ferguson) who surround Ariadne. Ian Rye (set designer) and Sheila White (costume designer) were also highly praised.

As always, the ultimate success depends on the music and this did not disappoint. Bernard Jacobson's opinion was - *Of all the fine orchestral performances I have heard Timothy Vernon draw from the Victoria Symphony in Pacific Opera productions over the past five years, his account of Ariadne auf Naxos must be ranked the finest.*

Editor's note: Read Ute Davis's review of this opera in the next newsletter.

The East-West Connection by Tom McCool

Pacific Opera Victoria has a well deserved reputation for supporting Canadian talent, particularly young singers. This commendable tradition was continued by the casting of 2011 Brian Law Opera Competition winner, Arminè Kassabian, in the February POV production of *Ariadne auf Naxos*. Arminè was just the most recent Brian Law winner to perform for Pacific Opera Victoria. The first was Julie Nesrallah who sang the role of the Composer in *Ariadne auf Naxos* in 1999. Julie returned to Victoria five years later as Carmen in Bizet's opera, a part that has become her signature role. A few years later Shannon Mercer sang the role of Pamina in *The Magic Flute* and in 2010 Joshua Hopkins was one of the principals

in *Capriccio*, the last opera of Richard Strauss. So, it is appropriately coincidental that this year's staging of *Ariadne* by POV features a Brian Law winner in the same role (the Composer) as the initial *Ariadne* production in 1999.

Quite aside from the hometowns of the singers it is great to see former Brian Law winners doing so well in the highly competitive opera world. And, it is great for young singers to have the support of opera companies such as Pacific Opera Victoria. (It should be noted that all four of the singers mentioned in this article have also performed with Opera Lyra).

Events you may have enjoyed by Shelagh Williams

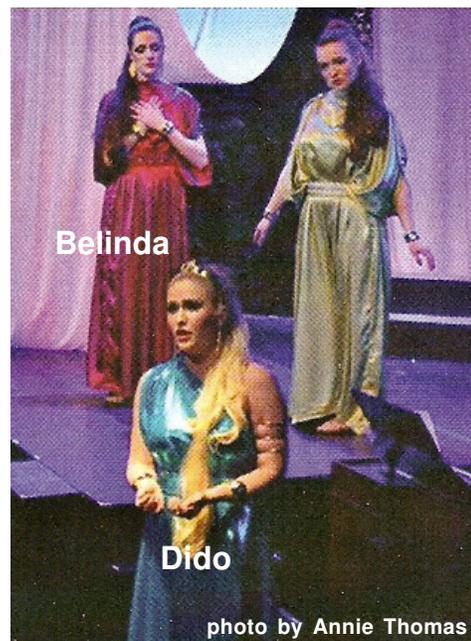
UOttawa Opera Company: *The Old Maid and the Thief*. The first snowfall plus freezing cold did not deter a near capacity crowd from enjoying UOOC's entertaining production of Menotti's rather bizarre comedy *The Old Maid and the Thief*. Music director Sandra Graham, as always, ensured its musical excellence, aided by Barbara Jeffrey on the piano. Student codirectors Kieran Foss and Hyung Song produced a sparkling show, light and humorous, with many deft touches. The setting was first class, the sound effects were excellent, and the costumes from Orpheus were dead on: ill fitting for the beggar Bob, prim for the neighbour Miss Pinkerton, sexy for the maid Laetitia, and with a typical oversized, ungainly cardigan for the old maid Miss Todd! The four singers had good diction and were also first rate actors. Soprano Katelyn Osmond-Devereux is only in second year, but handled her first solo role with aplomb. Tenor Philippe-Etienne Blais made a handsome Bob and sang his aria beautifully. Soprano Elise Heikkila as a perky Laetitia and mezzo Erika Churchill as the dried up skinny old maid are master's students, and their experience showed, as they carried the show. Another success for UOOC!

National Arts Centre Orchestra: *Messiah*: This year's *Messiah* featured BLOC winner bass-baritone Philippe Sly together with soprano Sherezade Panthaki, mezzo Meg Bragle, and tenor Nicholas Phan. Baroque music specialist conductor Matthew Halls led a chamber-sized NACO and a smallish word-perfect chorus of Cantata and Ewashko Singers in a magnificent style-appropriate rendition.

Joy of Opera Luncheon and Concert: This year's 18th Opera Lyra Ottawa Guild annual opera lunch and concert did not disappoint. Rob Clipperton and Jean Desmarais were super as MC and pianist, respectively, providing commentary for and collaboration with three great UOttawa student artists. Soprano Carolyn Beaudoin, mezzo Lydia Piehl, and bass-baritone Joel Allison sang an excellent programme of single arias plus a trio from various operas, with multiple selections from Mozart's *Così fan tutte* and Bizet's *Carmen*. Lydia also gave us

a preview of *Dido's Lament* from *Dido and Aeneas*. It was great to see in attendance OLO's General Director Jeep Jeffries, a strong Guild supporter, and OLO's interim Artistic Director, conductor Kevin Mallon!

UOttawa Opera Company: *Dido and Aeneas*. The second opera of the season, Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, was an excellent full-fledged production. Two dancers nimbly augmented the soloists and chorus, and the chamber orchestra, under Rennie Regehr, included two continuo groups: harpsichordist Andrea Tremblay Legendre and guitarist Louis Trepanier, each plus cello. Joan Foster-Jones' beautiful and appropriately classical costumes lent atmosphere to Music and Stage Director Sandra Graham's clever staging. Graham made effective use of every inch of the minuscule stage and of the front and aisles of the theatre. In the lead roles, bass-baritone Joel Allison was a strong presence as Aeneas, with clearly enunciated text, and mezzo Lydia Piehl was superb, both visually and vocally, as Dido. Mention must also be made of soprano Julie Ekker as Dido's sister Belinda, Carolynne Ball in her first major role as the Sorceress, and tenor Dominic Grandmaison providing comic relief as a Sailor. The black-clad Calixa-Lavallee Ensemble as chorus, under Ryan Hofman, was also very good. The opening performance was very strong and the second was even better! - UOOC has come a long way!!



Nellie Melba - the greatest diva from Down Under

by Vera-Lee Nelson

As February drew to a close, with slush and drips to make us think of spring, I discovered to my horror that February 23 marks the season finale of *Downton Abbey*. This production has gathered a very large coterie of devoted fans and helped to pass an exceptionally long and cold winter. When the first episode aired I was very excited to know that New Zealand singer Kiri Te Kanawa would be a guest, playing the part of Dame Nellie Melba. In the story Dame Nellie is invited to *Downton* to provide a small concert on a country house weekend. As an opera fan, I hoped to be part of the audience for that concert. However it did not quite develop that way. I found Mme. Te Kanawa quite charmless in the role and the demands of the complicated story line obscured any chance of undivided attention to the music, by the cast and by “viewers like me.” The “concert” was broken by take away scenes that advanced the plot and were, to say the least, disturbing, as in the rape of housemaid Anna Bates.

As soon as the episode aired, the tweets and emails began, pointing out factual errors of the time and great arguments as to the portrayal of Dame Melba who was not the gentle character of the show. In fact I became quite interested in Dame Melba, obviously not the mild creature of peaches and toast as she was portrayed. I began to read all I could find out about this Down Under Diva.

The following account by Ivan Hewitt in *The Telegraph* sums it up quite nicely and is worth sharing to remind us of a great singer of the 19th and early 20th century.

Dame Nellie Melba, whose stage name was a diminutive of her home city of Melbourne, was the greatest opera singer of her time. So, a great singing Kiwi Dame is to play a great Aussie one. The news that Kiri Te Kanawa is to impersonate Nellie Melba in the next series of Downton Abbey has a satisfying symmetry to it, and Dame Kiri is delighted to be making an appearance in the all-conquering TV drama series. “I couldn’t say yes fast enough” she’s quoted as saying, and one can see why. Dame Nellie Melba was one of the greatest stars opera has ever produced, with a grand, flamboyant style that even the biggest

performers of today can’t match. Of her it can truly be said that “they don’t make them like that any more”.

It’s worth asking why. The singers of today are vocally every bit as gifted as their predecessors, and thanks to mass media and air travel they have an instant global reach. But nowadays opera singers play to a niche market. The rare occasions when they break through to a mass market - as with the phenomenon of the “Tenors” Pavarotti, Domingo and Carreras, in the 1980s - only points up the fact that, on the whole, they are known to quite a small circle of opera lovers and “fanciers”

In Melba’s time, singers were popular entertainers as much as artists. True, the baleful division between art and entertainment had already come into being, and would become more entrenched as the 19th century wore on. But it hadn’t yet become an insuperable barrier. Museums could still show bearded ladies alongside Egyptian antiquities, and a soprano such as Jenny Lind - much admired by Mendelssohn and Schumann - could tour America courtesy of PT Barnum, the great showman who went on to co-found Barnum and Bailey’s circuses. Lind became rich on the proceeds, though she spent most of her money founding charitable schools in her native Sweden. Other star singers were less modest. Adelina Patti, who for a while was a rival to the younger Melba, spent part of



Photo: Getty Images

her fortune creating a private theatre in her Welsh stately home. The great tenor Enrico Caruso, who could earn \$10,000 for a single appearance, became a shrewd investor, and left a fortune.

Dame Nellie belongs in their company, and in some respects tops them all. Because she had such a flawless technique she was able to preserve her voice across a long career, which began in the mid-1880s and lasted

Nellie Melba - the greatest diva from Down Under (continued)

almost until her death in 1931. She was Australia's first classical music star, and indeed was the single most famous Australian alive for some decades. Dame Edna may feel she has put Melbourne on the map, but Dame Nellie did it first. Living in a far-flung corner of the Empire was hardly a good starting place for an operatic career, and the young Helen Porter Mitchell (as she was known before her stardom) made the mistake of marrying Charles Armstrong, a dour sugar-plantation manager, who carried her off to the steamy tropical north of Australia. The experience of being marooned among endless acres of sugar-cane, hundreds of miles from any cultural life, must have been crushing. Fortunately, Helen Armstrong had a fighting spirit, and soon ditched the plantation and the husband (though she didn't finally divorce him until 1900). She took singing lessons in Melbourne, impressed the Governor of Victoria with her voice, and in 1886 took herself off to England, where her efforts to break into the operatic scene were cold-shouldered (the impresario Carl Rosa forgot an appointment with her, surely the biggest mistake he ever made). Nothing daunted, Helen Armstrong went to Paris to study with the renowned teacher Mathilde Marchesi. As soon as she heard Armstrong, she exclaimed to her husband Salvatore, "J'ai trouvé une étoile". Armed with a new name (a diminutive of Melbourne) and a polished technique, Melba was soon spotted by an impresario who tied her into a 10-year contract - an unwise move, as it meant she had to turn down an offer from La Monnaie opera house in Brussels to play Gilda in Verdi's *Rigoletto*.

Then, in a twist of fate too implausible even for an opera libretto, the impresario died just at the right moment. So Nellie Melba made her debut in October 1887, and audiences were thrilled. Shortly afterwards she played the star role in Delibes's opera *Lakmé*. The composer was in raptures. "In a sort of reverie I heard your ideal voice interpreting my work with superhuman purity," he raved. That note of amazement at the even purity of Melba's voice would be struck again

and again. Sir Henry Wood, co-founder of the Proms, accompanied Melba in rehearsals as *Desdemona*, and recalled that "her notes were like a string of pearls, touching, yet separate, strung on a continuous vocal line of tone that was never marred or distorted." British audiences were cool at first, but were soon won over. In 1892 Bernard Shaw, previously sceptical, was converted. "I find Madame Melba transfigured, awakened," he wrote about her performance in a now forgotten opera called *Elaine*. "In sum, her heart, which before acted only on her circulation, now acted on her singing... from being a merely brilliant singer, she has become a dramatic soprano of whom the best class of work may be expected." By then she had already conquered Russia. During her tour in 1891 she so impressed the gilded youth of St Petersburg that they spread their cloaks on the snow for her to walk on. Tsar Alexander III added to her already large collection of jewellery with the gift of a diamond necklace. She then launched an assault on the Metropolitan Opera in New York, and the US as a whole, which she duly conquered. By the late 1890s she was living the sort of gilded life no opera singer of today can match. She would spend the summer season in London and then move to New York for the winter, awash with diamonds and furs, followed by an entourage of secretaries and hangers-on, and living in grand hotels and expensive rented villas. Melba's fame grew, in flamboyant extra-musical ways. She caught the eye of the Duke of Orléans who pursued her for some years in a way that kept the gossip columns busy. The great chef Escoffier created four dishes named after her, including Peach Melba. "My name has been printed fairly often and I suppose it will figure on menus long after I'm gone," wrote Melba. She was right. Poirés Mary Garden and *Coupe Emma Calvé* have disappeared, but Melba toast and Peach Melba live on.

Opera divas are supposed to be difficult, and Melba certainly was. She despised singers who would never sing minor roles - "I hate the artistic snobbery of it," she said grandly - but the truth is she couldn't bear rivals. She preferred to have a second-rank soprano playing *Musetta* to her *Mimi* in *La Bohème* and was annoyed when in 1903 at Covent

Nellie Melba (continued)

Garden Musetta was played by the very chic and popular Austrian soprano Fritzi Scheff. One evening young Fritzi was just about to soar up to a difficult top B at the end of one of Musetta's arias, when without warning "a clear angelic voice in the wings landed on it with effortless ease, and sang the rest of the phrase with her". The word went round that it was Melba. After the curtain fell the manager appeared to say Frä Scheff was now "indisposed" and would not be appearing again that evening. In fact Scheff had thrown a fit of hysterics, and a proper cat-fight was only narrowly averted. This was cruel, but Melba's saving grace was great generosity. She helped younger artists, and was an incredibly energetic teacher at the Melbourne conservatory. Another endearing trait was her common touch. At Melba's farewell concerts in New York in 1907 the audience was practically hysterical, and refused to leave. "Won't you go home?" cried Melba

from the stage. "No!" came the reply. So Melba got the stage-hands to push a piano on to the stage and sang an aria to her own accompaniment. A journalist reported that "a young fellow, in an excess of ardour, having no other offering, threw a round empty cardboard box at her feet." Melba wore it as a hat, which drove them all wild again.

Will Dame Kiri have that common touch? Gareth Neame, executive producer of Downton Abbey, said her performance went down a storm: "It was the sight of all these tough electricians and grips and all the people you see on a film set with tears in their eyes," he said. "It was quite a special day." Even for those who missed the first three series, that's surely worth tuning in for.

Editor's note: Ivan Hewitt's article was first published in The Telegraph on 14 August, 2013.

Same School, Different Pupils by Ute Davis

The following night we attended the COC Ensemble Studio performance of *Così*. Singing Don Alfonso, Gordon Bintner was strong and showed good vocal quality, tempered by a tendency to many grandiose gestures. Claire de Sévigné, as Despina, did not suffer by comparison with Tracy Dahl. Of a contrasting physique the tall slender de Sévigné moves well on stage and showed excellent timing in the first major comedy role I have seen her play. Her voice was delightful and remained strong through both acts.

The other four major roles were sung by different young performers in the first and second acts, to allow the maximum number a main-stage opportunity. Our first Fiordiligi was Aviva Fortunata who sang very well and proved very popular with the audience but did not impress me by her stage movement or acting abilities. Our second was Sasha Djihanian, who acted better and was also vocally very satisfactory. Our Dorabella in act I was Charlotte Burrage who moved well on stage and acted nicely but whose voice lacked conviction. In act II Danielle MacMillan showed a pretty balance of voice and acting ability. The tenor roles (Ferrando) were sung by Andrew Haji and Owen McCausland respectively. The former was vocally delightful, his *Un'aura amorosa* was superb, but his stage movement was very awkward and there was little acting shown. McCausland was vocally satisfactory but still ap-

pears uncomfortable on stage. The roles of Guglielmo were covered by an impressive Cameron McPhail who acts well with excellent stage presence but his voice proved immature, while Clarence Frazer showed better vocal quality and power but made little effort to act his role.

Having the advantage of youth, the Ensemble Studio performers fitted this production well. However the girls again were substantially better than the boys. Claire de Sévigné is a very promising artist however to my eye and ear there was no other cast member showing immediate promise of star quality. I hope that the quality of coaching and the immersion in excellent artistic productions offered by the COC program will really benefit these youngsters in the years to come.

Again under the baton of Johannes Debus, the COC orchestra did full justice to the Mozart score despite having played the same score the previous evening. My only complaint was that I found that act II was starting to drag. I am not sure whom to blame, but I checked my watch to discover that the performance was 12 minutes longer than the same production, the night before. Maestro Debus appeared shocked when I pointed this out at the post performance reception. I had expected him to be inured to Germans with stop watches.

DVD Corner

by Murray Kitts

The CBC during its Olympic Games coverage has an ad with Michael Schade connecting the Games with opera using *The Ring* as the obvious connection. Obvious? *The Ring*? What of the other four rings? What competition? For example, which of the gods can run over the rainbow bridge the fastest?

The CBC obviously doesn't know of the existence of an opera called *L' Olimpiade* by the great 18th century composer Pergolesi to a libretto by the prolific writer Pietro Metastasio. This is really about Olympic Games. However, the outcome of the competition is only a small part of the opera's plot. Lycidas wants to win in a competition because part of the prize is the hand of a princess. He asks his friend, Megacles, who is a much better athlete than he, to enter the games under the name Lycidas so that the prize will go to the right person. Little does Lycidas know that Megacles and the princess have fallen in love. Before the opera begins Lycidas has saved Megacles' life so Megacles feels compelled to compete under the false name, wins, renounces his love, and goes off to drown himself. But, everything works out just fine in the end. Megacles gets the princess and Lycidas returns to a former love. A recent DVD from Arthaus Musik proves that there is much beautiful music in this opera but the staging in the Teatro Valeria Moriconi in Jesi often makes the action difficult to follow. Lacking castrati, the two male protagonists are sung by females and are dressed alike in masculine attire. The two female characters are also dressed and hair-styled alike. The stage is occupied by a terrific Baroque orchestra under the direction of Alessandro De Marchi so the action of the opera takes

place on a double runway in the form of a cross dividing the audience into four sections. Singing is excellent. Actually the Games are only a minor part of the story. This almost three hour opera explores profound questions of honour, friendship, love, betrayal, etc. and the libretto is considered Metastasio's masterpiece. An opera, perhaps, for the Baroque specialist only.

There are at least two operas on CD by Antonio Vivaldi called *L' Olimpiade* to the same text used later by Pergolesi. One has been reissued and reviewed in Opera News for subscribers. The buyer beware.

For those long, cold nights that may remain you might want to get from the Ottawa Public Library a collection of 10 DVDs called *Glenn Gould on Television - The Complete CBC Broadcasts, 1954-1977*. Although not directly connected with opera there are quite a few vocal pieces included with Gould as accompanist, including the work of singers such as Roxolana Roslak, who served as a juror several times for the Brian Law Competition, and Lois Marshall among others. The vocal highlight for me is a performance of the 4th movement of Mahler's 2nd Symphony *Resurrection* with Gould conducting an orchestra and the incomparable Maureen Forster singing the text. Of course many of the performances are devoted to Bach, but Gould championed the works of other composers including Richard Strauss. Only a professional musician would be able to follow some of Gould's discussions of esoteric music and only someone who relished sophomoric humour would appreciate Gould's music promotion ads. But there is much to enjoy between these two extremes.

The Crossover Syndrome

by Tom McCool

When Renee Fleming sang the U.S. national anthem before this year's Super Bowl, more people than ever before - over 110 million - were exposed to an opera performer. It was great for opera not only because of the exposure but because Fleming's rendition was so superb. Frequently, when singers associated with one genre of singing (such as opera, jazz, folk, country etc.) crossover to another genre the results are disastrous. One crossover example (and there are many as more and more singers ap-

pear to enjoy doing this) occurred at the 1998 Grammy awards. Pavarotti was to be honoured and was scheduled to sing *Nessun Dorma* but he cancelled. He was replaced by Aretha Franklin, the "Queen of Soul", who volunteered to sing the famous aria from Puccini's *Turandot*. If you are interested you can view it on Youtube. You will find it intriguing and will probably conclude that it was not as successful as Fleming's crossover endeavour. Or, you may like it...well, maybe not! You be the judge.

Events you might enjoy!

by David Williams

Yoriko Tanno's Shooting Stars will present *Hanstra*, March 19 - 22, 7:30 p.m at the Shenkman Centre.

The Savoy Society of Ottawa will present Gilbert and Sullivan's *Ruddigore*. April 3-6, Algonquin College Commons Theatre. www.ottawasavoyssociety.org

Pellegrini Opera will present *L'Elisir d'amore*, April 11&12, 2014 at 7:30 p.m. at Dominion-Chalmers United Church. www.pellegrinopera.net

Thirteen Strings will present Bach's *St. John Passion*. April 18, 8:00 p.m., Dominion-Chalmers United Church. <http://thirteenstrings.ca/>

Les Jeunesses Musicales will present *La Bohème*, May 2nd, 7:30 p.m., at De LaSalle High School. www.jmcanada.ca

University of Ottawa: Students present vocal recitals during April, May and June. www.music.uottawa.ca

The Kiwanis Music Festival takes place from March 31st to May 3rd, 2014. Check their web site for information on the senior and open voice schedules.

The Ottawa Choral Society will present *Amadeus in Salzburg*. May 4, 3:00 p.m. St. Joseph's Church. www.ottawachoralsociety.com

Ottawa Classical Choir presents *Brahms: Ein Deutes Requiem*, May 4, 7:30 p.m. Dominion-Chalmers United Church. www.ottawaclassicalchoir.com

Capital City Opera will present *Opera in Hollywood*, May 17, 7:30 p.m., at the Algonquin College Commons Theatre. <http://capitalcityopera.ca>

Seventeen Voyces and the Ottawa Baroque Consort presents *War and Peace* featuring the work of Henry Purcell. May 30, 7:30 p.m. Southminster United Church. www.seventeenvoyces.ca

Orpheus Musical Theatre will feature *9 to 5 the Musical*. May 30 - June 9, at Centrepointe Theatre. www.centrepointetheatre.com

The Met: Live in HD 2014 - 2015

Verdi's *Macbeth* - October 11

Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* - October 18

Bizet's *Carmen* - November 1

Adams's *The Death of Klinghoffer* - Nov. 15

Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* - December 13

Lehar's *The Merry Widow* - January 17

Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* - Jan. 31

Tchaikovsky's *Iolanta* / Bartok's *Duke*

Bluebeard's Castle - February 14

Rossini's *La Donna del Lago* - March 14

Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* /

Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* - April 25

Bytowne - Opera in Cinema

The Bytowne Cinema is showing monthly opera performances from the Royal Opera House's 2013 - 14 season. Check the Royal Opera House site (www.roh.org.uk) for full cast information and the Bytowne web site (www.bytowne.ca) or their bi-monthly publication for times and dates.

Wagner's *Parsifal* - April 13 & 14, 2014
Starring Simon O'Neill (Parsifal), René Pape (Gurnemanz) and Gerald Finley (Amfortas).

Verdi's *Les Vepres Siciliennes* - May, 2014
Starring Helene (Marina Poplavskaya), Henri (Bryan Hymel) and Procida (Erwin Schrott).

Mozart's *Don Giovanni* - June, 2014
Starring Mariusz Kwiecien (Don Giovanni), Alex Esposito (Leporello), Malin Bystrom (Donna Anna) and Veronique Gens (Donna Elvira).

Puccini's *La Bohème* - July, 2014

Puccini's *Tosca* - August, 2014

Verdi's *Nabucco* - September, 2014

Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* - October, 2014

Aboriginal culture honoured with powerful opera

by Andrea Nelson

Giiwedín is a riveting and beautiful tale that captured the audience this past weekend at Wilfrid Laurier University, even for those not already fans of opera. *Giiwedín* is told from the perspective of a 150-year-old First Nations woman and speaks to the history of First Nations people in the Temiskaming region of Northern Ontario. The performance was devastating, funny and held a powerful message about honouring the First Nations history and knowledge. The score, the singing and the acting spoke volumes to the history and culture of First Nations people. This is the second production of *Giiwedín*, as a contemporary opera, the first being on stage in Toronto three years ago.

“The composers, when they saw our performance ... and our interpretation was vastly different - in some ways - from the original production in Toronto,” stated the director, Anne-Marie Donovan. “It’s a way of growing the piece that we brought out different things and they brought out things and we brought out other things because we never saw their production”.

One of the interpretations was the choice to use paintings of the land, spirit world and psychiatric ward for projections in order to achieve the evocative, deep imagery in *Giiwedín*. The opera, a recent release, introduced an intimidation factor for some of the opera students because they were unfamiliar with the piece. “I think what was intimidating for me was that I had nothing to go on in the start,” admitted Kendra Dyck, who played Mahigan.

Despite the challenges associated with performing a contemporary opera, all of the singers performed wonderfully on the opening night. *Giiwedín* is full of beautiful melodies and the performance drew on powerful emotions.

“Noodin-kwe comes in singing with her son [in the spirit world after her death] and there are just some beautiful melodies, especially at the end it kind of sounded like a creepy hymn,” said Dyck, reflecting on a favourite moment.

The students skillfully drew on their talents and aboriginal culture to bring the performance together. The opera class was incredibly involved; the students are able to participate in making sets, costumes and being a part of the promotions. “They built the canoe, which is actually a [usable] canoe,” stated Donovan.

In preparation for *Giiwedín*, the cast consulted extensively with the local aboriginal community, who taught them about their history and culture. One of the First Nations students at Laurier is a traditional dancer and she came and taught three singers how to dance.

“Before we even started rehearsals we had a meeting with Spy Dénomme-Welch and Catherine Magowan [the writers of *Giiwedín*] and the entire production team and they were all telling us ‘this is OK, we are behind you every step of the way, if you have any questions always ask’,” said Dyck. *Giiwedín* was part

of the opening weekend for Aboriginal Awareness Week. They were honoured that 50 tickets were purchased by attendants of an aboriginal conference for the Saturday show. Additional tickets were offered to Elders and those who helped out in the surrounding community.

Giiwedín was an incredible performance. It was so relevant to our modern history and current reality. The cast and crew of *Giiwedín* performed so well and truly honoured aboriginal history and culture. It was a performance worth seeing.

This article was first published in the Wilfrid Laurier University Campus Newsletter "The Cord".



Photo by Jody Waardenburg

Opera alla Pasta

Sunday Afternoon at the Opera

May 25, 2014

Tosca



This Covent Garden production stars three of today's finest singers. Angela Gheorghiu's sensitively portrayed Tosca, a character with which she closely identifies, is paired with Jonas Kaufmann's intense and compelling Cavaradossi, while Bryn Terfel is thrillingly malevolent as Scarpia. Antonio Pappano's masterfully paced conducting captures all the drama and beauty of Puccini's popular opera. Gramophone magazine acclaimed this recording as one of the three best opera DVDs of 2013.

Opera alla Pasta presentations are held at St. Anthony's Soccer Club at 2:00 p.m. The cost is a modest \$20. Call 613-830-9827 at least 3 days before the date of the DVD presentation in order to reserve a place. For additional information on Opera alla Pasta contact Murray Kitts at 613-830-9827.

The Met: Live in HD

Saturday, April 5, 2014 at 12:55 p.m.

Puccini's *LA BOHÈME*

Saturday, April 26, 2014 at 12:55 p.m.

Mozart's *COSÌ FAN TUTTE*

Saturday, May 10, 2014 at 12:55 p.m.

Rossini's *LA CENERENTOLA*

Saturday Afternoon at the Opera

Puccini's *La Bohème* April 5, 2014 1:00 p.m.

Giordano's *Andrea Chénier* April 12, 2014 1:00 p.m.

Strauss's *Arabella* April 19, 2014 12:00 p.m.

Mozart's *Così fan tutte* April 26, 2014 1:00 p.m.

Bellini's *I Puritani* May 3, 2014 1:00 p.m.

Rossini's *La Cenerentola* May 10, 2014 1:00 p.m.

CBC  radio *Two*

www.cbc.ca/sato

Opera Within Reach

Please check the Society's Website (www.ncos.ca) for information about opera productions in Ottawa, Montreal, Toronto and many other cities.