

Newsletter • Bulletin

Spring

2001

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P.O. Box 8347, Main Terminal, Ottawa, Ontario K1G 3H8 • C.P. 8347, Succursale principale, Ottawa (Ontario) K1G 3H8

Outstanding Competition Recital

by Murray Kitts

It was standing room only at The First Unitarian Congregation the evening of January 27, 2001 when the fifth biennial Brian Law Opera Scholarship Competition Recital took place. Faithful to her experience in music and the theater NCOS President Bobbi Cain began the proceedings at 7:30 sharp, introducing the first contestant and asking the audience to withhold applause until the end of the three selected numbers. Isabelle Lacroix, soprano, accompanied by Jean Desmarais sang arias from Mozart's *Così fan tutti*, Menotti's *The Medium* and Gounod's *Faust*. Next came Luc Lalonde, baritone, accompanied by Kinza Tyrrell singing arias from Thomas' *Hamlet*, Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* and Menotti's *The Old Maid and the Thief*. The second soprano in the competition was

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NATIONAL CAPITAL OPERA SOCIETY

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Annual General Meeting

Sunday
June 10, 2001

(details to follow)

SHAWNE ELIZABETH In Recital

Prior to her appearance as Gilda in *Rigoletto* in Prague Shawne Elizabeth is presenting a program of lieder, art songs and arias, including ones from *Rigoletto*. She will be assisted by singers Christina Harvey-Finlay, Fraser Rubens, Garth Hampson and violinist Joan Harea, with Frédéric



Lacroix accompanying on the piano. The recital will be held at **Christ Church Cathedral** on **Sunday, June 3 at 2 p.m.** Tickets at \$20, \$10 and \$5 at CD Warehouse (either store) or call 731-3991 or 236-2149. Proceeds to Shawne Elizabeth's Czech Republic Tour.

SUMMER OPERA

Théâtre lyrique de Hull

LA VEUVE

by Calixa Lavallée

June 21 & 22

Maison de la Culture
855, boulevard de la Gappe
Gatineau, Quebec
Information: 669-9769

Glimmerglass Opera

Cooperstown, New York

AGRIPPINA by Handel

July 21, 23, 29 Aug 7, 10, 13 & 16

LE NOZZE DI FIGARO by Mozart

July 6, 18, 14 Aug 3, 28

L'ETOILE by Chabrier

July 5, 7, 15, 27 Aug 2, 4, 18, 21 & 24

THE RAPE OF LUCRETIA by Britten

July 28, 30 Aug 5, 9, 11, 14, 17, 20 & 23

Information: 1-607-547-2255

Chautauqua Opera

Chautauqua, New York

LA TRAVIATA July 6 & 9

HANSEL & GRETEL

July 20 & 23

FALSTAFF August 3 & 6

THE MIKADO Aug 17 & 20

Information: 1-800-249-1441

AN OPERA-GOER'S DIARY

by Donald Metcalfe

The continuation of the 2000-20001 opera season is still presenting unusual fare, as if the new millenium is subconsciously imposing this dictate on directors.

My first venture into unknown territory was with the Canadian Opera Company in Toronto on January 31 who presented contemporary German composer Hans Werner Henze's *Venus and Adonis*. In order to make the evening into an acceptable length of, say, 90 minutes (given the price of opera tickets these days) a prologue consisting of excerpts from another *Venus and Adonis* by 17th century English composer John Blow was also included, apparently with the approval of Henze.

This was a singing and dancing affair, with the Dancemakers company in the latter role. As for the singers, in the Blow, Krisztina Szabo and Andrew Tees sang the two principal parts, and in the Henze, Susan Marie Pierson was Venus, Alan Woodrow, Adonis and Timothy Noble, Mars. Each work included six madragalists.

This rather strange evening of stylistically disparate works still managed to be successful partly because of the high quality of the singing and partly because of the excellent Santa Fe Opera production and Richard Bradshaw's conducting. The following night I attended Puccini's *La fanciulla del West*, probably one of the composer's least performed works, no doubt because of its "spaghetti Western" connotation. Nonetheless, this was the ninth time I had seen this opera, including productions in New York, London, San Francisco, and Amsterdam. Three of these performances were with Placido Domingo which goes to show that some operas are enjoyed mainly for the quality of the singing and not the credibility of the plot. Such was the case in this performance. Dick Johnson was sung by Michael Sylvester; Bulgarian soprano Elena Filipova, was Minnie; and John Fanning, fresh from his triumph in *Tales of Hoffmann* replacing Bryn Terfel at the Met, was Sheriff Jack Rance. Even in the relatively minor role of Happy was the veteran Cornelius Ophhof.

One thing I missed in this performance was what I saw in an earlier (1983) COC production with Johanna Meir as Minnie. She made her appearance on stage riding a horse! After all, if you're going to do a Western you should have a horse. In that production Cornelius Ophhof was the sheriff and the small role of Joe was taken by a most promising newcomer named Ben Heppner.

In Montreal there have been two productions so far this year, Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* and the rarely performed Boito *Mefistofele*, a carry-over from last season when the technicians' problems forced a postponement.

There is a full review of *Lucia* in this newsletter,

so I'll say only that I thought Mary Dunleavy was fine in the title role. As for *Mefistofele*, the comment of a friend with me on opening night was that it was probably the worst written opera he had ever attended. Arthur Kaptainis, the *Gazette* music critic, summed it up more generously by saying that it was a combination of the good, the bad, and the ugly: good singing, bad music, and ugly sets. I must confess that I have heard this opera at least six times, but once again on the basis of just who was in the cast, most notably Norman Treigle and Samuel Ramey in the title role.

It's true that the music doesn't work that well and probably accounts for the fact that Boito never completed *Nerone*, his second opera. He is honoured today as librettist for Verdi's masterpieces *Otello* and *Falstaff*.

In Montreal, with the Montreal Symphony in the pit under the direction of Edoardo Müller and a very good choice of singers: Andrea Papi as Mefistofe, Antonio Nagore, Faust, and Diana Soviero as Margherita, there could be little complaint about the vocal presentation whatever fault might exist with the actual score. And yes, the sets were ugly.

Still to come in Montreal are Claude Vivier's *Kopernikus* later this month, Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* in early May, Verdi's *Aida* late May-early June, as well as concert versions with Charles Dutoit and the MSO of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* (May 22 & 23), and Strauss' *Electra* featuring British soprano Elizabeth Connell (May 29 & 30).

On March 31 I attended the last performance of the Vancouver Opera's *The Flying Dutchman*, by Wagner in a production borrowed from the New Orleans Opera. This is the fourteenth time I have seen this opera in twelve different productions and I must admit that I have grown to prefer those versions that perform the work without intermissions and last approximately two hours and twenty minutes.

In Vancouver three acts were presented allowing complete scene changes for each act. Nevertheless, the docking in Act I and departure in Act III of the Dutchman's ship and the classroom-like spinning scene in Act II were not all that effective.

The singing was more successful, with Tom Fox as a marvellous Dutchman, Stefan Szkarafowsky, a fine Daland and Erik sung by John MacMaster who will sing the title role in Opera Lyra's *Il Trovatore* and will portray Peter Grimes in the opera of that name in the Opéra de Montréal's opening production in September.

Mary Jane Johnson as Senta began somewhat tenuously, but she gradually grew into the role and I was able to relax by the end of Act II. Philip Webb was a vocally adept Steersman. Conductor John Keenan managed the forces of the Vancouver Opera Symphony appropriately.

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Anick Lamarche, accompanied by Evelyn Greenberg, whose selections were from Mozart's *Così fan tutti*, Smetana's *The Bartered Bride* and Massenet's *Hérodiade*. The final soprano, Shannon Mercer, accompanied by Frédéric Lacroix, sang arias from Massenet's *Manon*, Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Handel's *Giulio Cesare*. As you can see, all the great periods of opera – baroque, classical, romantic and modern – were represented in the selections of these young artists. Such variety of subject, mood and style only added to the audience's enjoyment.

Then it was up to the three distinguished jurors, Roxalana Roslak, Marcia Swanston and Mark Pedrotti, to decide on a winner and also to award bursaries – a daunting task. But there were further delights for the audience. While deliberations went on Mary Ann Swerdfeger, our 1995 Brian Law Opera Scholarship winner performed.

Since Mary Ann is a mezzo-soprano it gave the audience a chance to hear arias in that range of voice. But much more was presented. Since going to New York Mary Ann has had much opportunity to develop her acting skills. Her arias from Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Così fan tutti*, as well as the selection from Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* allowed her acting skills to present themselves. But it was the two other numbers, "The Topsy Waltz" from Offenbach's *La Périchole* and "What a Movie" from Bernstein's *Trouble in Tahiti*, that allowed Mary Ann to really demonstrate what an accomplished singer-actress she is. The audience was delighted. NCOS members can be proud that our 1995 scholarship went to such a worthy recipient.

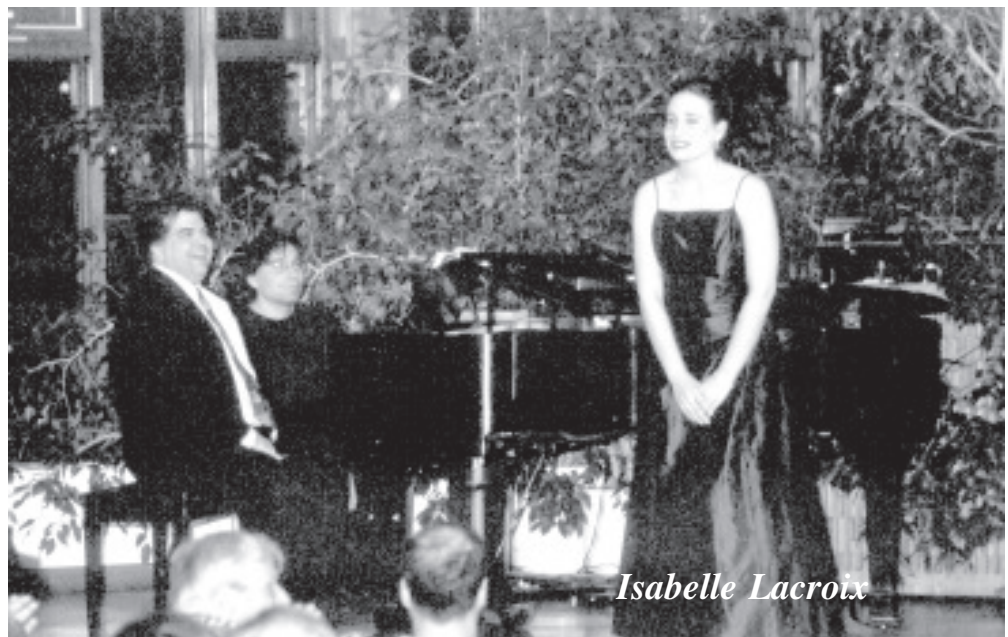
And then it was time for Mark Pedrotti to announce the winner. Shannon Mercer, with a lovely voice and the courage to tackle the awesomely difficult Handel aria, was the winner of the \$2,000 scholarship presented by Mary Ann Swerdfeger. Flowers were presented to Shannon by long-time NCOS Board member Norma Torontow. Through the generosity of the Vivian Asfar



Mary Ann Swerdfeger



Luc Lalonde



Isabelle Lacroix

*Bobbi Cain**Anick Lamarche**Shannon Mercer*

Memorial Fund for Opera Studies, a \$200 bursary for first runner-up Isabelle Lacroix and two \$150 bursaries for Luc Lalonde and Anik Lamarche were presented by Gordon Metcalfe, NCOS Treasurer.

At past competitions a dinner was held following the main proceedings. This year it was decided to change the format and have, instead of a dinner, a reception where contestants, judges and spectators could all meet, have a glass of wine or juice and eat some delicious finger food. Thanks particularly to the hard work of Norma and Cy Torontow and Peggy and Bob Pflug, the reception was an immediate success. We will repeat it next time.

To sum up, this was a great evening. The contestants sang beautifully, the former winner performed magnificently and everyone enjoyed the reception. Don't you wish you had been there? For those of you with cable TV, our presenting sponsor, Rogers Community TV, Channel 22, recorded the main proceedings and has been telecasting them at least twice already. To find out when another telecast is coming phone 728-2222.

Photography by Sheila Vaudrey

Besides the NCOS board members named above the audience was met at the door by Gerda Ruckerbauer, the brothers Metcalfe, Donald and Gordon, and Murray Kitts. Membership inquiries were handled by Jean Saldanha. The ushers were Renate Chartrand and Dan Leeman. Dan spent most of the day at the competition venue helping Bobbi Cain. Bobbi spent her day assisting the contestants with their rehearsals, briefing the judges, and generally supervising the whole affair. Bobbi's friends noted that she was unusually pale that evening but few of them knew that she had been ordered to go into the hospital for tests in the previous week. She refused outright and summoning up what strength she could muster she hosted our delightful evening with great courage. Many of you will be aware of her subsequent emergency surgery and the infection that followed it. But now Bobbi is on the mend – she has presided over a NCOS Board meeting, has attended our final Opera alla Pasta afternoon and is already hard at work planning ways to encourage individual singers and to promote opera productions in our community. Well done, Bobbi!

The Supporters



L'Opéra de Montréal's *LUCIA* by Murray Kitts

When I heard who was singing the title role in the Montreal production I was sure I was in for a great opera experience since Mary Dunleavy had been The Queen of the Night at the Met when the NCOS attended Gerald Finley's debut. It was a great performance. She sang very well in Montreal – but one singer can't carry the whole show.

It's true that she had excellent support from the orchestra – magnificent as usual. My only complaint about the chorus is that it is too small – a first class opera house should have a larger group of singers to handle choruses in operas like this one. The Alisa (Isabelle Ligot) was fine and tenor Marc Hervieux was most impressive in the small role of Arturo. The principal tenor was another matter. Gran Wilson has a voice that is technically accurate but lacks any real beauty – not the best for a leading *bel canto* role. The baritone, Brian Davis, was not only in poor voice in the performance I witnessed but seemed to have all sorts of problems with entries and intonation. Naturally, this caused problems for other singers. Bass James Patterson with his loud dull voice contributed little to the proceedings.

Of course, neither he nor anyone else in the cast was helped by the staging. The sets consisted of plane surfaces whose textures were varied by lighting. This was all right for some of the scenes but quite ineffective for the big scene in the castle. I've never before seen a performance of *Lucia* that lacked a stair-

case until I saw this one. Her wedding night bedroom seems to have been located in the basement.

The stage direction by Guy Montavon certainly did not add to the enjoyment of the opera. Alisa and Lucia were obliged to be stage hands draping some white material over some steps to suggest a fountain which looked more like a river. During the famous sextet the director obviously decided that the scene with six people singing and no one doing anything else was too static. So he had Normanno, a minor character, move around the stage from one side to the other. Since this character was the captain of the guard the question in my mind was – what is he going to do? The answer came at the end - nothing. There was seemingly no purpose in this move, distracting the audience from the important musical event that everyone had come to hear.

The bass sang one of his arias behind a scrim with a coloured picture on it. At another point he was reporting the crime but was only shown in silhouette. All of the wedding guests had brought along nets to throw over their heads when the murder was announced.

Lucia's mad scene was all right – but she had little to work with on the stage - no real staircase – and there was an excessive amount of lying down that detracted from her stellar vocal presentation. Hers was an excellent individual performance but as for the opera itself it was an unsatisfactory presentation. Perhaps much of the fault lies with the strike and its consequences.

SATURDAY AFTERNOON AT THE OPERA

LYRIC OPERA OF CHICAGO (WFMT)

April 28, 2001 **Rigoletto** (Verdi)



LYRIC OPERA OF CHICAGO (WFMT)

May 5, 2001 **The Queen of Spades** (Tchaikovsky)

CONCERTGEBOUW, AMSTERDAM (NOS)

May 12, 2001 **Osud** (Janáček)

GRAND THEATRE, GENEVA (SSR)

May 19, 2001 **Die Entführung aus dem Serail** (Mozart)

TEATRO MALIBRAN, VENICE (RAI)

May 26, 2001 **Anacréon** (Cherubini)

GRAND THEATRE - NATIONAL OPERA, WARSAW (PR)

June 2, 2001 **The Haunted Manor** (Moniuszko)

CONCERTGEBOUW, AMSTERDAM (NOS)

June 9, 2001 **Otello** (Rossini)

CONCERTGEBOUW, AMSTERDAM (NOS)

June 16, 2001 **The Makropulos Affair** (Janáček)

CONCERTGEBOUW, AMSTERDAM (NOS)

June 23, 2001 **Hercules** (Handel)



ROYAL DANISH THEATRE (DR)

June 30, 2001 **The Handmaid's Tale** (Ruders)

Opera Within Reach

OTTAWA National Arts Centre

José CARRERAS MAY 22

Information: 947-7000, ext 280

Opera Lyra Ottawa

SALOMÉ by Richard Strauss Oct 20, 22, 24 & 27

LA BOHÈME by Puccini April 13, 15, 17 & 20 (2002)

Information: 233-9200

Centrepointe Theatre Orpheus Society

THE WIZARD OF OZ June 1-9

MONTREAL L'Opéra de Montréal

KOPERNICUS by Vivier April 26, 28 & 30

PELLÉAS ET MÉLISANDE by Debussy
May 8, 10 & 12

AIDA by Verdi May 26, 28, 30 June 2, 6 & 9

NEXT SEASON:

**PETER GRIMES, THERESE RAQUIN, THE RAPE OF
LUCRETIA, L'ELISIR D'AMORE, NABUCCO & TOSCA**

All performances are in the Salle Wilfred Pelletier
in the Place des Arts

Information: 1-800-361-4595

TORONTO

Canadian Opera Company

IL TABARRO by Puccini &

CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA by Mascagni
Sept 20, 23, 26, 29 Oct 2 & 5

BLUEBEARD'S CASTLE by Bartok &
ERWARTBURG by Schoenberg
Sept 21, 25, 27, 30 Oct 3 & 6

SALOMÉ by R. Strauss Jan 18, 23, 27, 31 Feb 2 & 5
(2002)

IL VIAGGIO A REIMS by Rossini
Jan 22, 24, 26, 30 Feb 1 & 3

BORIS GODUNOV by Musorgsky
April 5, 9, 11, 14, 17 & 20

JULIUS CAESAR IN EGYPT by Handel
April 6, 10, 12, 16, 18 & 21

All performances are at the Hummingbird Centre.
Information: 1-800-250-4653

Opera Mississauga

LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR by Donizetti
May 4, 8, 10 & 12

RIGOLETTO by Verdi
July 14, 17, 19 & 21

All performances are in Hammerson Hall at
The Living Arts Centre in Mississauga

Information: 1-905-306-0060