



Winter 2015

NEWSLETTER : BULLETIN

Hiver 2015

Transformation!! Finley is Falstaff by Ute Davis

Those of us who know the slim, handsome, modest Gerald Finley, simply stopped and gaped when he appeared on the COC stage as the obese, overbearing, pompous Sir John! The transformation was so complete and dramatic that it took the opening several bars of music for me to realize that it really was Gerald Finley inside the masses of body padding and plastic face, neck and leg prostheses. Then he began to sing and the Falstaff character truly came to life.

Indeed Finley's Falstaff is, under the direction of Robert Carsen, larger than life, supremely funny and superb entertainment. The balance of comedy, some subtle and some obvious, with moments of pathos was finely handled (yes, that is an appropriate anagram of Finley). As his voice has darkened in recent years Finley has eased from the Mozart baritone roles he has sung in all the major houses in the world to the heavier Wagner and Verdi roles. Due credit to COC General Director Alexander Neef for bringing Finley back to Canada for his debut performance in this role, a visionary casting decision. Since the COC has recently been criticized for failing to stage "Canadian" opera (with no admission of the inherent box-office implications), it is only fair to note that Carsen (Canadian) was directing a highly talented all Canadian cast! Marie-Nicole Lemieux deserves very special mention. She has made the Mistress Quickly role her calling card world-wide and sings the part with consummate skill. However for me it is her excellence of come-

dic movement and timing that set her apart. Her interaction with Sir John added vastly to my enjoyment. I understand it even was her idea to give her coat, worn at the Garter Inn encounter with Gerald Finley, the same lining material as was that of her dress. This would only be funny to those of you who actually saw the COC production.

Colin Ainsworth as Bardolfo and Robert Gleadow as Pistola were appropriately disreputable in dress and behaviour, an excellent foil for Falstaff whose dapper appearance whether in tweeds or hunt-



ing pink demonstrated the value of a skilled tailor, no matter what your body shape. Lyne Fortin and Lauren Segal supplied the required charm and colour as well as fine singing. Simone Osborne and Frédéric Antoun made a convincing younger couple of lovers as Nanetta and Fenton. Russell Braun as Ford gave a particularly fine performance as a thoroughly outraged husband who was clearly prepared to treat Falstaff much

worse than dumping him in the River Thames. Michael Colvin was a fine, long-suffering Dr. Caius who did not have as much fun on stage as did the fine horse, most wonderfully behaved in both of our performances.

Last, but certainly not least, Music Director Johannes Debus conducted the COC orchestra in a delightfully vivacious reading of Verdi to support Carsen's light-hearted direction which was co-produced with ROH Covent Garden, Met Opera (including HD broadcast with Maestri in lead role), alla Scala, and the National Opera in Amsterdam. One advantage afforded to the opening night audience was an

continued on page 10

President's Message

Sometimes it becomes impossible to do what you plan to do. We had hoped to move the Brian Law Opera Competition to the spring season and to a more central location. Well, in spite of our best efforts too many difficulties arose. The next Competition will be held on Saturday, October 3rd at our regular venue, the Unitarian Congregation. This is early notice so that you can tell all the young people who would like to compete to start looking up the competition rules on our website ncos.ca. It is also fair notice to you, our supporters, to make certain that you mark this key date on your calendars so that you will be able to attend. But, in spite of continuing medical problems we are still able to get the job done. Our first Opera alla pasta of the season was a great success with the showing of the Franco Zeffirelli production of Verdi's *Aida*. Only a director of genius could have produced this great opera in the tiny opera house in Busseto, the town where Verdi spent much of his early years. We are constantly thrilled by the success of former contestants. To mention only a few – Joshua Hopkins singing Mozart's Count Almaviva in Dallas and Lisbon and Rossini's Figaro in Toronto; Yannick-Muriel Noah alternating performances of Tosca with Aida and then Aida alternating with Leonora in Beethoven's *Fidelio* in Bonn; and Philippe Sly in San Francisco earning much praise in *Così* and Handel's *Partenope*. We have valuable first hand reports of the San Francisco performances and from Toronto for our patron Gerald Finley's remarkable Falstaff. I hope you all read Gerald's page "The Final Take" in the fall issue of Opera Canada. I was particularly moved by his description of what singing the role of Hans Sachs meant to him and how he credited this to his colleagues – this shows his stature as a performer and as a fine human being.



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For information on the National Capital Opera Society or the Brian Law Opera Competition contact Murray Kitts at 613-830-9827.

Membership Renewal

It is that time once again to renew your annual membership. If you are not a member we would be happy to have you join us. If you receive your newsletter online (as most members do) the membership application form is attached or you can download a form from our website (ncos.ca) by clicking on Membership. If you receive a printed copy the membership form is enclosed. Please note that there is now a charge for a printed copy. The completed form and your payment should be sent to Mark Robinson, Treasurer NCOS, 20 Leonard Avenue, Ottawa, ON, K1S 4T7. If applicable, please remember to include your email address on the application form.

Events You Could Have Enjoyed

by Shelagh Williams

The Isabel: Queen's University's School of Music has long lacked and dreamed of a dedicated recital hall. Fortunately, a devoted and generous alumnus, Dr. Alfred Bader, provided the lead gift for the Isabel Bader Centre for the Performing Arts, named for his wife, Isabel. This stunning new building, on the Lake Ontario shore, was designed by the architectural firm Snohetta, which also did the new Oslo Opera House. It is a multidisciplinary facility, housing music, drama and fine arts programmes. Its jewel is the gorgeous 566 seat wood-lined concert hall, with marvellous acoustics. On September 20th the grand opening took place, and the evening concert was a delight. We returned two weeks later for the Gala Music Faculty Concert, and confirmed the hall's beauty and acoustics. A music recital programme is already in place for the coming year.

Opera Lyra Ottawa (OLO) Second Annual Evening of Arias: As a musical thank you to donors and patrons, OLO offered a delightful recital by Artists of its Opera Studio (OS). These included the four member cast of the upcoming *Magic Flute*: sopranos Ania Hejnar, a BLOC finalist, and Eliza Johnson, tenor Sean Clark, and baritone Cairan Ryan, plus mezzo Arminè Kassabian, well known to us as a BLOC winner and earlier OS member, who joined the OS for three weeks of its concerts. The tenor, Sean Clark, had both looks and stage presence to go with a remarkably fine voice. Accompanied by Judith Ginsburg, OLO's principal repetiteur, the combination of solos, duets and ensembles included several very interesting and uncommon selections. Ania and Arminè gave us a beautiful duet from *Lakme* plus a hilarious *Cat duet* by Rossini, and were joined by the two male singers for a very funny *Quator de l'omelette* by Bizet - all in all a most enjoyable evening.

National Arts Centre Orchestra (NACO) A Midsummer Night's Dream: For Shakespeare's 450th birthday, the NACO celebrated with Mendelssohn's Incidental Music to *A Midsummer*

Night's Dream, under the able baton of Music Director Designate Alexander Shelley, working all evening without a score! BLOC finalists soprano Maghan McPhee and mezzo Wallis Giunta both looked and sounded beautiful as they sang the two fairies, aided and abetted by pretty well every other good young female singer in town! This was a class presentation, with Stratford actor Colm Feore speaking the lines from the play, and his wife, director and choreographer Donna Feore, ensuring the whole was fascinating and surprising to watch, with appropriate lighting to complete the overall effect - a great evening!

Richard Margison: For a lovely afternoon of young singers doing their party pieces - well-prepared arias - a master class by a master singer cannot be beaten. Canadian tenor Richard Margison visited UOttawa School of Music in November and, by analysis and demonstration, and correction of pronunciation in multiple languages, put the finishing touches on the pieces offered by 7 performers. Amazingly, all but two were male, including well-known bass-baritone Joel Allison. It was both enlightening and entertaining, and well worth attending - and free!

Opera-Tunities Ottawa: Newly-founded Opera-Tunities Ottawa presented two performances of Mozart's *Magic Flute* in November. This was a class act, with a Mason narrating and explaining its Masonic significance, plus an English libretto was supplied. Music Director Jean Desmarais conducted his excellent cast of superior voices from the piano. In the lead roles were Dillon Parmer as Tamino, Morgan Strickland as Pamina, and coloratura soprano Misty Banyard hitting all the high notes as Queen of the Night. The lower voices were also pleasant surprises: 17 year old Reed MacDonald's baritone showed great promise as Papageno, and 71 year old bass John Forster as Sarastro boasted a voice as good as any outside of the major houses! This high quality and entertaining production bodes well for Opera-Tunities Ottawa's upcoming Ottawa premiere of Berlioz's *Damnation of Faust*, March 8, 2015.

BLOC Finalists Shine in *Alcina* by Shelagh Williams

For its first Handel opera, Opera Atelier (OA) chose *Alcina*, which just happens to have, unusually, four major female roles as against only two male roles! It seems that director Marshall Pynkoski had taught and been impressed by three excellent young singers from Ottawa and was able to cast all three together in this opera! The sorceress Alcina was the latest BLOC winner, soprano Meghan Lindsay; mezzo Wallis Giunta, an earlier BLOC finalist, was Bradamante; and soprano Mireille Asselin was Alcina's fairy sister Morgana! It made for a very Ottawa-proud weekend since the NCOS patron, baritone Gerald Finley, was simultaneously starring in *Falstaff* at the COC!

Alcina has a fairly complicated libretto but, fortunately, we had seen a production by Summer Opera Lyric Theatre in Toronto in 2013. Basically, the sorceress Alcina rules an island made up of her transformed discarded lovers and she has lured and entrapped the crusader Ruggiero. His betrothed, Bradamante, disguised as her brother Ricciardo, comes to rescue Ruggiero with the aid of her guardian Melisso and a magic ring. Alcina's fickle sister Morgana, her jealous lover Oronte, Alcina's general, and the OA Ballet make up the rest of the cast.

Visually the production was wonderful. To deal

with the magic, resident set designer Gerald Gauci collaborated with film director Ben Shirinian to project onto the beautiful drops integrated video images of OA dancers as Alcina's imprisoned men, mimicking earlier magic lantern technique! Thus the desert front drop revealed momentarily a reclining male nude forming some of the dunes, a rocky waterfall magnificently dissolved into another huge male nude, and four curled male figures made a fascinating play on the idea of a "man in the moon"! Debuting costume designer Michael Gianfrancesco supplied the expected gorgeous pastel Baroque-style gowns for the females, and dashing earth-toned period outfits with skin-tight pants for the males - and skin coloured leotards when necessary for the male dancers! Jeannette Lajeunesse Zingg beautifully choreographed the dance music for the OA Ballet to perform stylishly, and Bonnie Beecher's lighting made everything look magnificent.

Marshall Pynkoski ensured that the story line was clear, the action lively, and that his cast, all experienced OA performers, moved and gestured well and smoothly, in the Baroque style. Handel's score is marvellous, just one treat after another, and David Fallis ably conducted the superb Tafelmusik



BLOC Finalists Shine in *Alcina* (continued)

Baroque Orchestra, the excellent OA Chorus, and a great cast, of which the four women were outstanding. As would be expected, Meghan Lindsay looked and sounded beautiful as Alcina, her mesmerizing effect on men easily believable. When needed she transformed her voice into evil sorceress mode and also made us feel sympathetic at the end when she lost her powers. As Ruggiero, mezzo Allyson McHardy had the requisite voice and élan for a pants role. She mooned about appropriately while Ruggiero was be-



photo by Bruce Zinger

sotted with Alcina, then was very martial at the end, with a great and much appreciated and applauded heroic aria. Coloratura Mireille Asselin opened the opera, and sang marvellously while acting the ever-changeable Morgana, and providing comic relief in falling in love with and pursuing Bradamante/Ricciardo. Mezzo Wallis Giunta was believable as a man, until she let down her hair by untying the ribbon. She also sang splendidly despite having to deal with the exasperating, yet comical, situations as the cross-dressing Bradamante. Croatian tenor Kresimir Spicer has a lovely voice, and brought a light comic touch to his dealings as Oronte with Morgana, and a more dramatic one in his jealousy of Bradamante/Ricciardo. Canadian bass-baritone Olivier LaQuerre had a smaller role, but made good use of his deep voice and mobile face in Melisso's various misadventures! When everything in a production comes together so seamlessly, from music to staging to visuals to execution, such an extraordinary performance makes three hours just fly by! This Handel was well worth waiting for!

Nabucco in Montreal: A Premiere of Sorts

by Lesley Robinson

Opéra de Montréal's recent production of *Nabucco* was a first for me. Although familiar with the music since childhood, I had never before seen a staged production. Coincidentally, this version was a first in another way: it was presented as a sort of opera within an opera, staged as if it were the opera's actual premiere, which took place to great acclaim at La Scala in Milan on 9 March 1842. During the overture, a parade of opera goers make their way across the stage, to take their seats in boxes built into the side of the set, where they remain for the entire evening to watch Verdi's "new" offering. This invites the 2014 audience to imagine themselves alongside their 1842 counterparts and to watch and listen with fresh eyes and ears.

The actual premiere of *Nabucco* came at a time of intense political fervour in Italy and has forever been associated with the passionate desire for Italian nationhood. "Va, pensiero", the chorus of the Hebrew slaves from the third act, has long been considered Italy's unofficial national anthem, with its words of yearning for the homeland. This production was therefore presented with traditional sets and costumes, in keeping with how it might have been mounted in 1842.

The personal tragedies of Verdi's early life seem

to have marked him indelibly. He lost his young wife and their two children during the period when he was writing his first two operas and following the failure of *Un giorno di regno*, a comedy written inexplicably during this period, Verdi vowed never to compose another opera. Luckily for us, he was persuaded otherwise and his next composition brought forth the triumph of *Nabucco*. A number of Verdi's operas include explorations of the father-daughter relationship (for example *Aida*, *Rigoletto* and *Simon Boccanegra*). Watching *Nabucco*, I was aware of echoes of *King Lear*, Verdi's favourite Shakespearean tragedy which he never wrote as an opera. Just as in Shakespeare's play, one daughter takes advantage of the infirmity of the father to grab the crown for herself, while another suffers in silence. The themes of *Nabucco* seem to have had personal and artistic, as well as political interest for Verdi.

The international cast was headed most appropriately by Italian Baritone, Paolo Gavanelli in the title role. Conductor Francesco Maria Colombo is also Italian. In a clever reprise of "Va pensiero" following the final curtain, he turned to conduct the audience, while the Italian words flashed up on the surtitles to help us to participate in a spontaneous karaoke rendition. It almost made me wish I were Italian.

A Beloved *Butterfly*

by Shelagh Williams

This season the Canadian Opera Company (COC) is proudly trumpeting the fact that all of its operas are created wholly or in part (via co-productions) by the COC. This may be a moneysaving measure for their three resurrected but still stunning productions, but assures that the three new productions are probably of a higher standard than financially possible in a new in-house work and certainly of a rental, which may not be in synch with the director's views.

Madama Butterfly is a case in point: the beloved and familiar 1990 COC production by Brian Macdonald, designed by Susan Benson, was a welcome return, even though it was our fourth *Madama Butterfly* in a year! Incidentally, our *Butterfly* had sung the role in Seattle in 2012 with this same, obviously valued, production! In front of the beautiful painted backdrop, an abstract set of simple screens suggests the various rooms of the house and with gorgeous flowing hand-painted silk kimonos for colour, there are no superfluous or distracting elements or concepts to detract from the overall effect.

Director Macdonald and debuting German conductor Patrick Lange had the always excellent COC Orchestra and Chorus and a good set of mainly American principal singers to work with. Baritone Dwayne Croft sang and acted US Consul Sharpless with strength and conviction, a marvellous portrayal. Similarly, mezzo Elizabeth DeShong, an earlier COC *Cenerentola*, brought an entirely different vocal palette to her sympathetic portrayal of *Butterfly*'s servant and friend Suzuki. Italian tenor Stefano Secco, making his COC debut, certainly had the voice for the role, and has sung it in Europe and

the States. However, he seemed inordinately unfeeling and unsympathetic, and was looking quite irked by the end of Act I at the length of time it was taking to get *Butterfly* to bed! He really earned his boos! At the same time, he was also not really tall enough for his *Butterfly* and they had to resort to the same tactics as with Louis Lima at Verona years ago, stationing him a step higher than *Butterfly* and often standing on tiptoe. I unfortunately found it quite hilarious and it all rather spoiled the desired romantic effect!

Soprano Patricia Racette, making her COC debut, is famous for her *Butterfly*, which she has sung all over. We have heard her live at Santa Fe Opera and she is a powerful singer and actress. However, in the first act her make up and hairdo made her look awful - old enough to be Pinkerton's mother - and the couple had no chemistry. Fortunately Act II was a revelation, for Racette took off when released from trying to act like a teenager and interact with Pinkerton. She looked good in the simple hairdo, and her excellent acting skills and beautiful singing came to the fore. Her *Un bel di* was lovely and she did not allow the Letter Scene with Sharpless to become annoying, as can be the case. Macdonald gave us a simple ending with no fancy sallies by the child or Pinkerton to interfere - *Butterfly* just lay dead, her head toward us, for the last several

bars of music - most effective and moving! It is fortunately the beautiful setting and costumes and the powerful second act of this production which one will savour and remember.



Suzuki

Butterfly

Sharpless

photo by Michael Cooper

The Importance of Setting - Musings on a Weekend at the San Francisco Opera

by Lesley Robinson

What drew us to San Francisco was the opportunity to see NCOS's Brian Law winner, Philippe Sly performing with a stellar ensemble cast in Handel's *Partenope*, but while we were there, why not take advantage of what was on offer for Sunday's matinee, Verdi's magnificent *Un Ballo in Maschera*? The two productions proved to exemplify a thought-provoking contrast and engendered an intriguing question: how does the setting of an opera affect the experience for the audience? We are familiar with changes of setting, in both place and time for Shakespeare's plays, even the histories. When the drama is pulled out of its familiar setting, we can focus on the raw material of plot and character, which is the essence of the drama.

The *Partenope* of Handel's creation was the queen of ancient Naples, but that doesn't matter at all in this production, set in a 1920s Parisian salon, peopled by plaintive suitors. Thanks to the exigency of Neopolitan and Roman censors, Verdi was forced to move the setting of his *Ballo* from the 1792 assassination of King Gustav III of Sweden through a series of changes to the somewhat fanciful, if not a little baffling, backdrop of colonial Boston. For this production a traditional 18th century setting is used. Again, it doesn't really matter. In the case of either opera, what counts is the exploration of human emotion. Both operas delve into the themes of love, sometimes unrequited, rivalry, jealousy and rage, although the different treatments lead to contrasting resolutions. With its happy ending, *Partenope* is a comedy, whereas *Ballo* ends in tragedy tinged with pathos and irony, yet the emotional experience of both can be heightened by the artistic choices of the production team.

The structure of Handel's operas is a series of da capo arias, each expressing a single emotion: love, rage, jealousy, ecstasy, despair and so on, interspersed with recitative to move the action along. This can present a challenge in staging, particularly for modern tastes: what on earth is happening on stage while a character is ecstaticising or lamenting for minutes on end? An innovative setting can provide opportunities for visual and dramatic interest. *Partenope*'s salon and her suitors are presented as an assemblage of wacky

surrealists, with the character of Emilio (tenor Alek Shrader) bearing a striking resemblance to the photographer Man Ray. This adds a visual dynamic, as the action is interspersed with the creation of oversized works of art. The "battle" is presented as a series of dance moves (including some very silly cavorting from Mr. Sly.) The would-be lovers attempt their seductions in the dance and there is a distinct atmosphere of chaos. The twentieth century setting allows for the inclusion of some rollicking toilet humour and even (and this must be a first) tap dancing in pyjamas to Handel's music, complete with top hat and cane, thrown on from the wings. It was not quite Fred Astaire, but countertenor Anthony Roth Costanza tapped bravely and to great comic effect!

It could be argued that a traditional setting too can highlight the drama, without the distractions of what may sometimes be considered baffling or nonsensical treatments. In the case of this production of *Ballo*, it was not only the setting, but the staging that were traditional and static, with the singers coming to centre stage to face the conductor and audience. This style of staging highlights the singing rather than the acting. It is challenging to convey the emotional communication when the protagonists may have their backs to one other and the onus is on the singer to convey the mood vocally. Despite the fact that the final scene of *Ballo* is the ball, there was probably more dancing in *Partenope*!

Overall, this production seemed tired, particularly in the first scene of Act III where a room in Renato's house was depicted by worn, flat backdrops. It was unfortunate that at a most serious and dramatic moment, the closing of the door rocked the scenery and raised a titter in the auditorium. Traditional settings and treatments can nevertheless be sparkling, although unfortunately this particular production seemed to me to be a little tarnished.

Creative and unexpected variations in setting can strikingly highlight the universality of themes. This was a weekend of compelling, contrasting and thought-provoking comedy and drama, which is exactly what an opera experience should be.

A Charming *Magic Flute*

by Lesley Robinson

It was a tremendous privilege to attend Opera Lyra's production of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, adapted especially for young audiences. The delightful reworking of the story, in an interstellar setting, made every bit as much sense as the original! The young cast gave a spirited performance, which engaged the audience of elementary school children. Some of the students were invited to participate in the drama, ably performing the

roles of Sarastro and his Alien Council.

I was delighted to have the opportunity to chat with young audience members before the performance. The first and second graders I spoke to were excited to be there and were well prepared. They had learnt about the story and the music and their only concern was that it might be in German! A good time was had by all.



The cast graciously answer questions from the audience: from left to right, Cairan Ryan as Papageno, Eliza Johnson as Pamina, Judith Ginsburg, pianist, Sean Clark as Tamino and Ania Hejnar as the Queen of the Night

DVD CORNER

by Murray Kitts



Becoming an opera lover can lead one down many interesting paths. Tired of operas in which queens of England are beheaded? How about an opera in which a Doge of Venice is killed, not by poison, but by beheading on the stairs of the Palace? Such is Donizetti's 50th opera called *Marino Faliero*, with a libretto partly based on Lord Byron's verse-play of the same name. It should have been one of his greatest since opera #48 was *Maria Stuarda* and opera #51 was *Lucia di Lammermoor*. The first cast included the greatest group of Italian vocal artists of the time. And it was a success. But it has fallen into disuse and is only revived occasionally as in this Naxos DVD from the Bergamo Musica Festival Gaetano Donizetti available from the OPL. The tall bass, Giorgio Surian, presents a fine Doge and the rest of the principals, Rachele Stanisci, the Dogressa, and

Ivan Magri, as his nephew are equally good. The local chorus is excellent as is the orchestra under Marco Spada. It's great to see a production of an unfamiliar opera done so well in the proper historical perspective. The Doge was executed for leading an unsuccessful revolt of the working class against the nobles although the story has a love affair between the wife and the nephew as a subplot. The nephew gets killed in a duel and the Doge, on discovering his wife's infidelity forgives her as he leaves to meet the executioner. The music might not be all inspired but Donizetti never fails his listeners completely. In Venice you can see the portrait of the Doge painted over with a shroud with an inscription describing his fate. Or in London visit the Wallace Collection to see the painting by Delacroix of the execution.

Così Fan Tutte Meets The Bachelor: Up To Date And Televised

by Ute Davis

The “RAPPORT” staged their modern version of *Così fan Tutte* at St John’s Church, Elgin Street, on Saturday, 1 November. This is a recently formed group of bright young singers and musicians currently performing and teaching in Ottawa.

The rationale for their refreshingly new and very apt version of da Ponte’s plot was stimulated by viewing the current TV show “The Bachelor” and finding that the competitors behaved just like Fiordiligi and Dorabella. Here it must be noted that one of the ladies in a real TV version, competing for “rose”, hand, ring and heart of the bachelor (Juan Pablo) was none other than Stittsville opera singer Sharleen Joynt, now singing out of Heidelberg Opera, a young coloratura I remember well for her delightful voice and the fact that she went over the allotted time at the Brian Law Opera Competition in each of her two appearances as a finalist.

Thus the audience was thrust into the present day at the outset by the aggressive young TV director (Hayley Swanton) appearing, complete with head-set and mike, and ordering the

M.C. to get the show started and then lining up the eight bachelorette contestants for Ferrando (Fraser Rubens) and Guglielmo (Jean-Sebastien Kennedy) to choose their fiancées. Each girl was duly wooed and two winners, Fiordiligi and Dorabella, selected and presented with rose and engagement ring. The audience was able to follow as the dialogue was in English while the arias were sung in Italian.

All of this was viewed with amusement by Don Alfonso (Mark Wilkinson) who managed more Anglophone wry humour than Italian cynicism, which well suited the production. He then set the well-known plot in motion with suave skill, betting the two men against the fidelity of their betrothed. Don Alfonso explains to the two sisters that the men had “deserted” them because they were placed behind bars for having revealed to the Tonight Show pre-maturely which one of the girls had received the coveted “rose” the night before. He then produces two “new men” who, to the delight of the audience, are disguised in wig, facial hair and respective Habs and Sens hockey shirts. The plot then proceeds in conventional fashion, the undoing of the ladies suitably aided by Despina (Hayley Swanton)

photo by author



Hafner

Rubens

Kennedy

Boucher

Swanton

Wilkinson

Gilbertson

continued on page 10

Transformation!! Finley is Falstaff (continued)

invitation to join the cast at a reception after the performance. Having left the stage to a several minute long standing ovation, Gerald



All the big names of Canadian opera were present but I was able to take a couple of photos of Gerald with Wayne Gooding of *Opera Canada* as well as one with two former colleagues from Brian Law's St. Matthew's Church choir, Kevin Reeves

then disposed of the multiple "fat pads" worn as the larger than life Sir John character and joined us as the trim and very modest person we admire so much.

and Alexander (Sandy) Waddell. I had a pleasant chat with Ben Heppner at the larger than life buffet. Thank you, Gerald; an evening to remember!

Così Fan Tutte Meets The Bachelor: Up To Date And Televised (continued)

whose slim and effervescent stage presence was particularly impressive and who gave full vocal value in her arias. Rubens and Kennedy both sang well, blending very effectively and showing excellent stage presence and acting ability. The production again delighted the audience with Rubens singing a dead pan "heartbroken" *Un' aura amorosa* while Alfonso and Guglielmo blew soap bubbles behind him! Cara Gilbertson as Fiordiligi and Claire Hafner as Dorabella blended their voices particularly well. While having some initial difficulty with the generosity of girls wishing their fiancés "a gentle breeze" on their way to a rival television network, I became totally won over by the charming sound of their *Soave il vento*. Gilbertson was also outstanding in her *Come scolio*, especially firm and thoroughly convincing,

her voice sounding clean and positively angelic. The piano accompaniment provided by Nadia Boucher was always supportive and well paced, beautifully and tastefully provided throughout. It is a pity that there was not more work for the chorus. The eleven voices were well drilled by Jamie Loback whose expertise I have come to enjoy in performances of the Opera Lyra children's chorus. After attending this production I would recommend that you keep an eye out for future presentations by "Rapport" for their light-hearted and refreshingly novel approach to opera. I was told by several of the singers that they feel this might be a way to bring younger people to opera.

Always on the look-out in Ottawa for potential applicants for the Brian Law Opera Competitions, I am pleased to report that I suggested to soprano Hayley Swanton and baritone Mark Wilkinson that they apply.

Arias En Garde: Pellegrini Opera Presents *Singing Swords* by Ute Davis

In order to create goodwill with local funding agencies, Pellegrini Opera was obliged to put on a fundraiser in addition to its regular production. September is not an ideal time of year, since people are closing cottages and families are trying to get back to an organized school and work schedule.

The performance was an artistic success directed by Vincent Thomas, a certified Fight Director, who showed imaginative ideas; due credit to Thomas. Unfortunately it was not a box office success for two reasons. The title, *Singing Swords*, somehow did not “ring a bell” with opera lovers; also, not enough emails went out to advertise the event or to explain the poster since regular committee members were on holiday. Maria Pellegrini rehearsed all singers without the benefit of her pianist, who was traveling in Asia. The very entertaining staged and costumed production consisted of opera scenes which all involved sword fights, mostly at the end of the scene.

The evening started with the beautiful Fantasy on Bizet’s *Carmen*, played by Sophia Hsiao-Fei Pan, violin, and piano accompaniment by D.Kai Ma. Unfortunately the piece was more than overly long.

This was followed by scenes from six better known operas.

Don Giovanni, Act one: The vocal quality was of mostly ordinary, mediocre quality in this opening operatic piece; may I suggest, therefore, that this was not the best piece with which to start the show? Hats off though to the mandolin playing by Andrew Snow which was lovely indeed.

Il Trovatore, three different scenes: Stephanie Piercey Beames, as Leonora, was of sound vocal quality but appeared to be bemused to be on stage with “all these kids”. Joseph Song Chi, baritone, has a nice lower register and timbre but an unremarkable upper range.

Carmen, Act three: This was most likely the

best segment of the evening. Sarah Christina Steinert looked stunning as Carmen in a glorious red and black gown, supremely appropriate to the role. She met the vocal challenge with a highly seductive performance. Andrzej Stec has a really good lyric quality in his tenor voice and moves and acts well. It is most refreshing to meet a slim tenor of quality! Eugen Dragos Voicu, Escamillo, has an excellent voice and stage presence.

Die Zauberflöte, Act one: The three ladies, Susan Elizabeth Brown, Heidi Jost and Ksenia Kotchieva sang very well as individuals and blended beautifully. However, while musically very good, this segment suffered from inadequate direction and thus lacked the comedic impact it usually imparts. Jeffrey Boyd as Tamino, did not sound his best in “dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön”.

Roméo et Juliette, Act two: Sarah Christina Steinert, this time as Stéphano, was a delight to listen to and to watch. A beautiful performance! This was matched by tenor Andrzej Stec, who again demonstrated the innate musicality of his voice, a very effective and convincing Roméo. By the way, this young man has pretty good Italian, French, English, German, Russian and Romanian diction. He is Polish.

Faust, Act three: This segment was notable for the excellent performance of tenor Alain Paquette. I would have enjoyed hearing more of him. Alain as Faust was joined by Wayne Line as Mephistopheles and Peter Bass as Valentin.

A good choice for the finale was another visit with *Carmen*. Escamillo, Eugen Dragos Voicu, presented “Votre Toast” and was joined by the company of the *Singing Swords*. All in all this was an entertaining evening, whose novelty was appreciated very much by too small an audience.



The Met: Live in HD Review

by Murray Kitts

New York's Metropolitan Opera casts a large shadow over the opera world with its announcement of a 22 million dollar deficit this year. We thought that the Live from the Met simulcasts were having a bad effect on smaller opera companies but they don't seem to have helped the source very much. Up to the end of November there have been four presentations, all excellent operas. Verdi wrote to his librettist that *Macbeth* "...is one of the greatest creations of man." What would he have made of the young witches-in-training regurgitating horrible things into an illuminated cup? (By the way, a camera caught the Macbeth switching off the electric light in the cup.) Not even the outstanding performances by Anna Netrebko and Rene Pape would induce me to watch this production again as I saw the same one, several years ago. And I'm sure that many opera lovers would agree with me. The second presentation, *The Marriage of Figaro*, was a new production. No one can deny that the staging of this opera is a tricky business, especially the last Act. It seemed to me that the opera was being dominated by the stage machinery. With the exception of Amanda Majeski as the Countess and the ador-

directors of opera seem unaware that the comedy is in the music, not in frantic stage business

able Isabel Leonard as Cherubino, the cast of excellent singers all seemed too old for their roles even though they threw themselves with gusto into slapstick comedy. I recall one writer complaining that directors of opera seem to be unaware that the comedy is in the music, not in frantic stage business. Of course the orchestra under James Levine was at its very best. Third up was *Carmen* in a production by Richard Eyre which I disliked on my first viewing of it some years ago. The Spanish Civil War was one of the most brutal and devastating events of the 20th century. It has nothing to do with the story of *Carmen* which was twisted to fit in this wrong-headed concept. For example, the two chief smugglers are traditionally presented as an amusing relief, not as brutal masters of Carmen's two female companions and capable of burning an officer's face out of sheer malice. Listen to the music. This is comic relief in a serious story. The staging of the bullfight procession is cramped and inaccurate. Anita Rachvelishvili gives a torrid, very obvious, and well-sung portrait of the femme fatale and the other principals are ex-

cellent singers, although the Micaela is just too sweet for words, the Don José, too wooden in expression, and the Escamillo, too well-fed although better proportioned than the matador in the first presentation of this production at the Met who had to be the tallest matador in Spain. Finally we have another operatic masterpiece, *The Barber of Seville*, with absolutely outstanding singing by Laurence Brownlee as the Count and Isabel Leonard as Rosina. The rest of the cast was very good although Paata Burchuladze was only an adequate Basilio - great voice, but no comedian. The problem here was the same as with *The Marriage* - the comedy is in the music. Bartlett Sher's production give the impression that something has to be upstaging the singers all the time, either the old man sleeping, or door and sets being moved about. When the singers were left alone to do what they do best there were some truly glorious moments - opera at its best. What's coming? Don't miss *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg* even though it should have Gerald Finley as Hans Sachs since his triumph in the role at Glyndebourne in 2013, although Ben Heppner has praised the singing of Michael Volle who appears as the shoemaker poet. The

Otto Schenk staging of the second part of Act III is superb. A new production of *The Merry Widow* with Renee Fleming and Nathan Gunn looks like it may be a winner. Another repeat production - *The Tales of Hoffman* - again by Bartlett Sher (alert) introduces a whole new set of singers to the Met but Thomas Hampson as the Four Villains should be worth the price of admission. I'm very excited about the production of Tchaikovsky's beautiful opera *Iolanta* with Anna Netrebko in the title role with Piotr Beczala as the Prince. It even has a very political correct portrait of an Arab physician. This is a co-production with the Polish National Opera and is presented with *Bluebeard's Castle* by Bela Bartok, one of the giants of 20th century music. Valery Gergiev is conducting. At last, the Met has mounted the premiere of Rossini's *La Donna del Lago* with four brilliant singers, Joyce DiDonato, Daniela Barcellona, Juan Diego Florez, and John Osborn. This is a glorious, lovely opera which you should not miss. And finally, new productions of *Cav/Pag* with good casts. Let's hope Sir David McVicar doesn't bring in the Mafia to distract us from the singing. For a full, though outdated, discussion of the Met's finances and future plans google "The Met: what's really wrong?" See you at the opera.

Events you should enjoy

by David Williams

Les Concerts Ponticello will present soprano Marie-Claire Fafard-Blais and pianist Maxime Dubé-Malenfant in works by Debussy, Poulenc, Duparc, Bizet and Satie. 25 January, brunch at 10:00 a.m., concert at 11:00 a.m. Maison du Citoyen, salle Jean-Després, 25 rue Laurier, Gatineau. www.ponticello.ca

The **University of Ottawa Opera Company** will present Johann Strauss II's *Die Fledermaus*. 29, 30, 31 January, 7:00 p.m. and 1 February, 2:00 p.m. Alumni Auditorium, University Centre. www.uocal.uottawa.ca

St. Luke's Church will feature Misty Banyard (soprano) with Cristalle Watson (piano), Sunday, 15 February, 8:00 p.m. The recital will present *Some love songs in honour of Valentine's day*. www.stlukesottawa.ca

MIFO presents *Les Plaisirs du Clavecin - Amours profanes, Amours sacrées*. Sunday, 15 February, 3:00 p.m. Richcraft Theatre, Shenkman Arts Centre. This program, for St. Valentine's Day, will include "court arias and romantic duos", with Renée Lapointe, mezzo, and Mark Leslie Wilkinson, baritone. <http://mifo.ca/>

The **Ottawa Choral Society** will present Gilbert and Sullivan arias featuring the New Discoveries soloists. 21 February, 8:00 p.m. Dominion Chalmers United Church. www.ottawachoralsociety.com

Ottawa University Music at Tabaret: Christiane Riel, soprano, and Laura Loewen, pianist, will present *Along the Travelled Road: A musical journey celebrating inspiration, love, and one's native land*. Friday, 27 February, 12:15 p.m. Tabaret Hall. www.uocal.uottawa.ca

Opera-Tunities Ottawa will present Berlioz's *Damnation of Faust*, 8 March, Tabaret Hall, Ottawa University. Info: dparmer@dillonparmer.com

The **University of Ottawa Opera Company** will present Samuel Barber's *A Hand of Bridge*; and *Opera Confections*. Saturday, 14 March, 7:00 p.m. and Sunday 15 March, 2:00 p.m. Alumni Auditorium, University Centre. www.uocal.uottawa.ca

Opera Lyra Ottawa will present Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*. March 21, 23, 25, and 28, 2015, 8:00 p.m. National Arts Centre. www.operalyra.ca

Ottawa University Orchestra with the Calixa Lavallée Choral Ensemble performs Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette*. Friday, 27 March, 8:00 p.m. St. Brigid's Centre for the Arts. www.uocal.uottawa.ca

St. Luke's Church will present Handel's opera *Tolomeo*, Sunday, 29 March, 8:00 p.m. *A story of revenge, lost love, devotion and eventually reconciliation*. www.stlukesottawa.ca

Thirteen Strings will present Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* plus Vivaldi motets; the orchestra will be joined by Virginia Hatfield, soprano, and Vicki St. Pierre, mezzo-soprano. Friday 3 April, 8:00 p.m. Dominion Chalmers Church. <http://thirteenstrings.ca>

Pellegrini Opera will present Puccini's *La Bohème*, April, at 7:30 p.m. Dominion Chalmers United Church, Information: 613-236-3736, www.pellegriniopera.net

The **Ottawa Symphony Orchestra**, joined by the **Ottawa Choral Society**, will present Verdi's *Requiem* conducted by Jordan de Souza. Soloists are Michele Capalbo, Emilia Boteva, David Pomeroy, and Mark Steven Doss. April 27, 2015, 8:00 p.m. National Arts Centre. www.ottawasymphonyorchestra.com

Seventeen Voyces, with the Ottawa Baroque Consort, will present a semi-staged performance of Telemann's opera *Don Quixote* featuring Joel Allison as Don Quixote. Friday, May 29, 2015, 7:30 p.m. Southminster United Church. www.seventeenvoyces.ca

The Met: Live in HD 2014-15

Wagner, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*
Saturday, December 13, 2014

Lehár, *The Merry Widow*
Saturday, January 17, 2015

Offenbach, *Les contes d'Hoffmann*
Saturday, January 31, 2015

Tchaikovsky, *Iolanta* and Bartók,
Bluebeard's Castle
Saturday, February 14, 2015

Rossini, *La donna del lago*
Saturday, March 14, 2015

Leoncavallo, *Pagliacci* and Mascagni,
Cavalleria rusticana
Saturday, April 25, 2015

Complete details of all the productions, including encore dates, are available on the Met website.

Saturday Afternoon at the Opera

Rossini's *Il barbiere Di Siviglia*

December 6, 2014 12:00 pm

Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*

December 13, 2014 12:00 pm

Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*

December 20, 2014 12:00 pm

Verdi's *La Traviata*

December 27, 2014 1:00 pm

Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel*

January 3, 2015 1:00 pm

Verdi's *Aida*

January 10, 2015 1:00 pm

Lehár's *The Merry Widow*

January 17, 2015 1:00 pm

Puccini's *La bohème*

January 24, 2015 1:00 pm

Offenbach's *Les contes D'Hoffmann*

January 31, 2015 1:00 pm

Verdi's *Macbeth*

(Performance from Fall 2014)

February 7, 2015 1:00 pm

Tchaikovsky's *Iolanta*/

Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle*

February 14, 2015 12:30 pm

Mozart's *Don Giovanni*

February 21, 2015 12:30 pm

Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*

(Performance from October 2014)

February 28, 2015 1:00 pm

Bizet's *Carmen*

March 7, 2015 1:00 pm

Rossini's *La donna del lago*

March 14, 2015 1:00 pm

Massenet's *Manon*

March 21, 2014 12:30 pm

Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*

March 28, 2015 12:00 pm

Verdi's *Ernani*

April 4, 2015 1:00 pm

Verdi's *Don Carlo*

April 11, 2015 12:00 pm

Additional details of productions are available at www.metopera.org

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www.cbc.ca/sato

Opera alla Pasta

Sunday Afternoon at the Opera

DVD presentations of outstanding operas from the great opera houses of the world followed by a delicious meal.

February 8, 2015



L'Elisir d'Amore, Donizetti's comic masterpiece, has been in the regular repertoire since its premiere in 1832 in Milan. Without doubt this is one of the greatest comic operas ever composed. This acclaimed production features two of the preeminent opera stars of today, Anna Netrebko and Rolando Villazón. They have great chemistry together. In addition a superb supporting cast, including Leo Nucci and Ildebrando D'Arcangelo and the orchestra and chorus of the Vienna State Opera make this a marvellous presentation. Great fun and in the end true love prevails!

March 1, 2015



Andrea Chénier is a verismo opera by the composer Umberto Giordano based loosely on the life of the French poet, André Chénier (1762-1794), who was executed during the French Revolution. Like all verismo operas the drama is just as important as the music and this classic Vienna State Opera production has great acting as well as superb singing. Domingo is in top form.

The date for the final opera presentation (*Salome* with Teresa Stratas) in the Opera alla Pasta season will be announced in the next newsletter.

Opera alla Pasta presentations are held at St. Anthony's Soccer Club at 2:00 p.m. on Sunday afternoon. The cost is a modest \$25. Call 613-721-7121 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 Elizabeth Meller at 613-721-7121.

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