



**Remembering Murray Kitts**  
**1933-2026**



**From Marjie Clegg:**

Over the years, the National Capital Opera Society has played a big part in my life. I met Tom McCool through the NCOS in 2005, but I met his long-time friend Murray Kitts long before then.

Murray knew more about opera than anyone else I've ever known. He generously shared his knowledge and enthusiasm — making our frequent excursions to see opera performances in Ottawa, Victoria, Glimmerglass, etc even more enjoyable.

Tom and I loved spending time in Victoria when Murray and his good friend Les Sury were there at the same time. The last time was the year the pandemic hit and we all scrambled to get back to Ottawa as soon as we could.

I feel blessed to have had him as a friend.

**From Colleen Arseneau:**

I made Murray's acquaintance through the National Capital Opera Society many years ago when he would give presentations at the National Archives on Wellington Street. Pat Adamo, one of the founders of the organization, introduced us. Murray was so knowledgeable about opera and often knew the tenors and sopranos personally and these were famous opera singers performing in major opera houses around the world.

I got to know Murray better when the NCOS moved to the St. Anthony's Soccer Club in Little Italy; Murray was by then President of the organization. I attended many Sunday afternoons of Opera alla Pasta get-togethers where we watched opera performances on DVDs. Murray brought these operas to life, not only explaining the plot, but with real life comments about the singers. He just made it all so much more interesting.

Once a year, the NCOS would host an event called "High C and High T". It was such a lovely afternoon and my friends and I would show up wearing our fascinators, much to Murray's delight. Murray was a teacher, a scholar, an academic and above all a true gentleman. From the moment he began to speak, he had a captive audience. Never was there any need to raise his voice or do anything heroic; he just impressed his audience with his vast knowledge.

I last saw Murray at the October 2023 NCOS opera competition. By then his health was declining, but as I spoke with him I could still see that sparkle in his eyes and sense his excitement about being present at an opera function. He actually donated and awarded a prize to one of the winning contestants.

I feel privileged to have known Murray and I take solace knowing that he will be sharing his expertise with the opera choirs in Heaven.

May songs of the angels welcome you, Murray Kitts.

**From Laurence Ewashko:**

I am sad to learn of Murray's passing. He was a very passionate, enthusiastic champion of the opera scene here in Ottawa for many years. I have very fond memories of working with Murray at Barbara Clark's home as a member of the selection committee for the Brian Law Competition. Murray was always so well organized and engaging in his support of all the fine applicants who sent in recordings. His love and dedication to the operatic art form was ever present as overseer of the important vocal competition. The selection committee appreciated all that he did over the years to support young talented opera singers. May his memory be eternal.

**From Carole Stelmack:**

**"An Opera Aficionado Par Excellence!"**

Paired with his wonderful teaching skills, Murray shared his love of opera as both a very active Opera Lyra Guild Member and a National Opera Society Board Member for many years. He was always ready to present an educational evening on opera, to help with concerts featuring young singers, or to introduce DVD operas presented to help increase awareness and the beauty of opera in Ottawa. His knowledge of opera and his collection of opera DVDs was huge. You could never mention any opera that he didn't know about or have a DVD recording of it. And, he was always ready to share, both his knowledge and his DVDs.

Thank you, Murray for your contributions and your participation. You are missed.

Your friend, Carole Stelmack

**From Lesley Robinson:**

We were fortunate to have spent a lot of time with Murray in recent years, making plans for the National Capital Opera Society and the Competition and discussing opera and the arts. During our frequent dinners at a variety of area restaurants, we enjoyed much conversation about operatic experiences and Murray shared many of his memories of his extensive travels with us. Thanks to a shared passion for theatre and history we had many discussions about Shakespeare, the adaptation of his plays into operas and the historical accuracy (or the lack of it) in both the Shakespearean histories and in operas based on real historical figures.

Thanks to Murray for sharing his considerable knowledge and experience. His legacy is remarkable.

**From Mark Robinson:**

Murray was always willing to share his passion and knowledge of opera. He had a vast collection of CDs and DVDs which he used to present his illustrated talks, or to watch on our Sunday afternoons at Opera Alla Pasta. Murray was our President for many years, always looking for ways to attract and entertain new members. Murray provided much joy to our community and he will be missed.



**Celebrating “Canada’s Butterfly”**  
**Maria Pellegrini 1939-2025**



We were saddened to hear of the passing of Maria Pellegrini, a great figure in Ottawa’s opera community for many years. A native Italian, she always wanted to sing opera and achieved her dreams in spectacular fashion. A hugely talented soprano, she sang with the great Luciano Pavarotti at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden and performed in illustrious opera houses in Europe and North America. She was best known for her performances as Cio-Cio San in Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*.

In Ottawa she tirelessly taught young singers and founded the Pellegrini Opera Company which mounted productions to showcase and promote the careers of up-and-coming young singers in the Ottawa region. She warmly welcomed members of the opera community to her home and she will be greatly missed by Ottawa opera lovers.



## President's Message

I have some sad news and some happy news.

Murray Kitts, our past President, passed away the day after his 93rd birthday. Through his leadership, he provided much joy by organizing Opera Ala Pasta and from his video illustrated talks. Murray was always willing to share his knowledge and joy of opera. One of my special memories was when Murray was giving a talk entitled "A Tribute to Gerald Finley" and who should walk in the door—Gerald Finley himself!

One of our greatest supporters has been Carole Stelmack—not only for NCOS but also for classical music in Ottawa. We are grateful for all her contributions. The Board, unbeknownst to Carole, decided to honour Carole by awarding her lifetime membership to NCOS. Thank you, Carole for all your support for NCOS and for classical music in Ottawa.

Now on to the future of NCOS; over the years our society has provided much joy to our community. We have also helped singers early in their careers with financial assistance. However, lately our membership and attendance have declined. The questions before us are: how can we rejuvenate our society? What events would attract new members and new leaders? Please contact me with any ideas or suggestions.

Mark Robinson  
President, NCOS  
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## Editor's Note

We would love to add new voices to our newsletter. If you have ideas, experiences, reviews, memories or pictures to share, please send them to [Lesley@ncos.ca](mailto:Lesley@ncos.ca). The deadline for the Summer issue is the end of June. Thank you.



# Reviews

## **Tosca at the Astra Theatre in Gozo, Malta** **Marian Cumming**



In late October I attended an excellent production of *Tosca* at the Teatru Astra in Gozo, which has now become my yearly "live" opera fix. Although we were lucky to have enjoyed another semi-staged *Tosca* at the National Arts Centre in September. Having already reviewed operas at the Astra Theatre, I will not bore you with details about Gozo, Malta's smaller sister island, having two opera houses, the Astra and the Aurora. Both are in friendly competition and offer two productions each per year. I have always managed to miss the spring offerings, but have been fortunate enough to be able to be there in the Fall.

This was a traditional production directed by Enrico Strinchelli in collaboration with set designer Joseph Cauchi. The set was a two-level structure joined by a semi-circular staircase which spanned the stage with the backdrop changing in each act to depict Sant'Andrea della Valle, Palazzo Farnese and Castel Sant'Angelo. The upper level was particularly effective in the first act's *Te Deum* and Tosca's final jump off the ramparts. Costume designer Matteo Capobianco stuck to 18<sup>th</sup> century magnificent costumes in black and varying shades of grey with Tosca in a contrasting blood-red dress.

The title role was sung by Serbian soprano Marija Jelić. Marija performs mostly in Europe and Asia and made her North American debut in a solo recital at Carnegie Hall in 2021. Her lyric-dramatic voice was well suited to the role, and showed both passion and tenderness particularly in her rendition of "Vissi d'Arte".

Italian tenor Dario Di Vietri sang Tosca's beleaguered lover, Mario Cavaradossi. He has a powerful voice, with secure high notes and a commanding stage presence. He performs in major opera houses around the world. He made his debut at the Arena di Verona in 2014 as Calaf in *Turandot* and to quote the programme notes "This performance established him as one of the most promising tenors of his generation". As an aside, we were staying at the same hotel, down the road from the theatre, where I happened to run into him and his young daughter in the hallway. I congratulated him on his performance and he seemed very happy to be in what he called "questa bella isola—this beautiful island".

Baritone Badral Chuluunbaatar hails from Mongolia. Still in his mid-thirties he possesses a powerful yet warm voice as well as being a good actor. In 2019 he made his debuts at both La Scala and the Arena di Verona. His repertoire includes Amonasro in *Aida*, which he sang at the Marinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, Germont in *La Traviata*, Gerard in *Andrea Chenier* and *Rigoletto*, to name a few.

Secondary roles were performed by both Italian and local singers, some just branching out, others veterans who perform regularly on both islands.

The Malta Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by John Galea, together with the Teatru Astra Opera Chorus in collaboration with the Coro Lirico Siciliano provided excellent accompaniment and support. The performance, the first of two, was well received by a full house. It was also nice to see the audience dressed up for the occasion!



**Retribution and Redemption at Opéra de Montréal**  
**Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and *Jenůfa* by Janáček**  
**Lesley Robinson**

Opéra de Montréal invited us to their 2025-26 season with the following words on their website:

**“Opera lives in the present.**

It speaks to who we are – our choices, our struggles, and our triumphs. This season gives voice to opera as a modern art form, profoundly human and full of life.” This reminds us why we keep coming back for more—more Mozart, more Verdi, more Puccini—and this season’s production of *Don Giovanni* is an excellent example. Mozart is every bit as relevant today as he was in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. *Don Giovanni* is about the power relationships between men and women, between the privileged and the disadvantaged, between the master and the servant. It is about right and wrong, about justice and revenge, about Me Too and about final retribution, after getting away with it for so long.

John Brancy, as Don Giovanni, was a deliciously villainous and suave anti-hero, and a total contrast to Ruben Drole’s grubby, yet slightly more ethically sound Leporello.



John Brancy as the shameless reprobate Don Giovanni

It was enjoyable to see Ottawa’s Matthew Li in the role of the hapless Masetto. The Canadian trio of sopranos, Kirsten Leblanc, Andrea Núñez and Sophie Naubert in the roles of Donna Anna, Donna Elvira and Zerlina made a formidable team in seeking revenge on the remorseless Don Giovanni.

Conductor Kensho Watanabe guided the orchestra through the magnificent score with joyous aplomb.



*Don Giovanni* curtain call

**Jenůfa** by Leoš Janáček is a dark tale of with a redemptive ending. Jenůfa is abused by the men in her life, by her family by, her community and by society in general, yet she is able to transcend her horrible situation, to forgive and to embark with hope on a new life with the man who loves her. Atom Egoyan's thoughtful direction emphasized the relationships between the characters and the production created an astute blend of the traditional with the modern. This was highlighted in the costumes—with some jeans-clad townspeople contrasting with the traditional clothing of Jenůfa and her family. Separated by more than 100 years, these two operas are an interesting pairing for the season. Once again we see the power relationships, this time in a remote, conservative community. Jenůfa may be powerless, but her emotions are nevertheless powerful and consequential.

The cast brought the text and music to life. French soprano Marie-Adeline Henry embodied Jenůfa with perspicacity and great depth of feeling. Her agile voice expressed the lushness of Janáček's folk-inspired music. Swedish mezzo-soprano Katarina



Atom Egoyan takes a bow for his perceptive and captivating direction



The mostly Australian cast did a superb job, navigating the challenges of singing in Russian and presenting the action in an innovative way. Alongside the singers, the action on stage was acted out by what might be described as “stunt doubles”—dancers depicting the emotions of the younger selves of the two main characters. This was particularly effective in the letter scene. The young Tatyana emphasized her girlish innocence. It was her lack of maturity that caused her to send the letter declaring what was to be her unrequited love. Looking on as a mature woman she was able to see this clearly and it was as a mature woman that she was able to do the right thing and reject Onegin’s too little, too late declaration of love. The depiction of a younger Onegin was less convincing. After all, he was already older and more worldly at the beginning of the story, both older than Tatyana and older than the hotheaded Lensky. It was Onegin’s character flaws, not his youthfulness that were responsible for his callous actions. The depiction of Onegin’s younger self was particularly sympathetic to him in the duelscene and it seemed a little odd that only one of the characters in a duel should be represented by a “stunt double”. Another curious element was that items were left on stage when the scene changed, most notably a tree branch and Lensky’s dead body from the duel scene. This seemed to suggest that wherever we go, whatever we do in life, our past is always with us.

The elegant singing made for a top-notch experience. Particularly of note were Lauren Fagan’s delightfully nuanced Tatyana and Nicholas Jones’s luscious and poignant portrayal of Lensky. Ukrainian baritone Andrei Bondarenko began as a fairly understated Onegin, gradually intensifying as the character developed throughout the later scenes. Russian conductor Anna Skryleva debuted at Opera Australia with this performance, taking command of the beautiful score and magnificent musicians in their somewhat compact pit.

A visit to Sydney just wouldn’t seem complete without partaking of what’s on offer at the iconic Opera House.



Nicholas Jones as Lensky, Andrei Bondarenko as Onegin and Lauren Fagan as Tatyana



Sunrise over the Sydney Opera House



Mark and Lesley at the Opera House

## **And Now for Something Completely Different...**

### **Pelléas et Mélisande at Opera Atelier**

**Lesley Robinson**

*Debussy's impressionist masterpiece lifts us out of the parameters of life as we know it and projects us into a world in which dreams collide with reality. While preparing to direct this production of Pelléas, I keep in mind the statement by the great late film director David Lynch: 'I like to leave some room to dream. A lot of mysteries are sewn up at the end. That kills the dream.'* – **Marshall Pynkoski, Director**

Opera Atelier (OA) is primarily a baroque opera company with its core repertoire spanning from Monteverdi to Mozart, so it was quite a surprise to see Debussy's only opera included in this season's productions. *Pelléas et Mélisande* premiered at the dawn of the 20th century, but its eerie, dreamlike atmosphere lends itself particularly well to the stage of OA and the realization of this ethereal and evocative piece, was a long time in coming. For decades it had been a dream of the Co-Artistic Directors, Marshall Pynsoksi and Jeannette Lajeunesse Zingg to mount a production of *Pelléas et Mélisande*. This was not OA's first foray beyond the 18th century. 2012 saw the company's production of Weber's *Der Freischütz* (1821) and it has been since then that plans have been underway for the current production of *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Debussy's music, with its undercurrents of 17th century French music, was the inspiration for the choreography, which is perfectly in keeping with OA's style. One of the key tasks to accomplish was the rescoring of the piece by Associate Music Director and Assistant Conductor Dr. Christopher Bagan for 16 magnificent Tafelmusik musicians.

The French libretto of *Pelléas et Mélisande* was adapted from a play by Belgian playwright Maurice Maeterlinck. Its dreamlike, fairytale setting gives rise to a mysterious, quasi magical atmosphere and this was beautifully captured by Gerard Gauci's dark and otherworldly set.

It was a thrill to hear performances from two former Brian Law Opera Competition winners—the sumptuous bass-baritone Philippe Sly (2009) in the role of Arkel, the King of Allemonde and soprano Meghan Lindsay (2013) as a touching and delicate Mélisande. Bass-baritone Douglas Ray Williams is

becoming a regular at OA with his debonair presence and great hair in the role of the jealous and vengeful Golaud. The role of Pelléas was sung with an earnest clarity by French tenor Antonin Rondepierre.

This ethereal production allowed the audience to get totally lost in the dreamlike forest. Bravo to Marshall Pynkoski and the whole Opera Atelier team.



Philippe Sly

Douglas Ray Williams

Meghan Lindsay

Antonin Rondepierre

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