

Newsletter • Bulletin

Summer 2013

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Été 2013

Brian Law Opera Competition 2013

Saturday, 9th November, 7pm

First Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa

30 Cleary Avenue, Ottawa

It's time to mark your calendars for this year's Brian Law Opera Competition (BLOC), which is the National Capital Opera Society's principal event, held once every two years. The programme is not yet fixed. The jury will be selecting up to six finalists who will each perform three arias with piano accompaniment. The audience will be treated to a short recital (details to be announced) while the jury deliberates. At the end of the evening the winners will be announced and prizes awarded. There is a \$5000 first prize, \$3000 for the runner up and \$1000 (donated by board member Pat Adamo) for the third placed finalist. Tickets to the event cost \$25 (students \$10) and can be purchased at the door or reserved in advance by calling 613-830-9827.

The competition is made possible by generous contributions to the National Capital Opera Society's Brian Law Fund. As a registered charity, the NCOS is able to issue tax receipts for donations of \$20 or more. A hearty vote of thanks goes to all who have contributed to the success of the BLOC.

Past winners have gone on to achieve stellar success and we are proud to follow their illustrious accomplishments. Recent past winners include **Arminè Kassabian** (2011), **Philippe Sly** (2009), **Yannick-Muriel Noah** (2007), **Joyce El-Khoury** (2005) and **Joshua Hopkins** (2003).

The competition is open to young singers focusing on a career in opera who were born, are resident or have studied voice in the National Capital Region. This year's application deadline is 25th September.

Please encourage young singers you know (ages 20-32) to apply. Applicants are invited to submit a complete package containing the following:

- A completed and signed application form (available from the **NCOS** website)
- *Curriculum Vitae*, including opera experience, repertoire and names of teachers

- A statement of aspirations and goals
- A recording of the applicant's voice, including three operatic selections
- A list of the recorded selections
- A \$25 administration fee

For full details go to our website and click on **Brian Law Opera Competition** then **How to Apply**

President's Annual Report, May 26, 2013

2012 was not a competition year but that does not mean that nothing was happening in our organization. Fortunately the off-year gives us enough time to reflect on the past competition and prepare for the next one. That our chosen date for the 2013 competition was already taken more than one year in advance proves the necessity for long-range planning. Any date past the middle of November conflicts with Christmas music celebrations as we learned in 2011. So we were forced to book November 9th at the Unitarian Congregation for this year's competition. A visit to the venue by three board members enabled us to work out some of the logistics involving principally the jurors' accommodations and to establish more flexibility in our timing of the event.

But the real news and interest is with the growing number of singers who are of special interest to us. First of all, a few words about our patron, Gerald Finley. The great success of his recitals and song CD's landed him on the cover of Opera News. Moreover his appearance last summer at Glyndebourne as Hans Sachs in *Die Meistersinger*, a role that he sang for the first time, won enormous praise from audiences and critics and has been captured on an outstanding DVD. His patronage will always bring honour to the Brian Law Opera Competition. This year at Glyndebourne, Joshua Hopkins is the Count in *The Marriage of Figaro* for sixteen performances. We saw Joshua in *Maria Stuarda* from the Met and in person in *La Bohème*. He will be appearing again in the same opera in Toronto with lovely Joyce El-Khoury as Mimi. We may finally get to have Joyce as our recitalist on November 9th if her schedule permits. This June's Opera News has a photo of Joyce and another of Philippe Sly, who is now an Adler Fellow studying with Sherri Greenawald. Having completed the Merola Opera Program in San Francisco Philippe will appear in *Così fan tutte* with the San Francisco Opera. Because of her illness we missed Armine Kassabian in the Jeunesses Musicales tour of *Così* which played in her home town of Orleans. Having recovered, she is to sing with the alternate touring cast. Yannick-Muriel Noah has been performing in Germany, Ire-

land, Australia and the USA and will be performing at the Elora Festival this summer. Reviews praising Wallis Giunta frequently appear and Pascal Charbonneau, having completed an international tour in Charpentier's *David et Jonathas* appears in the role of David in the DVD first recording of this opera. We really do have a share in the development and success of these young aspirants to opera fame.

As president, I need a lot of help and assistance from the Board. Ute Davis, as Vice-President, fills in for me in my absence and takes special care to find both the right final jurors and a former winner as mini recitalist. Jean Saldana as Secretary has always been reliable and efficient. A new member, Mark Robinson, as Treasurer will impress you greatly when he presents his financial report. Mark's wife, Lesley, has taken over the publicity job and has already produced attractive posters and flyers that we send out to music faculties. The first batch advertising this year's competition were sent out in mid March and will be sent out again before the end of August. Vera-Lee Nelson is constantly improving her membership records. Renate Chartrand will again handle the program for the competition and Peggy Pflug the arrangements for the reception. Pat Adamo will continue her financial support and use her influence with the opera lovers of the Italian community on our behalf. Last but not least is Elizabeth Meller who has done so much to promote the Opera alla pasta Sunday afternoons in spite of many difficulties. Thanks to the generosity of Mark Robinson we are able to use his equipment and present any opera DVD, new or old, without fear of distortion or inability to have subtitles. We were able to celebrate the 200th anniversaries of Wagner and Verdi by showing two of their most famous operas with stellar international casts. Elizabeth spends a great deal of time preparing notes and choosing just the right operas. Let's all try to be more considerate and cooperative with her to reduce the amount of time she has to spend on the telephone.

Our good friends, the Williamses, certainly informed Elizabeth that they were off to London, England, for a couple of weeks. Dave asked me to thank all those whose splendid contributions make our newsletter so interesting and entertaining. I'm certain that

President's Report (continued)

Tom McCool during his convalescence and rehabilitation will do everything he can to assist in the production of the newsletter which will go ahead as scheduled. Tom is now out of the General Hospital and is being treated at the Perley Rideau Centre. I have visited him there twice. He is coming along well. He asked me to thank all those who had sent him messages and cards; obviously he was quite moved by our gift of a fruit basket and general concern. From there he will go to the Elizabeth Bruyere Centre in Lower Town.

Tom and Dave are great advocates for getting the newsletter by email as it saves postage. One can always print out a hard copy if that's what you prefer. By email, it's faster, more colourful, cheaper and more reliable. You will get it sent to you from Munich by our good friend Jim Burgess who sends his greetings and who is continuing to edit "How to Organize a Brian Law Competition". I'm sure that Norma Torontow will be pleased to have fewer newsletters to mail.

We have a fine opportunity again this year to help young singers on their way to wonderful careers. Let's do all we can to make this happen.



High Praise for Hopkins at Glyndebourne by Tom McCool

Former Brian Law winner, Josh Hopkins, loves performing at Glyndebourne and, judging from three recent reviews, his feelings are reciprocated.

The Financial Times, after praising the cast of *The Marriage of Figaro*, said that "Joshua Hopkins is likewise superb as the Count, contrasting a smooth, honeyed tone with a characterization that is lecherous and abusive." Laura Battle, Financial Times, June 10, 2013.

In the same vein the Guardian, in a most positive commentary, remarked that "In a superbly judged performance Joshua Hopkins makes him (Almaviva) sinister as well as sexy." Tim Ashley, Guardian, June 10, 2013.

The Express wrote - "Joshua Hopkins is delightfully smooth and lecherous as the count." William Hartson, Express, June 11, 2013.

NATIONAL CAPITAL OPERA SOCIETY

Board of Directors

President: Murray Kitts telephone 830-9827 email: kmitts1637@rogers.com

The following members were elected to the board at the annual general meeting: Pat Adamo, Renate Chartrand, Jim Burgess, Ute Davis, Elizabeth Meller, Peggy Pflug, Mark Robinson, Lesley Robinson and Jean Saldanha. Specific positions will be decided at the first meeting of the new board.

Newsletter Editors: David T. Williams and Tom McCool

Webmaster: Jim Burgess

A memorable week-end in Chicago by Marian Cumming

After a 20-year absence, my husband and I decided that Chicago warranted another visit. The main attraction was a production of *La Bohème* at Lyric Opera with Joseph Calleja and Anna Netrebko in late March.

Having secured seats on a direct flight to O'Hare which was scheduled to deposit us safely in Chicago 5 hours before curtain time, all we could do was pray that this strange winter (spring?) weather would not dump a few feet of snow or freezing rain which would make us late for the performance. We need not have worried, the weather was perfect, the plane left on time and even arrived 25 minutes ahead of schedule.

After a quick check-in and change, we headed up to the opera house, a mere block from our hotel, looking for a place to eat. The building itself houses three restaurants, open only to ticket holders. We decided on the Pedersen (or The Sarah and Peer Pedersen Room) which offered a prix-fixe five-course menu. They advertised two sittings, one at 5 p.m. which got one out in time for the pre-performance talk, the other at 6.15 p.m. which gave one enough time to get seated by 7.30 p.m. Now you would think that a 5-course meal would require an entire evening to consume. Not so, the first four courses were served simultaneously on small square plates balanced on a larger platter; small cup of soup, appetizer, salad, and main course. Dessert and coffee were served separately. The food was delicious and there were a number of choices.

The building (known as the Civic Opera House) is a hybrid Art Nouveau, Art Deco building completed in 1929. The entrance to the lobby is through large bronze doors and features Austrian crystal chandeliers, a marble floor and 40-foot columns topped with carved capitals covered in gold leaf. The auditorium is decorated in gold, olive and a dusty rose with a frond and lattice panel on either side of the walls close to the stage, gilt cornices and a highly decorative ceiling. The seats are upholstered in a velvet dusty rose, quite dainty and very comfortable. The Lyric Opera of Chicago was founded in 1954 and it is interesting to note that Maria Callas made her American debut in the title role of *Norma* during the company's first season.

The pre-performance talk was given by a critic from one of the local radio stations. He went over the history of that evening's opera, its early performances and highlighted passages to look out for while playing excerpts

from a 1970s recording featuring Pavarotti and Caballe.

The conductor for this performance of *La Bohème* was Emmanuel Villaume and the Director was Louisa Muller making her Lyric Opera directorial debut. The production, by Michael Yeargan, was imported from San Francisco. The garret was slightly elevated (not the two-tier Zeffirelli Met production) and only took up about 1/3 of centre stage. It made for an intimate (and appropriately meagre) setting. There was an instant camaraderie between Rodolfo (Joseph Calleja) and Marcello (Lucas Meachem) which later extended to the rest of the cast. Mimi (Anna Netrebko) was greeted by applause and her exchanges with Rodolfo were warm and touching, her *Donde lieta usci* and his *Che gelida manina* were superb. At the first strains of



Rodolfo

Mimi

photo by Dan Rest

O soave fanciulla the set of panels framing the garret gradually opened to reveal a moonlit sky and both walked, hand-in-hand, slowly into the moonlight sustaining breathtaking high notes. Calleja, who has been compared to past greats such as Gigli and Caruso, has excellent technique and can handle high notes effortlessly. He has superb control and his diminuendos, in my view, are the best in the business. Netrebko was making her long-anticipated debut with the Lyric Opera and she did not disappoint. Her voice seems to have developed a darker texture of late, which may prompt her to explore heavier roles in the future.

A memorable week-end in Chicago (continued)

The scene quickly changed to the Café Momus which was not immediately visible allowing the crowds and vendors to mill around freely. It was eventually unobtrusively wheeled in allowing the quartet plus Mimi to gather around the table. Both the adult and children's choruses were excellent as was the orchestra. The exchange (or avoidance) between Marcello and Musetta (Elizabeth Futral) was coy. I found Futral's voice a bit weak at first but she quickly warmed up and was up to par with the rest of the cast. Meachem, on the other hand, is a solid baritone with a beautiful tone and good technique. Both hail from North Carolina.



The snowy act three was a traditional scene with superb singing from both couples expressing very different emotions. Back to the garret for the final act which started off with great hilarity when, in addition to the duelling scene, we were entertained to a few steps of the Gangnam style dance. To quote Mark Thomas Ketterson in the latest edition of Opera News "The Bohemians were rounded out by Joseph Lim's appealing Schaunard and Andrea Silvestrilli's Colline, who delivered as poignant a rendering of the coat aria as could be imagined". I couldn't have said it better myself! The interplay between the principals in the more sombre part of the final act was touching. One could tell that this was a very homogenous group who enjoyed working together. All in all this production was one of the best *Bohèmes* I have ever heard. Not only was the

singing magnificent there was not one loose link in a chain of excellent actors.

The bonus for the evening was seeing Renee Fleming sitting across the aisle about four rows ahead of us. In addition to fulfilling her role as Creative Consultant and Vice President on the Board of Directors, she must have also been in rehearsal for her upcoming role as Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar named Desire*, (which is sold out).

The next night we returned for a performance of *Rigoletto*, but not before a repeat dinner at Pederson's. I ordered the same meal as the night before (why mess with success?), my husband was more adventurous. We attended the pre-performance talk, this time given by a retired music critic for the Chicago Tribune. The format was similar to that of the night before and just as interesting.

This was a more traditional production of *Rigoletto*, not the Las Vegas version of this season's Met, nor the Toronto version of a couple of years ago which took place in a men's smoking room with Rigoletto (when not part of the action) sitting in an arm-chair close to the footlights for the entire performance! The conductor was Evan Rogister and the Director was Stephen Barlow, both making their Lyric Opera debuts. The revolving stage allowed for quick scene changes but also encouraged some artistic freedom, as in the first act which opened with the Duke (Giuseppe Filianoti) in a very passionate scene in his bedroom with a young woman, both of whom very scantily dressed. After his *Questa of quella* ballad the stage mercifully revolved to a grand hall. The Duke by this time had thrown on a dressing gown although it did not hide very much! The costumes (designed by Jane Greenwood) were lavish and the stage direction kept things moving smoothly.

Rigoletto was sung by Zeljko Lucic, who also sang the jester in the Met HD production this season. It was interesting to see the difference in his interpretation between the two. In this traditional version he was more cynical, wore jester's clothes and a hump. In the Met version he seemed more philosophical and contained. He has a beautifully rich velvety voice. Gilda was sung by a young Russian soprano by the name of Albina Shagimuratova, also making her Lyric Opera debut. Her voice is slightly heavier than one associated

A memorable week-end in Chicago (continued)



with the usual Gildas but her technique is impeccable, her *Caro Nome* was particularly moving. The duet between father and daughter, *Tutte le feste al tempio*, as well as the closing duet were charged with emotion. We were back in the bedroom for the second act with the Duke and a woman (I could not tell whether it was the



same one as in Act 1, but probably not!) who was draped all over him while he sang *Parmi veder le lagrime*. At least he had the good sense to try and shrug her off during his short-lived pang of conscience. I was not particularly thrilled with the tenor. Filianoti has a pleasant enough voice, but his high notes were a bit strained and not well-rounded and the sound seemed rather barren. I

don't remember getting that impression when he sang the role of Tito in this season's Met HD production of *La Clemenza di Tito*.

The minor roles were well sung, with two singers from the previous night taking on different roles, namely Joseph Lim (*Bohème's* Schaunard) as Marullo and Andrea Silvestrelli (Colline) as Sparafucile, who handled the low note in *Sparafucil*, *Sparafucil* beautifully. Maddalena was sung by Nicole Piccolomini.

In addition to the two operas, we attended a Sunday matinee concert by the Chicago Symphony, with its 100+ musicians. The Symphony's permanent Music Director is Riccardo Muti; however this concert was conducted by Tugan Sokhiev. The first half of the program consisted of *In the Steppes of Central Asia* by Borodin and a flute concerto by Khachaturian. This concerto was originally written for violin and was adapted for flute by Jean-Pierre Rampal. The soloist was Mathieu Dufour, the principal flute of the CSO. His playing was superb, as was that of the orchestra. Not only did he receive a standing ovation from the audience, there was also a lot of foot stomping by his colleagues in the orchestra. The second half was Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 4 in F, Minor. This symphony is ideal for the CSO as it has many solo passages for brass and winds of which this orchestra boasts a large number. It was beautifully played and received another standing ovation.

And what would a visit to Chicago be without a few hours at the Art Institute. In addition to its fabulous permanent collection, among which are many Impressionist paintings, there was a special Picasso exhibit. This ranged from his early works through his various "periods" including his paintings on porcelain. There were long line-ups to get in throughout the day which included locals (many families) as well and out of town visitors.

Both opera performances were sold out, as was the Chicago Symphony concert. It is reported that Lyric Opera has been operating at 90% capacity for several seasons. It is therefore safe to say that the arts are alive and well in the windy city.

Events You Could Have Enjoyed by Shelagh Williams

Musical Talent: Born and/or Made?: Dr. Francoys Gagne, retired UQAM psychology professor, presented a very interesting talk at Ottawa U. School of Music concerning Giftedness, especially as it applies to music. Explaining the Differential Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT), he indicated that outstanding gifts can develop into outstanding talents, tho' through a complex interplay of many factors. It seems musicians are born AND made: both nature and nurture are important!

An Intimate Afternoon with Art Song - Donna Brown's Art Song Class: Once again we were regaled with a delightful programme presented by well prepared and nicely accoutred singers and pianists. The latter became the composers in their imagination and told us and demonstrated how they had illustrated the text, and then the singers as the poets encapsulated the meaning for each song. The majority of singers were sopranos, and among them Elise Heikkila gave us an interesting contrast with Goethe's *Kennst du das Land of Mignon*, set by Beethoven and then Schumann. Countertenor Zachary Windus sang Quilter's settings of Shakespeare songs and his last lament was truly lovely. The outstanding set of Vaughn Williams' *Songs of Travel* paired pianist Ivan Huor giving excellent musical explanations, and baritone Maciej Bujnowicz inhabiting the text beautifully.

Opera Lyra Ottawa (OLO) Guild: Joy of Music Luncheon and Concert: The 17th annual lunch this year was held as a tribute to Adele Kline, who was a long-time NCOS member and a founder of both the OLO Guild and the Luncheon. She would have enjoyed the good food, the company of fellow opera-lovers, and the great music. Four young Ottawa U. voice majors from the cast of their Opera Company's *Così fan tutte* treated us to several duets and ensembles, and baritone Sylvain Willman-Frenette also sang an aria, from that opera. Interspersed among these, tenor Kieren Foss gave us a lovely *Il mio tesoro* from *Don Giovanni* and mezzo Lydia Piehl touched us with her appealing *Dido's Lament* from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, while looking spec-

taclar in her long flowing gown. Finally, soprano Alexandria Givens sent us off happy with her joyful *Je veux vivre* from Gounod's *Romeo and Juliette*!

The Savoy Society of Ottawa (SSO): The SSO moved to an improved venue, the new Algonquin College Commons Theatre, for its enthusiastic updated production of Gilbert and Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore*. The expected high quality of set and costumes was matched by the small but precise orchestra accompanying the energetic chorus. The principals were excellent, with Richard Langlois outstanding as Ralph Rackstraw, combining a good tenor voice with superb diction, and Alberta Floyd the most attractive Little Buttercup I've ever seen! There were of course some new lyrics and the second act was not entirely traditional, but updated with an added Cancon, and a finale curtain call Gangnam Style!

Jeunesses Musicales: The spring tour of *Così fan tutte* was to highlight two of our BLOC winners: first place mezzo Armine Kassabian as Dorabella and third place soprano Jana Miller as Despina but, unfortunately, Armine was ill. However, it was a class production, including bilingual surtitles. The clever single set consisted of a "house" with sliding glass doors covered with various draperies, and Muskoka-style chairs on a front patio. The props and costumes were '60's style, with Canadian uniforms and minimal disguises with colourful turbans and vests for the two young men, and ladylike dresses with crinolined circular skirts for the two sisters. Pianist Jeremie Pelletier's nimble fingers brought the overture and the rest of the score to life, aided and abetted by six excellent singers. Baritone Philippe Bolduc and Jana Miller were our scheming bachelor Don Alfonso and ladies' maid Despina, keeping the plot bubbling along. Soprano Jennifer Taverner had a lovely voice for Fiordiligi, and her sister was sung by the fall tour Dorabella, mezzo Charlotte Barrage, ably replacing Armine. Their two young lovers were playfully played by two talented Montreal Opera Atelier Lyrique alumni, tenor Isaiah Bell as Ferrando and Ottawa-born baritone Philip Kalmanovitch as Guglielmo. The latter happily included the aria assuring us that they had no equals "from Vienna to Canada!" The very good turnout of audience was rewarded with a real treat of a production.

Something Old, Something New by Shelagh Williams

Despite the cold wet Toronto weather, unexpected for a May weekend, we enjoyed a twentieth century opera, Francis Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmelites* at the Canadian Opera Company (COC), plus at the Toronto Masque Theatre (TMT) a double bill of a seventeenth century masque, John Blow's *Venus and Adonis*, and a twentieth century world premiere fusing East and West traditions, Alice Ho's *The Lesson of Da Ji*. What a ride!

We had seen *Dialogues des Carmelites* before, but were happy to benefit from the Opera Exchange's insights the morning of the event. The opera is based on the true story of the 16 Carmelite nuns of Compiègne who were martyred heartbreakingly ten days before the end of the Reign of Terror and who, on the way to the scaffold, silenced the jeering mob by singing the *Veni Creator*, for renewing vows. The memoir of the sole nun to survive had a fascinating transformation through a novel, play and films, before Poulenc adapted the text of dialoguiste (film writer) Georges Bernanos' *Dialogue des Carmelites* and set it to music. Its melancholy and intense circumstances mirrored his own, since during its composition he suffered a nervous breakdown and was depressed by the death of his lover. A lecture on Poulenc's music illustrated that, unusually for the time, it was traditional and tonal, or melodic, with several motifs in the opera. The Opera Exchange concluded with the treat of COC Ensemble soprano Sasha Djihanian, Blanche's understudy, with Studio head Liz Upchurch on piano, performing two of Blanche's scenes, with beautiful French diction, and then two of Poulenc's songs written during the Nazi occupation. It is interesting that this opera is one of the few French works showing the negative aspects of the French Revolution, and premiered at La Scala in Italian, at the Paris opera in French, and at San Francisco Opera in English, all in 1957!

Our COC production was originally created for Nederlandse Opera in 1997 by Canadian director Robert Carsen, making this his third consecutive COC season, after *Orpheo ed Euridice* and *Iphigenie en Tauride*. In collaboration with Canadian set designer Michael Levine he brought an intense minimalist conception with no scenery beyond three walls which could be raised and lowered. However, more than 100 supernumeraries as the French Revolutionary mob moved en masse to threaten and hem in the principals while the harsh recreated lighting of French designer Jean Kalman focussed grimly on the



photo by michael cooper

scenes. Debuting German costume designer Falk Bauer fittingly dressed all monotonously and monochromatically in white, grey or black, contrasted only by the bright red and blue of Blanche's aristocratic family, the Marquis and Chevalier de la Force. COC Music Director Johannes Debus conducted the always excellent COC Orchestra and a superb cast,



photo by michael cooper

almost all Canadian singers! This is a piece to show off good female voices, but mention must be made of baritone Jean-Francois Lapointe as the Marquis and tenor Frederic Autoun as the Chevalier. The latter was especially strong in the scene with his sister Blanche when he tried to persuade her to leave the convent for her own safety. Canadian soprano Helene Guilmette, enjoying a European career, made her COC debut as a perky novice Sister Constance, friend to Blanche. Russian mezzo Irina Mishura sang Mother Marie of the Incarnation, ironically the instigator of the sisters' vow of martyrdom, but the sole survivor - and the writer of the original account! Veteran mezzo Judith Forst was superb as the First Prioress, giving us a shattering death scene to end Act I. Soprano Adrienne Pieczonka took over calmly and ably as Second Prioress, while the star of the show was soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian as Blanche de la Force, the timid young aristocrat who joins the convent as an escape from

Something Old, Something New (continued)

the world, but who undergoes spiritual growth and matures to face death at the end in the final wrenching guillotine scene. We have seen this staged in different, but effective, ways as the nuns, singing *Salve Regina*, for funerals, are silenced one by one. In a previous COC staging, each nun ascended the stairs singing, walked along the gantry, disappeared behind the curtain, and was silenced as the guillotine blade was heard to descend. The Ottawa U Opera Company had each nun in turn suddenly drop in silence with the swish of the blade, leaving a stage littered with corpses. Each resulted in the intake of breath and complete silence of the audience, too stunned for several minutes to applaud. I felt that here Carsen muted the effect of the deaths of the nuns by having each white gowned nun very slowly crumple, then roll onto her back and stretch out her arms, as if on a cross, all the while surrounded by the silent mob. However, the appearance of Blanche, also in white, spot lit and centre stage, with face and arms



photo by robert kusel

uplifted as if ascending, was a true coup de theatre to end the opera. This softened ending was not as completely devastating as the other two productions, but still was a powerful end to a marvellous performance!

And now for something completely different! The TMT, founded in 2003 by Artistic Director Larry Beckwith, does work based on the “courtly masque tradition of the late Renaissance”. TMT also commissions new works, as in the *Lessons of Love* double bill here reviewed, combining old and new and West and East. John Blow’s 1683 *Venus and Adonis* was given a traditional production with lovely projections by set designer Caroline Guilbaut and suitable costumes by Angela Thomas, for an attractive visual effect. Marie-Nathalie Lacoursiere both directed

and choreographed the piece, plus performed the lively dances, along with Marie-Laurence Primeau, who also doubled on the recorder! Music Director Larry Beckwith led the 9-piece Baroque orchestra from the violin, including a three-piece basso continuo of harpsichord, theorbo and viola da gamba. A chorus of shepherds and shepherdesses, and soprano Xin Wang as Cupid, ably supported the two title characters, very well sung by soprano



photo by tariq kieran

Charlotte Corwin and baritone Benjamin Covey, who sang in the recent Opera Lyra (OLO) *La Traviata*. It was so pleasant to have such a delightful performance sung clearly in English, with no need for surtitles!

The heart of the production was the newly commissioned opera, *The Lesson of Da Ji*, composed by Hong Kong-born Canadian Alice Ping Yee Ho to a libretto, by Marjorie Chan, based on a historical Chinese character, Late Shang Dynasty Queen Da Ji. She was the daughter of a rival king who somehow, by capture or barter, ended up as the concubine of a Shang Dynasty King. In the opera, she has an affair with a young nobleman, Bo Yi, son of a rival Duke, under the cover of taking music lessons on the guzheng (zither). The King becomes suspicious and jealous, and decides to combine conquest of the Duke’s valley with elimination of his young rival. He achieves this in a banquet where he entertains the Duke and his wife with a ghastly main dish containing their son before killing them as well! Da Ji is then presented with her lover’s heart, to teach her a lesson about betrayal and perhaps of the cruelty for which she later became notorious! Alice Ho

Something Old, Something New (continued)

explained that she wrote her music for the TMT's Baroque players, with an impressive array of extra gongs and noisemakers for the ecstatic percussionist, plus three Chinese specialists, playing the stringed Erhu plus Gaohu, the Pipa (lute) plus Zhongruan, and the Guzheng, which Da Ji was supposedly learning! Larry Beckwith managed

to keep all together nicely. Visually, the costumes by Angela Thomas were marvellous, and the projected images by Caroline Guilbout again very clever, while director Derek Boyes, of Souleppper Theatre, pulled it all together with consummate skill. Marjorie Chan admitted that she had used all of the singers available



from *Venus and Adonis*, and added Marion Newman as Da Ji, and William Lau, a very impressive Peking Opera Master, who sang and portrayed the Moon more gracefully than most females could. The cast was very good, with the singers of Adonis and Venus becoming the Duke and his wife and Xin Wang the maid Ming, who tips off the King to precipitate his vengeance. The young Bo Yi was sung lovingly by tenor Derek Kwan, while bass-baritone Alexander Dobson obviously enjoyed playing the wicked, bloodthirsty King at the dinner! On stage throughout, in the title role, was mezzo Marion Newman, who has been in the OLO Opera Studio, and sang Flora in the recent OLO *La Traviata*, and who here had the opportunity to show off her considerable acting and vocal skills. This premiere was a complete package and most enjoyable. The place was packed, with a large appreciative contingent of Chinese in the audience - a great success for the TMT!

Saturday Afternoon at the Opera



June 22, 2013 *Billy Budd* - Britten

July 13, 2013 *Lucia di Lammermoor* - Donizetti

June 29, 2013 *Nabucco* - Verdi from La Scala

July 20, 2013 *Boris Godunov* - Mussorgsky

In July and August SATO productions are from the 2012-2013 season of the Lyric Opera of Chicago

July 27, 2013 *Ariadne auf Naxos* - R. Strauss

Aug 3, 2013 *The Magic Flute* - Mozart

July 6, 2013 *The Tales of Hoffman* - Offenbach

Aug 10, 2013 *Aida* - Verdi

Aug 17, 2013 *Rinaldo* - Handel

For a complete listing of the opera broadcasts this summer check out the CBC website.

<http://music.cbc.ca/>

Events you may enjoy by David Williams

Highlands Opera Studio 2013 season (August 8-29) includes two concerts of Operatic Highlights, an Alumni Concert featuring past singers, a Fundraising Concert starring Richard Margison and friends, and the main productions of *Britteniana: A Celebration of Benjamin Britten*, and Verdi's opera *La Traviata* (August 23, 25, 27 & 29). Amber Braid will sing Violetta in three of the performances. www.highlandsoperastudio.com

Westben's 2013 Festival Season (June 29-August 4) has a variety of performances which will include a fully staged *Carmen* (July 5, 6 & 7) performed by the UBC Opera Ensemble with guest artist tenor Keith Klassen. www.westben.ca

Toronto's Summer Opera Lyric Theatre will present (July 26-August 4) Handel's *Alcina*, Bellini's *I Capuleti e I Montecchi* and Puccini's *La Bohème*. www.solt.ca

The Ottawa Chamber Music Festivals have concerts featuring well known singers.

Music and Beyond: Julie Nesrallah (July 5), Karina Gauvin & Daniel Taylor (July 6), Bach's Coffee Cantata (July 7), Anuna (July 8) and Isabel Bayrakdarian (July 9 & 10).

Chamberfest Ottawa: The Swingle Singers (July 25), Measha Brueggergosman (July 26), Michael Slattery (July 28), Wallis Giunta (July 30), Suzie LeBlanc (July 30 & Aug 1), Les Voix Baroques (July 31), Marie Josee Lord (Aug 2).

Unfinished Business - *The Magic Flute* at Opera Atelier

by Lesley Robinson

In a season during which Opera Atelier (Toronto) made an unprecedented foray into the nineteenth century with its charming production of Weber's *Der Freischütz*, the company returned to Mozart's fantastical masterpiece, *The Magic Flute*, for the fourth time in its short history. Since Opera Atelier's first fully staged productions began in 1985, audiences have been delighted by *The Magic Flute* in 1991, 2001, 2006 and now, once again in 2013. Opera Atelier specialises in baroque opera and when there is such a vast array of baroque repertoire to choose from, why go back to works that have already been produced by the company? OA's answer is to be found in the programme notes from Co-Artistic Directors, Marshall Pynkoski and Jeannette Lajeunesse Zingg. The company returns to great works repeatedly, not because the company is not "finished" with these masterpieces, but rather because the works themselves have not finished with their interpreters. OA asserts that remounting past productions has nothing to do with cost saving, although cost saving would in itself be an admirable endeavour in these troubled times.

Opera Atelier's productions are visually sumptuous and musically outstanding, so it is sad for OA's productions to have such a short life. This year's *The Magic Flute* had a run of just six performances at the Elgin Theatre. Thankfully there have been touring opportunities for Opera Atelier's productions, notably last year's mounting of Lully's *Armide* at the Glimmerglass Festival in Cooperstown, New York and at the Royal Opera House in Versailles. Such opportunities bring productions to a wider audience and allow for some of that unfinished business to be conducted, but revisiting these great works allows for a renewal of the artistic experience. Marshall Pynkoski shares the following quote from Italian writer, Roberto Calasso in his Director's Notes: "...every notion of progress is refuted by the existence of *The Magic Flute*. The perfection of this op-

era makes any idea of progressive ascension ridiculous." Pynkoski sees the perfection of the masterpiece as a never-ending opportunity for artistic growth, both for young artists and for more seasoned interpreters. Thanks to the accessibility of the piece, it continues to provide enrichment both for newcomers to opera, young and old and for experienced aficionados. The opera contains elements ranging from the everyday, to fairy-tale, to the mythic, heroic and sublime and every element invites a range of artistic interpretation. Any production might be said to barely scratch the surface.

The Magic Flute began its life as a populist *Singspiel*, a form which included both singing and spoken dialogue. Opera Atelier chose to perform the piece entirely in English to take full advantage of the connection with the audience. Mozart collaborated on the work with his friend and librettist, Emanuel Schikaneder and *The Magic Flute* premiered in 1791 at Schikaneder's theatre in Vienna, with Mozart conducting and Schikaneder playing the comic role of Papageno. In OA's production Olivier LaQuerre brings a capable sense of comic timing to Papageno, emphasising both his reticence for heroism and his blithe amiability. We cannot know exactly how the orchestra sounded at

Pynkoski sees the perfection of the masterpiece as a never-ending opportunity for artistic growth

the premiere, but the Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra, under the baton of David Fallis provides an intimate connection to the music through its period instruments and historical performance

practice.

Colin Ainsworth (tenor), Olivier LaQuerre (bass-baritone) and Carla Huhtanen (soprano) reprise their OA 2006 roles as Tamino, Papageno and Papagena respectively, so for them the 2013 production is definitely a continuation of unfinished business. Colin Ainsworth mentioned in a blog posting that he is playing the role for the seventh time. He said, "Beyond the pleasure of revisiting a beloved opera is my increasing realization that, no matter how many times you return to the role, each brings new discoveries." Ainsworth, LaQuerre and Huhtanen have been joined

Unfinished Business -*The Magic Flute* (continued)



by other OA returning artists and by Laura Albino (soprano) in her OA debut as Pamina.

Gerard Gauci's magnificent sets pay homage to the period, paying detailed attention to the predilection at the time for anything exotic and fanciful. As well as being a musical fantasy *The Magic Flute* appears also to be a Masonic allegory (Mozart and Schikaneder were both freemasons) and the opera takes the protagonists on a journey through trials and rituals towards a symbolic enlightenment and Gauci's sets sweep us up and take us along on this magical journey.

Dance features in all of Opera Atelier's productions, although this *Magic Flute* made less use of the Atelier Ballet than I expected. We see them perform the dance of the priests with grace and nobility, in the style of the period. The style reflects the balance and dignity of the Age of Enlightenment. Another small disappointment for me was that the three child spirits were sung by young women and I missed the haunting clarity of children's voices in these parts.

Opera Atelier invites audiences to join them once again for some unfinished business in the upcoming 2013-2014 season when productions of Mozart's *Abduction From The Seraglio* (2008) and Lully's *Persée* (2000 and 2004) will be on the calendar.

Adler Fellow Philippe Sly – a Hit On The West Coast by Ute Davis

Let me start with full disclosure. I have known Philippe since he was not quite a teenager and I really like the young man. That is why my critique of San Francisco Opera's *Così fan Tutte* relies heavily on quotes from the more objective music critic of the San Francisco Chronicle, Joshua Kosman, as well as a few others I have read.

We saw the first two performances, happily joined at the opening matinée by Lesley and Mark Robinson. It is an aptly modernized production set in the Monte Carlo casino in 1914 by José Maria Condemi after John Cox, and ably conducted by OSF music director Nicola Luisotti. Sly sings Guglielmo, one of two young officers, who put the fidelity of their sweethearts to the test, by a bet with their cynical croupier pal, Don Alfonso. The premise that all women are fickle turns off many in the audience, in fact some of my close female friends. I personally never enjoyed this opera very much until an opera buddy of mine in Germany sat me down after we had attended a well produced *Oper am Rhein Così* in the eighties and gave me chapter and verse, since she had just finished a week long seminar on this opera. *Così* maintains its position in the repertoire due to Mozart's sublime music, beautifully rendered here by Maestro Luisotto and his OSF orchestra, plus harpsichord and forte piano. Now to critic Kosman's opinion: "In the ensemble cast of six, the standout performance was the precocious and phenomenally assured debut of Adler Fellow Philippe Sly as Guglielmo. Adler Fellows (members of a two-year young artist training program) don't often get cast at this level, but then again, Adler Fellows this gifted and accomplished are rare indeed. Sly's singing was at once robust and lyrical with a beautiful range of tonal colour and the ability to combine virility and tenderness in a single phrase".

I must say, just to add perspective, that this was a high quality cast. Francesco Demuro (Ferrando) was very impressive with an upper register which lent great poignancy to his lustrous version of the aria *Un'aura amorosa*. It was no surprise to read that his career includes major roles at Milan's La Scala, the Vienna State Opera, Dresden, Verona etc. Marco

(continued on page 15)

Obsession, Devotion and Madness in Toronto by Lesley Robinson

The Canadian Opera Company promised us a weekend of obsession, devotion and madness when we saw Richard Strauss's *Salome*, Francis Poulenc's, *Dialogues des Carmélites* (reviewed elsewhere in this newsletter) and Donizetti's *Lucia De Lamermoor* on consecutive days and they did not fail to deliver, all served up with plenty of hideous gore.

Salome was portrayed in Atom Egoyan's production as a petulant child, at times swinging wistfully, at times engrossed in playing with dolls, seemingly oblivious to the machinations of the adult world in the background. Yet she bargains in the currency of adulthood—sex and politics. The production highlights this dichotomy and Erika Sunnegardh (soprano) portrayed it masterfully as an alternately brooding and foot-stamping Salome.

There was a feeling at moments that the stage was populated by cartoon characters, with the bickering Jews in their oversized suits and the Nazarenes trotting on with their Christian logo'd briefcases to speak of miracles. Herodias was portrayed by Hanna Schwarz (mezzo-soprano) in her COC debut as the nagging wife, egging on her obstinate daughter with a hairstyle and costume reminiscent of Wilma Flintstone. Richard Margison (tenor) portrayed Herod with his wife-beater tank top under his robe, like a henpecked Homer Simpson,

insisting that he is in charge. This is the ultimate dysfunctional family, barreling towards a tragic conclusion.

The set was stark, with most of the action happening on a slanting platform, enhancing the impression

that everyone was on a precipice, about to tumble inevitably into destruction. The only character standing on firm ground was the doomed Jochanaan (John the Baptist), sung by bass-baritone, Alan Held.

Salome's dance was tastefully portrayed in silhouette, beginning with projected images of a girl swinging back and forth in a garden. Projections were used throughout for visual effects. These were sometimes distracting, notably in the opening scene when Narraboth's conversation with Herodias' page was going on simultaneously towards the back of the stage and seemed somehow to be going on in the background. The orchestra was huge, with eight double basses giving it a booming presence and unfortunately occasionally drowning out the voices.

David Alden's production of *Lucia di Lamermoor* proved to be a treat for the senses. When I say that the staging was interesting I mean that in no pejorative sense. The Victorian setting emphasises the repressive atmosphere in which the story develops. The story's original setting was much earlier, during the reign of Queen Anne (early 18th century) and both Sir Walter Scott's 1819 novel, *The Bride of Lamermoor*, on which the opera is based and Donizetti's 1835 version pre-date the Victorian period. The drabness of the set, with its monochromatic walls and peeling paint, heightens the impression of moral decay which surrounds Lucia and precipitates her doom. Instead of meeting with his beloved by a fountain in the gardens, Edgardo comes to Lucia in the house, through a window which has the appearance of a curtained stage, as if he is coming to her from another world and to which he must return, leaving her to the fate which awaits her. (A word about the set designer: Charles Edwards is responsible for the fabulous set of Covent Garden's recent production of *Adriana Lecouvreur*. His astonishing stage-within-a-stage can be seen on the DVD version of the production.)

Like Salome, we see Lucia as a little girl functioning in an adult world. Her costume and hairstyle are reminiscent of Alice in Wonderland, but she is stripped of her innocence as we see her forced to change from her little girl's dress straight into her wedding gown. She sits by the window with her legs dangling, as if the world she inhabits is too big for her. She is manipulated by her



photo by Michael Cooper

Obsession, Devotion and Madness in Toronto (continued)

brother as easily as he manipulates a rag doll. Enrico himself seems hardly beyond childhood, as he casts aside the doll in favour of a more masculine top and truck. Alden's production hints at an undercurrent of incest, bondage and child abuse, which leaves the audience shifting uncomfortably in their seats.

The production is well cast with young, American singers in all three principle roles making their COC debuts. Anna Christy portrayed Lucia with touching vulnerability. Her mad scene was delivered with a calm inevitability and not a shred of shriekiness. Stephen Costello's Edgardo cut a dashing figure, like a young Bob Geldof in a kilt, enhancing the impression that he



is a figure from another, fantasy world, apart from Lucia's reality. Enrico was played by Brian Mulligan as a complex character, not simply a cardboard villain.

The COC orchestra performed with crisp precision under the direction of conductor, Stephen Lord. Lucia was accompanied in the mad scene, not by a flute as is often the case, but by a glass armonica, as originally written for the scene by Donizetti. This instrument, invented by Benjamin Franklin, is rarely played, but has an eerie, haunting sound, reminiscent of running a moistened finger around the rim of a wine glass. The sound is perfect for the atmosphere of the scene.

The weekend was replete with love and death, the stuff of opera at its finest and, as Salome wailed to the head of John the Baptist in the opera's final macabre scene, "The mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death".

Adler Fellow Philippe Sly – a Hit On The West Coast (cont.)

Vinco (Don Alfonso) was supremely world-weary and cynical. Again confirmation of his great acting and vocal quality is evident in a biography which includes performances at La Scala, Covent Garden, Madrid's Real and Deutsche Oper Berlin. On the female side of the cast, the two American sopranos and the German mezzo performed very ably and Elli Dehn (Fiordiligi) was particularly pleasing in this difficult role. However, I found myself in the unusual position of having enjoyed the male voices more than the female ones. The overall high quality of all the cast lends special emphasis to Mr. Kosman's words. His view is supported by critic Michael Milenski writing in "Opera Today": "Guglielmo was sung by first year Adler Fellow Philippe Sly, a highly communicative performer, in an auspicious main stage debut".

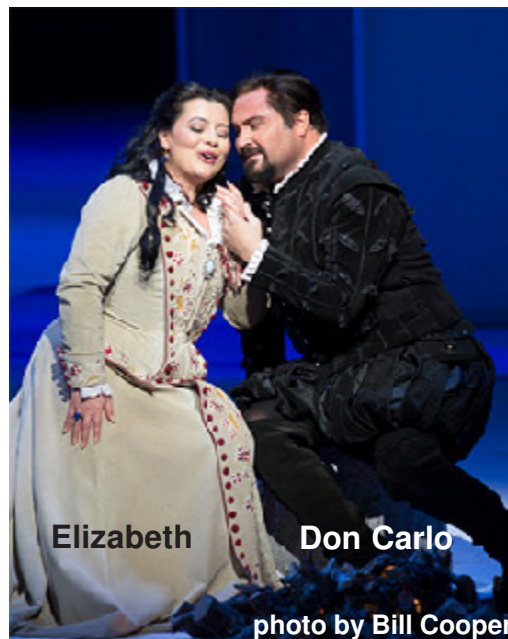
Since winning our Brian Law Prize in 2009, Philippe has wasted not a moment. You are aware of his huge successes in competitions at the Met in New York and in Montréal at the International Voice Competition. After spending a summer at the Schubert Institute outside Vienna, he was chosen for the San Francisco Merola summer Program. He then spent a year with the COC Ensemble Studio followed by a summer in Salzburg where he was part of a small group of excellent International Singers in the Young Singers' Program. I attended a master class with Thomas Hampson and listened to Mr. Hampson address the audience in German, praising Philippe in a way I have never come across in a master class. Philippe's Salzburg program netted him a small role of "Sithos" in the sequel to Mozart's *Magic Flute*, called *Das Labyrinth*, now out on DVD. In San Francisco, prior to *Così* he received praise for the sonorous quality he showed in his part in Nolan Gasser's *The Secret Garden*. He then was selected to sing this year's Schwabach Debut Recital, presenting a wide range of German Lieder and French art songs, including Ravel's *Don Quichotte à Dulciné*. The critics reported this as "dazzling performance" and "electrifying". It is no surprise that he is now booked for performances up to 2016!

London DeLights

by Shelagh Williams

Despite the crowds, the traffic, and the cost, London is still a city of culture. Plus, we had great weather on our spring visit! We chose our dates to maximize our opera treats and managed to catch two marvellous performances at the Royal Opera House (ROH) Covent Garden (CG). The ROH is a lovely venue for opera, big enough for a good sized stage, but not so large that you are miles away. Unfortunately that means it sells out easily and quickly, and for both *Don Carlo* and *La donna del lago* we had to rely on queuing for one of the 67 day tickets available. Luckily we obtained good (though not cheap) tickets on the sides in the stalls circle, close to the stage for both operas.

. We first saw Verdi's *Don Carlo* at ROH many years ago, also in the full five act version - otherwise the opera makes no sense! - when it ran from 6 p.m. to 11 p.m., but this time they shortened the intermissions and got us out before 10.30! The present production was of Verdi's final 1886 version, sung in Italian, and was the second revival of Nicholas Hytner's 2008 CG production, constructed by the ROH Production Department. Thanks to revival director Paul Higgins, it was well directed and clear, in spite of his having to deal with the rather weird auto-da-fe scene, plus Carlos V's tomb strangely travelling diagonally across the stage! Designer Bob Crowley provided sumptuous Spanish period costumes and striking red and black scenery which, since this was a co-production with Norwegian National Opera and the MET Opera, some of us saw with the MET Live in HD. This CG production was an unalloyed vocal and auditory pleasure. The ROH Orchestra under Sir Antonio Pappano was superb, including some nice harp and brass solos and the especially lovely cello solo introducing the King's monologue in his study, and the chorus was great, especially in the auto-da-fe. While *Il Trovatore* needs four great singers, *Don Carlo* needs six, in the different ranges, and we had them! Princess Eboli is often cast with an older mezzo but we had French mezzo Beatrice Uria-Monzon, making her, some felt belated, CG debut, and, attractive of both face and voice, truly embodying this strong and dangerous character. Next you need two impressive basses, and we had both Ferruccio Furlanetto as King Philip, commanding yet inwardly tormented, and Eric Halfvarson as the old and snakelike Grand In-



Elizabeth

Don Carlo

photo by Bill Cooper

quisitor, and their confrontation was something to behold in the flesh! Then of course you must have a splendid soprano for Elizabeth of Valois, able to develop from a young Princess to a noble Queen, and the Armenian, French-based, Lianna Haroutounian filled the bill, with both power and the high notes required. For the seven-performance run the necessary brilliant tenor was German Jonas Kaufmann for the first five, and for the last two, Italian Roberto Aronica. Aronica delivered a strong characterization in a ringing tenor and his Friend-



Rodrigo

Elizabeth

photo by Bill Cooper

London DeLights (continued)

ship Duet with Rodrigo brought happy tears to my eyes. But for me the absolute highlight was the robust baritone for Rodrigo, Marquis of Posa, in the person of the outstanding Polish baritone Mariusz Kwiecien. We had enjoyed him in *King Roger* last summer at Santa Fe, but to experience him at his peak in this classic role was pure delight. In our experience, the live performance always eclipses a Live in HD, or DVD, and this performance with luxury casting was unbelievably magnificent - opera at its best!

Rossini's *La donna del lago* is one of his Neapolitan *opere serie* written for his stable of exceptional opera singers, including his first wife, the Spanish mezzo Isabella Colbran who created the title role. ROH Director of Opera, Kaspar Holten, remarked that it is "an opera that comes round once in a generation" because of "the extreme vocal demands". The story is based on Sir Walter Scott's poem *The Lady of the Lake* wherein Scottish King James, disguised as Uberto, falls in love with Elena (the Lady), who in turn loves the warrior Malcom. However, she is betrothed by her rebelling father Douglas to the rough Highland chieftain Rodrigo. Once Rodrigo and the Rebellion are put down, Uberto reveals himself as the King and, in true *opera seria* fashion, respects Elena's love for Malcom and with clemency forgives both Douglas and Malcom and allows the true loves to marry - a happy ending!

With *La donna del lago* it is the music that matters and debuting Italian conductor and Rossini specialist Michele Mariotti knew how to deal with the fine music Rossini provided for the receptive ROH Orchestra, the virile RO Chorus, and the dazzling cast. For this opera you only need four of the best bel canto and Rossini singers in the world! - two tenors and two mezzos! Rossini liked to have two tenors in his Neapolitan operas and for the Highlander Rodrigo we had handsome tenor Colin Lee, who more than held his own against Juan Diego Flores, the King, as they vied vocally with top notes over Elena! Although Elena is pursued by three men, she loves neither of the good looking tenors, but instead prefers Malcom, a mezzo trouser role sung superbly by Italian col-

oratura contralto Daniela Barcellona, who with Elena gave us great mezzo duets! This was another belated ROH debut by a singer who was the tallest and, with sideburns, kilt and sword, the most manly person on stage! Tenor Juan Diego Flores was of course impec-

cable, tossing off stunningly well the difficult but beautiful music - and taking his final bows in a kilt! In the title role of Elena, Lady of the Lake, was mezzo Joyce DiDonato, with simply marvelous coloratura, both alone and in duets and trios,

and with volume for ensembles, besides being beautiful to behold - the complete singer! A fellow opera addict and day ticket queuer called her "The Divine Joyce"!

However, the staging wasn't of comparable standard! Director, John Fulljames, in his ROH debut, didn't clarify the convoluted story line of an unfamiliar opera - not seen at CG for 28 years - but instead confused us with a weird self-indulgent directorial concept. He awkwardly framed the opera by setting it in the year of composition (1819) with a group of unknown top-hatted gentlemen, in a Scottish museum, carefully looking at exhibits of regalia and statues in glass cases - the



photo by Bill Cooper



photo by Bill Cooper

London DeLights (continued)

action started when Elena was taken out of her case. We learned later from a review that two of these gentlemen were supposed to be Scott and Rossini - but who knew? This may be why they stayed on stage, prowling about and puzzlingly interfering with the later proceedings! The centrepiece of debuting designer Dick Bird's set was a circular staircase for people to repeatedly and irritatingly go up and down! To further annoy us, there were the anachronistic use of prissy umbrellas by the gentlemen and the unnecessary and pointless mauling of some apparently underage girls. Plus at the end of Act I a goat? deer? boar? (whatever!) was messily disembowelled to provide blood to daub on the Highlanders, and near the end of Act II there were dead bodies hanging about - all quite tasteless and gratuitous. In the final scene the two time zones became one and the principals went back into their museum cases! Greek debuting costume designer Yannis Thavoris thus had to provide costume designs for the two periods involved: the framing 1800's and the earlier romantic Highland story. It was unfortunate that the clumsy staging wasn't up to the fabulous vocalizing. However, we and the audience were there for the spectacular singing and we were satisfied!

Tickets are a little easier to come by at English National Opera (ENO) - money and perseverance usually suffice! In spite of excellent critical reviews we were able to get good stalls seats for the revival of Jonathan Miller's 2009 production of Puccini's *La Bohème* and it was worth it! Miller and his oft-times collaborator, designer Isabella Bywater, updated it to the Great Depression of the 1930's, basing visuals on the Parisian black and white photography of Brassai, and it worked very well. The clever and easily moveable scenery consisted of two reversible modules which together presented the Act I and IV garret on one side, and quickly turned to present street scenes for the Act II Cafe Momus and the Act III inn. Suitable costuming and good staging completed the picture, matched by intelligent cuts in the score to minimize the boring bits where the kids take over in Act II at Cafe Momus and the interminable people go through the city gate in Act III. The musical side was also admirable, with conductor Alex Ingram leading his excellent orchestra and young singers through the tuneful score. This was, as usual at ENO, sung in

English, with English surtitles, so everything was very clear - but somehow in such a familiar opera the Italian always sounds more romantic! Baritone Simon Butteriss specializes in buffo roles, and sang and acted well enough and was very nicely made up, but somehow he still looked too young for the landlord Benoit and the older Alcindoro - maybe we were just too close! Baritone Richard Burkhard and soprano Kate Valentine acquitted themselves very well as Marcello and Mimi respectively. Welsh tenor Gwyn Hughes Jones had an especially lovely voice for Rodolfo. The standout artist was debuting American soprano Angel Blue, who re-



Alcindoro Musetta

photo by Alistair Muir

ally brought out Musetta's strong personality and temperament. This was a most enjoyable performance of an old favourite, and passed the acid test by still making me cry at the end!

Our fourth opera was the opening night at ENO of Philip Glass's new and 25th (!) opera, *The Perfect American*, about Walt Disney, a co-commission with Teatro Real, Madrid. It had its world debut there in January, but this was the UK premiere, and Philip Glass was present - the ENO has a special relationship with Glass. This production was created in collaboration with the innovative theatre company Improbable which also worked on the 2007 Glass *Satyagraha*, a production which went on to the NY MET, and which many of us

London DeLights (continued)

saw at the MET's Live in HD. The opera libretto by Rudy Wurlitzer is based on Peter Stephan Jungk's fictional biography of the same rather ironic name about Disney's last months and death. It is reportedly rather critical of Disney, showing him, among other things, as a perfectionist, perhaps exploitive, control freak. The opera is more open-ended and sympathetic, since it shows how he came from a humble background to fulfil the American Dream, only to die of lung cancer at 65. Ironically, he wanted his body to be frozen so that in the future he could be awakened and cured, but his family cremated him!

The opera story begins and ends with Disney in hospital on his deathbed in December 1966 having a nightmare, and in between, in no chronological order, are episodes from his last year of life. A hospital bed dominated all of the first half of the opera, while the second half was better in most ways throughout. Ingenious director Phelim McDermott and designer Dan Potra used, as befits the story of a cartoonist, video scenic backdrops and animal cartoon image projections on screens hanging from giant arms on the crosspieces of a film reel (?) to give an aura of fantasy to all.



photo by Richard Hubert Smith

Among the many supernumeraries were 10 dancing and drawing animators in visors and vests, who not only drew the animals but also often moved like animals, and were also used to sketchily set a scene for Disney to step into - all very clever! Welsh conductor Gareth Jones oversaw the musical contribution, which for Glass was quite listenable - if there were any intonation problems, I wasn't aware! The cast was strong and included some fascinating

characters. In cameos, Americans bass Zachary James and tenor John Easterlin respectively created the malfunctioning animated Abraham Lincoln mannequin with which Disney conversed while fixing it, and Andy Warhol, who visited Disney as a fellow collaborative artist with a team of his own people working for him. Tenor Donald Kaasch embodied a very important protagonist, William Dantine, an angry sacked Disney em-



photo by Laurie Lewis

ployee who felt misused and came back for revenge. Supporting Disney were soprano Janis Kelly as Walt's sympathetic studio nurse and confidant Hazel George, and bass David Soar as his brother Roy. Suitably commanding as Walt Disney himself was baritone Christopher Purves. It is always good to encounter a new opera, especially when it is done in such an interesting manner and with the excitement of opening night,



photo by Richard Hubert Smith

and it is certainly not often these days that one gets to applaud a live opera composer!

Opera Within Reach

Opera Lyra Ottawa

Carmen (Bizet) September 7, 9, 11, 14
Pirates of Penzance (G&S) October 19, 20
 Information: www.operalyra.ca

Opera de Montréal

Lakmé (Delibes) September 21, 24, 26, 28
Falstaff (Verdi) November 9, 12, 14, 16

Information: www.operademontreal.com

Canadian Opera Company

La Bohème (Puccini) October 3, 6, 9, 12, 16, 18,
 19, 22, 25, 27, 29, 30

Peter Grimes (Britten)
 October 5, 8, 11, 17, 20, 23, 26

Information: www.coc.ca

Summer Opera Festivals

Glimmerglass Opera

Cooperstown N.Y.

King for a Day (Verdi) July 21, 26
 August 2, 6, 8, 10, 17, 19, 24
Passions (Double Bill) July 20, 23, 25, 29
 August 3, 9, 18, 22
Flying Dutchman (Wagner) July 6, 12, 14, 18, 27, 30
 August 4, 10, 12, 16, 20, 24
Camelot (Lerner/Loewe) July 13, 19, 22, 27, 28
 August 1, 3, 5, 11, 13, 15, 17, 23

Information: www.glimmerglass.org

Opera North

Lebanon, New Hampshire

Lucia di Lammermoor (Donizetti) Aug 6, 10, 14, 16
South Pacific (Rodgers/Hammerstein)
 August 3, 8, 9, 15, 17

Information: www.operanorth.org

Opera Quebec

Faust (Berlioz) July 25, 27, 29, 31
Powder Her Face (Adès) August 1, 3, 5
 Information: festivaloperaquebec.com

Chautauqua Opera

Peter Grimes (Britten) July 6
Falstaff (Verdi) July 26, 29

Information: opera.ciweb.org

Opera Saratoga

Lucia di Lammermoor (Donizetti) June 27, 30
 July 2, 5, 7
Pinafore (G&S) June 23, 25, 28, 30 July 1, 6
 Information: operasaratogo.org