



A Rare Treat - The Other Cinderella (Massenet!) by Shelagh Williams

For their second season and opera production, SOPAC chose Massenet's rarely performed *Cendrillon*, based more closely on the storybook and fairy-tale Cinderella than Rossini's version, *Cenerentola*.

Co-Producers Morgan Strickland and Tania Granata assembled a great cast and crew for this accomplished and top class production, which we saw opening night. Director Alaina Viau, imported from Toronto, where she is founder and Artistic Director of the indie opera company, Loose Tea Music Theatre, chose to update the opera to the present in Hollywood, with accompanying modern film, technology and lighting effects. She again recruited her talented Ottawa parents, Maureen Russell for marvellous costumes and Alan Viau for lighting. Videographer Bent Tector provided the films and projections to help enliven the overall concept. The film also helped with continuity, especially showing Cendrillon running as she left the ball, and losing her shoe on the stairs!

A large number of the best singers in town (and out!), including three who have been BLOC finalists, were in the huge cast. Soprano Julie Ekker transformed from jeans via a beautiful gown and glass slippers into a charming Cendrillon. Mezzo Katarzyna Sadej, in a white sports coat, was our Prince Charming,

and she and Cendrillon had a lovely duet at the ball, and later they sang together beautifully in the magic forest scene. We have seen Torontonians mezzo Catharin Carew at SOLT as Julius Caesar and in a one-woman show, and she used her strong vocal, comedy and acting skills as the wicked stepmother - especially at the end when she brought down the house when the Prince discovered his Cendrillon and she suddenly claimed Cendrillon as her very own daughter!

In the magic department, soprano Carolyn Beaudoin was a very svelte and glamorous Fairy Godmother with note perfect coloratura. She and her Magical Makeover Team of three soprano fairies, including Maria Bamford as First Fairy, sang together beautifully, during Cendrillon's transformation and in the enchanted forest. A ballerina, Hailey Duncan, danced to embody the magic. The welcome baritone voice of Jean-Sebastian Kennedy feelingly sang and acted the much put upon father Pandolfe. He had a nice aria, and a lovely duet with Cendrillon. Mugging in Kardashian style, loudly and comically, were the two step-sisters, mezzo Danielle Vaillancourt and soprano Samara Garfinkle. This was another successful production of SOPAC, especially when of such a rarity!



Sadej

Ekker

Photos by Kathi Robertson



Carew

Vaillancourt

Garfinkle

President's Message March 2018

by Murray Kitts

I am just about to leave Victoria where I spent January and February missing the challenges of part of an Ottawa winter. So you won't be too jealous I must tell you that of my four winter visits here this one was the worst for weather. Cooler than usual with even a few minus temperatures overnight, much more showery and rainy, intense wind storms, even some snow which disappeared quickly. The cherry blossoms bloomed in early February but I'm sure they wished they hadn't.

But there were still some fine musical events: The Victoria Symphony playing Brahms's *Violin Concerto* with violin prodigy, Caroline Goulding, as soloist and with the addition of students from the Greater Victoria Youth Orchestra giving an exciting performance of Gustav Holst's *The Planets*. The University Auditorium presented a terrific performance of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* featuring the Victoria Choral Society with members of the Victoria Symphony, and on the following Sunday an outstanding concert by Daniel Taylor and Suzie Leblanc featuring Handel solos and duets which Daniel claimed that they had been singing together for forty years. The orchestra drawn from the Victoria Symphony was conducted by Early Music specialist Alexander Weimann who conducted a few pieces by Giovanni Bononcini (Handel's rival in the London of the time) as well as some of Handel's "greatest hits".

And then there was the opera which I will discuss in another article. The rest of Live from the Met looks very good. Rossini's *Semiramide* is a rare treat of bel canto singing and *Luisa Miller* is a Verdi treasure which any opera lover will enjoy. Be sure to attend the Opera alla pasta performance of *David et Jonathas*, a recently discovered masterpiece by Marc-Antoine Charpentier, with BLOC winner Pascal Charbonneau as David, on Sunday, March 25.

A word or two about three of our board members who died last year. Stuart Baxter was an enthusiastic opera lover but poor health kept him from very much activity. Norma Torontow worked for at least thirty years seeing that our newsletters were mailed successfully to our members. Elizabeth Meller spent many years promoting the love of opera to many Ottawans whether in retirement homes, in her condo building, or more recently with Opera alla pasta, where she displayed her depth of knowledge of all things operatic to such an extent that she attracted many new members to our group. I was fortunate enough to sample her cuisine a number of times and learned that her own opera showings ended with a delightful meal. Elizabeth was noted for her generosity and fine manners - a true grande dame. See you soon!

Murray Kitts

Remember the AGM is on May 27 after the Opera alla pasta

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Marriage of Figaro - Another uOttawa Opera Success!

by Shelagh Williams

Just days after the marvellous Opera alla Pasta production of *Barber of Seville*, with Gino Quilico and Cecilia Bartoli, we were treated to its sequel, Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, entertainingly staged and prepared by Sandra Graham and conducted by Alain Trudel with uOttawa Opera Company (uOOC).

As always, Sandra Graham had a unifying and attractive overall concept for the work, setting it in a castle in Great Britain in 1912, all stylishly designed in a black and white motif, with red accents. The backgrounds, consisting of black and white silhouettes of the soloists, were clever and the cast "emerged" from them at the start of the production! Even the gardener, Antonio, was in a black and white kilt! The chorus of black and white clad house/parlour maids, dancing about with their black feather dusters, was charming and innovative, plus also usefully got the furniture moved between scenes! The cast worked together well under Graham's direction, bringing out both the humour and poignancy of the work.

Leading the excellent orchestra, Maestro Alain Trudel, Music Director of Toledo and Lavall Symphonies, and in town also conducting the NACO and OSO, was excellent. Being super busy, he was only free for 3 uOOC performances, which meant that, although the opera was double cast, not everyone had the chance to be on stage twice - unless they had two roles! Fortunately, most of the singers we especially wanted to see were in the final performance, and of course everyone performed very well.

In the title role bass-baritone Kevin Burke brought out the role's physical comedy as well as Figaro's cunning. All the while he managed to sing beautifully, giving us, for example, an ironical *Non piu andrai* at Cherubino's expense. Soprano Jeanine Williams, our 2017 BLOC third prize winner, was a lovely

Countess Almaviva, and in the second half, in an outstanding black and white gown and most becoming hair do, sang a marvellous *Dove sono*. The ensuing letter-writing duet between her and soprano Marlise Richie, as a sympathetic Susanna, was quite enchanting. Alumnus guest, baritone Ryan Hofman, a 2017 BLOC finalist, was perfectly cast as Count Almaviva, looking suitably aristocratic and singing and playing the role with panache. A tall Cherubino dressed in a black and white sailor's suit, soprano Carmen Harris provided a humorous sprite, forever in trouble and in the Count's hair! As Marcellina, Juliana Krajcovic's gorgeous soprano voice and comic ability highlighted her appearance on stage, as she morphed from Don Bartolo's housekeeper to Figaro's mother and finally Don Bartolo's bride! Tenor Yanik Gosselin was a standout in more ways than one as Don Basilio, the music master!

My only minor quibble was that Marcellina, as a housekeeper, and Susanna, as the Countess's lady's maid, should have been better dressed than, and easily distinguished from, the general house/parlour maids, and certainly without the mob-caps and aprons! However, it was a great production, another in the long line of uOOC successes, a credit to Sandra Graham and Alain Trudel and the uOttawa School of Music. What a treat to have live opera in the midst of Ottawa's winter and our operatic wasteland!



Figaro

Susanna

Countess

Count

Antonio

A Tale of Two *Bohèmes* by Murray Kitts

Saturday, February 24, 9:30 am. I was sitting in the Cineplex in Victoria with Marjorie Clegg and Tom McCool ready to enjoy the Live from the Met simulcast of Puccini's *La Bohème*. It is the Zeffirelli production that I have seen before. It is a justly famous production with an enormous number of singers and supernumeraries in the Second Act. The cast is very good, Sonia Yoncheva as Mimi (perhaps looking too healthy and singing somewhat too loud), Michael Fabiano (who has perfected his excellent interpretation of Rodolfo since we heard him in Ottawa with two Brian Law Competition winners in the cast - Joyce El-Khoury and Joshua Hopkins), Susanna Phillips as a suitably lively Musetta, and Lucas Meachem excellent as Marcello. I was surprised to see long time singer Paul Plishka in the double role of landlord of the student hovel and "sugar daddy" to Musetta. At one time I thought he only had two "facial" expressions - eyes open/eyes closed. With long intermissions the opera ended at 12:40 even though the huge set change between Act I and Act II took only five minutes as was shown in a video. Marco Armiliato was a superb conductor. Let's hope that Yannick Nézet-Séguin will keep this production in the repertoire.

Sunday, February 25, 2:30 pm. I was sitting in The Royal Theatre, Victoria, to see a live production of *La Bohème*. I have to admit that the main attraction was BLOC winner Sharleen Joynt who "wowed" the Victoria audience in last year's opera as Queen of the Night in Mozart's *Magic Flute*. Maestro Giuseppe Pietraroia continues to be sought after as a conductor for operas performed by Canadian companies as well as being Associate Conductor for Pacific Opera Symphony. He and his small but adequate orchestra brought out the soaring lyricism of Puccini's score which never fails to bring me close to tears of emotion. Lucia Cesaroni sang the role of Mimi for the first time in this production. Lucia is an alumna of Pacific Opera Victoria's (POV) Resident Artist Program and has sung major roles in Canada and the USA as well as in Italy. She has a good voice and technique but her portrayal of the little flower maker is quite a bit more aggressive than the usual one for this character. As Rodolfo Jason Sladen gave a very good performance only lacking in the Italianate passion that Michael Fabiano does so well. Sharleen Joynt was a first time Musetta and was obviously once again an

audience favorite. Clad in a skimpy costume Sharleen sang and danced her way through the famous Waltz Song, pursuing the object of her attentions, Brett Polegato as Marcello, who was never able to resist the beautiful siren in their love/quarrel relationship. This excellent baritone has had an outstanding international career and displayed his exceptional singing and acting ability. Andrew Love and Stephen Hegeudus gave good performances as the musician and philosopher who make up the four friends. An other connection with Ottawa and the BLOC, J. Patrick Raftery, one of our former competition jurors, played the landlord Benoit with less scruffiness than usual in the part, and in a second role added a bit of kinkiness: Musetta's "sugar daddy" sniffing her empty shoe and fondling her feet. Very amusing.

Well-known Director Maria Lamont's main contribution was to set the opera in the 1960's but she had to depend on the beauty of face and figure and vocal power of Sharleen Joynt to portray Musetta on a platform well backstage; but it certainly worked. Set Designer Camellia Koo relied almost exclusively on a large painted drop as a stage curtain which dropped onto the apron and on flats all painted to suggest a very stylized, pastel Paris. Act III had practically nothing on stage but the flats, Act I and IV were played on a raised platform some feet back of stage front, not a good idea at any time. Act II was presented in front of the front drop with the children, Parpignol and others, opening up to reveal the Café Momus as a nightclub. The set was the worst I've seen for this opera since the last production of it by Opera Lyra referred to earlier. But the designer was dealing with a very small stage. With only one intermission the opera was over by 5 pm. Both performances had their merits: the Zeffirelli production with a first rate cast and the exciting live Victoria production promising much more for these singers in future.

My ticket prices: at Cineplex \$27.00; at The Royal Theatre \$150.00 as I had to buy a ticket when there was only one seat available downstairs for an afternoon performance. Other seats had been available earlier at half that price. Still, producing live opera is an expensive business and its devotees have to be prepared to pay similar prices as those at sporting events.

If It Ain't Broke, Don't Fix It!

by Shelagh Williams

For our Winter 2018 trip “South” we attended the presentations by the Canadian Opera Company (COC) of Verdi's *Rigoletto* and Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio*, and Handel's *Alexander's Feast* by Tafelmusik.

Regarding *Rigoletto*, I must confess that I do not like American director Christopher Alden, having seen him ruin Glimmerglass Opera and COC productions in the past, including the original COC 2011 *Rigoletto* production (see 2011 review). His earlier staging of this production for Chicago Lyric Opera in 2000 and English National Opera in 2014 were wisely not repeated by those companies! However, this time through it didn't seem quite so bad, possibly because of Opera Canada's Wayne Gooding's impassioned support for the concept in the pre-chat, and also because a week before we'd enjoyed Covent Garden's great traditional production at the Bytowne, and so knew exactly what and where things should be happening! Alden and Canadian set and

costume designer Michael Levine chose to reframe the opera and set the whole story solely in a glorious wood-paneled men's club “Gaming Room”, at the time the opera was written. This was to indicate that it took place in an all-male society, with Gilda, *Rigoletto*'s daughter, one of only four females in the cast, and the only sympathetic character. The premise was that it was a mental recounting of *Rigoletto*'s nightmare, the result of Monterone's curse, with *Rigoletto* onstage throughout. This of course meant that if you didn't know the opera, the fast moving scenes, all seemingly in the same place, would not make any sense - and were confusing and even annoying if you did know it!

Nevertheless, the handsomely costumed cast and chorus, under superb conductor Stephen Lord and with the excellent COC Orchestra, sang and acted their hearts out, not at all dismayed by the inherent difficulties of the setting! Scottish baritone Roland Wood sang marvelously and was surprisingly strapping and good looking, with only one slightly higher shoulder to suggest anything to mar his appearance. American soprano Anna

Christy embodied his daughter Gilda, singing a lovely *Caro nome* and making us ache for her as she discovers how she has been deceived, and then bravely dies. But of course, you need a handsome tenor with a good voice and an attractive swagger for the irresistible libertine, the Duke, and American Stephen Costello, in demand in the role elsewhere as well, easily filled the bill! Canadian bass Robert Pomakov is so good as Monterone that he is singing the role all over the world. Canadian mezzo

Megan Latham gave us an ambiguous and ubiquitous “Nurse” Giovanna, in love with and serving the Duke, while not at all protective of her supposed charge, Gilda! COC debutees Canadian mezzo Carolyn Sproule and Russian bass Goderdzi Janelidze brought us the lovely Maddelena and her “honourable” though menacing assassin brother Sparafucile! Despite Alden's unnecessary and clumsy reframing of Verdi's libretto as a play within a play, the COC, as usual, pre-

sented solid vocal and orchestral values for one of Verdi's best!

Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio* is a lively singspiel, and when Opera Atelier did it a couple of years ago, it was a delightful comic romp. However, this COC co-production with Opera de Lyon (2016), updated, earnest and politically correct, was definitely not! COC debutee director Wajdi Mouawad, playwright and erstwhile Director of NAC French Theatre, reimagined it from the viewpoint of the participants looking backwards and telling their stories, another play within a play, which directors inexplicably love! He also wrote additional dialogue (in French, translated into German) for the extra and changed scenes. Unfortunately, the added scenes - the opening prologue consisting of a party to celebrate the safe return of the captives and to set up the reminiscences, and a Muslim prayer scene (not Mozart's music!) just after the intermission - only served to increase the non-Mozart and non-musical component and make the already long opera even longer! Some people wisely left at intermission!



If It Ain't Broke, Don't Fix It! (continued)

Mouawad's French production team consisted of Emanuel Clolus on sets and Emmanuelle Thomas on costumes. The latter were sumptuous for the party and suitably flowing for the harem, but just plain weird, like ghosts, for the military Janissaries! The scenery consisted mainly of two huge ugly doors closing off the Pasha's palace from sight, manipulated at times ominously, and then finally to reveal the cage-like harem where the women were kept captive - certainly not a lovely Turkish palace!

Thankfully, COC Music Director Johannes Debus had a great cast to ensure high musical values, but the arias often lacked life and aptness, in the context in which they were sung in this production. Canadian soprano Jane Archibald of course sang Konstanze beautifully, and debutee Swiss tenor Mauro Peter sang her rescuer Belmonte wonderfully well if wodenly. COC Ensemble grads soprano Claire de Sevig ne as a pregnant(!) Blonde and tenor Owen McCausland as Pedrillo, the single source of humour, were the young captive servants also rescued. Rather than the usual funny and bombastic overseer Osmin, Croatian bass Goran Juric was directed to be rather bland and uninteresting - although in this version Blonde obviously succumbed to his advances! Finally, in the dual non-singing role of Belmonte's father (Prologue) and the noble Bassa Selim was the excellent debutee Israeli actor Raphael Weinstein - not often are sworn enemies played by the same person!

For me, this rewrite of Seraglio resulted in a production that was long, boring, tedious and static, not the entertaining piece which Mozart wrote. The emphasis should be on the sing, not the spiel! Why meddle with success?!

To quote a knowledgeable Mozartian, who attend



Bassa Selim Konstanze Belmonte

Photo by Michael Cooper: Blonde and Pedrillo hidden

-ed the same night as we did: *The sopranos were superb (as good as some of the recordings in my collection), but the changed dialogue was stupid to the extent of being offensive. The sets were poor and the Janissaries were absurd. Since the four were released by the Pasha unharmed, Belmonte's people would not be rejoicing drunkenly when the four returned - rather they would feel humbled, and thankful to their own God for their unexpected relief. The*

impact of the Pasha's magnanimity - the real point of the whole story - is diminished by the changed dialogue.

Arthur Kaptainis, in a review of the 2011 *Rigoletto* COC production said of the Alden brothers: *Christopher, like David, is a registered member of international society of opera bugger-uppers, with many lavish updates and reinterpretations on his résumé.* Perhaps Wajdi Mouawad is trying to be nominated as a member of this society?

Fortunately, for our third event in Toronto, we thoroughly enjoyed Tafelmusik's production of Handel's *Alexander's Feast*, conducted by Ivars Taurins, on Handel's 333rd birthday! It was composed to John Dryden's ode to celebrate Nov. 22nd, St. Cecilia's Day (music's patron saint), and is like an oratorio, but with two concertos: harp and organ. A highlight was the beautiful harp concerto played by Julia Seager-Scott on a rare 93-stringed baroque harp, as originally set by Handel! Three soloists - soprano Amanda Forsythe, tenor Thomas Hobbs, and baritone Alexander Dobson - plus the Tafelmusik Chamber Choir gloriously delivered the poetry. As a matter of interest, BLOC prizewinner Joel Allison is still singing in the Tafelmusik Chamber Choir, and we had a chance to chat at intermission. Tafelmusik had never done this piece before and it was a very special evening, to cap off the musical visit.

Parsifal at the Met

by Lesley Robinson

The five-and-a-half hour running time of *Parsifal* may seem like a daunting prospect—factoring in the 20-block walk from the hotel and the 11:30 am start, it was an all-day venture, but it was, indeed, a day well spent.

It was notable that there were a number of Canadians involved in the project. Firstly it was conducted by the Met's fabulous new Music Director-designate, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, who arrived on the podium to a tremendous ovation. Joining Nézet-Séguin in the pit was American-Canadian violinist Benjamin Bowman who has joined the Met Orchestra as a concertmaster for the 2017/18 season and is featured in the current issue of Opera Canada magazine. This was a co-production of the Metropolitan Opera, the Opéra National de Lyon and the Canadian Opera Company. The production is by Québécois director and screenwriter, François Girard.

As a Wagner neophyte I make no attempt to pontificate, but would like to share a few thoughts on the experience. Seated in the front of the orchestra on the right, we were blasted by the full energy of the amazing Wagnerian brass section. The tuba was right in front of us and rather than feel overwhelmed by the dominance of the brass from that vantage point, I felt thrilled by its power. We were also well situated to watch M. Nézet-Séguin, observe his gestures and enjoy his complete immersion in the music.

The production, with its quasi contemporary setting, was thought-provoking and highlighted several of the somewhat abstruse Wagnerian themes. Most notable in this production were the buckets of blood, symbolizing the suffering of Amfortas and of Christ. As a non-Christian I find this confusing. If the suffering of Christ was to absolve the rest of humanity, why does Amfortas

have to suffer this seemingly endless agony and how is Parsifal able to redeem this torment? Parsifal is described as a pure fool, but he is not a pure fool in the mould of Forrest Gump, who, although simple-minded, has a heart of gold. Parsifal is significantly flawed, yet he is given the power to save mankind. Am I thinking too much? I am also confused by the mystical power of relics. Is this not somewhat sacrilegious? Why does what is, in fact, a mere symbol, have equal power to that which it symbolizes? I am reminded of what CS Lewis would call the “deeper magic” which always seemed like a bit of a cop out to me to explain away the inexplicable.

As an eternal optimist I was relieved to find solace in the conclusion of *Parsifal*. I was aware of the theme of renewal - life is rubbish, we are destroying the world, yet somehow redemption is still possible (albeit by dubious means.)

A highlight of this performance was the special feature of the Saturday Matinee Broadcasts. During the second intermission we were privileged to attend the Toll Brothers Metropolitan Opera Quiz. The special guest was tenor Javier Camarena who is performing in the upcoming run of Rossini's *Semiramide*. The host was Gerald Martin Moore and the amazingly knowledgeable panellists were Neal Goren, Suzanne Martinucci, and Rob Marx.

As an aside, I have been delighted to follow on Instagram soprano Deanna Breiwick, a flower maiden in this production and also earlier this season La Charmeuse in *Thaïs*. It is inspiring to see the enthusiasm of young, up-and-coming singers for their art and for the camaraderie it engenders. Bravi!

Opera alla PastaMarch 25 *David et Jonathas* (M.A. Charpentier)

April 15 To be determined

May 27 Double Bill *Suor Angelica* (Puccini) & *Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo)

DVD presentations begin at 2 p.m. at St. Anthony's Soccer Club and are followed by a delicious meal. Cost: \$25. Reserve at least 4 days prior to the showings by calling Lesley Robinson at 613-769-5957 or Murray Kitts at 613-830-9827.

JFK at Opéra de Montréal

by Lesley Robinson

JFK is an imaginative and highly thoughtful collaboration between composer David T. Little and (Canadian) librettist Royce Vavrek. This is a co-production with the Fort Worth Opera, where it premiered in April 2016 and the American Lyric Theatre (ALT), a small company based in New York City which specializes in the development of new works. The ALT initiated its innovative Composer Librettist Development Program in which Little and Vavrek have participated as guest mentors and of which Vavrek is a prominent alumnus.

The opera covers the last 12 hours of the life of President John F. Kennedy, set mostly in the Hotel Texas in Fort Worth, where the President and First Lady spent that fateful last night. We don't need a spoiler alert to forewarn us of what transpired on 22nd November 1963, but the opera is about JFK's life rather than about his death.

The Opéra de Montréal programme featured some notable facts and figures. Here's what I learnt about the numbers from the programme:

6 cheerleaders from the Montreal Alouettes football team performed onstage. They were credited individually as dancers in the programme. They contributed greatly to the atmosphere of wacky Americana.

14 soloists performed. Most of the major roles were taken by the original, mostly American cast members from the premiere production in Fort Worth. These included baritone Matthew Worth as John F. Kennedy, mezzo-soprano Daniela Mack as Jacqueline Kennedy, mezzo-soprano Katharine Goeldner as the older Jacqueline Onassis, soprano Cree Carrico as JFK's sister Rosemary, Canadian bass-baritone Daniel Okulitch as Lyndon Johnson, soprano Talise Trevigne as chambermaid Clara Harris and tenor Sean Panikkar as secret service agent Henry Rathbone, the latter two serving as the chorus as in a Greek tragedy. British tenor Colin Judson made a fine Nikita Khrushchev, singing on the Moon, (as you may guess there were a number of lavish

fantasy scenes) and the lesser roles of a reporter and five Texas politicians were performed by Canadian singers, all familiar faces at the Opéra de Montréal.

28 make-up artists, dressers, hair stylists and couriers formed the team that gave the performers a stylish 1960s look. Big hair, big Stetsons and cat eye sunglasses were the order of the day.

40 technicians worked on the stage. The revolving set represented the bathroom, living room and bedroom of the Texas Hotel suite which was the centre of most of the action.

There were **50** choristers, including the **18** members of Les Petits Chanteurs du Mont-Royal. The purity of the children's voices provided a delightful freshness and a poignancy of innocence in the face of the tragedy which was to come. The children's choir is worthy of note and has recorded with Daniel Taylor among others.

The **52** members of the Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal who were in the pit acquitted themselves admirably under the direction of American conductor Steven Osgood (who conducted the premiere in Fort Worth).

The soloists rehearsed for **69** hours. Approximately three weeks of rehearsal time is allocated for each production at the Opéra de Montréal. The first two weeks of rehearsals take place in a designated rehearsal space and only move to the performance hall for the last week. Most rehearsal sessions are three hours long and the singers may spend six hours per day in rehearsal.

This production required **118** costumes for a total of **77** performers. Costume designer Mattie Ulrich has an extensive portfolio in opera, theatre and film. Her opera credits include productions at the San Francisco Opera, Washington National Opera and Wolf Trap Opera. You can see her talking about her costumes for *Lucia di Lamermoor* at San Francisco on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=86stekE0xZ0>.

Concerto Competition Finalists Concert, uOttawa Music School

What sort of a concert do you get when the top 6 are chosen from 50 excellent university music students - fantastic! In February we attended this year's Final and it was exceptional. Soprano Lynee Wolstencroft gave a heartfelt rendition of Beethoven's *Ah! Perfido*, in the midst of an energetic guitarist, an excellent bass, an accomplished violinist, and an excellent flautist, mostly

accompanied by Fred Lacroix. The competition ended with Ethan Allers playing Elgar's *Cello Concerto* to win! What a great concert that will be next year when he plays it with the uOttawa Orchestra! - his prize!

Don't miss out on uOttawa's always great year-end recitals and concerts of individuals, classes and ensembles coming up in March and April! **SW**

And Now For Something Completely Different! by Shelagh Williams

Essentially a chamber opera, *Mr. Shi and His Lover*, a Macau Experimental Theatre/NAC English Theatre co-production, was a very interesting work, based on a fascinating true story. Bernard Boursicot, a French diplomat, posted to China, fell in love with Shi Pei Pu, a Beijing Opera singer. The affair lasted 20 years until, in 1983, they were arrested by the French government for espionage, with Shi named a Chinese spy. Only in the ensuing trial did Boursicot learn Shi was not, as he believed, female, but male, in the Beijing Opera tradition of males performing female roles!

The piece takes off from there, with the two men in their respective prison cells, ruminating on their situation, and exchanging barbs and some comforting thoughts. Since the opera was sung in Mandarin, this required 80 minutes of concentrated speed-reading, of constant, almost invisible, Chinese and English surtitles!

The story is told mainly from the point of view of Shi, a fascinating Jordan Cheng, who opened the proceedings with his favourite Chinese story, *Butterfly Lovers*. Derek Kwan's Boursicot loved Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* - cue an excerpt from the opera! Thus composer/music director/pianist Njo Kong Kie, former music director of La La Human Steps, cleverly and interestingly combined Western and Chinese references in his score.

The opera, in 7 separate scenes, was premiered in Macau in 2013, then was presented in Toronto at Summerworks Festival in 2016 and at Tarragon in December, 2017, before coming to the NAC in Janu-

ary, 2018, and the performers' experience showed.

Director Tam Chi Chun used only minimal staging: a red Oriental carpet, a chair and a Beijing Opera robe hanging on a reversible dressing stand, flanked by Njo on grand piano and Yuku Lai on marimba, with extra percussion played by the two musicians and the singers. Amazingly, the singers were dressed in business suits and ties, but their brilliant acting and the clever lighting scheme of Fung Kwok Kee Gabriel kept one focussed on the story!

Jordan Cheng was mesmerizing as Shi: good looking in a soft way, with beautiful gestures. When he changed into a practice ensemble and, singing falsetto, performed a dance in Scene 5, to emphasize his devotion to his art, he was believably an opera diva.

Derek Kwan we have seen in *Lesson of Da Ji* in Toronto Masque Theatre, and he has a lovely voice and was a solid foil to Shi as Boursicot. Much of the proceedings were static, and not a lot happened dramatically during the piece. However it was an interesting exploration of the minds of the two men and Shi's dedication to performance, but leaving us with many questions unanswered!

For those interested in unusual shows, Njo Kong Kie has written another work, *Picnic in the Cemetery*, which will be produced by Canadian Stage in Toronto, April 26th - May 16th. Described as a meditation on dying and living, this concert-theatre performance features music for violin, cello and piano with non-spoken texts projected to introduce each piece of music.



Yoriko Tanno's 23rd Annual Shooting Stars by Shelagh Williams

Every year Yoriko Tanno showcases her studio's accomplishments in an operatic concert. This year's opening opera was a charming production of Puccini's *Suor Angelica*, taking advantage of a good crop of female singers! Artfully placed scenery and benches and attractive nuns habits contributed to the ambiance of the convent's cloister garden. Soprano Juliana Krajcovic (now at uOttawa), in the lead as Sister Angelica, easily carried the show, and was ably abetted by mezzo Linda Damus, strong as the unfeeling Princess. The miracle at the end, with an angel, was beautifully done, and brought me to tears!

The second half embodied the concert's title: *Opera A to Z*. Cunningly set in a Museum of Chinese Opera Houses, it allowed selections from many singers, singly and in groups, singing Ariadne to Zerbinetta! As Museum cohosts, Helen Cai and Xing Li ably directed us and various "tourists" from Museum city to city and introduced the various numbers. They also sang, Helen the difficult *Come scoglio* from *Così*, and Xing the rousing

Toreador Song from *Carmen*, and finally a Chinese song together. BLOC 2017 winner, soprano Jennifer Olenic, started it all off with Ariadne's aria and later sang her winning *Vissi d'arte* from *Tosca*. Interestingly, four delightful young girls sang the *Jasmine Song* which Puccini used in *Turandot*! The "Japanese tourists", Tomo Adachi and Michael Xu, sang a Japanese song, clad in shirts emblazoned with symbols indicating they were brothers! Among the many offerings, Kristen Jerebeck and Mabel Wonnacott gave us a lovely *Flower Song* from *Lakme*, Cameron Martin and Rebecca Shew each presented a well sung aria from *Figaro*, and Ally Downes and Preston Smith sang the seduction duet *La ci darem la mano* from *Don Giovanni*. All very nicely done!

This was another successful production from producer and general director Yoriko Tanno, and her studio, with Maestro Luis Camacho accompanying everything plus being both musical and stage director! Still going strong after 23 years!

Events You Could Have Enjoyed by Shelagh Williams

Ottawa Choral Society With Russell Braun: The Ottawa Choral Society presented two lovely Edwardian Yuletide pieces, with chamber orchestra and starring baritone Russell Braun and soprano Caitlin Wood with Matthew Larkin on organ and piano. Braun sang the first, Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia on Christmas Carols*, based on traditional English carols which Williams had collected. Both soloists sang the interesting and much more dramatic concert title piece, Finzi's *In Terra Pax*. Here Braun's lovely voice bracketed the familiar St. Luke's Gospel story sung by the choir, with orchestral fireworks for Wood's singing of the concluding Angel's pronouncement! Great stuff!

Music and Beyond with Wallis Giunta combined its chamber ensemble with the Ottawa Children's Choir and the Canterbury High School Choir. Looking beautiful in a festive red gown, Wallis sang a lovely assortment of more traditional items in the first half. For Brahms' *Geistliches Wiegenlied (Sacred Lullaby)* she had a live prop, the baby of the violist accompanying her, and it was good as gold! She also did a marvellous, swinging Mozart *Laudamus Te*. For the second half she donned a slinky blue number for more modern fare. Then special guest Kellylee Evans, in black, with harpist

Caroline Leonardelli, gave a marvellous rendition of Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah*, arranged by Kelly-Marie Murphy, turning the pages! A great assortment of seasonal vocal and instrumental fare!

Isabelle Lacroix at Southminster's Anniversary Celebration: Roland Graham's Doors Open for Music at Southminster (DOMS) has been going strong for 5 years now and, to celebrate, presented a lovely Baroque programme.

A total of 7 first class instrumentalists were engaged. Roland Graham on harpsichord, Adam Nelson on violin, Dakota Martin on flute, and Julian Armour on cello played a Telemann *Trio Sonata* to open the concert. The major piece, Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto V*, with the additional violin Brigitte Amyot, viola Olivier Philippe-Auguste, and bass Peter Kilpatrick, was beautifully presented.

The final treat was Handel's *Gloria* for soprano, strings and continuo, featuring Isabella Lacroix. She easily negotiated all the "tricky bits", finishing off with multiple *Amen's* to elicit a standing ovation! So nice to hear her again, and in such good voice - another former BLOC finalist! A truly celebratory programme, pulling out all the stops - with some cake to finish it off!

Critic's Corner by Shelagh Williams and Murray Kitts

Tosca's Rome: The Play and the Opera in Historical Perspective. Susan Vandiver Nicassio. Chicago, Ill., U. of Chicago Press, c1999.

What do you get when a former opera singer who has sung the role of Tosca becomes a historian and does a post-doctoral fellowship at the American Academy in Rome? - this book! All you ever wanted to know, and more, surrounding the genesis and development of the opera, and its historical and sociological context!

The opera covers 16 hours in Rome during the Napoleonic Wars, from midday June 17th to dawn June 18th, 1800, based on the perceptions of 1890 in France in Victorien Sardou's play *La Tosca*. Puccini saw the play twice, starring Sarah Bernhardt, and it was another foreign source of one of his emotional operas, becoming in 1900 the Italian perception, in Puccini's opera *Tosca*.

Nicassio's book helpfully starts with the complicated history of the era, then examines each of the three main protagonists in the opera, none of whom is Roman! For example, the French source actually had Mario Cavaradossi as French, with only an aristocratic Roman father, which explains a lot about his French and Republican beliefs, sympathies and actions - and his two Roman properties! Floria Tosca is a famous Italian singer from Verona in the Veneto, and a Royalist. Barone Scarpia is Sicilian, sent from Naples as a specialist in dealing with "problems".

Nicassio considers the opera to be well constructed, and goes through an act by act study of the opera, both musically and comparing it with the original play. She feels, interestingly, that both Sardou and Puccini shared an anticlerical point of view, but that Puccini and his librettists understood Rome much better. An appendix helpfully compares the scenes in more detail to show how they were rearranged from play to opera.

Her book also contains a very useful map of Tosca's Rome showing where the many buildings and piazzas are located, and the routes various persons would take in the story. Although Castel Sant'Angelo, the Farnese Palace, and Sant'Andrea della Valle are close to each other - I've been on a walking tour including them - Cavaradossi's townhouse and country villa with the convenient well are farther away, making some events portrayed difficult to imagine in the opera's timeframe!

This was an intriguing book, presenting a lot to think about! It may be borrowed from the Ottawa Public Library. **SW**

Two new baroque operas on DVDs performed by specialists have appeared: Claudio Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* was first performed in Mantua in 1607 and thus rates as one of the earliest operas and is considered Monteverdi's greatest work. This performance is by Les Arts Florissants from the Theatre de Caen recorded in 2017. Paul Agnew, a well known baroque haut-contre not only sings two roles, Apollo and Echo, but also is Stage and Musical Director conducting La Philharmonie de Paris. The music, singing and acting are superb and the production outstanding. Definitely a possible choice for Opera alla pasta. **MK**

From Glyndebourne comes Rameau's *Hippolyte and Aricie* boasting a fine cast with Sarah Connolly as Phaedra with the renowned William Christie leading the Orchestra of the Age of the Enlightenment and the Glyndebourne Chorus. Rameau wrote great music, the dancers are very good at what they are called on to do, but the production is the most extreme that I have ever seen of a Baroque opera. The curtain opens on an open giant refrigerator with singers and dancers emerging from behind giant broccoli stems. The fifth and final act is set suitably in another cold place, a mortuary, as the story is a tragedy following the same lines as Jean Racine's *Phèdre*. Running at over three hours this one is only for the adventurous. **MK**

Tom McCool loaned me a book by William Berger called *Wagner Without Fear: Learning to Love and Even Enjoy Opera's Most Demanding Genius*, first published in 1998 and available in two formats for a very low price from Amazon. When I first retired I found the time to read Newman's multivolume biography and even Wagner's truncated autobiography as well as other books. This book is a delight and has in it such hidden gems as the serious controversy over the sex of Grane, Brunhilde's horse. Really! What a hoot! **MK**

Joanne Fiedler. *Molto agitato: the mayhem behind the music at the Metropolitan Opera*. This is a fascinating book by Arthur Fiedler's daughter, Joanne, who was the Met's general press rep for 15 years. She therefore had insider's knowledge to enhance her history of the Met with back stage stories and fast moving tales of disasters, power struggles, firings and who detested whom! Interspersed are delightful - and catty! - thumbnail sketches of individual singers, conductors, stage directors and designers, and Met intendants and donors. An interesting and informative read, available from the OPL. **SW**

The Met Live in HD 2018

February 10 12:00 *L'Elisir d'Amore* (Donizetti) Encores March 17, 19 & 21

February 24 12:30 *La Bohème* (Puccini) Encores April 7, 9 & 11

March 10 12:55 *Semiramide* (Rossini) Encores April 21, 23 & 25

March 31 12:55 *Così fan tutte* (Mozart) Encores May 5, 7 & 9

April 14 12:30 *Luisa Miller* (Verdi) Encores May 19, 21 & 23

April 28 12:55 *Cendrillon* (Massenet) Encores June 9, 11 & 13

(Additional information is available at <https://www.cineplex.com/Events/MetOpera>)

Saturday Afternoon at the Opera, 2018

March 17 1:00 pm *Electra* (Strauss)

March 24 1:00 pm *Turandot* (Puccini)

March 31 1:00 pm *Così fan tutte* (Mozart)

April 7 12:30 pm *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Donizetti)

April 14 12:30 pm *Luisa Miller* (Verdi)

April 21 1:00 pm *The Exterminating Angel* (Adès)

April 28 1:00 pm *Cendrillon* (Massenet)

May 5 1:00 pm *Roméo et Juliette* (Gounod)

(For details about casts, conductors, synopsis, and much more see the Met's website.)

The Met Live in HD 2018 - 2019

The Met Live in HD will kick off with *Aida* (6 October). The series will continue with *Samson et Dalila* (20 October), *La Fanciulla del West* (27 October), *Marnie* (10 November), *La Traviata* (15 December), *Adriana Lecouvreur* (12 January), *Carmen* (2 February), *La Fille du Régiment* (2 March), *Die Walküre* (30 March), and *Dialogues des Carmélites* (11 May).

Opera in Local Cinemas

Cinema Aylmer, 400 Boulevard Wilfrid-Lavigne, Gatineau.

La dame de pique, Tchaïkovsky (Dutch National Opera), 6 April, 3:00 p.m.; 11 April, 7:00 p.m.

Benvenuto Cellini, Berlioz (Dutch National Opera), 18 May, 3:00 p.m.; 23 May, 7:00 p.m.

Towne Cinema, Rideau Street, Ottawa.

Tosca, Puccini (Royal Opera House). 24 March, 1:00 p.m.

Carmen, Bizet (Royal Opera House). 21 April, 1:00 p.m.