



The COC Ensemble Studio Competition

by David Williams

The Canadian Opera Company's Centre Stage Gala, with the competition and celebration of the Ensemble Studio, was held November 1st. From 134 entries, the 7 finalists were: bass-baritone Joel Allison (Ottawa); tenor Matthew Dalen (Grande Prairie, Alta.); mezzo-soprano Simona Genga (Vaughan, Ont.); soprano Natalie Image (Tsawwassen, B.C.); soprano Chelsea Rus (Abbotsford, B.C.); soprano Anna-Sophie Neher (Gatineau, Que.); and baritone Jonah Spungin (Ottawa).

The finalists each sang a single aria accompanied by the COC Orchestra under its Music Director, Johannes Debus. Prior to the public concert, the singers sang another aria in a round closed to media and the public. Before that, each contestant had spent several days working with COC coaches and voice instructors. The results of the competition were, therefore, based on more than the public performance.

Simona Genga finished first (\$10,000) and was the audience choice (\$1,500) and a popular winner. **Joel Allison** finished second (\$3,000) and **Anna-Sophie Neher** was third (\$1,500).

Select finalists may also be invited to join the COC's 2018/2019 Ensemble Studio, to be announced in January or February.

We should be proud that three of the finalists, including the second and third prize winners, were from the National Capital Region.

Unfortunately, of these, only Joel Allison competed in the 2017 Brian Law Competition, where he was awarded the 2nd prize (\$3,000). Hopefully, for our 2019 competition we can ensure that all potential contestants are identified and encouraged to participate. Our prize money compares favourably with that of the COC Studio Competition.



Simona Genga



Joel Allison



Anna-Sophie Neher

President's Message December 2017

Despite a number of glitches our most recent Brian Law Competition went very well and was enthusiastically received by those attending. However, some necessary changes must be made to the way in which applications are made, so that we take full advantage of electronic methods of communication which are so much easier and cheaper than ones used in the past. This should be done as soon as possible in preparation for the 2019 Competition. Our financial arrangements with the Southminster Music Series proved to be most satisfactory to both parties. Much of the credit for arranging our cooperation with the Series goes to the Robinsons, Lesley and Mark, our Secretary and Treasurer, who have been working for four years since the financial disaster of the last competition held at the Unitarian Congregation in 2013 to find a new venue, to almost single-handedly produce the 2015 Competition independently at Southminster, and again make such arrangements with the Music Director, Roland Graham, to ensure that this year's competition would be a success. As President my job is to accept or reject applications according to the rules prescribed by the competition. The next phase is done by three preliminary jurors who are asked to choose up to six finalists. The jurors make their decisions and the finalists are named. Incidentally Barbara Clark has been doing this service for NCOS for 20 years, Charlotte Stewart for almost as many, and Laurence Ewashko in the last 8 years. The final jurors, arranged this year as in many past years by Ute Davis, represent a very distinguished group of musical experts including Joanne Kolomyjec, James Wright, Dean of Music at Carleton, and Richard Turp who has become the usual spokesman awarding the prizes. I was particularly pleased to have a few minutes to reminisce with Joanne Kolomyjec about a performance of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* at the NAC in 1988 in which she appeared with

Richard Margison in a delightfully bright and funny production. In 2013 the budget for food and refreshments was set at \$1,000.00 and most of it was given away because of the poor attendance that year. Now the food is virtually free to NCOS as much of the baking is donated and served by our members. Lesley Robinson and Vera-Lee Nelson organized the food squad and Lesley again brought in some very helpful and pleasant students from Ashbury College. It's too bad that the Robinsons were unable to attend and experience the gratitude of the audience. I was particularly grateful to Garth Hampson who volunteered to meet and greet the finalists when they arrived for their afternoon rehearsals. This is a job I usually take on but would have found it particularly difficult this time due to health reasons. Finally, I was not the only member of our organization who objected to the criticisms of the performances of some of the contestants in the account written by one of our members.

Extending Opera alla pasta to seven sessions seemed to work well so far. Glyndebourne's *La Traviata* was generally highly praised, Barcelona's *Queen of Spades* was enjoyed for the elaborate costumes and staging as well as the magnificent music and Zurich's presentation of an unusual take on the *Romeo and Juliet* story presented outstanding singing of the Bellini masterpiece. The New Year will feature excellent performances by Canadian singers: Gino Quilico as Rossini's *Barber*, Philippe Sly in Berlioz's delightful comedy *Béatrice et Bénédicte*, Pascal Charbonneau playing one of the leads in Marc-Antoine Charpentier's moving biblical story of *David and Jonathan*, and finally Jon Vickers appearing as Canio in Leoncavalli's *Pagliacci*. Don't miss any of them.

Murray Kitts

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

All's Well That Ends Well in Toronto

by Shelagh Williams

The Fall opera season in Toronto featured three happy solutions to problematic love situations - and nobody died! The Canadian Opera Company (COC) presented Donizetti's *Elixir of Love* and Strauss's *Arabella*, and Opera Atelier, Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* (see separate reviews pp. 6&7), all in great productions.

Elixir of Love (*L'Elisir d'Amore*), Donizetti's tuneful gently comic bel canto masterpiece, amazingly had not been performed at the COC since 1999! American director James Robinson, remembered fondly for his delightful 2002 *Il Viaggio a Reims*, has set *Elixir* in Niagara-on-the-Lake in 1914. The band shell cum garden pavilion centre stage, designed and colourfully decorated by Allen Moyer, with Red Ensigns and red, white and blue bunting, was adaptable for most scenes, and with the charming period costumes created a nostalgic ambience. However, as is often the case with updating, it was not completely successful, with for example the supposed universal gullibility unbelievable for 1914, especially on the eve of the not at all funny World War I. Still, Robinson marshalled his forces well, and the age-appropriate singers ensured a lively presentation.

Amazingly, Canadian opera conductor Yves Abel, although he works internationally, was making his COC debut with this production! He of course did a great job showcasing Donizetti's beautiful music, with the great COC Orchestra and Chorus and his excellent cast. Also debuting was English baritone Andrew Shore, the best all-round performer on stage, who sang, danced and acted the travelling medicine man and Elixir seller Dr.

Dulcamara to the hilt. His G&S experience was obviously of great value, especially in the patter songs. Dulcamara is one of his signature roles - his MET debut role, in fact - and his comic duet with Adina at the "wedding" banquet was the best rendition I've ever seen!

For the younger principals, the COC wisely recruited three recent Ensemble Studio grads. Andrew Haji's lovely tenor was perfect for the pivotal role of Nemorino - his *Una furtiva lagrima* was gorgeous and a show-stopper - and he was the personification of a shy, love-sick bumpkin. He is unsurprisingly already engaged to sing Nemorino with the Vancouver Opera, but his physique may preclude more glamorous roles in the future. And what was the point of casting him as an ice cream salesman, except as a directorial excuse to bring on stage his fancy van?! Similarly, bass-baritone Gordon Bittner, now with the Opera in Frankfurt, had the good looks and voice and perfect WWI grooming for the self-assured recruiting sergeant Belcore. However, he was directed to be a preening, posing, over-the-top caricature - just a bit too pompous for an Ontario native, albeit hilarious! Interestingly, the two men were just back from singing at the acclaimed Salzburg Festival! Lovely soprano Simone Osborne, who sang Marguerite Riel in *Louis Riel* so marvellously this summer at both the COC and the NAC, was Adina, the deserved object of both their affections. She perfectly embodied and sang the spirited and brainy town librarian who knew a good man when she finally recognized him! Incidentally, since Simone and Gordon are married, their kiss as



Dulcamara



Nemorino Adina



Belcore

All's Well That Ends Well in Toronto (continued)

Adina and Belcore, at the end of Act I, had more oomph than the more chaste one of Nemorino, having won Adina, at the happy end of the opera! Soprano Lauren Eberwein, a COC Ensemble Studio member, more than held her own as Adina's friend, Giannetta.

It was inspired casting by the COC to use its own protégés in the younger roles, both for the singers' careers, and for the enjoyment of the audience which had followed the singers' progress. It fostered a warm "family" feeling appropriate to the funny and heart warming story and the chosen local setting - everyone on and off stage went home happy!

Strauss's *Arabella* was a Canadian and COC premiere! We had seen and enjoyed *Arabella* many years ago in Covent Garden, with Fischer-Dieskau as Mandryka but then not again until 2012 at Santa Fe Opera where the COC's co-production premiered. Santa Fe had starred Erin Wall as Arabella, and we wanted to see her again - even though we did miss seeing the sun setting behind the open-backed stage in Santa Fe!

The story takes place during a day in the life of an aristocratic Viennese family in dire financial straits. The elder daughter Arabella must marry advantageously, and is expected to choose among her suitors at that evening's ball. Only then can her sister, Zdenka/o, disguised as a boy to save money, hope to have a life - and love. Fortunately, their father, Count Waldner, has sent his old rich army friend Mandryka a photo of Arabella, and his nephew and heir, reading his now dead uncle's mail, falls in love with Arabella's photo and arrives in Vienna that very day! Of course, there are a few hiccups along the way, but in the end everything is amicably and financially settled to everyone's satisfaction.

Director Tim Albery had an elegant canvas, and knew how to use it and his great cast effectively. As behoved its setting in Vienna, updated again to just before WWI, the stage settings and costumes by Tobias Hoheisel were sumptuous, though monochromatic. Grey

two-sided curved walls, with the necessary doors and windows, were moved and swivelled between scenes to quickly assemble the various venues in the family's hotel and at the ball, each formal and grand. Everyday ladies' clothing was lovely, while the ball gowns were of course marvellous.

The fact that German conductor Patrick Lange is doing several *Arabellas* in Europe, including the Vienna State Opera, boded well for the production. We went on closing night, so that the COC Orchestra and Chorus had had ample time to learn the new and difficult music, plus the cast had been well chosen, so that all performed well, as expected! Of course, the two Canadian sopranos Erin Wall, perfect as the ladylike Arabella, and Jane Archibald, in a role debut, cleverly acting as the boy Zdenka/o is



dressed up to be, were a treat to watch and hear. For the pivotal role of Mandryka, the COC secured Polish bass-baritone Tomasz Konieczny, a specialist in the role, who has performed it many times in Vienna and Budapest, and it showed. In his COC debut, he did not overplay the fact that Mandryka is from the country and is also super rich, but played and sang him naturally, a pleasant and intriguing contrast to Arabella's usual suitors! It was great to see veteran Canadian baritone John Fanning, just right as the father, Count Waldner.

American tenor Michael Brandenburg, as the young officer Matteo, dealt well with Zdenka/o, secretly in love with him, but as the lovesick unsuccessful suitor of Arabella was directed so as to become rather tiresome. Canadian soprano Claire de Sevigne, an Ensemble Studio grad, had both the voice and good looks to sing and act the showy red-clad role of the

coachmen's mascot, the Fiakermilli, although I remembered a bit more stage business in the earlier production! Overall it was an excellent and most enjoyable performance, with great production and musical values, well worth the 84 years the COC waited. Plus another happy ending!

Lucia di Lammermoor on the island of Gozo

by Marian Cumming

During a recent visit to Malta we finally decided to find out first hand why a number of our friends flocked to attend opera performances on the island of Gozo (Ghawdex) which forms part of the Maltese archipelago, a mere 20-minute ferry ride from the main island. Like Malta, Gozo has been inhabited for thousands of years and is probably best known for its Megalithic Temples, Ggantija (c.3600-3200 BCE), which makes it older than the Pyramids of Egypt, and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Its other claim to fame is the fact that it is home to two opera houses, on opposite sides of the same street, and within a block of each other, in the capital, Rabat (also known as Victoria). With 30,000 inhabitants and an area of 67 sq. km. Gozo has more opera houses per sq. km. than any other place in the world. Both houses, the Aurora and the Astra, have been producing fully-staged operas continuously for the past 40 years. We happened to attend a performance of Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* at the Astra, while the Aurora had just ended its run of *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci* the previous week. While international singers are engaged to take on the principal roles, many of the secondary roles are given to young local up-and-coming artists. (It was in fact at the Astra that Joseph Calleja, "the Maltese tenor" made his operatic debut at the age of 19 in the role of Macduff in Verdi's *Macbeth* 20 years ago.) Because of the small budget, a large amount of voluntary work goes into each production. Both theatres have their own chorus (with each member having a day job), while the Malta Philharmonic Orchestra accompanies performances in both theatres, which seems to be the only common link. Suffice to say that a healthy rivalry and a love of music has contributed to great art.

As the curtain went up we were pleased to see that this was going to be a traditional version of Lucia, under the direction of Enrico Stinchelli with sets by Joseph Cauchi. The baroque-looking sets were virtually the same throughout the opera: however, by moving a few panels around, the stage was in turn cleverly transformed from a castle into an office, a ballroom, a bedroom and a graveyard. The cast was made up entirely of young singers who have all performed in major and some lesser-known opera houses throughout Europe. The role of Lucia was sung by Turkish soprano Serenad Uyar. My first impression was that her voice had a nasal quality particularly in the lower register. Fortunately, this was only temporary as she soon displayed a crystal-clear voice which carried her convincingly through to the mad scene. Edgardo was sung by Italian (Sicilian)

tenor Giulio Pelligra, who is blessed with a ringing bel canto voice. Although his technique was flawless, he could have benefited from more modulation and feeling, particularly during the emotionally charged closing arias "Tombe degli avi miei" and "Tu che a Dio spiegasti l'ali". In terms of vocal quality, in my view, the highlight of the evening was Russian baritone Boris Pinkhasovich as Enrico, Lucia's brother. Despite his young age, he possesses a beautiful, powerful, dark voice with a very secure high register. Not to be overly critical, but I found his interpretation to be too nice and not forceful enough, particularly during his interaction with Lucia. Another powerful voice was that of Italian bass Dario Russo in the role of Raimondo, rich and sonorous throughout. The roles of Alisa and Arturo were sung by two very talented, young Maltese singers, respectively Marvic Monreal and Cliff Zammit Stevens, the former in her second year at the Royal Academy Opera and the latter a recent graduate of the Royal College of Music. Both have received financial support from the Joseph Calleja Foundation which was recently set up to sponsor and encourage promising young local artists. They both acquitted themselves admirably, particularly during the sextet, where every part could be distinctly heard.

The theatre acoustics are excellent, and the lighting in this production was a refreshing change. Unlike many recent productions, both at the Met and elsewhere, where the trend seems to favour darkened stages, this was well lit. The costumes were simple, mainly due to budgetary restraints. The men wore black trousers and knee-length jackets with tartan sashes (no

Curtain call

photo by Marian



kilts!) and the women were all in black (probably not entirely suitable for a wedding!) but they looked very elegant with feathers in their hair (which today might be called fascinators), and all wore shiny masks. Among

***Lucia di Lammermoor* on the island of Gozo (continued)**

the extras was a group of eight female dancers, also wearing black diaphanous dresses, who floated, not always very gracefully, across the stage at random intervals. Did I say this was a traditional version? Well, sort of! After Raimondo advises the wedding guests that Lucia has stabbed her husband who is lying lifeless and bloody in the bed chamber, the scene switches to said chamber with a large, shell-shaped bed on which Arturo is indeed lying, seemingly dead, while Lucia embarks on her mad scene. However, somewhere along the way, Arturo suddenly comes to life, and after exchanging a few embraces is stabbed, while Lucia concludes her aria and falls lifeless beside him. All along the chorus is on stage forming a semi-circle behind them. Poetic license?! At least this departure was not as outrageous as the most recent ROH production which had Lucia carrying Edgardo's child, which she messily aborts, and stabs herself in a bath tub!

The glossy programme not only provided biographies and photographs of the entire cast and crew, a synopsis, extensive background notes about the libretto, particularly as it relates to the Sir Walter Scott novel, *The Bride of Lammermoor*, on which the opera is based, but also included the full Italian text. The singers were beautifully supported by the Teatru Astra Opera Chorus, in collaboration with the Coro Lirico Siciliano, and the Malta Philharmonic Orchestra, ably conducted by Joseph Vella. All in all, this was a most enjoyable production that went well beyond our expectations, particularly given the age of the performers and the fact that none of them had likely ever sung together. This may have been our first time experiencing opera in Gozo but it will certainly not be our last. And if I have managed to convince one single reader to consider a visit, I will have done my part in promoting the Maltese islands and their rich culture and heritage.

A Commedia dell'arte-styled *Marriage of Figaro* by Shelagh Williams

Just when you think you know what Opera Atelier's (OA) director Marshall Pynkowski and choreographer Jeannette Lajeunesse Zingg will serve up to delight you, they surprise you! For Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, they and costumier Martha Mann dressed some secondary characters in classic commedia dell'arte costumes and masks, resulting in interesting visuals and underlining the comedy and complications of Da Ponte's intrigue-filled plot! Also, there was little dancing by the Opera Atelier Ballet.

Set designer Gerard Gauci's painted backdrops were, as usual, marvellous, with each clearly identifying the Act and location, in English. The decision to perform the opera in English, in a great rhyming translation by Brit Jeremy Sams, ensured that the comedy was not missed by the audience!

Conductor David Fallis, with the impeccable Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra, maintained a brisk tempo, which suited the lively production, and the talented cast and Opera Atelier Chorus. Soprano Mireille Asselin, an Ottawa native and now on the MET Opera roster, was the star as Susanna, her pert personality and comic touch

combining with her ideal voice to win us over. Debutee American bass-baritone Douglas Williams, as Figaro her betrothed, was a real find, good looking and fit plus possessing a fine voice to match. Sporting a funny, floppy hat, he played Figaro as young and a bit gormless, in contrast to the clever women!

The other roles were filled by good singers, adept at comedy. Soprano Peggy Kriha Dye was a lovely, harried Countess, and bass-baritone Stephen Hegedus her sexy Count, while mezzo Laura Pudwell stood out as Marcellina, with bass Gustav Andreassen her Bartolo. Dressed as a commedia Pierrot, mezzo Mireille Lebel was a charming Cherubino, but when her hair was let down was almost too curvy a boy-as-girl for the cross dressing scenes! Tenor Christopher Enns, in commedia motley, brought out the humour of both Basilio and lawyer Don Curzio. They made a great ensemble. Combine Mozart's marvellous music, Da Ponte's wicked comedy (in English) and Pynkoski's take on the story, with great artistes and visuals, and you get superb opera that is so entertaining and satisfying - what a treat!



Susanna Figaro

Photo by Bruce Zinger

Opera Atelier – A Great New Translation and Big News

by Lesley Robinson

Opera Atelier delighted us once again with its latest production of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*. It doesn't matter how many times the company revisits old favourites, there is always something new to offer. This season's production of the opera was the sixth in the company's 32 year history, the last being as recent as 2010. So what was new this year? The terrific contemporary English translation by British writer, director, lyricist and translator, Jeremy Sams, changed the experience for the audience, enhancing the comedy and highlighting themes that are topical today. (Sams was responsible for the libretto of the Met's brilliant 2011 pastiche, *The Enchanted Island*.)

The Marriage of Figaro is a fast paced comedy and when the audience is relying on surtitles to understand witty interchanges, they inevitably laugh at the wrong time, often before the funny lines are delivered. This can be off-putting to the performers and compromises the spontaneity that results from the audience reaction. Despite the fact that even when arias are translated, audiences still find it useful to see the text, the passages of recitative are where the action moves along and the best comedic moments reside.

Sams's translation is in contemporary English, which highlights the continuing relevance of Beaumarchais's 1778 French play (on which the opera is based). The original title of the play was *La Folle Journée, ou Le Mariage de Figaro* (*The Crazy Day or Figaro's Wedding*). A decade or so before the eruption of the French revolution, its subversive theme of the conflict

between the classes, and indeed the triumph of the servant classes over the aristocracy, generated significant controversy, but it is the comedy that carries the more personal human theme of the perennial battle of the sexes. The Count, a philandering husband, is a man in a position of power who attempts to use his clout to manipulate women in order to receive the sexual favours he thinks are his right. Does that sound familiar? The story is every bit as relevant today as it was in 1778!

In an exciting new development, co-artistic director Marshall Pynkoski was thrilled to be able to announce Opera Atelier's invitation to participate in 2018 in the annual Rossini Opera Festival (ROF) in Pesaro, Italy, Rossini's hometown. Mr. Pynkoski will be directing a new production of *Ricciardo e Zoraide* featuring one of the greatest stars of the ROF, none other than the fabulous Juan Diego Florez in the role of Ricciardo. Pesaro was where Mr. Florez made his debut in a leading role and he returns there every summer. Details remain thin on the ROF website, but thestar.com reports that soprano Pretty Yende will sing the role of Zoraide and tenor Sergey Romanovsky will sing Agorante in this rarely performed piece. The Opera Atelier creative team will perform its magic to open the festival's season, including choreography from co-artistic director Jeanette Lajeunesse Zingg and set design by Gerard Gauci. Go to: <https://operaatelier.com/support/events/vip-patrontour/> for details about how you could join Opera Atelier's Italian opera tour to Florence, Pesaro and Venice in August 2018.

Membership Renewal

You will find included with your newsletter a 2018 membership form.

In October 2019 the NCOS will be holding the next Brian Law Opera Competition; therefore, your support is much appreciated.

Best wishes for the coming year to all of our readers and contributors.

Please continue to submit your articles, etc. to the newsletter.

David Williams

Gerald Finley: The Master gives a Class! by Shelagh Williams

UOttawa School of Music's Visiting Artist Series starred our patron, Gerald Finley, in a masterful master class on the evening of Dec. 4th. In a 3^{1/2} hour session he dealt with five excellent singer/pianist combos, with Maxime Dube-Malenfant for three of the sets. Gerald praised the pianists (as orchestras!) and found aspects to compliment and to work on for each singer.

Our BLOC third place singer, soprano Jeanine Williams, got assistance with her Czech for Dvorak's lovely *Song to the Moon*, and help in freedom of delivery for an English art song.

The only male, bass-baritone Kevin Burke, with Ylan Chu, was complimented on his beautiful soft delivery of a lullaby and demonstration of a "messa di voce", and given some acting and singing tips on showing anger for his upcoming *Figaro* aria, *Se vuol ballare* - from the expert!

Soprano Juliana Krajcovic, another Yoriko Tanno student and the only under-

grad (fourth year), sang with Connor O'Kane. She gave us a top class *Come scoglio (Cosi)*, needing little work, and got advice on individualizing bits of her phone conversation in *Hello Rico*.

Soprano Emili Losier received a generous helping of Gerald's assistance. For her *I go to Him (Rake's Progress)*, she was helped to pronounce the English vowels beautifully, while *O quante volte (I Capulet e I Montecchi)* elicited exercises to help keep the voice free and resonant.

Unfortunately for soprano Carmen Harris, time ran out and she received some help only on her *Music for a While* (Purcell), which she was encouraged to approach as sharing a moment together with the audience.

Gerald was extremely generous with his help, explanations, anecdotes and overall support for the young people - quite a glorious evening all round!



Gerald Finley in *Thaïs* at the Met by Lesley Robinson

Ailyn Pérez starred as the courtesan, Thaïs, along with Gerald Finley as Athanaël, the monk with the increasingly tortured soul, in a revival of the Met's sumptuous production of Massenet's *Thaïs*.

The production is familiar, having featured as an HD Live from the Met presentation, and was released on DVD in 2010 with Renée Fleming and Thomas Hampson in the leading roles, but this version felt completely fresh and artistically vibrant.

The story hinges on the emotional journey on which the two protagonists accompany each other, but essentially in opposite directions. The sad irony that they are unable to find a common destination to arrive at together was expressed exquisitely in the performance. The two leading singers were superb. This was Ms. Pérez's role debut and her performance began as a sensual and sexy Thaïs. The jaded dissatisfaction that she gradually comes to in Act 2 was entirely believable and her final rise to saintly piety was expressed with heartfelt and convincing composure. Her voice was perfectly expressive throughout, meltingly alluring at the outset, achingly vulnerable during the transition in *Dis-moi que je suis belle* and reaching a blissful enlightenment at the end. Gerald Finley brought his magical

qualities to this role, following the character's emotional journey in his voice and giving himself up totally to the torment of wantonness and guilt and to the agony of his loss. The third major role was portrayed by French tenor Jean-Francois Borrás who made a convincing foil to Finley's character, contrasting in tone with a soft, yet sophisticated charm.

French conductor Emmanuel Villaume was a joy to watch. Conducting some of the time without a baton, his hand gestures were unusually expressive - it was almost as if he were conversing in his own brand of sign language. The musical interludes between scenes were highlights of Massenet's enchanting and atmospheric score and, as usual, the Met Orchestra gave a precise and moving rendition. Above all, the violin solo, *Méditation*, was exquisitely performed by Concertmaster David Chan, rising to sublime emotional crescendos. You can watch his magnificent interpretation on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LE-vk76Fg5k>. This was the last night of the run and Mr. Chan received a tremendous and affectionate ovation during curtain calls.

Ms. Pérez's costumes were those created especially for the production by French fashion designer, Christian Lacroix, and she looked spectacular. The set for the

Gerald Finley in *Thaïs* at the Met (continued)

desert scenes had a raised and undulating floor, which looked a little perilous for the artists. The colours were sumptuous with lots of gold, turquoise and pink for the interior scenes and a stunning blue sky for the outside scenes, which gave the impression of sunshine and heat. As usual we dined after the performance at Fiorello's, across the road from the Lincoln Center, where we were

fortunate to have the opportunity to congratulate a most gracious Ms. Pérez and the affable Mr. Villaume (photo by Mark). The Met continues to provide wonderful evenings and treasured memories.



Norma Live at the Met

It was a rare opportunity to attend a performance at the Met that was being broadcast live in cinemas around the world and then to attend an encore showing in order to compare the experiences. I went to the performance of Bellini's *Norma* on October 7th with the inspiring words of our Honorary Patron, Gerald Finley, to both singers and audience at the Brian Law Opera Competition ringing in my head. Gerald said that the best sound in the best acoustics can never be relayed and now I had the chance to put this to the test. We had already attended performances of productions that were later broadcast, perhaps with a different cast and certainly with a different unique performance. It was already clear to me that the view was different and that the broadcast sound would differ from the experience that was coloured by one's location in the theatre and proximity to the singers and musicians.

On this occasion we were sitting at the front of the auditorium, to the left of the conductor, Carlo Rizzi, close to the strings section (and close enough to hear the conductor breathing). A cameraman was stationed in the aisle, looking into the pit and it was interesting to talk to him and to congratulate him on his fine work. From the first notes it was immediately clear how this live experience differs dramatically from the recorded version. We could pay attention to how the music moves around the orchestra from instrument to instrument. The placement of multiple microphones eliminates that impression from the recording, so although the sound is perfect, it is different from being there. The most notable difference in the voices was that the recording was unable to capture the subtleties of the variations in volume and expression. This was most notable in Sondra Radvanovsky's magnificent *Casta diva*, at moments soft and gentle, at moments resounding and exigent, always sublime. It was better live. It is inevitable too for the audience on the day to be part of the performance, reacting to what is heard and seen.

by Lesley Robinson

Visually, the live experience is also different. The director for cinema literally directs the attention of the viewer and unavoidably some of what is happening on stage is missed. At a live performance attention is drawn to movements, to changes in lighting, to what may be going on peripherally. The audience's eyes may dart from the actions and expressions of chorus members, to the reactions of principle singers and to the movements of elements of the set. Robert Jones's spectacular set is in itself worthy of note. Those who saw the cinema broadcast may have noticed the reaction of the audience, as the set changed between scenes to reveal Norma's underground refuge. Again, it was so much more impressive to see this live. It is the Met's amazing space that makes such a breathtaking scene change possible and only live in the auditorium can this multi-storey stage space be fully appreciated.

The quality of the entire production was magnificent. As well as gloriously expressive singing, both Sondra Radvanovsky as Norma and Joyce DiDonato as Adalgisa put their heart and soul into portraying their characters. We shared their pain, their misgivings and their resolve. Joseph Calleja was in fine voice as Pollione and Matthew Rose gave a fine performance as Norma's sorrow-stricken father, Oroveso. It is in the exposition of the drama that the HD presentations excel. With camera close-ups on the artists, there is nowhere to hide and the acting is required to be top-notch. Today's superstars are required to act with more than their voices.

Also, it was fun to spot us as the onstage camera panned across during the overture and the curtain calls.

Gerald Finley, in his message to the BLOC, and indeed every presenter of the HD Live from the Met series have urged us to attend live performances, wherever they are happening. The benefit to the performers as well as to the audience is way more far-reaching than that which results from the contribution of the price of the ticket. Let's keep it happening.

Events You Might Have Attended

by Shelagh Williams

Farewell, My Beloved Canary!: Southminster's noon concert on October 18th featured Georg Philipp Telemann's *Kanarienvogel Kantata, Farewell, My Beloved Canary!*, commissioned by a bereaved canary owner, and only recently rediscovered. Although the music is serious, it was actually quite funny, and was staged as a comic mini-opera, with tenor David MacAdam in period costume, along with the dead canary in a cage! It was sung in English, with a lovely five-piece ensemble, including Roland Graham on harpsichord, and took an entertaining half hour, with alternating recits and arias, including a fierce rage aria! An Easter cantata by Telemann and two Handel arias rounded out this baroque concert, in a class presentation, with full English translations in the programme, and scrumptious cookies at the entrance to assuage any hunger pangs!

Seventeen Voyces with Caelis Academy Ensemble: Remembrance Day Concert: Seventeen Voyces under Director Kevin Reeves presented its most ambitious production yet in its November 11th concert at St Matthew's. It enlisted both the Seventeen Voyces and Matthew Larkin's new Caelis Academy Ensemble, plus four great Ottawa area soloists, two actors, video, and a huge orchestra. Luckily, extra funding was available from *Ontario 150*.

The programme began with an introduction to *The 48* of St. Matthew's killed in the two global conflicts, and especially the 16 from WWI. Then we enjoyed the premiere of Andrew Ager's *War Prelude*, the prelude of his forthcoming 6th symphony.

The first major piece was the premiere of the multi-media *Somewhere in France - love letters from the trenches*, featuring Kevin Reeves and Bronwyn Thies-Thompson reading extracts from Kevin's grandparents' WWI letters, suitably illustrated with photo and film videos. The various soloists interjected rousing renditions of popular war songs of the day to complete the thought-provoking production.

The excellent and well-chosen soloists happily included two BLOC finalists, soprano Maghan McPhee and Joel Allison, our 2017 second prize winner. The other two soloists were mezzo April Babey and tenor Dillon Parmer.

The major work was Hayden's *Missa in tempore belli - Mass in Time of War*, a later (1796) work of symphonic scope, with the prominent use of timpani occasioning the subtitle *Paukenmasse* or *Kettledrum*

Mass. It was here that both choirs, full orchestra, and four soloists were all required, and they really shone under Kevin Reeves' direction. We left with the voices and trumpets ringing in our ears!

An Evening of English and French Art Song: Prof. Lawrence Ewashko's uOttawa Art Song class recitals are always interesting and entertaining, and this one (November 30th), in easily accessible English and French, was especially so. This is a master's level class of piano, guitar and voice majors, and the programme spanned repertoire from the Baroque period to a work by uOttawa's Dr. Fred Lacroix. It opened charmingly with several singers seated in a semicircle as each sang with one of the guitarists in the centre, for an intimate feeling. The remainder of the concert took the usual collaborating pianist and singer format, plus two songs with Julian Bertino and his 10-string guitar upright on a stand - you had to see it to believe it! Of special interest to NCOS opera-lovers was the performance by 2017 BLOC third place winner, soprano Jeanine Williams.

Good and Bad Love Situations: A Celebration of Canadian Music: The final concert (December 7th) of the vocal repertoire class of Prof. Julian LeBlanc was an ingenious amalgam of art songs, mostly humorous. The third and fourth year students obviously enjoyed delivering them, resulting in good performances all round. The first half comprised French songs by Quebec composer Lionel Daunais. They ranged from romantic to short and funny to just plain lovely, and each singer had a solo piece to sing and helpfully summarised it first.

The second half was John Greer's *Liebesleid Lieder*, a spoof of Brahms' *Liebeslieder Waltzes*, set for SATB and four hands piano. This setting for 15 clever and satirical poems, mainly by Dorothy Parker, each to a different catchy dance rhythm, benefited from the singers' better English diction, and had us chuckling throughout. A delightful afternoon.

Onegin: This was advertised by the NAC English Theatre as a hip new take on Pushkin's tale of unrequited love, featuring a raucous and uplifting score. It was definitely not opera and did not appeal to me in the least. I felt that it was *Onegin* for dummies! Not a delightful evening.

Events You Should Enjoy

by David Williams

uOttawa's School of Music will hold a Workshop: *Singer as Storyteller* with mezzo soprano Rebecca Hass. Saturday, January 13, 10:30 a.m.-4 p.m., Room 109, Pérez Building. <http://arts.uottawa.ca/live>

The NAC will stage *Mr. Shi and His Lover*, January 3 - 13, NAC Studio, 8:00 p.m. plus 2:00 p.m. matinees January 6 & 13. This is a new chamber musical sung almost entirely in Mandarin with English surtitles.

The University of Ottawa Opera Company will present Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* with Chamber Orchestra. Sandra Graham, music and stage director, and conductor Alain Trudel. Thursday, January 25, and Friday, January 26, at 7:30 p.m., Saturday, January 27, at 2:00 p.m. St. Brigid's Centre for the Arts (310 St. Patrick Street). <http://arts.uottawa.ca/live/music-events>

A Night at the Opera presented by Centrepointe Theatres, Centrepointe Theatre, Thursday, February 01, at 8:00 p.m. Mezzo-soprano Julie Nesrallah, bass-baritone Gary Relyea and tenor Richard Margison take the stage to perform popular arias, emotional duets, and an impressive repertoire from this talented trio.

South Ottawa Performing Arts Collaborative will present Massenet's *Cendrillon*, February 15 & 17 (7:30 p.m.) and 18 (4:00 p.m.). Glebe St. James United Church, Ottawa. www.sopacottawa.com

The Ottawa Choral Society will perform Gabriel Fauré's *Requiem* and Howard Goodall's *Light Eternal Requiem*, Saturday, March 17, 2018 at 7:30 p.m. at Christ Church Cathedral, Ottawa. Featuring soprano Ellen McAteer, tenor Jean-Philippe Fortier-Lazure and baritone Jonah Spungin. www.ottawachoralsociety.com

The uOttawa's Vocal Sector will present *Great Composers of note*: Celebrating the anniversaries of Rossini, Gounod, Tchaikovsky, Debussy, Boulanger and Bernstein. Sunday, March 18, 7:30 p.m., Tabaret Hall.

The Savoy Society of Ottawa in collaboration with Malfi Productions will present *James Bond: A Convenient Lie*, Centrepointe Studio Theatre, April 12 - April 14, 8:00 p.m. A new opera in English described as an operatic spectacle blending the beautiful and demanding classical style of singing with the fast paced and exciting story of a contemporary film.

Opera in Local Cinemas

by David Williams

Cinema Aylmer, 400 Boulevard Wilfrid-Lavigne, Gatineau.

La bohème, Puccini (Opéra national de Paris), Friday 19 January, 3:00 p.m.; Wednesday 24 January, 7:00 p.m. The stage direction of this new production is entrusted to Claus Guth, who sets the drama in a future without hope where love and art become the ultimate transcendence.

Carmen, Bizet (Royal Opera House), Friday 9 March, 3:00 p.m.; Wednesday 14 March, 7:00 p.m. Barrie Kosky has devised a far-from-traditional version, incorporating music written by Bizet for the score but not usually heard, and giving a new voice to the opera's endlessly fascinating central character.

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

7:00 p.m. Filmed in Amsterdam, it inserts Tchaikovsky himself into it! At the same time a painful exploration into the psyche of the composer and a spectacular theatrical deployment.

Benvenuto Cellini, Berlioz (Dutch National Opera), Friday 18 May, 3:00 p.m.; Wednesday 23 May, 7:00 p.m. Terry Gilliam's exuberant production draws the protagonists into a delirious and joyful yet claustrophobic and megalomaniac world: a flaring up of contagious madness.

Towne Cinema, Rideau Street, Ottawa.

Rigoletto, Verdi (Covent Garden), 17 February, Time TBA. David McVicar's acclaimed production of Verdi's potent and tragic opera is conducted by Alexander Joel, with an excellent cast led by Dimitri Plataniyas, Lucy Crowe and Michael Fabiano.

DVD Reviews

by Shelagh Williams and Murray Kitts

For those of you who, like us, did not make it to Cinema Aylmer for the Bavarian State Opera production of Donizetti's *La favorite*, the OPL came to the rescue! They have a DVD of the 2016 Amelie Niermeyer production, with three of the same six principal singers.

The DVD stars mezzo Elina Garanča in her debut in the title role of Léonor de Guzman, mistress of the king, in a production mounted just for her. She sang beautifully and brought out the strength of the character, in history both a mistress and an advisor to King Alfonso XI of Castile, with her own court. Matthew Polenzani's lovely tenor made her admirer Fernand very sympathetic, while baritone Mariusz Kwiecień embodied a shifty, selfish king. Besides these big names, the excellent cast included bass Mika Kares as Balthazar, prior of Santiago de Compostela; Joshua Owen Mills as the dastard, Don Gaspar; and Elsa Benoit as Inès, Leonor's confidante.

The production, though well sung, played and acted, was compromised by the director's decision to drop any historical references, or even scenery, and give us instead modern dress and the usual multiple chairs to be manoeuvred about. Of course, this meant no *Pas de six* during the *Air des danses*, no swords for altercations or to be broken in disgust, and even no robes for the monks or even for Léonora's disguise at the end when she infiltrated the monastery to die! Talk about the necessary suspension of disbelief!

The video from Deutsch Grammophon came with a helpful booklet which included a list of musical numbers, synopsis, and useful background on the opera's historical background, genesis and versions, a welcome introduction to this opera, rarely performed these days, and which I had not seen previously. **SCW**

Plácido Domingo, in his quest to perform all the leading baritone roles in opera, has joined with LA Opera (Sony) to do his take on Verdi's *Macbeth*, one of the master's greatest early operas. The result will probably only appeal to his fans and to those who enjoy quasi-traditional productions. In an attempt to make the opera "spooky", Director Darko Tresnjak and Scenic Designer Colin McGurk have created a set where action is limited by a wall upon which the more flexible witches, using large metal brackets set in the wall, crawl and writhe from time to time. This leaves little space for other activities such as the Banquet Scene where only Macbeth's chair is present (table missing entirely). Domingo is reliable as usual but Ekaterina Semenchek

gives a rather tepid performance as the fearsome Lady Macbeth. Ildebrando D'Archangelo is excellent as Banquo. In spite of my preference for a traditional staging of *Macbeth*, I still prefer Zurich Opera's 2001 production (Image) with true baritone Thomas Hampson and a blood-curdling performance by Paoletta Marrocu as the wife of Macbeth. Domingo fans will like the LA production for Domingo, and Netrebko fans will like the Met's version even when she sleepwalks on chairs.

Speaking of Anna Netrebko (one of my favourite opera stars since I first saw her in the 1995 DVD of Glinka's *Ruslan and Lyudmila*), she appears for the first time in one of Wagner's operas and is outstanding as Elsa in Dresden's 2016 production of *Lohengrin* (DG). Also new to Wagner singing is Piotr Beczala whose lyric tenor is not as suited to the music as is the female heroine but shines in the lyric parts. The Dresden orchestra and chorus are superb as directed by renowned Wagner conductor Christian Thielemann. Supporting main characters are excellent. For those who treasure traditional settings of operas this is a very good choice. The main drawback is that the staging is stodgy and the sets are drab. The 2009 Munich Festival version (Decca) featuring the incomparable Jonas Kaufmann as Lohengrin was featured in a wildly updated version of the story. This was featured at one of our past Opera alla pasta sessions.

You can't tell a DVD by its cover is a good title for the next item. Being an enthusiastic fan of Rossini's operas I have had in my possession for many years a DVD of *Elisabetta, regina d'Inghilterra* from a 1995 Turin performance (Hardy). Although the music is of high quality, the production is not and the singers mostly not of the first rank. Then I saw advertised a new DVD (Bongiovanni) of the same opera, this time from Sassari on the island of Sardinia, displaying a properly costumed Elizabeth I in period finery. Playing the disc I discovered that the only time Elizabeth gets to wear this costume is in the final moments of the opera when it is lowered on wires to engulf her and the modern clothing that she has been wearing during the whole opera. The story is ludicrous from the historical point of view. Leicester has married Mary, Queen of Scots daughter(!) and is condemned to death. But that's partly another opera. Leicester saves Elizabeth from assassination by the Duke of Norfolk and Elizabeth gets to sing a terrific aria at the end of the proceedings in her costume *ex machina*, so to speak. To really appreciate this opera view the Philips CD with Monserrat Caballé and José Carreras. **MK**

SATURDAY AFTERNOON at the OPERA – from The Met

2017

March 3 1:00 pm *Madama Butterfly* (Puccini)

Dec 16 1:00 pm *Norma* (Bellini)

March 10 1:00 pm *Semiramide* (Rossini)

Dec 23 1:00 pm *Le Nozze di Figaro* (Mozart)

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

Dec 30 1:00 pm *The Merry Widow* (Lehár)

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

2018

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

Jan 6 1:00 pm *Hansel and Gretel* (Humperdinck)

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

Jan 13 12:30 pm *Cavalleria Rusticana/Pagliacci*
(Mascagni & Leoncavallo)

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

Jan 20 1:00 pm *Thaïs* (Massenet)

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

Jan 27 1:00 pm *Tosca* (Puccini)

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

Feb 3 1:00 pm *Il Trovatore* (Verdi)

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

Feb 10 12:00 pm *L'Elisir d'Amore* (Donizetti)

(For details about casts, conductors, synopsis, photos and much, much more see the Met's website: www.metopera.org/Season/Radio/Saturday-Matinee/Broadcasts)

Feb 17 1:30 am *Parsifal* (Wagner)

Feb 24 12:30 pm *La Bohème* (Puccini)

The Metropolitan Opera – Live in HD 2018

January 27 12:55 *Tosca* (Puccini) Encores February 17, 26 & 28

February 10 12:00 *L'Elisir d'Amore* (Donnizetti) 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>)

Opera alla Pasta

Sunday Afternoon at the Opera

January 21, 2018 *THE BARBER OF SEVILLE* (Rossini)

This all-time favourite comic opera features an all-star cast headed by Cecilia Bartoli and Gino Quilico from the Schwetzingen Festival 1988.

February 16 *BEATRIX AND BENEDICT* (Berlioz)

This version of Shakespeare's *MUCH DO ABOUT NOTHING* stars Stéphanie d'Oustrac (remember her from *L'HEURE ESPAGNOL*) and Paul Appleby in a battle of the sexes, assisted by Philippe Sly (1st prize winner, Brian Law Competition, 2009). This 2016 Glyndebourne production was directed by Laurent Pelly.

March 25 *DAVID ET JONATHAS* (M.A. Charpentier)

This opera version of a newly discovered baroque oratorio, based on the Bible story, stars Pascal Charbonneau (2nd place winner in the Brian Law Competition in 2003) and Anne Quintans in the title roles in a 2012 production picked two years running by BBC viewers as the best DVD of the year. William Christie conducts Les Arts Florissants.

May 27 Double Bill *SUOR ANGELICA* (Puccini)

This 2011 Covent Garden production, set in a children's hospital, features two outstanding European singers, Emmanuele Jaho and Anna Larsson. Antonio Pappano conducts.

PAGLIACCI (Leoncavallo)

Starring Jon Vickers and Raina Kabaivanska. Herbert von Karajan conducts the Orchestra and Chorus of La Scala, Milan.

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.