

Société d' Opéra  
de la Capitale Nationale



National Capital  
Opera Society

Concours d'opera Brian Law

2019

Brian Law Opera Competition



## Winners of the 2019 Brian Law Opera Competition

\$7,500 1<sup>st</sup> prize: Soprano **Ellen McAteer**

\$3,500 2<sup>nd</sup> prize: Bass-baritone **Mark Wilkinson**

\$1,500 3<sup>rd</sup> prize: Soprano **Susan Elizabeth Brown.**

The three other finalists, baritone **Adam Kuiack**, soprano **Juliana Krajčovič** and soprano **Lucie St-Martin** were each awarded \$750.

# The Finalists



From left to right **St-Martin, Krajčovič, Kuiack, Brown, Wilkinson, McAteer**

## A Message from Gerald Finley

Congratulations to all finalists!

How exciting that you will be able to sing for your supper, and other expenses, when the competition is over.

It is common to say that “it is the taking part, rather than the winning”. It is the thing to say if one is consoling the losers. One doesn’t enter competitions without really wanting to win or gain at least approval and recognition, and a few pennies in the process!

If you are not the winner, then what? What is the driving ambition that keeps you dealing with your every day frustrations of vocal state, or passages that still prove difficult? Do you deal with the detail of every element of your singing? Have you the freedom to become the artist that will fuel your ambition from whatever spark that comes? Will you be the “best you”, if a singing career doesn’t become reality?

From the moment that a rather famous Canadian baritone told me that I should “do something else” and a rather notable conductor said I’d never make it as

a soloist, there has been a burning desire to prove them wrong. Actually, it made me embark along a path that has given me such rewards in the journey, mostly not in singing. I took part in competitions knowing that I would not win, because it gave me the chance to come up against my nerves, which changed the way I sang. Only after years of ‘working the adrenaline’ did I realize that the fragile structure was entirely the uncertainty of what my voice would do under pressure. No, the voice is your friend and constant companion, be good to it and allow your spirit to shine because you know you can rely on that technique to provide that magic that you have within. Make your instrument your unique offering, hone its lumps and ease the tensions into a free-flowing expression of your heart. Today, you get to forget the technique – you will just be artists. Every audience wants to be enraptured.

Enjoy the task!



## The 2019 Brian Law Opera Competition by Lesley Robinson

The 14<sup>th</sup> Brian Law Competition was a special one. With a record number of entries, the standard was extremely high and all of the finalists distinguished themselves greatly. The three judges, Cara Gilbertson, Maghan McPhee and Doreen Taylor-Claxton really had their work cut out for them. The programme of the finals was notably diverse with arias in Italian, English, French, Russian and German by more than a dozen different composers and from works dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Following an introduction by NCOS President Mark Robinson, the afternoon was hosted by the energetic and knowledgeable Sandra Graham (one of our preliminary judges) who stepped in valiantly at the last minute for the ailing Roland Graham. As it must, the show went on, and Sandra was a skilled and charming presenter of the proceedings.

The programme began with a little bit of Mozart (*Don Giovanni*) from soprano Susan Elizabeth Brown, followed by an aria from Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* and then something from *Glory Denied* by contemporary American composer, Tom Cipullo. Accompanied by pianist Frédéric Lacroix, Susan sang with delicate expression. Her Lucia was a particularly vulnerable portrayal.



Adam Kuiack, baritone, sang in three different languages. The aria from *Silent Night* by Kevin Puts was in French. He followed that with a lighthearted Italian piece from Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore* and some serious Russian from Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades*. These three selections allowed Adam to portray a variety of characters, giving voice to a pensive Lieutenant Audebert, a pompous and bombastic Sergeant Belcore and an earnest Prince Yeletsky. The pianist was Nadia Boucher.



Soprano Juliana Krajcovic treated us to some more delightful Mozart, this time from *Così fan tutte*. The mood changed drastically with arias from *La Wally* by Catalani followed by Menotti's *The Consul*. Accompanied by pianist Peter Grant Mackechnie, Juliana's powerful voice filled the space. The heavy operatic themes of love and death can provide a challenge for young singers to find the maturity required and Juliana was up to the task, particularly in the Menotti piece.



Ellen McAteer, soprano, was our next finalist. She began unexpectedly with an English aria from Handel's *Theodora*. She too chose a Mozart aria, this time from the less frequently performed *Idomeneo*. Ms. McAteer's final selection was from the Russian fairy tale, *The Snowmaiden* by Rimsky-Korsakov. To give you an idea of the difficulty of Russian for Anglophones, the full Russian title of the opera is *Snegúrochka–Vesennyaya Skazka*. Ellen handled the challenge expertly. Her characterization was subtle, portraying Theodora's conviction, Ilia's tom loyalties and Snegurachka's playful innocence. The pianist was Frédéric Lacroix.



Frédéric Lacroix was also the pianist for baritone Mark Wilkinson, who began with some Mozart—an aria from *Le nozze di Figaro*. Mr. Wilkinson's second selection took us from comedy to tragedy, albeit in a lighter moment (and from Italian to French) with an aria from Ambroise Thomas's *Hamlet*. Finally, we were treated to an aria sung in German from an opera with an otherwise English libretto—*Little Women* by Mark Adamo. (The aria consists of the recitation of a German poem, followed by its translation.) Mark portrayed the characters he was presenting with skill and panache. His Count Almaviva was gruff, resolute and extremely well-acted. Next he was able to shade the complexity of Hamlet's character and finally we saw how the tender Dr. Bhaer was able to awaken Jo's heart.



Soprano Lucie St-Martin (also accompanied by Frédéric Lacroix) brought the afternoon's competition to a close with some more varied selections in French, English and finally German. The first was from the little-known opera *Rodrigue et Chimène*, by Debussy, based on the legend of El Cid, a classic tale of love and duty. (Debussy abandoned the opera in 1893 and the orchestration was finally completed for a premiere 100 years later!) Ms. St-Martin followed this with an aria from Menotti's *The Old Maid and the Thief*, a somewhat twisted tale which curiously was composed specifically to be performed on the radio. The competition came to an end on a delightful and upbeat note with an aria from Johann Strauss's *Die Fledermaus*. Lucie's renditions were charming. She acts, not only with her voice, but with her whole body, particularly with her eyes, whether expressing the ecstasy of love, the complexities of relationships or the downright chutzpah of Adèle in the final selection.



Lacroix



Boucher



Mackechnie

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As the judges deliberated, we were diverted by Sandra Graham reading messages from Gerald Finley and Brian Law whose inspiration and support provided encouragement for the young singers. (Each finalist received printed copies of their messages at the awards ceremony.) Following the judges decision, flowers were presented to Ellen McAteer and cheques were presented to all of the finalists.

## Greetings from Brian Law

Kia ora. Greetings from one of the farthest-flung outposts of the British Empire, where this month New Zealand is celebrating Captain Cook's first landing on these shores 250 years ago. "Celebrating" is perhaps not the ideal word, particularly if you're Maori, who, at the time of Cook's landing, had been settled in New Zealand for some 700 years. At their very first encounter with Cook, their leader Te Maro was shot and killed by one of the ship's crew. Hardly a cause for celebration. A decade later Cook would land on Nootka Sound on the west coast of Vancouver Island and have a more affable first meeting with the locals.

This past July, I was privileged to spend a month in Ottawa, where I found the natives to be very pleasant and friendly. What a beautiful city Ottawa still is! After 28 years away I rediscovered the grandeur of Parliament Hill and the majestic buildings along the River; the bustle and energy of the Byward Market; the splendour of the refurbished NAC and the new acoustic of Southam Hall (what a transformation); the exciting new performance space at Dominion Chalmers - how perspicacious and forward thinking of Carleton University to acquire it.

In a slightly different way, I also enjoyed the arguments over that extraordinary carbuncle proposed for the back side of The Chateau Laurier, and the appalling state of the roads - I make this latter observation as one who is still living through the rebuild of Christchurch after the 2011 earthquake, where for years every road has looked like present-day Elgin Street.

Much had changed since I left, but the essence of this wonderful city shines forth.

I am informed that I am expected to give some words of advice to these young singers at the beginning

of their careers—some bon môt salvaged from my life experience. Well no, that won't happen ... I did that once—once, when he was in his early twenties, Gerald Finley received some advice from me. (I'd known him since he'd joined St Matthew's Choir when he was eight.) He was now living in England and his career was just beginning.

I remember saying "You've got a promising voice, but I'm not sure there's a career there. Keep up your piano lessons and keep working on your choir training skills, you may need them." Ouch! Thank God he didn't take my advice!

What I did see in the subsequent years was the determination and dedication you need to achieve your goals. Gerald, living and studying in England, came to the realisation that his vocal technique was not secure enough to sustain a lifetime's singing career. He found the teacher he needed, Armen Boyajian, who unfortunately lived in New York. He sat outside his studio for two days trying to get an audition, eventually securing his acceptance and agreement to work with Gerald for a week or two, three or four times a year. This meant, of course, an incredible financial commitment by the young singer. But that determination, those lessons and long-term planning, produced the voice and sustained career that we and the world love and admire today.

That is the nearest I will come to giving advice ... You must be prepared to make great sacrifices to achieve your goals and reach your full potential. By reaching the finals of this competition you show you have great potential. You have a glorious vocal gift and the ultimate rewards are so fulfilling. Coraggio! - it's worth it!

Congratulations and thanks to everyone who made this year's competition a success!

Thank you to the singers who work hard to achieve high standards, and to the teachers who help and inspire the singers and to the excellent pianists.

Thank you to David Williams who prepared this special edition newsletter and to Klaus S. for the photography.

Thank you to all who made donations. Please consider donating for 2021 as the Competition relies exclusively on your generous donations.

Mark Robinson