

Société d' Opéra  
de la Capitale Nationale



National Capital  
Opera Society

Spring 2021

NEWSLETTER : BULLETIN

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## President's Message

It is March 15, 2021 and I am starting to feel optimistic that our jail sentences are coming to an end. Spring is in the air and we saw a high of 16 C last week. The vaccines are on their way!! Phew! It is about time.

We have postponed the next Brian Law Opera Competition until October 2022 and will start the planning in the fall. Also we decided to waive membership fees for this year. So do not worry about your membership. However, if you would like to make a donation to the society, it will be gratefully received. I will provide you a receipt for Income Tax purposes.

I have some sad news to share, that one of our long-time supporters passed away recently, Tom McCool. Our deepest sympathies go out to Marjie and their families. He was a lovely gentleman and will be missed.

I feel somewhat overwhelmed with all the Opera live streams that are available to us. It is really marvellous to have such a problem during these times. My current chosen stream is from San Francisco Opera, which is pro-

viding a virtual Ring festival throughout March. The four operas, recorded in 2018, are streamed each weekend free of charge. In addition they offer a series of one hour presentations on subjects such as the History of The Ring, Dining on the Rhine, Feminism, Grace Bumbry breaking the colour barrier at Bayreuth etc. The fee to watch all 16 presentations is US\$99. As always, big thanks for contributions from David Williams and his team for the newsletter and to Jim Burgess for our website.

As soon as everyone feels safe, we should plan on a special face-to-face meeting where we can embrace, watch opera, eat, drink and be merry!

Our next Zoom meetings are planned for March 21, May 2 and May 23. We will hold a brief AGM after the presentation on May 23.

Stay safe and I hope to see you on a Zoom soon.

**Mark Robinson**

### Board of Directors

Mark Robinson - President Murray Kitts - Past President.

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Newsletter: David Williams

Webmaster: Jim Burgess

## Tom McCool's Legacy in the NCOS Newsletter

The second of two prominent contributors to our newsletter has been lost to a fatal disease. The tribute to Shelagh Williams's contributions appeared in our Summer Newsletter 2020.

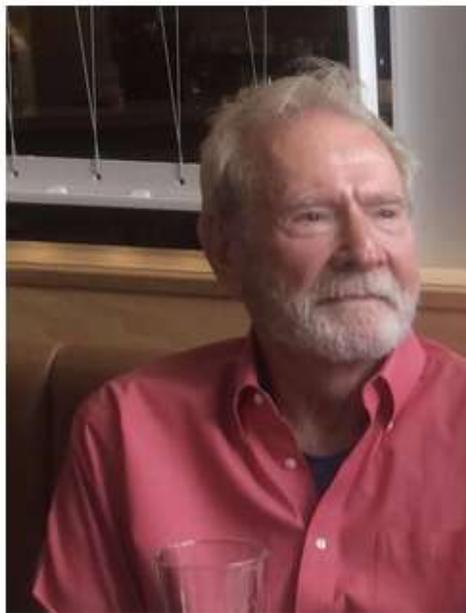
Tom McCool joined our society in 1997 and immediately took over as editor of the newsletter for four years. But he preferred to write reviews of opera performances he had seen or to review books dealing with some opera connection. It was difficult for him in his review in the Summer 2001 newsletter to conceal his enthusiasm to be able to see Calixta Lavaleé's *La Veuve* composed by the creator of the "O Canada" music. But he tried to praise the performance in Hull by Le Théâtre Lyrique de Hull while admitting that the music was definitely not as good as anything Offenbach wrote in the same genre.

He was a great reader and as well as books on composers and operas admired those novels of Donna Leon and Maragaret Truman where mystery murders took place in an opera house.

Year after year he wrote many articles and book reviews. As the newsletter became more and more popular Tom was called on to help David with the editing as early as 2006 and continued doing this until the end.

### Personal Memories

I first met Tom about 40 years ago when we both taught history at Fort Frances High School. There was no teacher on the staff who was more praised by his students or admired by his colleagues than Tom. Especially on weekends I could expect to hear the door leading to my loft



flat open and a voice would call out loudly "McCool, McCool" while Tom ascended the staircase. And I would set out proper libations for historical and philosophical discussions. Tom left Fort Frances at the end of this one year but we kept in touch because Tom knew that we both took summer courses, especially abroad, because they were very inexpensive and usually excellent. I wound up in Rome and Tom was

there for one of those four summers I spent with the University of Alberta, studying the art and archaeology of ancient Rome and going to all the wonderful operas and concerts and eating all the great food. On Tom's recommendation I attended a summer course offered by mainly American universities at Oxford's Corpus Christi College and kept going back, summer after summer until 1988, the year I retired. From then on when Tom was in Ottawa we were in the habit of phoning

one another regularly and when we were both in Victoria I was usually next door neighbour to Tom and Marjie so we could go to musical events together and wine and dine each other, a practice which carried over to the days we were in Ottawa. Marjie was a dear friend from my early days with the Opera Society.

Although physically challenged much of his life, Tom never complained and led a full life. He was a very fine person and a good friend. I wish I could find the proper words to tell you how much I miss him.

**Murray Kitts**

## Encounters with a Diva (with none of the negative connotations)! by Marian Cumming

When David suggested a submission to the Newsletter could include writing about a famous singer you know personally. I asked whether “knew” counted! The following Obituary in a recent Opera News magazine brought back memories of my parents and my friendship with a young soprano whose international operatic career was just taking off.

“*Gabriella Tucci, 90. An Authoritative Interpreter of Verdi and Puccini Heroines, has died. Rome, Italy - August 4, 1929 – July 9, 2020.*”

A striking, authoritative interpreter of the heroines of Verdi and Puccini, Gabriella Tucci made her Metropolitan Opera debut in 1960 as Cio-Cio-San. Tucci remained on the Met roster for thirteen consecutive seasons, singing 250 performances with the company in New York and on tour. The most frequent of the soprano's twenty roles for the Met were Aida, Leonora in *Il Trovatore*, Marguerite in *Faust*, Alice Ford, Violetta, Desdemona, Tosca, Cio-Cio-San, Mimi and Gluck's Eurydice. Tucci sang leading roles in four new Met Productions – *Otello* (1963), conducted by Georg Solti and directed by Herbert Graf. *Falstaff* (1964), conducted by Leonard Bernstein and directed by Franco Zeffirelli, *Faust* (1965), conducted by George Pretre and directed by Jean-Louis Barrault, and *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1970) conducted by Richard Bonynge and directed and choreographed by Milko Sparembek. On the afternoon of Saturday, April 16, 1966, Tucci sang Mimi in the *Bohème* that was the last live radio broadcast from the Met's home at Broadway and 39th Street. That evening, at the gala to mark the company's farewell to the Old Met, the last number on the program was the final trio from *Faust* sung by Tucci, Nicolai Gedda and Jerome Hines. Tucci's last Met performance was as Marguerite in 1972.”

Tucci trained at the *Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia* in Rome with her voice coach, Leonardo Filoni, whom she later married. In 1951 she made her operatic debut in Spoleto as Leonora in *La Forza del Destino* alongside the famed Italian tenor Beniamino Gigli, then 61. In 1953 she took part in the famous revival of Cherubini's *Medea*, as Glauce opposite Maria Callas at the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino. She made her La Scala debut in 1959 as Mimi in Puccini's *La Bohème*, followed by her debut in 1960 at the Royal Opera House in London as Puccini's *Tosca* and at the Metropolitan Opera that same year as Cio-Cio-San (as noted above).

Ms. Tucci made only two studio recordings of complete operas, Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* opposite

Mario del Monaco and Verdi's *Il Trovatore* with Franco Corelli. However, there are recordings of live performances and radio broadcasts and on YouTube. I happened to come across an Agnus Dei from Verdi's *Requiem* with Janet Baker and the Cleveland Orchestra and Chorus, which is worth a listen, once you get past the coughs from the audience!

### Now for the personal connection:

In the late 1940's my father decided to take a temporary break from medicine to focus on his operatic ambitions. He had already performed in Malta in concerts and in local productions of *La Traviata* and *Tosca*. At the time he was a baritone taking on the roles of Germont and Scarpia respectively. Within a few years it was suggested that his voice was more suited to Verdian tenor roles. By this time we were living in Rome and my father was in search of a voice coach. He settled on none other than Maestro Leonardo Filoni, Gabriella Tucci's husband. I often tagged along to his singing lessons which were given at their home and when Gabriella wasn't travelling she often came by and would sometimes join in a duet from either *La Forza del Destino* or *Il Trovatore*, which were the two operas my father happened to be working on at the time.

She was slim, attractive, had perfect diction and was a consummate actress, which in those days was somewhat of a rarity. She was dedicated to her craft often dropping by our flat in Rome where my mother would help her with her French diction. She never let fame go to her head, she was warm, engaging and unassuming. Gabriella was, however, a bit of a hypochondriac. I remember one evening after one of her performances at the Teatro dell'Opera in Rome a group of us went to a nearby restaurant for dinner. It was a beautiful evening and warm enough to sit outdoors. There were about ten of us around the table. The men removed their jackets and there was Gabriella, bundled up in a heavy wrap with a scarf wrapped around her nose and mouth (which she only removed between bites). She was always afraid of “l'aria cattiva” (bad air) which might have affected her vocal chords and interfered with her singing.

My only regret is that I never managed to catch any of her Met performances before she retired.

P.S. A rather tenuous connection with a famous singer – Beniamino Gigli lived in a villa two streets away from our flat in Rome. Unfortunately I never got to see him in the neighbourhood nor anywhere else for that matter!

## Good News from Joel Allison

Since the COVID pandemic had closed the Berlin Opera, Joel was released in December and was home in Toronto for Christmas and has been there since. Joel and Eveline are pleased to announce that their baby daughter, Klara Elizabeth Mate-Allison was born on 11 March. All are doing well.

While in Toronto Joel teamed up with Matthew Larkin to record *Der Heiland fällt vor seinem Vater nieder* from Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*.

<https://www.facebook.com/matthew.larkin.583/videos/10157714128041426>

Joel will also be part of NACO's 17<sup>th</sup> April live stream concert singing selections from Vaughn-Williams' *House of Life*. He'll be accompanied by a group playing Joel's transcription of the accompaniment for strings, harp and woodwinds

At this point Joel's plan is to go back to Berlin at the end of April to start rehearsals for *Das Rheingold*. I am hoping the third wave doesn't change these plans but time will tell.



I am sure that you will join me in wishing all three a happy and successful future. Who knows - maybe Klara Elizabeth will join both her parents in a classical music career.

**David Williams**

## OPERA CAKE

by Vera-Lee Nelson



Watching the "Great Canadian Baking Show" recently I was so interested to see that one of their challenges was "Opera Cake". How did it get its name, I wondered, what did it have to do with opera? Watching the contest one was immediately assured that the cake was elegant, expensive, rich in flavour and beautiful, with its name scrolled grandly on the top in chocolate glaze.. Well that certainly applies to most operas! There must be more, though, to its history. Some claim the cake was invented in Paris, as long ago as 1890. But the greatest of these cakes is made in Paris, at Dalloyau. They claim the cake is as gloriously delicious as *La Bohème* is affectingly beautiful. The name was given by Madame Andree Gavillon, the wife of Chef Cyriaque Gavillon who claimed to have invented the cake, and she

named it after the Opera Garnier.

It is a cake in 6 acts. Three thin layers of almond cake, soaked in coffee syrupy layer of espresso flavoured buttercream, a layer of bittersweet chocolate ganache and a topping of chocolate glaze. The traditional name is scrolled across the top. (The baking contestants had some trouble with this step). The cake is 10 inches square. There are recipes available in many places for those with the time, patience and artistic flair to construct one. However, I will be ordering mine from a French Patisserie. I believe it can also be ordered frozen from Dalloyau in Paris.

## Precocious and Prodigious - Young Operatic Composers by Lesley Robinson

We are familiar with the phenomenon of child prodigies in the musical world, but rarely are those of tender age able to compose their own music, let alone complete operas. Nevertheless, there are many examples of first operas being composed by teenagers or even younger tunesmiths. Some of them had the advantage of being born into musical families, but not all. Here's a little review of some of their astonishing achievements.

**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** was well known to have begun his career in music at a very young age. Wolfgang was the youngest of seven children, although five of them died in infancy and Wolfgang and his famous older sister (four years older), known as "Nannerl", were left to fulfill their parents' ambitions. Their father Leopold was a composer in his own right, but much of his body of work, consisting of symphonies, concertos, oratorios and some theatrical pieces, has been lost. Leopold is of course better known as the teacher and reputedly somewhat harsh and authoritarian promoter of his children's careers. He began to teach Nannerl keyboard when she was seven years old and Wolfgang (then only three years old) showed a marked interest in the proceedings. Only a year later he began to learn formally and by the age of five he was already composing his own music. He wrote his first violin sonata at the age of seven and his first symphony just a year later. His first operatic work, *Die Schuldigkeit des ersten Gebots*, described as a sacred singspiel (musical play), premiered in 1767 when Mozart was just 11 years old. His first true opera, *Apollo et Hyacinthus* appeared just couple of months later. The original cast was made up of young singers between the ages of 12 and 22 years old. You can view a recent performance of the entire opera on You Tube.



Cut and paste the following link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORVE\\_LaG-5A&list=PLc6ZDeDSaSBKb9AhwiWzy4wS9RH6mLuG&index=4&t=1548s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORVE_LaG-5A&list=PLc6ZDeDSaSBKb9AhwiWzy4wS9RH6mLuG&index=4&t=1548s) or search on You Tube for W.A.Mozart: "Apollo et Hyacinthus" K.38 (1767). More frequently performed is *Bastien und Bastienne*, written when Mozart had reached the ripe old age of 12. Readily available on You Tube, a recently uploaded version can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F0UABWCfDZM> or search for "BASTIEN UND BASTIENNE" im Brandenburger Theater. The young composer was to write another seven operas whilst still in his teens, including *Lucio Silla* and *La finta giardiniera*. (Many composers have been less prolific in a lifetime!) These early works were premiered in Salzburg, Milan and Munich. Mozart can certainly be described as the first international, teenaged superstar.

**Alessandro Scarlatti** was born in Palermo, Sicily almost a hundred years before Mozart. He was sent to Rome at the age of 12 where he composed his first opera, *Gli equivoci nel sembiante* at the age of 18. Cut and paste the following link for some brief excerpts: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrNxQDTesFo> or search You Tube for Gli Equivoci nel Sembiante. A year later, the young man's second operatic offering, *L'honestà negli amori* was premiered.

**Georg Friederich Händel** was born and grew up in a place called Halle, not far from Leipzig in Central Germany. His father was a barber-surgeon who died when Handel was only 11 years old. Georg's aptitude for music was noted from an early age and the young organist at the Halle parish church, Friedrich Wilhelm Zachow (a composer in his own right) became his teacher. The young Händel's first two operas, *Almira* and *Nero* were both produced in Hamburg while the composer was still in his teens. Go to: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I4bgMj7SkFk> for an excerpt from the Boston Early Music Festival's 2013 production of *Almira* or search You Tube for Handel's *Almira*: "Der Himmel wird straffen dein falsches Gemüht".



**Luigi Cherubini** came from a musical family. Born in Florence in 1760, he started to learn from his father, Bartolomeo, a harpsichordist at around the age of six. His first operatic work, *Amore artigiano* was written when he was 13 years old. He completed three more works during his teens, including *Il giuocatore* and *Il Quinto Fabio*, his first three-act opera seria. Of these, the only one I was able to find on You Tube is *Il giuocatore*. There is a complete version at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpaLnn2tQbl>. (Search You Tube for *Il giuocatore* Cherubini.)

## Precocious and Prodigious - Young Operatic Composers (contd.)



**Carl Maria von Weber** was born in 1786 into a musical family. His father, Franz Anton von Weber was a violinist, conductor and theatre director and his mother, Genoveva Brenner was a singer. Genoveva was Franz Anton's second wife and Carl Maria was the first of three children of this marriage, although the other two died in infancy. The family moved frequently, pursuing their theatrical and musical careers and Franz Anton, aware of his young son's talents, was ambitious for him, hoping that he would become a famous prodigy in the way that Mozart had been. There was incidentally a family connection between the two composers—Mozart's wife Constanze was Weber's cousin. Weber's first opera was *Die Macht der Liebe und des Weins* (*The Power of Love and Wine*) which seems somewhat of a curious title for the work of a twelve-year-old! Unfortunately, none of the music from this or the opera he wrote two years later, *Das stumme Waldmädchen* (*The Silent Forest Maiden*) survives. He was 15 when he wrote his third opera, *Peter Schmoll und seine Nachbarn* (*Peter Schmoll and His Neighbours*). There are some recordings, but no video. Nevertheless, a playlist of the audio recording can be found on You Tube [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KW7hP9N1Jvg&list=OLAK5uy\\_lo7C2GgalolwJJ2KhOutNVobgYVtXaNFA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KW7hP9N1Jvg&list=OLAK5uy_lo7C2GgalolwJJ2KhOutNVobgYVtXaNFA) (Search for *Peter Schmoll und seine Nachbarn*.) Only fragments remain of *Rübezahl*, which was a subsequent opera written in Weber's later teens.



**Gioachino Rossini** was a prolific composer of opera, packing in 39 operas over a period of less than 20 years. He retired at the grand old age of 37 and lived in glorious retirement from the opera world, mostly in Paris where he hosted musical salons, for another 39 years. Rossini did have the advantage of being born into a musical family. Both of his parents were musicians—his father played the trumpet and his mother was a singer. He is the most famous son of Pesaro, a small town on Italy's Adriatic coast, which is now the home of the annual Rossini Opera Festival. He went to a music school in Bologna (150 kilometres from Pesaro) and began to compose music from the age of 12. His first professional opera premiere took place in Venice when he was 18 years old. *La cambiale di matrimonio* (*The Marriage Contract*) was a delightful farce, composed in a few days and included music that Rossini later reused as the duet, "Dunque io son" between Figaro and Rosina in Act 1 of *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. For a

full version, recorded at the Rossini Opera Festival see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T0eEBsWOSVU> (Search on You Tube for Rossini: La cambiale di matrimonio - ROF 2020.) There was actually an earlier, more serious opera entitled *Demetrio e Polibio* which was composed when Rossini was still a student in Bologna, but it didn't have a professional staging until 1812 when he was already 20 years old. Incidentally, Rossini didn't celebrate many actual birthdays because he was born on 29 February 1792. There was one more comic opera which was written during his teens. *L'equivoco stravagante* (*The Curious Misunderstanding*) was Rossini's first attempt at a full two-act opera. A complete video version, also from the Rossini Opera Festival in Pesaro, is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbPvZkuAgb4> (Search on You Tube for G Rossini L'equivoco stravagante HQ.)



Five years younger than Rossini, **Gaetano Donizetti** died 20 years earlier, but remained active in opera composition throughout his life, so that he completed nearly 70 operas. With two older brothers, Gaetano grew up as the youngest in a poor family with no musical background. His father was a caretaker at a pawnbroker's shop. He was born in Bergamo and became a less than hugely successful choirboy in the local church. Nevertheless, the "maestro di cappella", Simone Mayr, himself a prolific composer of opera, recognised the boy's talents and accepted him into the music school he had founded. Donizetti completed his first opera, *Il Pigmalione* (*Pygmalion*) at the age of 19. However, it was never performed during his lifetime. The premiere finally took place in the composer's hometown of Bergamo on 13 October 1960. There is a recording of a live performance available on You Tube, at:

## Precocious and Prodigious - Young Operatic Composers (contd.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XSUYOcg9r9Y>, but the video is peopled by stills of beautiful statues. Search on You Tube for “Il Pigmalione (First Donizetti’s Opera)”.



**Richard Wagner**’s first surviving complete work for the stage, *Die Feen* (*The Fairies*) was composed during his early twenties, but he deserves a mention here because there were some earlier attempts which were incomplete or did not survive. Wagner too came from humble circumstances. He was the ninth child of Carl Wagner, a clerk for the police and his wife Johanna who was the daughter of a baker. His father died when Richard was only six months old and as a child he was influenced by his stepfather, Ludwig Geyer who was an actor and playwright. As a 13-year-old schoolboy Richard wrote a five-act Shakespearean-style tragedy entitled *Leubald*. He was determined to set it to music, so he asked for music lessons and began to learn the following year. The text is still in existence, but none of the music survives. There were also a couple of unfinished pieces he worked on during the next few years. *Die Laune des Verliebten* (*The Mood of the One in Love*) and *Die Hochzeit* (*The Wedding*) were both abandoned.

**Ruggero Leoncavallo** composed his first opera when he was 19 years old, but it was not performed until 20 years later. Born in Naples in 1857, his family was not a musical one. His father was a magistrate and judge. Ruggero studied at the Naples Conservatory and attended the University of Bologna where he studied literature. His first opera was entitled *Chatterton* and he wrote the libretto himself. The title character was an 18th century English poet, Thomas Chatterton, who was raised in poverty, yet began to publish his poetry at the age of 11. Chatterton was a very sad character indeed. He managed to pass off his poetry as the work of an imaginary medieval monk and ended up committing suicide at the tender age of 17—some heavy themes indeed for a teenaged composer. There is a recording of the complete opera which can be found on You Tube at [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=OLAK5uy\\_ITjYuC2zNL4WKuUnG5ThYQyuKwI0i0FBc](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=OLAK5uy_ITjYuC2zNL4WKuUnG5ThYQyuKwI0i0FBc) or search for Leoncavallo: Chatterton.

**Richard Strauss**’s first attempt at an operatic work was a one-act piece entitled *Der Kampf mit dem Drachen* (*The Fight with the Dragon*.) It was written in 1876 when he was just 12 years old, but it was never performed. Strauss was born in 1864 in Munich where his father was the principal horn player in the Court Opera and was also a professor of music, so Richard began his musical studies early—he was four years old when he started to learn piano and attended orchestra rehearsals. He soon took lessons in music theory and orchestration, so that his first musical composition was written at the age of six.



**Sergei Prokofiev** was born in 1891 in Ukraine, at that time part of the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union. His father was an agronomist and a soil engineer; it was his mother, who came from a family of former serfs, who had artistic sensibilities. She took piano lessons as an adult and it was hearing her practise that sparked young Sergei’s interest in music. By the age of five he was already composing piano pieces which his mother wrote down. Incredibly, by the age of eight he was working on his first opera, *Великан, Velikan* (*The Giant*). His parents had taken him to Moscow where he heard opera for the first time including Borodin’s *Prince Igor* and Gounod’s *Faust*. The premiere of *The Giant* took place at an uncle’s estate, with the roles taken by family members. Cut and paste the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zw97IKElwgs> to see some brief excerpts from a recent performance at the Prokofiev Hall of the new Mariinsky Theatre in Saint Petersburg. (Search on You Tube for The Giant Prokofiev.) Incidentally the new Mariinsky Theatre is a fabulous building. If you look at photographs of its interior spaces, you may notice a marked similarity to the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, home of the Canadian Opera Company in Toronto. That is because they share the same architects—Toronto-based Diamond Schmitt Architects.

## Precocious and Prodigious - Young Operatic Composers (contd.)



By the time he was 14 years old **Dmitri Shostakovich** had composed his first opera entitled *The Gypsies* with text from a poem by Pushkin. Unfortunately, the young composer burnt some of his early work in a fit of disillusionment and only fragments of *The Gypsies* survived. He later bitterly regretted this and sadly we don't have any record of a performance. Originally from Siberia, Dmitri's father studied physics and mathematics at Saint Petersburg University and worked as an engineer. His mother, also from Siberia, played piano and she started to teach Dmitri at the age of nine. He quickly displayed remarkable musical aptitude, remembering pieces his mother had played at previous lessons and playing them from memory. He entered the Petrograd Conservatory at the age of 13 and graduated at the age of 19, writing his First Symphony as his graduation piece.



Pennsylvania-born **Samuel Barber**'s musical talent was apparent from an early age. His father was a physician, but the family had many musical connections. His mother was a pianist and his aunt, on his mother's side, Louise Homer, was a contralto who sang at the Met. Her husband, Sidney Homer composed songs. Young Samuel began to learn the piano at the age of six and composed his first work for piano a year later. His father hoped that he would one day go to Princeton and become a doctor. Wanting him to be well rounded, his parents encouraged him to play football at school. However, in a letter to his mother, he told her that he wasn't cut out to be an athlete, but was meant to be a composer. Samuel wrote his first opera, entitled *The Rose Tree*, with a libretto by the

family's cook, at the age of 10. Unfortunately, none of it survives. Samuel did well academically and was involved in a number of extracurricular activities—Latin, French, music and drama clubs. He became organist at a local church at the age of 12 and at 14 he entered the youth program at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, where he flourished for nine years.

With a variety of musical backgrounds and a range of parental encouragement and/or pressure, these young composers showed a remarkable passion to create. What they have in common is the confidence that they were capable of these remarkable accomplishments and the dedication to make them a reality.

### Glyndebourne

by Vera-Lee Nelson

Glyndebourne is an opera venue like no other. Glyndebourne itself is an English Country House, Grade II listed and about 600 years old. Since 1934 it has been the location of an opera house hosting the Glyndebourne Festival Opera. It provides a very English experience, dressing up, and picnicking on the lawns. It is located near Lewes in East Sussex. There's a shop and wonderful gardens, laid out for safe visiting this year.

During the festival (May-August) the wearing of formal dress is encouraged. Vintage attire is appreciated, and changing rooms are provided.

A meal before the performance is also a tradition. It can be a prepared picnic or ordered from the house. Of course, the English weather must be taken into account. There is a 90 minute interval to enable dining in the restaurant.

The capacity of the opera house is 1200 and because of the restrictions this year the capacity for performances will be limited to 600. Most seats are

arranged in pairs. Most covid precautions will be in effect, wearing of masks, etc. There are generally 6 performances in the season, this year 20 May until 29 August. This year there will be 4 fully staged operas, A semi-staged *Tristan und Isolde* and a concert series.

John Christie, a music lover, became the owner of the Manor in 1920 and after his marriage to the singer-Audrey Mildmay developed the first concert venue in 1934. In 1994, just 60 years to the day later the new opera house seating 1200 was opened. In 2002 a wind turbine was launched, making the opera house the UK's first arts organization to generate its own power.

Glyndebourne has its own star power, and in turn attracts the best and brightest of the opera world. Many of us have not had the enchantment of attending a performance there. Perhaps it is a worthy addition to our private bucket list, or perhaps a glass of champagne and a good video from the Met will suffice.

## Celebrating Black Opera, A Personal View by Mark Robinson

This was a presentation in our series of Zoom events, held on 21 February 2021. It was a musical journey that was inspired by two books I read last year. They were: *Black Opera, History, Power, Engagement* by Naomi André and Shirley Verrett's *I Never Walked Alone—the Autobiography of an American Singer*. Mainly, we will celebrate Black voices and along the way we will learn about “Black Mozart” and “Black Callas” and how these terms take away from the individuals.

### Excerpt from Rossini's *Otello*

Rossini was 24 years old when he wrote this. It was his 19th opera, after *The Barber of Seville* and before *La Cenerentola* and was very popular in its day. Lesley Showed you an extract in her talk on Shakespeare. I want to use the same production for a different reason. It is a relatively recent production (2012) from the Zürich Opera House. It features three marvellous tenors—Javier Camarena as Rodrigo, John Osborn as Otello and Edgardo Rocha as Iago. The production also stars Cecilia Bartoli as Desdemona and Peter Kalman as Desdemona's father. The excerpt is from the end of Act I. Otello and Desdemona have secretly married, but in this scene, Desdemona's father is giving her hand in marriage to Rodrigo. Wow! What singing! The modern dress in the production highlights the racism of the Venetians. There is a scene in which a Black waiter is clearly snubbed. Yet there is nothing mentioned in the program about the fact that John Osborn is performing in blackface. The Met stopped using blackface in 2015, committing to “color-blind” casting. This year Alexander Neef was criticized for proposing that the Paris Opera eliminate blackface since the practice of blackface makeup vividly references the painful tradition of minstrelsy where white singers portrayed negative stereotypes of Blacks. Feeling uncomfortable with the blackface, when Lesley showed an excerpt from the Zürich production of *Otello*, she chose to use a scene without Mr. Osborn. This is a wonderful production which it no longer feels acceptable to show.

### Excerpt from *The Black and White Minstrel Show*

This was the number one TV show in Europe for 21 year from 1957-1978. It was on at a prime time slot—Saturday at 6 pm. It features white male singers in blackface with 12 pretty girls and we grew up with this in the UK. The blackface phenomenon started in the US in 1840 where white men imitated what Black entertainers were doing. The excerpt selected featured songs from Gilbert and Sullivan. At the time there was no thought that this was racist, just that it was nice singing.



### Joseph Bologne

Few may know of Joseph Bologne who later became known as the Chevalier de Saint-Georges. He was a fascinating man. He was a champion fencer in France and is depicted in a portrait in Buckingham Palace. He shared lodgings in Paris with Mozart for two months. He was born in Guadeloupe in the Caribbean on Christmas Day in 1745. His father was a French plantation owner and his mother a slave. He was educated in Paris in both fencing and music and played the violin for Marie Antoinette. He has inappropriately been called “Black Mozart”, which diminishes his place in classical music history. He was accomplished in riding, shooting, fencing and dancing as well as music. There is only one surviving opera of the six that Chevalier de Saint-Georges wrote. It is called *L'Amant Anonyme* (*The Anonymous Lover*). Last year LA Opera live-streamed a new production. The excerpt shared was a trio from a concert performance: Léontine, a beautiful young widow is disillusioned with love. She begins to receive numerous letters from an anonymous lover. This amuses her friend Valcour (tenor). After hiding his true feelings, he finally reveals that he is the anonymous lover.

### Sally Hemings

Sally Hemings was a Black woman in the late 18th century. Her story has been suppressed, revised and rewritten, depending on who is writing the history. This is the imagined diary of Sally Hemings who was enslaved by Thomas Jefferson and was the mother of six of his children. They had a long-term relationship, but despite the enormous amount written about Thomas Jefferson, very little is known about Sally Hemings.

## Celebrating Black Opera, A Personal View (continued)

The extract was introduced by Francesca Zambello who is Artistic director of the Glimmerglass Festival, where this was produced.

### Excerpt from *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*

French Composer Georges Bizet died in 1875 at the age of 36 on the night of the 33rd performance of *Carmen*. Bizet was never to know that *Carmen* was to become one of the top three, most popular operas. One wonders, if he had lived long enough to write another opera, whether he would have left us another masterpiece. The music of *Carmen* is full of great melodies, representing the emotions and suffering of the characters. The story is based on a Prosper Mérimée novella by the same title, which is a mix of a travelogue and an adventure yarn. What surprised me was how much racism is in the novella. *Carmen* is described as “a Gypsy girl”. Today this is considered by some to be a racial/ethnic slur for Romani people. Western art forms have misrepresented these people as untrustworthy and violent thieves. Bizet’s intent was to present an exotic story for the 19th century French public. The extract chosen is something different. In this version, *Carmen* is not stunning or special, but she is an everyday sympathetic character. *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha* was filmed in 2005 in a south African township called Khayelitsha. The poverty is clear. It is set in the present and does have references to apartheid. None of the cast had acted in a film before. There were four weeks of rehearsals and all the singing was recorded live on set with no dubbing. Lastly it was sung in Xhosa, which is an official South African language that uses clicks. In the excerpt chosen, we join Michaela waiting for a bus. Jongikhaya (Don Jose) is driving the police car and I think you will recognise the rest.

### Excerpts from *Porgy and Bess*

Now back to the Americas and in my opinion the great American opera, often described as a folk opera and an “opera of the people”. Like *Carmen*, it is full of marvellous melodies. The opera is based on the book by DuBose Heyward, written in 1925. He based the character of Porgy on a real-life crippled Black man who lived in a tenement building in a place called Cabbage Row in South Carolina. Heyward wrote about him, “From the newspaper report I could read passion, hate and despair.” In the fictional version the characters live in Catfish Row. The opera is *Porgy and Bess* with music by George Gershwin, born in Brooklyn in 1898 of Jewish parents who emigrated from St. Petersburg, Russia. *Porgy and Bess* was Gershwin’s last and most important work which premiered in 1935. In 1937 Gershwin died unexpectedly of a brain tumour. I wonder what other music could have been created had he lived. *Porgy and Bess* has an almost exclusively Black cast, as specified by Gershwin. It is a story about Black people, performed by a Black cast and written by a white Jew from New York. I believe that Gershwin found some aspects of the story to be autobiographical in that his parents escaped poverty and discrimination and made their way to New York.

The first excerpt shown was filmed in 1993 at London’s Shepperton Studios following productions at Covent Garden and the Glyndebourne Festival. It is directed by Sir Trevor Nunn and conducted by Sir Simon Rattle. Bess is Cynthia Haymon and Porgy is Willard White. The drug dealer “Sportin’ Life” tries to seduce Bess with more dope to run away to New York. She refuses and Porgy chases the druggie away. Porgy and Bess sing of their new found happiness.

In 1933, Gershwin and Heyward went to Folly Beach, South Carolina to study the locale and the language. Ira Gershwin wrote the lyrics to some of the songs. Heyward wrote the libretto. In 1985 the Met first produce *Porgy and Bess* and the US Postal Service issued a *Porgy and Bess* stamp in 1993. In 2001 it was designated the official opera of south Carolina.

Next we go to the San Francisco Opera, directed by Francesca Zambello, conducted by John DeMain. It was recorded live in June 2009. This is at the end of the opera where the druggie has finally persuaded Bess to leave with him for New York. Porgy is sung by the great Eric Owens. I found the end uplifting and wondered if Gershwin was thinking of his parents. Another question is whether this is a musical or an opera.

### Singers

Now to discuss Black opera singers. It is difficult to find records of the earliest Black opera singers. The records are only recently coming into view. Let’s start in the US. Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield is credited as being the first Black opera singer. She lived from 1809-1876. She was known inappropriately as Black

## Celebrating Black Opera, A Personal View

by Mark Robinson



Portia May White

swan. She performed for Queen Victoria. Then followed Matilda Sissieretta Joyner Jones (1868-1933) who was known as Black Patti. She travelled widely, singing excerpts from operas. Black performers could sing opera arias in concert, but did not perform in staged opera productions. In 1941, Mary Cardwell Dawson created the National Negro Opera Company in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Their first performance was of *Aida*. This was the first opera company to be run by a Black woman. Marian Anderson is credited with breaking the colour barrier at the Met in 1955. Before that Black singers were segregated. However, it was 16 years earlier in 1939, that Marian Anderson sang for a crowd of 75,000 in front of the Lincoln Memorial. This was arranged by First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt after the Daughters of the American Revolution did not allow Marian Anderson to sing in Constitution Hall. In Canada we have Portia May White (1912-1968) who was born in Truro and grew up in Halifax. She too broke the colour barrier. Sadly, there are only scratchy recordings of her voice which can be heard on You Tube. She was a contralto and only performed in concerts.

### Excerpts from Shirley Verrett

The next excerpts are from Shirley Verrett who was best known in Italy as the Nera Callas or Black Callas. Shirley was born in 1931 in New Orleans. She was brought up in Los Angeles of parents who were devout Seventh Day Adventists. She made her home in European opera houses, Boston, San Francisco, but surprisingly not the Met. She died in 2010 following completion of her autobiography *I never Walked Alone* where she talks about how she was invited to sing with the Houston Symphony in 1959; then the invitation was withdrawn when they learnt she was Black.

Now to the music. During her talk on Shakespeare, Lesley showed Shirley Verrett's marvellous performance as Lady Macbeth. Today's first excerpt is from *Samson et Dalila* composed by Camille Saint-Saëns in 1877 (just two years after *Carmen*). This 1981 San Francisco Opera production conducted by Julius Rudel. Samson is sung by the amazing Placido Domingo. This is the scene where Dalila totally seduces Samson to learn the secret of his strength. The second excerpt from Shirley Verrett is from an opera by Giacomo Meyerbeer, a German composer of Jewish birth. He was the most popular composer of the 19th century in France and Germany. His last opera was *L'Africaine*, produced after his death in 1865 (10 years before *Carmen*). The opera is an examination of the complex relationship between colonial and sexual exploitation. This is another production from San Francisco Opera from 1988, also with Placido Domingo as Vasco de Gama. The opera's story is: boy abducts queen and enslaves her. Boy returns to the scene of the abduction and is enslaved by the queen. The excerpt is the love scene between the boy and the girl.

### Conclusion

We can be proud of our latest generation of Canadian Black opera artists. To name a few: Measha Brueggergosman, Marie-Josée Lord, Othalie Graham, Catherine Daniel and Yannick-Muriel Noah.

I hope you enjoyed this musical journey. I really enjoyed the preparation and I appreciate your attendance. I wanted to end with something uplifting and self-indulgent. It is from the 1945 musical *Carousel*, by Rodgers and Hammerstein. This is a performance by the late great Jessye Norman of "You'll Never Walk Alone."

NOTE: If you missed the presentation or would like to see it again, please contact Mark at [smark.robinson@yahoo.ca](mailto:smark.robinson@yahoo.ca) for a link to the recording.

**Confused by opera terminology? From arias to vibrato, Glyndebourne's glossary of opera terms will bring you up to speed.**

**Aria:** A piece for one voice in an opera, ie a song for a solo singer. It derives from the Greek and Latin 'aer', meaning 'air'.

**Baritone:** The middle male singing voice, situated between the bass and tenor ranges. A baritone in opera often portrays either the villain, the tenor's rival in love, or his best mate.

**Bass:** The lowest male singing voice. In serious operas, the basses usually play authority figures such as fathers, monarchs or priests, but sometimes they portray incarnations of the devil. In comic opera, though, the bass is often a buffoonish old man.

**Cadenza:** A passage, usually at the end of a musical number, in which singers perform a few improvised measures of vocally showy music to personalise their characters and show off their virtuosity.

**Coloratura:** Elaborately ornamented vocal music featuring runs up and down the scale, trills, wide melodic leaps and many fast notes per syllable, used both to depict a character's heightened emotional state and to display a singer's 'athletic' virtuosity. Many people would describe this as 'typical opera singing'.

**Continuo:** An accompaniment for dry or 'secco' recitative, written for a harpsichord or other keyboard instrument together with a bass instrument (eg a cello). It usually follows and comments upon the dramatic action.

**Contralto:** The lowest female voice. Similar to mezzo-sopranos, they frequently embody female villains or 'trouser roles', ie roles written for men with higher voices (such as in Baroque opera).

**Countertenor:** The highest male voice. Countertenors frequently sing Baroque opera but there is also some modern repertoire for them.

**Diva:** Literally 'goddess', or an important female opera star, also sometimes called a 'prima donna' ('first lady').

**Dramma giocoso:** sub-category of opera buffa that arose in the mid-18th-century and included sentimentality, pathos and sometimes even glimmers of tragedy amid the comedy and despite a happy ending. It also featured upper-, middle- and lower-class characters instead of just the latter.

**Libretto:** Literally 'little book', the text sung in an opera or oratorio.

**Mezzo-soprano:** The middle female singing voice. Mezzo-sopranos often portray maternal figures, villainesses, or seductive anti-heroines. They also often assume 'trouser roles', characters meant to be men.

**Obbligato:** In opera, a solo instrumental part in a vocal number designed not just to accompany but to support the principal vocal part or to throw it into relief. Sometimes as flashy as the vocal part itself.

**Opera:** A play in musical form. An art form in which singers and instrumentalists perform a dramatic work that unites a libretto (text) and a musical score in a theatrical setting.

**Opera buffa:** A light-hearted genre of opera, originating in the 18th century, which depicts everyday characters contending with the familiar challenges and foibles of life in an amusing way.

**Recitative:** A style of vocal music that follows the rhythms and pitches of ordinary speech. Syllabic recitativo secco ('dry recitative', accompanied only by continuo) is used to advance the action, while the more emotional recitativo accompagnato ('accompanied recitative', with full orchestra) ratchets up the dramatic temperature, leading to full-blown arias and ensembles.

**Soprano:** The highest and most common female singing voice. Most often young romantic heroines of both comic and serious operas.

**Supertitles:** Projection of the opera's libretto – often in English translation – on a display just above the stage.

**Tenor:** The highest natural adult male singing voice. In 18th and 19th-century opera, leading tenors are almost always the romantic heroes, although there are a few cads among them.

**Trill:** The very rapid alternation of pitch between two adjacent notes, used as a virtuosic vocal effect.

**Vibrato:** A gentle vibration created by slight variations of pitch in a singing voice. This adds warmth, richness and expressiveness to its tone.

**Vera-Lee Nelson**