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NEWSLETTER : BULLETIN

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## Handel's *The Resurrection* - a New Production for a New Era

Opera Atelier in 2021      by Lesley Robinson

After more than a year of re-runs and old favourites, I am absolutely thrilled to be writing about a brand-new production. When Ontario went into a lockdown in March 2020, the production was officially cancelled. At that time, the set had been built, the costumes were almost ready and rehearsals had begun. Instead of just shutting everything down and waiting for things to get back to "normal", Toronto's Opera Atelier chose to create something new and exciting. Rather than bemoaning what was not possible, they focused on new ways to present their traditional, classic, baroque content. Atelier's production of *The Resurrection* is a film, which was streamed online over a limited period for their audience. They sold tickets, just as they would for a regular production and provided an online libretto, translation and program book.

The creators' task was to reimagine a production, whilst remaining true to the work. They looked back to the roots of the piece which was first performed in Rome in 1708 in the grand hall of a palace. Without the constraints of a regular theatrical auditorium and in keeping with the premiere, they decided to film *The Resurrection* in the Ballroom of St. Lawrence Hall. Everything was done in strict accordance with pandemic guidelines and when the appropriately socially distanced artists of the Atelier Ballet appeared in their protective masks, I was immediately struck by the impression that this was a whole new take on a masked ball. In a regularly staged production, all the action takes place facing the audience, but a film has no such constraints, so set designer Gerard Gauci created a new, compromised set, using the beautiful features of the St. Lawrence Hall's ballroom.

Production started out with the recording of the sound. David Fallis conducted the musicians of Tafelmusik between plexiglass dividers and the singers were recorded, then they lip synced during rehearsals and filming. All pandemic regulations were strictly adhered to. Incoming artists were required to quarantine. PCR tests for COVID were done twice a week during rehearsals and every day during filming. Artists did their own hair and makeup and no actual singing happened during rehearsals. All rules were equally followed by backstage personnel and camera crew.

*The Resurrection* depicts the events between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, through the eyes of five characters: St. John the Evangelist, sung by tenor **Colin Ainsworth**, an Angel, sung by soprano **Carla Huhtanen**, Mary Magdalene, portrayed by Brian Law Opera Competition winner, soprano **Meghan Lindsay**, Cleophas, sung by mezzo-soprano **Allyson McHardy** and Lucifer, interpreted by bass-baritone **Douglas Williams**. Despite the fact that all filming was done with social distancing observed, the singers were able to create a completely natural interaction and an atmosphere of deep emotion.

One thing I really did miss was the intimacy with the orchestra, which is typical of Atelier's productions. The Elgin Theatre doesn't really have a pit and the conductor and musicians spill into the auditorium, just a few feet from the audience. With the sound all pre-recorded, we didn't see any of the musicians at all. There is something thrilling about every performance being unique, but there is equally something satisfying in the fact that the film is a permanent work of art and a fine one at that.

## Message from the President

On behalf of the Board, I wish to thank everyone for their contributions, support, participation and encouraging feedback over the last 12 months. Despite everything our Society continues to flourish.

Our monthly Zoom calls have helped us to stay connected as a community. I was particularly pleased and grateful for the May 2 Zoom presented by Andrew Ager. For me, it was a special treat to hear directly from a composer, a soprano, a baritone and an opera director. We plan to continue the monthly Zooms until we can return to Opera alla Pasta.

We have continued to produce our quarterly newsletter which has included many interesting articles. We constantly receive positive feedback. Please join me in thanking our Editor, David Williams and his team of contributors for all they do in producing this seamlessly.

We also maintain our website where we publicize future events. Please join me in thanking our Web-

master Jim Burgess based in Munich, Germany, for managing our website and keeping it up to date.

Looking forward, we plan to hold the 15th Brian Law Opera Competition on October 15th, 2022. We will start the planning in the fall. The purpose of our Competition is to help young singers who are planning a career in opera performance.

Lastly, I invite everyone to make a contribution to our Society. No matter how small or large, it is greatly appreciated. Please consider joining the Board, writing an article, hosting a Zoom or making a donation for the next competition.

I am proud of our accomplishments. I hope you are too. Thanks to you!

**Mark Robinson**

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## Girl Power! Women Composers Do Opera by Lesley Robinson

This was a presentation in our series of Zoom events, held on 21 March 2021.

Let's start with a little question for you... How many female opera composers do you know of? I must admit that when I posed this question to myself before I started researching for this presentation, I could think of two - one because I happened to know of her, since she was a few years ahead of me in school and the other, well... I couldn't actually remember her name, but I knew who I meant. I don't know what your answers to this question might be, but I think that my own says a lot about how little attention women composers have had in the world of opera. Despite our likely inability to name them, there have in fact been hundreds of operas written by women, from as early as the 17th century. Most of them have been shamefully neglected, so that performances have been rare and very few have made it to immortality in audio or video recordings. The first place I looked for information was Wikipedia, which lists a mere four women as an addendum to their list of major opera composers, with an additional four as sort of honourable mentions. Since Wikipedia is the encyclopedia for the people, by the people, perhaps we all can take a share in the responsibility for its shortcomings along with society in general. Google proved to be a much more comprehensive trove of material. I shall pick out a few of the composers I discovered that are deserving of your attention. They are Italian, German, French, British, Finnish and American. The libretti of the operas are in all the corresponding languages except for Finnish and the composers span the centuries from the 17th to the present day. I hope you will enjoy the diversity.



**Francesca Caccini:** The earliest surviving opera by a woman is entitled *La liberazione di Ruggiero dall'isola d'Alcina* (*The liberation of Ruggiero from the island of Alcina*). It was first performed in Florence 1625 and as well as being the earliest known opera composed by a woman, it was the first Italian opera known to have been performed outside of Italy. It was performed during a visit of Prince Władysław of Poland during carnival in 1625 and the prince liked it so much that he had it performed three years later in Warsaw. Francesca Caccini was born in Florence in 1587. She was well educated—she studied Latin and Greek, some modern languages, literature and even mathematics. Her father, Giulio (a well-known composer in his own right) was her music teacher. She sang and played a number of instruments. She quickly became known as a performer and was singing at the Medici court along with family members as early as 1602 (so at the age of 15). She was hired by the court as a teacher, chamber singer, rehearsal coach and composer and became the most highly paid musician in the court. Her compositions included chamber music as well as works for the stage. She was equally prolific as her male court colleagues, one of

whom was Jacopo Peri, composer of *Dafne*, considered the world's first opera (1597). So Francesca was right there as opera was first developing. She also found time to have two husbands and two children and after she was widowed for the second time in around 1630 she returned to the service of the Medicis until 1641 after which there is no further record of her.

The plot of *La liberazione di Ruggiero dall'isola d'Alcina* interestingly for its time has some feminist elements. The main character is Alcina who lures Ruggiero to an island and keeps him there under a spell. He is a bit of a victim and is finally rescued by Melissa, a good sorceress. The composition focuses on the higher range of voices: six sopranos, two altos, seven tenors and a single bass. Unusually for the time, there is no castrato role in the opera. The excerpt I chose is from a delightful 2019 production by Opera McGill. McGill's productions and recordings are highly professionally put together. It is directed by Patrick Hansen and Stephen Hargreaves is the principal coach, with the McGill Baroque Orchestra and Capella Antica. The scene I chose is between Ruggiero, sung by Ottawa tenor Yanick Gosselin and Alcina, sung by soprano Laura Fishman. They are speaking words of love, for she has bewitched him to keep him there.



**Maria Teresa Agnesi Pinottini:** Let's take a leap into the 18th century. Maria Teresa Agnesi Pinottini was born and died in Milan, 1720-1795. She was a composer, harpsichordist and singer. Her family background is described as "modest nobility", so she had plenty of opportunities for education and intellectual activity. Her older sister, Maria Gaetana was also musically gifted, but she was a mathematician and linguist and became famous as a lecturer and debater. Pinottini was Maria Teresa's husband's name, so she is often known just as Maria Teresa Agnesi. Pinottini turned out to be a bit of a liability and they were saddled with tremendous debt before he died an early death. She wrote six operas, although some were lost or survive only in fragments, so consequently recordings are hard to come by. *Ciro in Armenia* was considered her finest achievement. She wrote the libretto herself and the work premiered in Milan in 1753. It is a work of political and military history, dealing with alliances and invasions, culminating in a happy ending. Unfortunately I was unable to find any video recordings. What I did find was an excerpt from *Ulisse in Campania* (1768): "Chi non senza in campo armato", recorded in 2010. The group is called La Donna Musicale and all the musicians are women. The singer is American mezzo soprano Renée Rapier.

## Girl Power! Women Composers Do Opera (continued)



**Amalie von Sachsen:** Now let's go to Germany. Amalie von Sachsen (1794-1870) was a real live Princess who lived her whole life in Pillnitz Castle near Dresden, apart from when the family had to be evacuated at times of war. As a young girl she actually met Napoleon a few times and took a definite dislike to him. She studied music with Carl Maria von Weber among others and Weber was very impressed with her musical talent. Between 1816 and 1835, she composed more than a dozen operas and published her works under the pseudonym A. Serena.

*La casa disabitata* (The Uninhabited House) is a comic opera in one act, composed in 1835 with an Italian libretto, which the Princess wrote herself. It premiered in Pillnitz Castle. The uninhabited house of the title (in Rome) is thought to be haunted and ends up being used by smugglers for their illegal activities. A beautiful young orphan is given shelter there and after much confusion ends up marrying the kind owner of the property and they live happily ever after. Extracts were from a 2012 concert performance at the Dresden Music Festival.



**Pauline Viardot:** Now we're off to Paris, where Pauline Viardot was born as Michelle Ferdinandine Pauline García in 1821 and died at the age of 88 in 1910. She was born into a musical family. Her father, Manuel was a Spanish tenor who was a singing teacher, composer and impresario. As a small child she travelled with her family to London, New York and Mexico. In New York in 1826 she attended the US premiere of *Don Giovanni*, in the presence of the librettist da Ponte himself. Her father, mother, brother and sister were all in the cast. As a child Pauline was fluent in four languages—Spanish, French, Italian and English. She later learnt and sang in Russian, which she did so competently that she was taken for a native speaker. She gave her first concert performance as a mezzo-soprano in Brussels at the age of 16. Just two years later she made her opera debut in London as Desdemona in Rossini's *Otello*. Pauline had a long list of famous friends and suitors. She met the poet Alfred de Musset when she was only 17 and it was rumoured that he wanted to marry her. Her friend, the novelist George Sand discouraged this alliance. Sand later based the heroine of her 1843 novel *Consuelo* on Pauline and introduced her to Louis Viardot

who became her husband in 1840. She was 18 and he was more than twice her age. He was a devoted husband who managed her career. Their four children went on to illustrious musical careers of their own. She knew Charles Gounod, Hector Berlioz, Giacomo Meyerbeer and Camille Saint-Saëns, who dedicated *Samson and Delilah* to her. Thanks to her friendship with George Sand, she knew Sand's lover Frédéric Chopin, who gave her advice on playing the piano. She met the Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev who was quite taken by her performance in *The Barber of Seville* in Russia. He followed her to Paris and was in love with her for the rest of his life.

Pauline wrote five operas and Turgenev wrote the libretti for three of them. She wrote her own libretti for the last two. Her final opera was her own version of *Cendrillon* (*Cinderella*) written in 1904. Her plot is pretty faithful to Perrault's fairy tale except that the wicked stepmother is replaced by an inept and befuddled stepfather and the fairy Godmother actually shows up at the ball and entertains the guests. The excerpt I chose is a scene between Cinders and the ugly sisters. It is a Canadian performance from the Festival Opéra de Saint-Eustache with soprano Vanessa Oude-Reimerink as Cendrillon.



**Dame Ethel Smyth:** Our next stop is South East England where Ethel Smyth was born in 1858 (and died at the age of 86 in 1944). Her father was a military officer and was reluctant to allow her to pursue music as a career, but he finally relented and allowed her to go to Leipzig to study at the Conservatory.

Smyth became involved in the suffragette movement, giving up music for a couple of years (1910-1912) to devote herself to the cause. She composed a song called "The March of the Women" which became the movement's anthem. She was a highly passionate person and had many affairs, mostly with women. She was actually in love with the famous Emmeline Pankhurst, organizer of the UK suffragette movement. She later fell in love with Virginia Woolf. Her only male lover was librettist, Henry Brewster.

Ethel wrote six operas. One of them, *Der Wald*, with a libretto by Brewster, was the only opera by a female composer to be produced at the Met in over a century. *The Wreckers* is a dramatic tale of shipwrecks, plunder and doomed lovers, set on the rocky Cornish coast. There is a trailer available on You Tube with excerpts featuring Australian soprano Sky Ingram in the first full staging of the opera by Bard SummerScape at Annandale-on-Hudson, New York in 2015.

## Girl Power! Women Composers Do Opera (continued)



**Elisabeth Lutyens:** Elisabeth Lutyens lived in London from 1906-1983. She was a flamboyant and gregarious character who was known for her avant-garde work. In 1933 she married baritone Ian Glennie. They had a son and twin daughters, but it was not a happy marriage and in 1938 she left him for the love of her life, Edward Clark, a conductor and former BBC producer. They had another son and Elisabeth found herself the breadwinner when Clark remained unemployed until his death in 1962. She juggled her work and motherhood and the couple were known to host many boozy and smoke-filled parties in their flat. She composed film scores for Hammer horror films to pay the bills and also wrote a lot of music for documentary films and for BBC radio and TV programmes. With reference to this work she was

known to have uttered the following witticism: "Do you want it good, or do you want it Wednesday?"

She wrote six pieces of opera and musical theatre. I love the title of the first—it is *Infidelio*. Unfortunately, however deserving, performances of these operatic works have been lacking and some have never been performed. After much searching I found the following: "The Lament of Isis on the Death of Osiris" from *Isis and Osiris* (1969), performed by soprano Stephanie Aston.



**Thea Musgrave:** Thea Musgrave is the oldest of the living composers we'll be talking about today. She was born in Edinburgh in 1928. (she'll be 93 this year). In 1971 she married distinguished American opera conductor, Peter Mark (founding General and Artistic Director of Virginia Opera) and lives in the United States. She has written 10 operas, a number of them about historical figures—*Mary, Queen of Scots* (1977), Harriet Tubman in *Harriet, the Woman Called Moses* (1985) and *Simón Bolívar* (1997). Arias from the three main female characters in these operas appear in Musgrave's 40-minute triptych, *Three Women: Queen, Mistress, Slave* (1999).

Musgrave's *Mary, Queen of Scots* is a lot more historically accurate than Donizetti's! It was commissioned by Scottish Opera and was premiered at the Edinburgh Festival in 1977. It deals with the period from 1561 when Mary returns to Scotland as the recently widowed Queen of France (she had grown up in the French Court from an early age) to 1567 when she is forced to flee to England after

the murder of her second husband, Lord Darnley. The excerpt chosen is from a concert in celebration of Thea Musgrave's 90th birthday in New York City on 27th May 2018 (which is actually her birthday.) Finnish soprano Jenny Sandelin is singing the role of Mary. This is the second act aria, "Alone, Alone, I stand Alone" in which Mary resolves to rule without the aid of the three men in her life who seek to manipulate her—her half-brother James Stewart who wants power, her husband Lord Darnley whom she has come to despise and the Earl of Bothwell who later seduces her in return for his protection.



**Kaija Saariaho:** Kaija Saariaho is an award-winning Finnish composer, born in Helsinki in 1952 and living in France since 1982 (married to French composer Jean-Baptiste Barrière). This was the composer who I mentioned at the beginning as the one whose name I couldn't remember. That was in large part because I found it difficult to remember her name, since it is Finnish, but I certainly knew who she was. We attended the Robert Lepage production of her opera *L'Amour de Loin* at the Met in December 2016.

*L'Amour de Loin* (2000) was the first and is the best known of four operas by Saariaho. The aforementioned production at the Met was the first by a female composer in over a century, the only prior one being *Der Wald* by Ethel Smyth, which we talked about earlier. Another first for *L'Amour de Loin* was that it was the first opera by a female composer to feature in the Metropolitan Opera Live in HD series when it was broadcast in cinemas all over the world on 10 December 2016. Since you may already have seen that, I am not going to show you that production, but another that will be of interest for other reasons. As you can tell from the title, *L'Amour de Loin* (Love from Afar) has a French libretto, written by a Lebanese-French journalist

and author living in Paris, Amin Maalouf. What sets out as a seemingly straightforward story develops deeper themes of love and obsession, reality and illusion, isolation and the need to belong. The first production of the opera was jointly commissioned by the Salzburg Festival, the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris and Santa Fe Opera. The story is set in the 12th century and the three characters are Jaufré Rudel, a prince and troubadour obsessed with idealized love, the Pilgrim who acts as a go-between, carrying messages to and from

## Girl Power! Women Composers Do Opera (continued)

the lovers and Clémence, the Countess of Tripoli, the object of Jaufré's love from afar. At first the lady is imagined in Jaufré's head, but the Pilgrim tells him she is real. Jaufré eventually sets out on an ill-fated journey to find her. He becomes ill on the journey and when they finally meet, he dies in her arms. The extract selected is from the 2004 production of the Finnish National Opera, directed by Peter Sellars. Clémence is American soprano Dawn Upshaw, the Pilgrim is Finnish mezzo-soprano Monica Groop and Jaufré is our very own Honorary Patron, Gerald Finley. There is a DVD available of this production. The excerpt is of Jaufré and Clémence's final moments together.



**Judith Weir:** Judith Weir was born in Cambridge in 1954 and grew up in London where she was three years ahead of me at North London Collegiate School. I remember her well. We were already proud of her as an exceptionally gifted musician (although I'm sure she would never remember me - unless she was interested in who was in the under fifteen hockey or netball teams!) After North London she spent three years at King's College, Cambridge, a great place for a budding composer.

In 2014, Judith was appointed to the position of Master of the Queen's Music which is a little like a musical poet laureate. She is the first woman to hold the post which dates back to 1625 and the reign of Charles I.

Judith is best known for her operas and theatrical pieces of which there are more than 10. I am going to share with you the first on the list—*King Harald's Saga*. It is based on a medieval account of the history of Norwegian kings and Weir is her own librettist. *King Harald's Saga* is written for a single unaccompanied soprano singing eight roles. It is very short. Our extract is a brief taste of it with soprano Inês Simões.



**Missy Mazzoli:** Grammy-nominated American, Missy Mazzoli is the youngest contemporary composer on my list. She was born in Pennsylvania in 1980. She made history in 2018 when she became one of the first two women (along with Jeanine Tesori) to receive a commission from the Metropolitan Opera. The New York Times has described her as “one of the more consistently inventive, surprising composers now working in New York” and Time Out New York dubbed her ‘Brooklyn’s post-millennial Mozart’.

She has been highly acclaimed for her operatic works. Her third opera, *Proving Up*, with a libretto by Royce Vavrek, was commissioned by the Washington National Opera, Opera Omaha and New York’s Miller Theatre. Based on a short story by Karen Russell, *Proving Up* premiered in 2018. The title refers to the Homestead Act of 1862 which made a provision for settlers in the American West to acquire public land that they had farmed, otherwise to “prove up”, as long as the homesteads in question included, among other things, a glass window.

Gramophone Magazine described the work as “one of the most successful and striking of a new generation of American operas.”

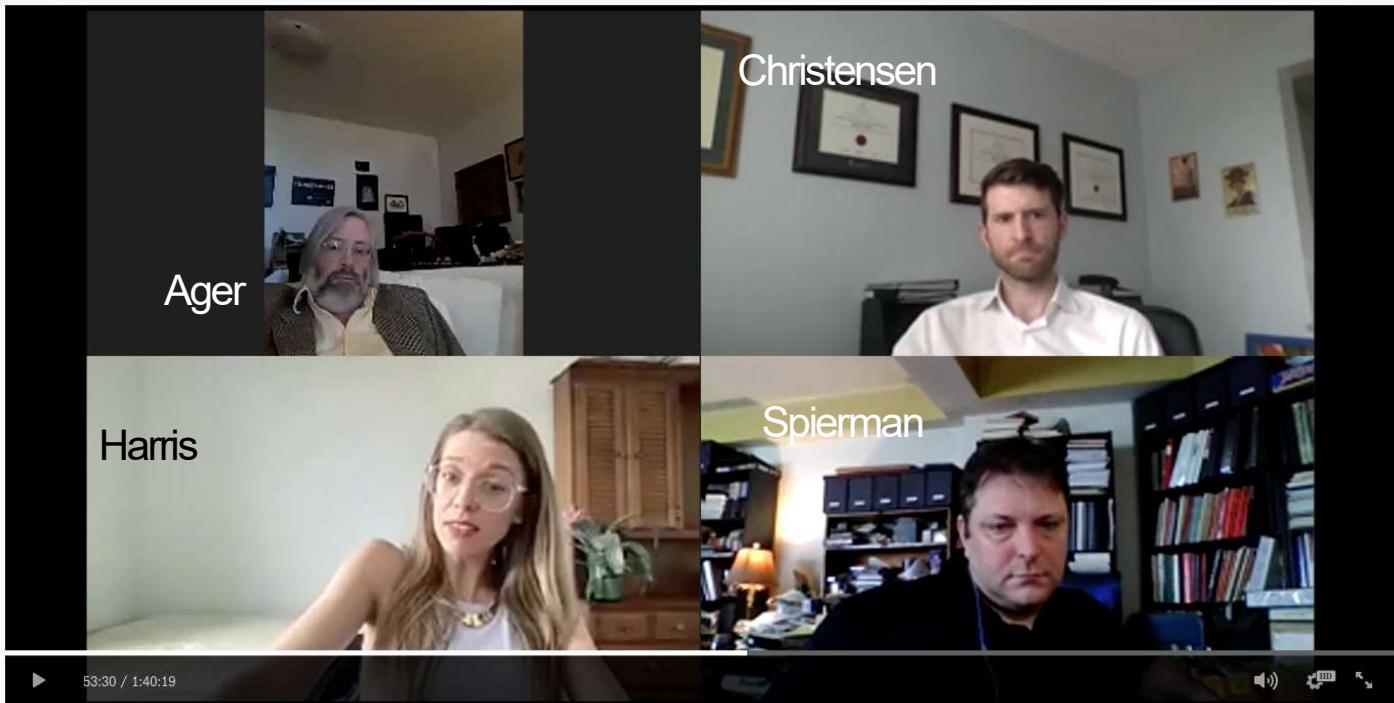
There is a video of the opera’s haunting prologue, “Uncle Sam’s Farm” featuring baritone John Moore. The words of the prologue come from an 1850 text by Jesse Hutchison, Jr., which was written to encourage settlers to move out west. “Uncle Sam is rich enough to give us all a farm.” It was shot on location by Missy Mazzoli and Royce Vavrek in Nebraska and South Dakota.

So I hope we’ll all be able to go away today being able to name some female opera composers... or at least to know who we mean. Thank you for listening.

## New Projects - New Voices by Lesley Robinson

### An NCOS Zoom Event

We were delighted to invite some special guests to our May 2nd Zoom event. Composer Andrew Ager, baritone Bradley Christensen, soprano Carmen Harris and Director Benjamin Spierman joined us for an afternoon of interviews, insights and video clips.



We were delighted to have a real live composer available to speak to us and answer questions. Many of us were privileged to see Andrew's first opera, *Frankenstein* which featured the two singers who were with us on the May 2nd Zoom event, when it was presented at Dominion Chalmers in Ottawa on Halloween in 2019. The world premiere of *Dracula* was originally scheduled for Ottawa in 2020, but sadly the pandemic has prevented that from happening as yet. Andrew's comic opera *Casanova* was premiered in Ottawa by "Seventeen Voyces", directed by Kevin Reeves. Another upcoming project is a chamber opera entitled *Angel*, featuring Carmen Harris and artistic direction from Benjamin Spierman.

Bradley Christensen is known to Ottawa audiences for his excellent portrayal of Frankenstein's monster in 2019. What some may not have known is that Bradley had to stand in at the last minute and gave a wonderful performance, staggering across the stage on his platform shoes in monstrous fashion. We had also seen Bradley earlier that year singing in Mozart's *Idomeneo* at Opera Atelier in Toronto, alongside former Brian Law Opera Competition prizewinners Meghan Lindsay and Wallis Giunta. A native of New Zealand, Bradley earned a Masters in music from the University of Toronto. He also performed notably in Ottawa on a very snowy day in the Schubert song cycle *Winterreise* with Andrew Ager at the piano. In an Opera Canada review we learnt that "Baritone Bradley Christensen (Silvio) was both vocally rich and a good actor, particularly convincing during the Nedda/Silvio duet which DeCiantis and Christensen sang with the lush musical ebb and flow that Leoncavallo's score demands."

Carmen Harris is a soprano "unafraid to go for the emotional jugular". She is known to Ottawa audiences having done her Masters in music at the University of Ottawa and she has performed with the National Arts centre Orchestra under Alexander Shelley.

Benjamin Spierman joined us from the Bronx in New York City. Benjamin began his career as Grants Coordinator for the Bronx Council on the Arts and was the Founding Director of their Business Center for the Arts. He moved into opera initially as a Stage Manager and Assistant Director. Now a Director, he has an impressive total of 94 productions of 58 operas under his belt (although these numbers are now out of date.) He is currently General Director of the Bronx Opera which was founded by his parents, as well as Resident Stage Director of Long Island's North Shore Music Festival.

Andrew Ager began his presentation by talking about the *Dracula* project which involves Bradley. He completed the score last year and it was supposed to have been premiered in November 2020. At the outset of COVID it was thought that it would last a few months, but as time

## New Projects - New Voices (continued)

went on Andrew had the feeling that plans for the fall would not work out, so a full year went by and he used the time for other writing. Having been really looking forward to producing *Dracula* and there were plans for a whole 21-foot special effects wall on the set, so that Dracula would be able to go down the wall head first (with the assistance of ropes) from a window of his castle. When it was clear that this wasn't going to happen in the near term, Andrew began to think about what *would* be possible. He had seen a beautiful dance video, shot on Toronto's waterfront and figured that since Bradley was in Toronto, he could get together with the videographer, Katie Allen and see what they could come up with.

The video was shot on a cold autumn afternoon at Mount Pleasant Cemetery in Toronto. When everything went online, everyone was looking for different ways to produce content. First of all the sound was recorded in a studio and the video was done later in the cemetery. Bradley said it was a strange experience since it is a popular public cemetery where people were going for walks. There was a loudspeaker broadcasting the soundtrack as Bradley was creeping around the tombstones. It was a strange experience for him to hear his own voice, but it was a lot of fun. It could be that whole operas could be filmed on site in this way. The video clip was of Bradley in the title role, singing the Act 1 aria, "In this Dishonourable Peace" in which Dracula tells who he is and where he's from. Post production and sound were done by Marty Smyth in Toronto.

Bradley then shared what else he has been doing in what he described as "a bit of a funny year" for those in the performing arts industry. The rest of Bradley's calendar had been cancelled for last year, but this year there are some projects on the go. He was involved in the Toronto Operetta Theatre's production of *The Gondoliers*. Ticket purchasers were able to watch the performance online. Another challenging virtual project was Canadian composer John Beckwith's 94th birthday celebration. Artists from all over Canada participated and Bradley recorded three songs which were done in steps, with different parts recorded separately. Firstly Bradley recorded his recitative, then the pianist added his part, whilst listening to Bradley's recording and Bradley's final part was added afterwards. In addition, the Toronto Children's Chorus asked him to record Vaughan Williams' Five Mystical Songs with them. This too was recorded virtually. The chorus rehearsed with click tracks and the recordings were done in sections with the use of ear pieces. Another project is for a lecture recital at the University of Toronto on John Beckwith's songs. Four sets of songs cover 65 years of his writing. Bradley is looking forward to getting back to making real live music with people again when that is possible! Andrew commented on how Bradley was able to produce such a fine performance on video without a conductor, just listening to the orchestra. Singers are producing fine performances alongside what is essentially a robot in their ear!

About five to six years ago Andrew started writing an opera about a New York crime family. Without telling us the name, he mentioned a trilogy of movies based on a famous 1969 novel. His mother had left the book lying around, so Andrew picked it up and read it at the age of ten. The material is not legally producible at the moment because of the ownership of the rights, but Andrew hopes that if/when it comes to fruition, it would be wonderful for it to be performed and certainly premiered in New York City, since that is where it is set. Andrew went to the Bronx to meet with Benjamin Spierman to discuss the future of this project. In the meantime he turned his attention to another project with a similar flavour. The opera *Angel* was completed a few months ago. It is the story of Angel, a dancer working in a down-market dance club in New York in 1977. A lot of bad things happen and Angel survives, but it's not a pretty story.

After Carmen Harris's performance in *Frankenstein* in which she milked the music and made it gorgeous, Andrew decided that Carmen would have to be Angel. Since *Angel* can't be produced live at this time, Andrew thought that another video would be a good idea. He arranged with Ottawa filmmaker and musician, Kevin Reeves to film Angel's aria from Act 1 in a large space with green screen and a huge digital set which was built virtually. As luck would have it, the latest lockdown intervened and a new plan had to be devised. Benjamin was already engaged as the director of the piece and he and Carmen found a way to put it together. Initial plans had already been made and Ben had talked to Kevin about what the digital set would look like. The new plan was for Carmen to perform the aria in her apartment, considering the limitations on what they would be able to accomplish during the lockdown. Benjamin was concerned because lip-synching is problematic. When singers lip-synch to their own singing it can yield an exaggerated sense of diction. With Carmen singing in her relatively small space and the atmosphere that Andrew's music set, it would be hard to get it right. Carmen said that she was certainly nervous about doing that and what they *did* arrive on was the best possible result given the constraints. She described Angel as very gritty and very real and that feeling would have been harmed by any grandiose staging. The wonderful flip side to what happened was the resulting recording, done on a phone camera in a tiny area of the apartment, with the help of Carmen's partner Adam Sperry, who created a divey bar in a corner to serve as the set. The audio was done in a separate take. Ben gave some really interesting ideas for angled camera shots which showed exactly what would be happening in a dingy dive bar—lazily cleaning glasses, sitting behind the bar painting nails, fixing lipstick. She doesn't want to be doing this job and she certainly isn't trying hard. She's thinking about the dreams that she actually has. It was really fun and the end product that Marty and Ben and Andrew came up with together was a blast. The aria in the video was "I just Want to be Dancing". It's the first thing Angel sings in the opera.

Ben pointed out that the video works like a trailer for a film. That was the look they were going for. He thought that Carmen and Adam did a great job of finding angles and materials in the apartment that could simulate what it would look like. The video represents Angel's thoughts.

## New Projects - New Voices (continued)

She's thinking to a vaguely disco beat and where she works isn't Studio 54, but it's the dingier place behind Studio 54. The sound choices worked well with the 1970s footage that was used. There's even a flash of a movie theatre showing *Rocky*. This was the result of how directors have had to start to think as film directors in the last year, rather than as strictly theatre people. This last year has broken down the barriers between the more cinematic thought process and the straight on-stage theatre process and it brought about a good way to introduce *Angel* the opera and Angel the character to the audience that will see her on stage in Ottawa in 2022.

Carmen thanked Andrew because it is so wonderful to have new works to work with. She loves the "meat" of the music with its stretch and drama. *Angel* has a bossanova, groovy feel. Carmen comes from a musical theatre background, so she has experience working with tracks or very reduced orchestras, although only on stage, not in the video form. She said it was good to use the sounds that just don't occur in traditional opera written by composers long past that she can't talk to. After preparing with Marty and Andrew, she felt a lot of freedom working in the apartment without others present.

Andrew handed over the direction of the videos and found it very interesting as the composer to hand over the music and see what comes back. Ben said that there was a lot of trust involved from Andrew and looks forward to working with him in person in the future.

Carmen has found this year tough in many ways. There were some things that she was very much looking forward to that she hopes are only postponed and she looks forward to being able to put things in the calendar firmly. She has found things like the above projects to be the one really wonderful thing that has happened. She has had an influx of grant opportunities and there have been guest performing, lecturing and recording opportunities. She just completed a guest lecture with PAL Ottawa. She spoke about Strauss's Ophelia Lieder, which in the past has been a stage experience for her and sang some Shakespearean songs by Andrew. She hopes to get a grant to help her prepare for *Angel*. She plans to learn go-go dancing and work on her popstar/disco groove.

Ben shared that his email signature lists upcoming shows. Now, some have been "upcoming" for a year and a half, but things are beginning to come to life *presario* for the Bronx Opera and also upcoming will be Seymour Barab's *Little Red Riding Hood*, which will be filmed and streamed and performed outdoors. Other projects underway include directing (and also possibly performing in) *HMS Pinafore* in Oswego and directing *The Bartered Bride* for the Bronx. Things are percolating and coming back to life. He recently participated with his wife in a outdoor performance of some sections of *The Messiah* in Manhattan. It was rehearsed virtually before the performance on a busy street. Despite everything, this has been a very active period. There have been opportunities to learn unexpected skills, for example film directing. The video he shared was the overture of Mozart's *The Impresario* (written the same year as *The Marriage of Figaro*). He treated the overture as an introduction to the characters: the impresario, the diva soprano, the Jersey girl soprano, the Texan sugar daddy and the young, ambitious assistant. The video ends with a Zoom board meeting, reappointing the impresario for another year.

Andrew mentioned another project that is on the go, proposed by and with a libretto by Ben on the life of Aaron Burr, perhaps best known as the man who shot Alexander Hamilton. However, as Ben said, there is so much more to him than that.

In our question and answer session Andrew was asked about his orchestration. He explained that everything we heard of his music today was performed by a computer, using sound files in a Sibelius program that he uses. It is a sophisticated program that Andrew has been using for 20 years. Initially it sounded terrible, but it has become increasingly sophisticated in the interim, so that it sounds like a real orchestra. We also heard birdsong in the cemetery video thanks to Marty Smith. The next question was about the new techniques being used because of the current constraints. It is wonderful to see the creative solutions that are being used to create material and it leaves us wanting more. Video can give things more life and get to wider audiences, so will these measures continue into the future when live performances are back with us? Ben answered that pieces like the *Impresario* and *Angel* videos that we saw today can work well as trailers. In the future things like this can serve as promotional material, but not to replace live performances. Carmen talked about how this has opened up more opportunities for young singers in the form of grants and competitions. It has been possible to audition and compete without the expense of taking a flight to do so. Carmen has found quite a comfy spot, auditioning at home with whatever audio is available and using an iPhone camera. She hopes that such opportunities will continue. It saves a lot of money and opens up more possibilities. Bradley hates working virtually like this. Yes, there are things that have been easier, such as attending conferences and it is possible to be in one place while working in another country, so it has been great in that respect, but he has found the process of recording online difficult. After years of education, learning to sing as loudly as possible to be heard in a large theatre, all of a sudden you're in a cubicle with a microphone. So the technical change is one thing and for Bradley, it's all about interaction with people and making music live. Coordinating with recordings is a challenge and all of a sudden singers have to act as recording engineers as well, which is not of interest to Bradley. He gave the example of recording a Vaughan Williams song where it was difficult to do without being able to interact live with the pianist. Despite having said he hates it, he thinks that there are opportunities to use this medium going forward.

The comments in the Zoom chat were all very positive, with much applause and appreciation for the video clips. If you missed the presentation or if you would like to see it again, you can watch the recording of the session. Contact Lesley at [mummypiggy@gmail.com](mailto:mummypiggy@gmail.com) for the link.

# Just for fun - Top 10 Tenor Arias

Lesley Robinson

Those who know me well, know that I am a bit of a sucker for a tenor voice. Surprisingly to some, my list of favourite tenors *does* extend beyond the one superlative superstar and although the selection here has been significantly influenced by that stand-alone, adored exemplar, I shall endeavour to share the work of some other estimable interpreters of some of my favourite tenor arias. Before you complain that I have not included some of the greatest, let me just say that I have concentrated on my favourite contemporary tenors and was not always able to find the clips that I would have enjoyed the most. I have nevertheless found some great performances on YouTube and I'll share the links, so you can see what *you* think. I actually found it very hard to put these in order of preference, so the numbering is somewhat arbitrary. They are all my favourites.

10

**“Che gelida manina”** from *La Bohème* by Giacomo Puccini: I have always had a strong sentimental attachment to Act 1 of *La Bohème*. It is thanks to the special magic of opera that such an intense expression of love at first sight can be thoroughly believable, especially when it is performed as authentically as it is here.



Go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-L3uqoQUV4> to see **Michael Fabiano** (with hair) as Rodolfo, earnestly talking about himself to Mimi. They have only met a few moments before, but the sparks are in the air. In her silent attention, **Nicole Car** portrays a vulnerable and timid Mimi, eager to drink in his every word. This production is from The Royal Opera House, Covent Garden.

9

“Ah! lève-toi, soleil!” from *Roméo et Juliette* by Charles Gounod: Romeo is just about the most legendary star-crossed tenor of them all. Here he is in the famous balcony scene, speaking of Juliet’s radiance. She is the sun coming up, making the stars fade away with her luminescence. Here is a young **Roberto Alagna** as Romeo. I love it when he performs French repertoire.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mgqfIEdTgg>

8

“Un’aura amorosa” from Mozart’s *Così fan tutte*. This is Ferrando’s first aria and he’s singing just simply about love and hope. The words are beautiful and the music sublime. I chose an extract from the dazzling, light-filled 2006 Glyndebourne production, sung by Finnish tenor **Topi Lehtipuu**. Go to [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77M1fg\\_fXrw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77M1fg_fXrw)



**“Ella mi fu rapita”** from Verdi’s *Rigoletto*: This is from the beginning of Act 2, when Gilda, the current object of the lascivious Duke’s amorous attention, has been abducted. In this aria, we think, for one brief moment, that he might actually care. I chose a performance by Piotr Bezcalá who I think is getting better and better.

Go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eGn-laa7z1g>



# 6

“O fiamma soave” from *La donna del lago* by Rossini: It’s time for a bit of bel canto and this time, try as I might, I can only pick **Juan Diego Florez**. This is a tender and reflective, yet passionate moment. The King expresses his feelings, but although he is powerful, he doesn’t always get what he wants. I chose this aria from the 2015 Met production: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7A5hF\\_YmJU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7A5hF_YmJU)



# 5

"**E lucevan le stelle**" from Puccini's *Tosca*: In this poignant third act aria, the hero Cavaradossi reflects on the love he has shared with Tosca, but now he faces death alone. The aria culminates with the lines, "E non ho amato mai tanto la vita, tanto la vita!" Never have I loved life so much. I had often thought that one of my current favourites, **Vittorio Grigolo** would make the perfect Cavaradossi and when he finally sang the part at the Met in 2017/18 I was not disappointed. See what you think:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yekG4jLG9G0>



# 4

"**Ecco ridente in cielo**" from *Il barbiere di Siviglia* by Rossini is a great opening aria for the lovestruck Count Almaviva. It is a rapturous serenade, sung as dawn is breaking outside his lady's window, but all to no avail. (He needs Figaro to help get her attention.) There is a lovely version available on YouTube from Minnesota Opera with **Alek Schrader**.

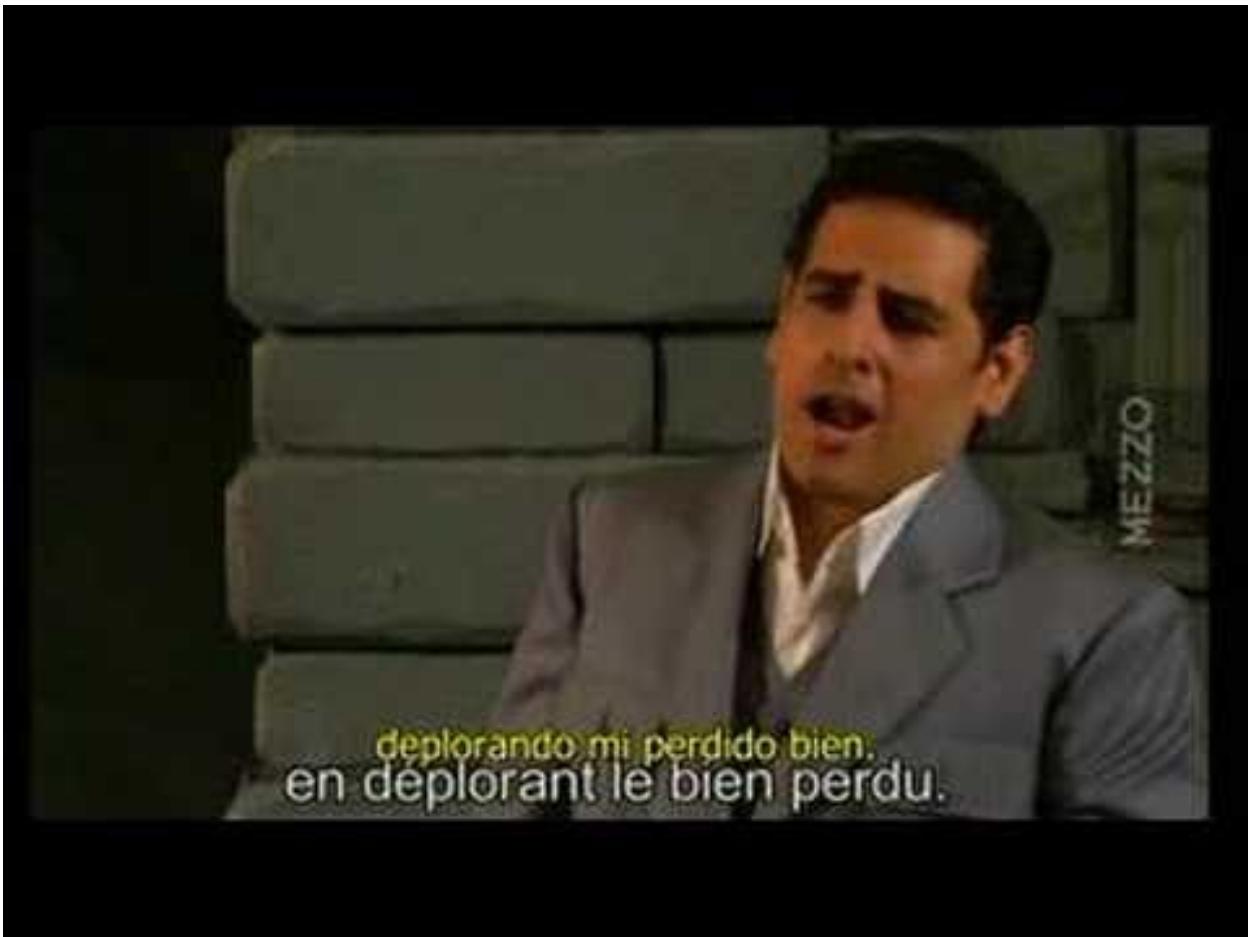
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTD6hZosFN0>



# 3

"**Povero Ernesto**" from *Don Pasquale* by Donizetti: One thing that I particular love about this aria is that it is preceded by a melancholy and poignant trumpet solo. Disinherited and penniless, Ernesto will lose his beloved Norina, since he can no longer afford to marry her. There is a lovely version by **Juan Diego Florez** in which the trumpeter is onstage with him.

Go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xFdNlNNxs1g>



## 2

**"Pourquoi me réveiller"** From *Werther* by Jules Massenet: In this aria we feel the full force of the poet's lovelorn angst. He is reciting a poem to his beloved who belongs to another man. **Roberto Alagna** expresses all the fervour and intensity required in this role - again, I love it when he sings in French. (**Kate Aldrich** makes a wonderfully torn and guilt-ridden Charlotte.) Go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvM5beFesOw>



**1**

"Ah! dov'è il cimento!" From Rossini's *Semiramide*.: As far as tenor parts go, this is a fairly obscure one. Idreno is not the hero and he doesn't get the girl (the Princess Azema), but his hopeful love song is so heartfelt. I love the version from the Liceu Opera Barcelona in which **Juan Diego Florez** (of course) pours his heart out ,while Azema just ignores him, looking at clothes and jewellery.

The YouTube video is at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M64om3iOdsY>



Despite the fact that this is not necessarily a definitive top ten, since there are so many worthy singers and arias, but I managed to pick out some that are noteworthy and I hope you enjoy them. Thank you for indulging me.