



OperOttawa *What Is Love?* A World Premiere Opera by Jack Hui Litster

Jack Hui Litster is the composer in residence at OperOttawa and *What Is Love?* is his second opera commissioned by the company. (NCOS hosted a Zoom premiere of his first opera *The Day You Were Born* in 2021.) *What Is Love?* is based on the poem “On Love” by Kahlil Gibran from his 1923 book *The Prophet*. The opera is set in present day Ottawa, to be precise in the Byward Market in June 2022. Tourists and locals are mingling in the sunshine, chatting about the meaning of love. The cast included eight soloists: Erinne-Colleen Laurin, Patricia Beckett, Jean-E. Hudson, Norman E. Brown, Alexander Cappellazzo, Carole Portelance and two talented young high schoolers, Maria Delaney and Victor Toma. Jasmine van Schoewen performed a number of dance sequences. Musical accompaniment was provided by a string quintet and by Frédéric Lacroix on piano.



Jack Hui Litster conducts the cast of his opera *What is Love?*

On Sunday, October 2nd OperOttawa marked the beginning of its 10th anniversary season with a gala afternoon. Members of the company performed scenes from some beloved operas including *The Impresario*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Turandot*, *Fidelio*, *The Magic Flute*, *La Traviata*, *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Nabucco*. This was a celebration of what OperOttawa has to offer. The company’s next presentation will be Handel’s *Alcina* in March 2023.

President's Message – October 2022

It is great to see that live opera has returned. Both Montreal and Toronto have successfully launched on their 22/23 seasons. The NY Met has opened with *Medea* with Sondra Radvanovsky singing the lead. More relevant to our community is that live opera is returning to Ottawa. The recently launched New Opera Lyra will be presenting Andrew Ager's latest opera, *Dracula*, on October 28 and 29 at St. Andrew's Church. This is not to be missed and is bound to be "bloody" good! I find all of this is so encouraging as we carefully return to normal.

We continue to meet via Zoom, publish our newsletter and keep our website up to date. We have started the preparation for the 2023 Brian Law Opera Competition. If you would like to help, please let us know. Also, we are also searching for a place to hold our monthly face-to-face meetings.

I thank all our volunteers for all for their contributions to keep our society moving along.

Mark Robinson

Editor's Message

Many thanks to everyone who has contributed articles or reviews to the newsletter in 2022 and to everyone involved in the preparation and distribution of the digital and printed versions.

Remember, any member or guest is welcome to submit anything related to opera. Your opinion and experiences are of interest to our readers - you do not have to be an expert.

David Williams

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For information on the National Capital Opera Society or the Brian Law Opera Competition contact Lesley Robinson at 613-769-5957 or consult www.ncos.ca

More of an oratory and oratorio than an opera! By Marian Cumming

When looking into spending a week on one of the many navigable European rivers I came across one which featured a pre-cruise stay in Oberammergau including a performance of the Passion Play; an opportunity I could not pass up.

In 1633 the Bubonic plague was raging in Europe and the people of Oberammergau vowed that if the dying stopped they would stage the play of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, every ten years. There were no further deaths, the vow was kept, the first play took place in 1634 and, with only a couple of exceptions due to war, has since been performed every ten years, and in the process becoming a major tourist attraction with visitors from around the world. (Because of the Covid-19 virus the 2020 play was postponed to this year, with the next one scheduled for 2030.)

Oberammergau is a charming hamlet in the mountains of Bavaria with a population of roughly 5,000 inhabitants, 2000 of whom take an active part in the play, which runs for 4 1/2 months, between May and October, five days a week. The town is also known for its woodcarving, with the majority of its shops featuring mostly religious-themed carved artifacts, as well as for its frescoes of traditional Bavarian themes on many houses and buildings.

The Passion Play, performed in German, is five hours long with a three-hour break for dinner at a local restaurant. It covers the period of Jesus entering Jerusalem and continues to his crucifixion and resurrection. Luckily for non-German speakers texts in multiple languages are made available, making it easier to follow, except that so much is going on on stage that one is often tempted to abandon the script and just enjoy the visual part of the performance. The theatre seats 4,500 and is the world's largest open-air stage with a covered auditorium. The stage runs the entire width of the hall as, in addition to the hundreds of actors and singers, it must accommodate horses, camels, sheep, goats, doves and even a donkey. The costumes are long, heavy grey robes for Jesus and his followers and varying shades of beige for the rest of the cast. There are no wigs or fake beards, all male actors (and male choristers) let their hair grow and do not shave for months leading up to opening night.



In addition to hundreds of actors, the performance includes a live orchestra of around 40 musicians (the size of the original NAC orchestra!), a 60-member choir and four soloists: a bass, a tenor, a soprano and a mezzo. The musical score was composed in 1810 by Rochus Dedler, a native of Oberammergau, and features overtures, choral singing, arias and duets. The music (clearly influenced by Mozart) is sacred in nature and takes up approximately two hours of the entire performance. Marcus Swink, the musical director of the current and past three productions, has adapted the music and has composed some new music which accompanies the newly added tableaux vivants. These tableaux are interspersed throughout the performance at suitable intervals during the choral singing and feature scenes from the Old Testament (e.g. The Golden Calf, the parting of the Red Sea, the Burning Bush, etc.)

All of the performers must have either been born in Oberammergau, or, with the exception of the children, have lived there for at least 20 years. All of the actors, singers and musicians are amateurs, although one would have never guessed it. There was not a weak link among them. One departure from tradition was that, despite the enthusiastic, sustained applause and standing ovation, none of the performers returned to the stage to take a bow. I'm guessing that given the fact that the performance is the fulfillment of a vow, it would have been unseemly for them to do so.

New Opera Lyra Launches Inaugural Season

On Sunday, October 5th New Opera Lyra launched its inaugural season with an afternoon of music featuring artists of NOL’s inaugural season and hosted by Sandra Graham. New Opera Lyra is an exciting initiative to bring back fully-staged opera to Ottawa, headed by co-artistic directors Andrew Ager and Suzanne Bassett.

The 2022-23 season will feature the long-awaited world premiere of Andrew Ager’s opera *Dracula*, to be performed on October 28th and 29th (just in time for Halloween) at St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church. The opera stars Bradley Christensen as Dracula, Carmen Harris as Mina, Iain Macpherson as Jonathan and Gary Dahl as Renfield. The production is directed by Benjamin Spierman of Bronx Opera and conducted by Matthew Larkin. Tickets are available from Eventbrite.

In January New Opera Lyra will bring us “Pictures and Dances—An Evening of Mussorgsky”, featuring Ukrainian-Canadian soprano Antonina Ermolenko and members of the NAC Orchestra conducted by Matthew Larkin.

The season will be rounded off in June with a production of Puccini’s comedy *Gianni Schicchi*, directed by Suzanne Bassett and with new orchestration for chamber orchestra by Andrew Ager. Ryan Hofman (a Brian Law Opera Competition finalist) will sing the title role, with Susan Elizabeth as Lauretta and Adam Sperry as Rinuccio.

For more information go to New Opera Lyra’s website: newoperalyra.ca. Congratulations to New Opera Lyra on this exciting inaugural season.



NCOS Zoom Event - *Gianni Schicchi* by Giacomo Puccini by Lesley Robinson

Gianni Schicchi (1917-18) is a one-act comic opera that Puccini wrote as the third element in his *Il trittico* (Tryptich). As the final work of the trilogy of contrasting themes, it provides some light relief. The three short operas were intended to be performed together, although in practice this rarely happens. More frequently it is performed in a double bill together with another short opera by a different composer.

We watched several versions of this opera before selecting a 2011 production by the Royal Opera House Covent Garden from a DVD which features all three of the *Il trittico* operas (also *Il tabarro* and *Suor Angelica*). This is a piece that requires an extensive ensemble cast and the ROH's version is excellently cast, featuring Italian baritone Lucio Gallo in the title role, Russian soprano Ekaterina Siurina as his daughter Lauretta and Italian tenor Francesco Demuro as Rinuccio, her ardent lover. The entire cast perform wonderfully with great acting as well as singing. Stage Director Richard Jones makes sure that there is plenty going on on stage, all executed with precise comic timing. It is conducted by Antonio Pappano. All in all, these elements come together to make this production an excellent choice for our Zoom event.



The story is based on an incident from Dante's *Divine Comedy*. As a 14th century work, this highlights how little human nature has changed over the centuries. The avarice and hypocrisy of the characters make just as much sense today as they did 700 years ago. This version is set in the 20th century. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLoymrFcirE>.

Against the Grain Presents

Bluebeard's Castle - The Gothic Thriller Retold

Composed by: Béla Bartók; Libretto by: Daisy Evans

Starring: **Gerald Finley**, Baritone; **Adrienne Pieczonka**, Soprano

Language: English; Running Time: 60 Minutes

A haunting reimagining of one of the greatest operas of the 20th century. *Bluebeard's Castle* by Béla Bartók stars Canadian operatic superstars Gerald Finley and Adrienne Pieczonka. The piece features a new English libretto and orchestral arrangement, reframing the piece as a love story between a long-married couple living with dementia. March 29, 31, April 1 2023.

Tickets <https://my.harbourfrontcentre.com/events>

Live Performance Returns to Montreal

Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, Verdi's *Il Trovatore* by Lesley Robinson

It was a thrill to attend the first night of the first live production at Opéra de Montréal in more than two years. Montreal played host to the highly renowned Barrie Kosky production of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. This was definitely a *Flute* like I'd never seen before. The production had the look of a silent movie. The costumes were of the appropriate era, circa 1920. Papageno looked like Buster Keaton, complete with straw boater. Monostatos was a bald-headed, silent-era villain à la Nosferatu. Special effects were achieved by using animated projections onto a white background and the singers appeared on platforms at different levels. The dialogue sections of the opera were replaced by Gothic script captions like the subtitles in a silent film and the music served as the live music which would have accompanied accompanied silent era film showings. It all worked perfectly and the performances were characterised by excellent comic timing as well as vocal skill. The cast was international. American tenor Brian Wallin sang the role of Tamino, with British soprano Kim-Lillian Strebel as Pamina. Slovakian baritone Richard Sveda was Papageno and Canadian Elizabeth Polese was his Papagena. Polish soprano Anna Siminska sang the role of Queen of the Night with French-American bass Christian Zarembo as her nemesis Sarastro. This was a fabulously enjoyable performance.



L-r Queen of the Night, Papageno, Pamina, conductor Christopher Allen and Tamino

The opening of the new season in September saw a new production of Verdi's *Il Trovatore*. The new season was also marked by the return of the engaging pre-opera talks of musicologist Pierre Vachon, whose witty and informative talks consistently amuse and enlighten. We were encouraged not to attempt to follow the nonsensical story, but instead to live in the moment, appreciating the music. The fairly minimal set and staging helped to emphasize the isolation of the characters. It was a particular thrill to enjoy the return to the Montréal stage of baritone Etienne Dupuis (former member of Atelier lyrique de l' Opéra de Montréal) as the imposing Count di Luna and his Australian wife, soprano Nicole Car in the role of the alluring Leonora. They were joined in the other major roles by Canadians Marie-Nicole Lemieux (contralto) as Azucena and Luc Robert (tenor) as Manrico. Mr. Dupuis's luscious voice provided the outstanding performance. Thank you, Opéra de Montréal for bringing us this much needed treat.



L-r: Etienne Dupuis, Nicole Car, Luc Robert, Marie-Nicole Lemieux

Canadian Opera Company 2022 - 2023



Conductor: Johannes Debus
Director: Marilyn Gronsdal
The Dutchman: Johan Reuter
Senta: Marjorie Owens
Daland: Franz-Josef Selig
The Steersman: Miles Mykkanen
Erik: Christopher Ventris
Mary: Rosie Aldridge



Conductor: Jacques Lacombe
Director: Joel Ivany
Carmen: J'Nai Bridges, Rihab Chaieb
Don José: Marcelo Puente
Micaëla: Joyce El-Khoury, Anna-Sophie Neher
Escamillo: Lucas Meachem, Gregory Dahl
Zuniga: Alain Coulombe
Le Dancaïre: Jonah Spungin
Le Remendado: Jean-Philippe Lazure
Frasquita: Ariana Cossette



Conductor: Harry Bicket
Director: Claus Guth
Figaro: Luca Pisaroni
Countess: Johanni Van Oostrum
Count: Gordon Bintner
Cherubino: Emily Fons
Dr. Bartolo: Robert Pomakov
Marcellina: Helene Schneiderman
Antonio: Doug MacNaughton
Cherubim: Uli Kirsch



Conductor: Johannes Debus
Director: Atom Egoyan
Salome: Ambur Braid
Herod: Michael Schade
Herodias: Karita Mattila
Narraboth: Frédéric Antoun
The Page: Carolyn Sproule

L'Opéra de Montréal

La beauté du monde (November 19 - 27, 2022)



Conductor Jean-Marie Zeitouni
Stage director Florent Siaud
Jacques Jaujard Damien Pass
Rose Valland Allyson McHardy
Hermann Göring Matthew Dalen
Franz Wolff-Metternich John Brancy
Alexandre Rosenberg Rocco Rupolo
Jeanne Boitel Layla Claire
Bruno Lohse Isaiah Bell
Esther France Bellemare

MET Opera HD LIVE 2022-23 Season

Medea Sondra Radvanovsky stars as Medea in the Met-premiere production of Cherubini's rarely performed masterpiece. Tenor Matthew Polenzani is Giasone; soprano Janai Brugger is Glauce; bass Michele Pertusi is Creonte, and mezzo-soprano Ekaterina Gubanova is Neris. **October 22, 2022**

La Traviata Soprano Nadine Sierra stars as Violetta in Michael Mayer's production of Verdi's beloved tragedy. Tenor Stephen Costello is her self-centered lover Alfredo, alongside baritone Luca Salsi as his disapproving father, and Maestro Daniele Callegari on the podium. **November 5, 2022**

The Hours Renée Fleming returns to the Met in the world-premiere production of composer Kevin Puts's opera. Kelli O'Hara and Joyce DiDonato join Fleming as the opera's trio of heroines. Phelim McDermott directs this compelling drama, with Met Music Director Yannick Nézet-Séguin on the podium. **December 10, 2022**

Lohengrin Wagner's masterpiece returns to the Met stage after 17 years. Director François Girard unveils an atmospheric staging that once again weds his striking visual style and keen dramatic insight to Wagner's breathtaking music. Yannick Nézet-Séguin is on the podium with a cast led by tenor Piotr Beczala as Lohengrin. Soprano Tamara Wilson is the virtuous duchess Elsa going head-to-head with soprano Christine Goerke as the cunning sorceress Ortrud. Bass-baritone Evgeny Nikitin is Ortrud's husband, Telramund, and bass Günther Groissböck is King Heinrich. **March 18, 2023**

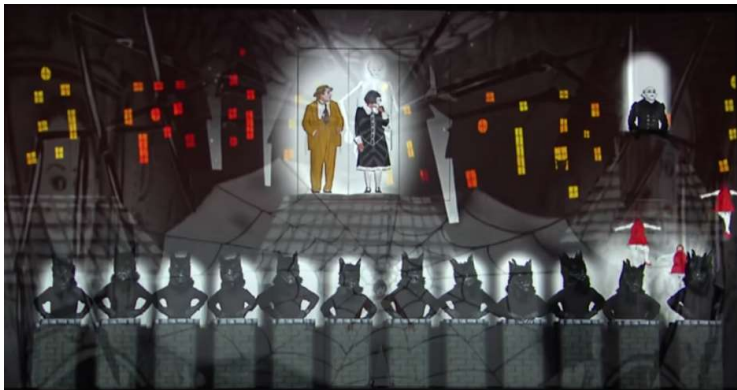
Falstaff Baritone Michael Volle stars as the caddish knight Falstaff, gleefully tormented by a trio of clever women who deliver his comeuppance, in Verdi's comedy. Maestro Daniele Rustioni takes the podium to oversee a brilliant ensemble cast that features sopranos Hera Hyesang Park, Ailyn Pérez, and Jennifer Johnson Cano, mezzo-soprano Marie-Nicole Lemieux, tenor Bogdan Volkov, and baritone Christopher Maltman. **April 1, 2023**

As always check dates and times with the cinema of your choice

NCOS Zoom Event—Lights... Camera... Action, Part 2

by Lesley Robinson

In Part 1 of this presentation, we looked at how the same operas are presented over and over again, each time subtly different—different singers, musicians and conductors, with different settings and sets. These changes highlight different aspects of the composition, by encouraging the audience to reflect on the historical, geographical or social context. We looked at how a film of an opera can use set, imagery and special effects to achieve a production that's not possible in the opera house and we began with the example of two different film versions of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. As an addendum to that comparison, it is worth mentioning the recent production of the opera staged in Montreal (and reviewed elsewhere in this newsletter.) Here, instead of a stage production being shown on film, we are treated to the look of a silent film, right on stage, in front of our eyes. Since this is hard to imagine, it is worth taking a look at the incredible special effects achieved through projections, with the singers live on stage, in this trailer for the production, as seen at LA Opera in their 2013/2014 season:



You may have seen the Met's recent Live in HD transmission of Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*. In an interview, Simon Stone, the Australian director talked about how he likes to set a production in a place familiar to the audience. For this brand-new production of a story, originally telling of a disintegrating, 17th century Scottish aristocratic family, Stone chose a present-day, American rust belt setting, with Lucia's authoritarian brother Enrico as a cash-strapped, drug addicted mobster. This is an excellent example of what changing the setting can do—it highlights certain aspects of the story and the characters and it brings it closer to home for the audience. The emotions remain universal, but the audience can relate on a new level.

Here's an example of two very different film versions of another very well-known opera, Bizet's *Carmen*, one set traditionally, the other in another time and place. The first was made in 1984 and although traditionally set in 19th century Seville, the film is dazzling in the realism it achieves in comparison to a staged version. We go to the bullfight and look into the eye of the bull as he meets his fate. The second version, made in 2005 moves the story to contemporary South Africa. It is translated and sung in Xhosa. The inclusion of traditional song creates a synthesis of Xhosa culture and European opera. This version highlights the truly universal story of obsession and jealousy which translates all over the world.

NCOS Zoom Event—Lights... Camera... Action, Part 2 (cont.)

Here are the two Carmens.



In another example of a traditionally set opera as opposed to an updated (and a little wacky) one, we can compare two versions of Bellini's *La Sonnambula*. The first is a traditional version from the 1979 Spoleto Festival, filmed for TV with Lucia Aliberti and Aldo Bertolo. The whole opera is available on You Tube.



The contrasting version is from the Met and yes, it is set in modern-day New York, but there's a twist. It is an opera company rehearsing *La Sonnambula* in a Manhattan rehearsal room. It is clear that the singers are romantically entangled, like the characters they play. This Met version stars the ever-wonderful Juan Diego Florez along with Natalie Dessay. The chosen scene is my favourite in the opera, another duet, beautifully acted, between the two main characters. You can watch it on You Tube.



First performed on 5 October 1762, Gluck's *Orpheus and Eurydice* has a mythological tale for its subject and contains a chorus and dancing. The part of Orfeo has been sung by different voice types. At the premiere in Vienna it was sung by an alto castrato. In the revised Italian version it was sung by a soprano castrato. For the Paris premiere the part was revised for a high tenor. These days of course we have no castrati and the role is sometimes sung by a mezzo soprano, sometimes in the French version by a high tenor, as in the first extract selected or a counter tenor, as in the second.

NCOS Zoom Event—Lights... Camera... Action, Part 2 (cont.)

Here is Roberto Alagna singing in a 2008 production from Bologna. In this modern-day setting, Eurydice dies in a car accident that Orfeus survives! Nevertheless the music is as lovely as ever. This production is an Alagna family affair, directed by David Alagna with sets designed by Frédéric Alagna, Roberto's brothers.



There is a Blu-ray recording of a 2013 Italian version from the theatre of Český Krumlov Castle in the Czech Republic. Performances there are rare, but totally authentic. The theatre is a working Baroque theatre on a UNESCO World Heritage site. The authenticity goes right down to the pit where the orchestra perform by candlelight in period costumes. This version was shot as a film rather than as a straight live performance in the theatre, nevertheless, much of it was recorded live on stage. Countertenor Bejun Mehta sings the role of Orfeo.



The next comparison was two very different presentations of Handel's *Acis & Galatea*. A tale of shepherds and nymphs, *Acis & Galatea* is a very English pastoral work. We compared two pieces from the first, very happy Act – “Happy We” is a joyful duet between the lovers.



Benedikt Kristjánsson sings Acis and Patricia Janečková is Galatea. The marionettes are by Buchty a loutky in the Czech Republic. The music is played by Collegium Marianum an ensemble based in Prague and conducted by Artistic Director Jana Semerádová.

NCOS Zoom Event—Lights... Camera... Action, Part 2 (cont.)

For a contrasting and surprising version of *Acis & Galatea* we chose a production by the Irish National Opera, which uses a whole different type of “country” from the usual English pastoral setting.



Rameau’s *Les Indes galantes* premiered in Paris in 1735 and in the tradition of French opera contains ballet as well as singing. At the time it was designed to show the triumph of the French Enlightenment over all things *other*. The term “Les Indes” was used at the time to describe anywhere that was not European. The piece consists of four separate tableaux featuring love in exotic places. We looked at two very different productions of *Les Indes galantes*, both from Paris, one recorded in 2003 at the Palais Garnier production at the Opéra both showed the “Danse du the final section of the work French and Spanish first extract was the Arts William Christie. The classic, although there are



and the other a new 2019 Bastille. The extracts selected Grand Calumet de la Paix” from called “Les Sauvages” set in the colonies in the Americas. The Florissants version conducted by costumes and set are fairly some wacky dance moves.

Lastly we saw the version from the Bastille. This is an example of updating to the present day and the dance in this case is hip-hop.

