

feature

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RALLENTANDO SOTTO VOCE
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Opera Under the Stars, Ottawa, June 29 & 30, 2007 - l to r: Robert Pomakov, Andrew Stewart, (Richard Bradshaw hidden), Lawrence Wiliford, Russell Braun, David Pomeroy, Yannick-Muriel Noah, Isabel Bayrakdarian, Lauren Segal, Virginia Hatfield, Joni Henson.

The COC Ensemble Studio

The Magical Bridge to the Professional Opera Stage

By Francine P. Lewis

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MELISSA THAN



Quick now! This is not the Opera Quiz, but what do Guillermo Silva-Marin, Theodore Baerg, Roxolana Roslak, Ben Heppner, John Fanning, Gaétan Laperrière, Isabel Bayrakdarian, Krisztina Szabó, Michael Colvin, Frédérique Vézina, Robert Gleadow and Yannick-Muriel Noah have in common? If your answer was the Canadian Opera Company Ensemble Studio, you were right on.

For young aspiring opera singers, the COC Ensemble Studio has been, for 26 years, the magical bridge spanning the more sheltered world of school and the professional world of opera. Seen as Canada's premier training program for young opera professionals, it allows young singers not only to build a solid foundation in terms of repertoire, advanced studies and practical experience, but also to learn the business of being an opera singer.

Founded in 1980 by the COC's former General Director, Lotfi Mansouri, with a continuing grant from Imperial Oil Ltd., assistance from the Canadian Government through the Department of Canadian Heritage, and private donors, the Ensemble Studio has evolved into a rich, fertile training ground for "an inordinate amount of wealth in Canadian talent," in the words of Liz Upchurch, its Artistic Director.

Upchurch laughingly attributes this wealth of talent to our Rocky Mountains, or perhaps our Canadian water, a sentiment echoed by the late Richard Bradshaw. "Probably the greatest number of important young singers coming up in the world is from Canada. It's not from Italy. It's not from Russia – although it used to be. But we have these extraordinarily gifted singers – it must be something in the water," he quipped playfully. However, he went on to observe, "We're also quite good at training them. That is something the Canada Council is quite good at – giving money to train young artists."

And there's no doubt the money is well spent. Members receive vocal coaching from such renowned teachers as Marlena Malas from the

Juilliard School, Jean Mallandaine, from the Young Artists program at the Royal Opera Covent Garden, Timothy Noble, Distinguished Professor of Voice at Bloomington, Indiana, and Margaret Singer, a coach at the Paris Opera young singers program and Opera Theatre Erfurt.

Ensemble Studio members also have the chance to participate in *lieder* classes and seminars led by illustrious Canadians such as Russell Bratun, Adrienne Pieczonka and Tracy Dahl. In addition to learning the roles they are expected to perform or understudy, they also take classes in languages, acting, physical combat, dance and movement – training vital to their stage-craft.

As Music Administrator Sandy Gavinchuk points out, "At one point, having a stellar voice was the most important thing – then it changed to 'there's the voice, but we want them to be able to act'. Now, they want a package. They want the voice, they want the acting, they want the singers to look the part – they want them to be creative. So as the art form evolves, the training has to evolve with it."

To that end, personal training classes are also available. "Singers need to be aware that their body is the instrument," Gavinchuk says, "not only the voice." For a singer, it's also simple economics that one must keep in top health. A singer who cannot sing does not get paid. But artists must not only remain in top shape physically, but also psychologically. A new class offered this year is "neurolinguistic programming", to help develop successful habits and strategies by reinforcing positive, helpful behaviours, while diminishing negative ones.

The business side of opera singing has also evolved. Professional agents from Europe and New York teach singers how to find an agent. There are also classes on how to produce an effective résumé, how to conduct oneself in an interview, how to dress for auditions, as well as classes on the ins and outs of filing taxes.

Paramount, however, in everyone's mind is always

la voce – the voice and those who have it – no matter what the business side of opera may dictate.

Competition to become an Ensemble member is intense. Each year, brochures are sent out to university music programs, music schools and teachers. Hopefuls from across the country must send in résumés, proof of Canadian citizenship or landed immigrant status, and prepare five arias in contrasting styles, in the original languages of each, before auditioning in the city of their choice (Montreal, Toronto, Calgary or Vancouver) for Sandy Gavinchuk, Liz Upchurch and Phil Boswell, COC Artistic Administrator. Gavinchuk and Boswell also conduct auditions each autumn in New York for Canadian citizens studying in the United States.

Every applicant receives an audition. The COC provides the pianist, although those who prefer to bring their own may do so. The top 10 to 15 singers receive call-back auditions. The COC pays their expenses to come to Toronto for the intensive two-day auditions. The first day they have coaching with Liz Upchurch and the COC accompanist. The audition itself is on the second day.

The two-day structure helps to settle any anxiety the singers may have about being in a new city or environment, and also gives the coaches an opportunity to become acquainted with them, and to see how they respond to constructive criticism, suggestions on interpretation, or even flattery. On day two, the coaches are able to see if the singers have taken their comments to heart and incorporated them into the audition.

The decision on which singers to accept is based on talent, as well as whether the singer as a whole would respond to, or benefit from, the Ensemble Studio program. The COC is manifestly unconcerned with having a balance of voice types. In some years, there may be a dearth of tenors. In the current year, there are quite a few sopranos. The size of the Ensemble will expand and contract depending on the available talent pool in any given year. In the words of the late Richard Bradshaw, “We have these talented people and we can’t send them out the door.”

This year’s Ensemble Studio has 12 dynamic members including an intern director and an intern opera coach. In true Canadian fashion, they hail from very diverse backgrounds – from Whitehorse to Ottawa to exotic Madagascar. I spoke to two of these exciting young artists, soprano Virginia Hatfield and tenor Lawrence Wiliford, and their musical backgrounds are as varied as their cultural heritages.

Wiliford began singing at age nine in the prestigious American Boychoir School in Princeton, New Jersey, eventually moving on to take a Bachelor

in Music and Choral Conducting at St. Olaf College in Minnesota. While still in college, he became a founding member of the professional male *a cappella* ensemble, “Cantus,” whose singing has been called “spontaneous grace” by the Washington Post. After studies in England, he moved to Toronto to pursue a Masters in Voice Performance at the University of Toronto, where his interest in opera was sparked.

Although he came late to the opera world, Wiliford’s COC mainstage debut came in true operatic style in October 2006. Due to the illness of colleague, Michael Colvin, and with barely five hours notice, this charming tenor was asked to step into the major role of Ferrando in Mozart’s *Così fan tutte*. When the call came, he and the other Ensemble members had been at an early-morning talk. The other Ensemble members immediately rallied around him to help him learn all the intricate staging in that one afternoon. “It was terrifying and exciting – I didn’t have time to think,” Wiliford says now, “but it was a wonderful experience. The cast was amazing. Most were singers I’d worked with before, except Russell Braun, but he was amazing to work with. I was a little nervous right away, since Ferrando opens the entire opera, but after my first five minutes of singing, I enjoyed it. It was great fun!” He also gives much credit to his friends and colleagues in the Ensemble, “because I wouldn’t have been able to do it without them.”

It certainly shows! Wiliford received kudos for this role from reviewer Paula Citron (Classical 96 FM), who praised him as “a talented lyric tenor.” According to Stephen Cera (National Post), “he acquitted himself with fluent and well-shaped singing ... a distinctively appealing tenor that caressed the lovely melody in *Un’aura amorosa* in a way that was light, lyrical and sensitively coloured.”

Virginia Hatfield, a charismatic and lively redhead, also made a well received COC mainstage debut as Frasquita in Bizet’s *Carmen*. “I don’t think that a young soprano could ask for a better debut role than Frasquita,” says Hatfield, “because it’s fun, it’s charming, and there’s a little bit of comedy and drama in the scenes in which she appears.” She was able to sing with the COC Chorus in the large ensemble numbers, as well as part of a more intimate trio and quintet, which showed off the vocal talents of its members. Furthermore, she loved the fact that she didn’t have “the pressure of a main role, but still got to sing high Cs!”

Like Wiliford, Hatfield started singing from a young age in school and church choirs, as well as local county festivals around Northumberland County, Ontario. At age 12, she started voice lessons



Top Row: Andrew Stewart,
Lauren Segal, Ashlie Corcoran,
Jon-Paul Decosse
Middle Row: Virginia Hatfield,
Justin Welsh, Betty Allison,
Melinda Delorme
Bottom Row: Miriam Khalil,
Yannick-Muriel Noah,
Lawrence Wilford
Front: Liz Upchurch

with soprano Donna Bennett, who introduced her to her first opera recording (*La Traviata*) and became her mentor, inspiring her to pursue a career in classical music. Entering the University of Toronto, she took a degree in Voice Performance, followed by a three-year Opera Diploma at the Faculty of Music, Opera Division.

In 2003, she was the recipient of the Canadian Opera Volunteer Committee’s Distinguished Graduate Award, and is the winner of the 2006 David and Ann Award. As Pamina in the COC Ensemble Studio’s production of Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*, Hatfield’s performance was praised by reviewer Christopher Hoile (Stage Door) as “a constant pleasure”, noting her “ravishing account” of *Ach, ich fühl’s*.

Hatfield values immensely the opportunity to work with the Canadian Opera Company’s international casts and to meet professionals from around the world. Upchurch notes that there is “no substitute” for such experience for a young professional, adding

that being in the Ensemble Studio “makes it possible for them to have a window into the world of opera and hopefully their futures.”

Regardless of their experiences and aspirations, Hatfield and Wilford agree that as students at the University of Toronto, the COC Ensemble Studio program “quickly becomes a part of your consciousness,” as Hatfield eloquently puts it. It is something that students begin to discuss seriously by second or third year, as older students and graduates audition for the COC in the fall, and the exciting news of who got into the coveted program makes the rounds of the university’s corridors and lecture halls.

Knowing that such a program as the COC Ensemble Studio exists gives professional young artists a challenging, but obtainable goal to strive for as they work towards their chosen career. Along the way, not only do they gain valuable experience and education, but in the nurturing of such talent, the Canadian Opera Company is tremendously enriched and, ultimately, so are all opera lovers. **@**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NISHA LEWIS