
JOHN
MATTHEW
MYERS
"Myers unfurled a lovely, warm tenor of considerable promise."
– Opera News

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John Matthew Myers, tenor
2024-2025 Full Biography

John Matthew Myers has garnered acclaim for his "lovely, warm tenor of considerable promise" (*Opera News*), "insightful and beautifully nuanced performances" (*Fort Worth Star-Telegram*), and "remarkable emotional depth and range" (*Opera Magazine*) in recent collaborations with companies such as the New York Philharmonic, Verbier Festival, Metropolitan Opera, Opera National de Paris, Teatro alla Scala, and Teatro la Fenice. His critically acclaimed solo debut album, a thoughtful program of works by American and American émigré composers titled *Desiderium* with pianist Myra Huang, was released on AVIE Records in 2022.

In the 2024-2025 season, Myers performs Handel's *Messiah* with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra under Manfred Honeck and with the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra. He returns to the Grant Park Music Festival to sing Mahler's 8th Symphony and to the Oregon Symphony as tenor soloist in Mendelssohn's *Lobgesang*. In concert, he sings the roles of Iopas in *Les Troyens* at the Seattle Opera with Ludovic Morlot and Cavaradossi in *Tosca* with the Richmond Symphony under Valentina Peleggi. With the Opera Carlo Felice Genova, he sings Midas in Strauss's *Die Liebe der Danae* under Fabio Luisi. He appears as The Tenor/Bacchaus in *Ariadne auf Naxos* with Zurich Opera.

Myers made his surprise Los Angeles Philharmonic debut in 2017 as Mao in John Adams's *Nixon in China* conducted by the composer. In 2023, he reprised the role with the Opera National de Paris under Gustavo Dudamel, "handling Mao's tessitura with seeming ease and limning a convincing portrayal both imposing and humorous" (*Classical Voice North America*).

Recently, Myers has covered roles for the Metropolitan Opera in productions of Britten's *Peter Grimes*, Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, Wagner's *Die Meistersinger,* Tchaikovsky's *Queen of Spades* and Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*. The 2021-2022 season included a role in the Metropolitan Opera's premiere of Brett Dean's *Hamlet,* and last season, he also covered Siegmund in Wagner's *Die Walküre* with the Fort Worth Symphony.

Highlights of Myers' extensive opera repertoire include Pollione in *Norma* (LA Opera), Cavaradossi in *Tosca* (Arizona Opera), Don Jose in *Carmen* (Music Academy of the West), Cassio in *Otello* (Portland Summer Fest), Flavio in Bellini's *Norma* (Teatro Regio di Parma),

Trin in *La Fanciulla del West* (Santa Fe Opera), Valerio in Mercadante's *Virginia* (Wexford Festival Opera), Der Kaiser in *Die Frau Ohne Schatten* (San Francisco Opera), Aufide in Rossini's *Moïse et Pharaon* (Collegiate Chorale/Carnegie Hall), Junior/Charlie in Jennifer Higdon's *Cold Mountain* (Santa Fe Opera), and Der Tenor/Bacchus in Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos* (Teatro La Fenice). As a Resident Artist at the Academy of Vocal Arts, Myers sang Duca di Mantua in Verdi's *Rigoletto*, Prince Sinodal in Rubinstein's *The Demon,* Bacchus in *Ariadne auf Naxos*, and the Prince in Dvorak's *Rusalka*. He has collaborated with Long Beach Opera to perform Michael Gordon's *Van Gogh*, Gabriela Ortiz's *Camelia la Tejana: Unicamente La Verdad*, Stewart Copeland's *Tell-Tale Heart*, and a co-production of Tobias Picker's *Thérèse Raquin* with Chicago Opera Theater. He made his New York Philharmonic debut in the world premiere of David Lang's *prisoner of the state,* directed by Elkhanah Pulitzer. He also sang in John Cage's *Europeras 1 & 2* in with the LA Phil in collaboration with The Industry and Yuval Sharon.

Myers has been seen as a soloist in Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 and Mozart's Mass in C minor with the Grand Rapids Symphony, Handel's *Messiah* with the New York Philharmonic, National Symphony Orchestra, and St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* with Colorado Springs Philharmonic, Mahler's Symphony No. 8 with the Canterbury Choral Society, Britten's *Serenade for Tenor, Horn, and Strings* with Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia and with Cameristi della Scala at Teatro alla Scala, Britten's *War Requiem* with the Oratorio Society of New York at Carnegie Hall and in the Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine, Vaughan Williams's *Serenade to Music* with the Wexford Festival Orchestra, Mendelssohn's *Elijah* with the Fairfield Chorale, and Brahms's *Liebeslieder Waltzes* with Performance Santa Fe. He recently performed Dvořák's *Stabat Mater* at the Grant Park Music Festival, about which the *Chicago Tribune* wrote, "He astonished from his thrilling entrance…and kept listeners at the edge of their seats whenever he appeared, his voice a thing of poignance and power."

Originally from southern California, Myers received his graduate and undergraduate degrees from the Manhattan School of Music, was a Gerdine Young Artist with the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, Apprentice Artist with Santa Fe Opera, an alumnus of the Verbier Festival Academy, and a fellow with Music Academy of the West. He won Third Prize and the Richard Tauber Prize for the best interpretation of Schubert Lieder at the 2022 Wigmore Hall Bollinger International Song Competition.

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MARCH 2025 - PLEASE DESTROY ALL PREVIOUSLY DATED MATERIALS

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John Matthew Myers

Critical Acclaim

"Tenor John Matthew Myers as Bacchus exuded a gentle demeanor that made for an interesting development of chemistry on stage. His voice sounded pure and powerfully romantic. Even his physical gestures exuded gracefulness. I enjoyed the breath of fresh air he brought to the cast's dynamics and am curious to see him blossom in more roles."

Opera Wire

"As he proved in last season's opener, tenor John Matthew Myers has one of those rare, full-package voices, with impeccable diction, a radiant tone and unflagging stamina as Doctor Marianus."

Chicago Tribune

"Myers' sound is evenly produced and gorgeously colored throughout its range. He brought dramatic conviction to each reading, from the creeping uncertainty of the Elegy (after William Blake) to the bright and hopeful mythology of the Hymn (text by Ben Jonson). Myers' overall performance achieved a certain dreamlike quality that suited the nighttime setting evoked by the work's title, without growing hazy enough to eclipse its meaning or momentum."

Bachtrack

"John Matthew Myers' Mao showed a great command of Adams' lyrical approach to politics. His voice has a particularly good and heroic upper register, with a tenor timbre that sometimes sounds more baritone. His expressivity connects Mao to characters like Peter Grimes—a link that I would not expect otherwise. He gave a sense of vocal dignity to a character the staging mocked most of the time."

Opera Wire

"The festival landed a most impressive 'get' in tenor John Matthew Myers, who recently starred opposite Thomas Hampson and Renée Fleming in Opéra de Paris's 'Nixon in China.' He astonished from his thrilling entrance in 'Stabat Mater' and kept listeners at the edge of their seats wherever he appeared, his voice a thing of poignance and power."

Chicago Trbune

"Vocally, *Nixon in China* was a resounding success. All of the principals flourished...the magnificent John Matthew Myers, a late replacement to the production, was impressively nonchalant about his ridiculous range as Mao."

Stage and Cinema

"Tenor John Matthew Myers' Mao Tse-tung was brightly lighted to match his declaiming voice."

Los Angeles Times

"John Matthew Myers unfurled a lovely, warm tenor of considerable promise in Sinodal's sometime melismatic music."

Opera News

"Myers, whose vocal timbre uncannily resembles that of Peter Pears, Britten's lover and longtime muse, delivered his songs with pinpoint diction, beauty of sound and deep feeling for what the words convey."

Chicago Classical Review

"Bacchus is a famously difficult role, nearly impossible to make graceful either vocally or theatrically—but John Matthew Myers brought considerable power and ring to the line, coped with its fearsomely high attacks, and found more dynamic variety than many famous tenors have."

Philadelphia Magazine

"Myers possesses a plangent, substantial tenor, appealingly vibrant and with a sense of considerable power in reserve, and an ardent stage presence."

Parterre

"Suzanne's hapless police officer husband, Olivier, and the family friend Grivet supplied the evening's fleeting moments of amusement, thanks, respectively to Zeffin Quinn Hollis and John Matthew Myers."

Los Angeles Times

"John Matthew Myers displayed a heroic timbre and ardent singing."

Chicago Classical Review

"As Alfredo, John Matthew Myers' tenor was as smooth and rich as butter, a good fit for a romantic lead."

Coast Weekend

"Tenor John Matthew Myers sang with a plaintive, clear and warm timbre."

Oberon's Grove

"In the two male leads, Jeffrey Halili and John Matthew Myers proved that two tenors can occupy the same stage and convince the audience they're good friends. In addition to their technical vocal prowess, both created believable characters, Halili as the prince and Myers as the kind of sensible humorist a woman like Countess Stasi would find attractive."

Broad Street Review

"Myers' expansive tenor expressed pathos and hope."

Star-Telegram

JOHN MATTHEW MYERS

OPERAWIRE

September 12, 2022

Bollinger International Song Competition Announces Winners

By Francisco Salazar

Wigmore Hall has announced the winners of the Bollinger International Song Competition.

The first prize went to tenor Laurence Kilsby while the second prize went to baritone Arvid Fagerfjäll. The third prize went to tenor John Matthew Myers and the fourth prize was awarded to mezzo Susan Zarrabi.

The competition also saw the Pianist's Prize awarded to Hikaru Kanki, while the Jean Meikle Prize for a Duo went to Anna Cavaliero and Sebastian Issler.

Third Prize winner Myers also won the Richard Tauber Prize for the best interpretation of Schubert Lieder while Vinicius Costa won the Vaughan Williams Song Prize for the best interpretation of songs in English by a British composer.

The Britten Pears Young Artist Programme Prize was given to Jeeyoung Lim and Benedikt Holter.

The competition was juried by John Gilhooly CBE, Roberta Alexander, Olaf Baer, Hugh Canning, Bernarda Fink, David Jackson, Graham Johnson OBE, Dame Felicity Lott, Claron McFadden, and Asadour Santourian.

JOHN MATTHEW MYERS

LebTown

Lebanon County, PA news, events, and opinions.

August 19, 2019

This week at Gretna Music: Five questions with Jennifer Johnson Cano and John Matthew Myers

By Matt Reigle

Song of the Earth — or in German, *Das Lied Von Der Erde* — is a composition by Austrian composer Gustav Mahler. It's a comprised of six songs for two singers who alternate movements.

On August 25, mezzo soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano and tenor John Matthew Myers, accompanied by pianist Christopher Cano, will play a special piano arrangement of Mahler's classic composition.

Each week this summer, LebTown will be previewing who's playing next at Gretna Music — leaving you time to purchase tickets or get more information on the artists by visiting the Gretna Music website or Facebook page, or calling 717-361-1508.

So, without further ado, here are five questions with Jennider Johnson Cano and John Matthew Myers.

How would you describe Song of the Earth to someone who hasn't seen it perform before?

Jennifer Johnson Cano: To be as succinct as possible and not give too many spoilers, I would describe "Song of the Earth" as a beautiful collection of poetry set to evocative music which depicts all of the wonderfully complicated aspects of what it means to be human. It is truly unique within the canon of classical song.

John Matthew Myers: Das Lied is a sonic world that is both visceral and introspective, with themes of living, parting, and salvation.

What inspirations have gone into the performance?

Jennifer Johnson Cano: The music of Mahler is, in and of itself, inspiring. I feel a particular kinship to his songs – the texts he chose and how he crafted the music – so meticulous yet full of feeling. His music has a remarkable ability to address the complexities of the human condition, to make one consider, but not dictate what should be felt or thought.

John Matthew Myers: The more that I have lived with the piece, I have become more inspired by Mahler and the circumstances of his life that were surrounding this piece. He used music and composing as a way to pull himself out of being despondent, and I find that the music he wrote can have that effect for others as well.

What has the experience rehearsing and putting it together been like?

Jennifer Johnson Cano: It will be, for all of us, our first time performing "Songs of the Earth" in the piano version. Having performed both with full orchestra and the Schoenberg chamber version, I'm discovering an newfound intimacy within the piece. It is as though much of the adornment has been stripped away and we are left with the most pure essence. This allows much more freedom and, in many ways, more vulnerability.

John Matthew Myers: For me, the experience rehearsing and putting the

piece together is partly pacing and to make sure I plan the arch of how the journey of hate songs develop. But I have the guilty pleasure of just being able to listen to the last song sung by Jennifer which is always a treat!

Where is the most unexpected place you've heard or played amazing music?

Jennifer Johnson Cano: Amazing music happens all around us, everywhere, everyday. Music created and performed with joy and conviction will, most often, move me to tears. While I adore witnessing virtuoso musicians work their magic in grand concert halls, I particularly enjoy seeing young people, just discovering and working on their own craft, put all the various pieces of the puzzle together.

John Matthew Myers: The most unexpected place that I heard music was at the forbidden city in China, it was a production of Turandot and it was magical! For where I've performed, I guess the most unexpected venue was an old furniture warehouse that was being turned into a performance and arts expo in Long Beach, California. The piece was Michael Gordon's Van Gogh and Stewart Copland's Tell Tale Heart.

What would be your Jigger Shop order?

Jennifer Johnson Cano: The Beignet Sundae!! – I cannot wait to try it!

John Matthew Myers: Ooooh My order at Jigger Shop would either be the Shoo-Fly Pie Sundae or the Death By Chocolate!

LEHIGH VALLEY'S NEWSPAPER
THE MORNING CALL

September 29, 2017

Acclaimed opera singers, performing in Allentown, talk about sharing a stage and life together

By Steve Siegel

Soon after graduating from the University of Southern California's Thornton School of Music in 2005, aspiring soprano Angela Meade sang "Casta Diva" from Bellini's opera "Norma" at her audition for Philadelphia's Academy of Vocal Arts.

Nobody could believe it. By what pretense could a young vocal student tackle this Holy Grail of arias, immortalized by such opera legends as Maria Callas and Montserrat Caballe?

Luckily, the academy'scelebrated vocal instructor Bill Schuman wanted to hear it. After the audition, Schuman is quoted to have said, "That girl is coming here, and she's going to sing 'Norma' at the Met some day." Schuman was correct on both counts. Meade got into the academy, made her Met debut in 2008 as Elvira in "Ernani," and sang her first Met "Norma" in 2013.

Out of such fairytale stories, legends are born, and Meade just might be one of them. On Oct. 7 and 8, Meade, with her husband, tenor John Matthew Myers, will join the Allentown Symphony Orchestra and the Allentown Symphony Chorus in the opening concert of the season.

Diane Wittry will conduct a program of some of grand opera's grandest arias, overtures, duets and marches by Verdi, Wagner, Bellini, Tchaikovsky and more. And yes, "Casta Diva" is on the program, too.

Meade first appeared with the orchestra at Symphony Hall in 2009 in a Valentine's Day program of music by Strauss, Wagner and Tchaikovsky. It was the second in the orchestra's "Rising Star" concerts, a series conceived by Wittry to identify young upcoming artists to be featured as soloists.

The first in the series was 17-year-old pianist Hao Chen Zhang, who performed in 2008, just six months before he won the gold medal in the Van Cliburn Competition.

When Meade appeared with the symphony, she had just made her Met Opera debut as a last-minute replacement for an ailing Sondra Radvanovsky.

"This is a woman on the cusp of a major career," Wittry said back then. "We probably won't be able to afford her again, so the timing is perfect." History has proved Wittry correct — except, of course, for the fact that she's back here again.

"With wins at every major vocal competition and rave reviews for her work in Bellini, Donizetti, Rossini and Verdi, Angela Meade is easily the most talked-about soprano of her generation," said Opera News in 2014. Winner of both the Metropolitan Opera's 2012 Beverly Sills Artist Award and the 2011 Richard Tucker Award, the Washington State native has appeared in the world's premiere opera houses and concert halls.

Last season Meade performed at Teatro Real in Madrid as Lucrezia, in concert performances of Verdi's "I due Foscari" opposite Placido Domingo, and starred

as Leonora in Verdi's “Il Trovatore” in February 2016 at the Met.

She returns to the Met this season in “Norma” and Rossini’s “Semiramide.” Meade has appeared on the concert stage in recital or as soloist with major orchestras across the country, from the New York Philharmonic to the Seattle Symphony, and has triumphed in an unprecedented 57 vocal competitions, winning many of the opera world’s most valuable prizes.

The Allentown concert features a sample of the bel canto and Verdi arias Meade is best known for. Bel canto, Italian for “beautiful singing,” is both a style of singing and a style of opera. At its peak, from the mid-18th century well into the 1800s, bel canto opera is represented by the works of Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti. The singing technique requires great breath control to sustain long, legato phrases.

But Meade is not adverse to other operatic styles, even though in an Opera News article in 2012 she admitted some ambivalence to Wagner.

“I do enjoy singing Wagner, and in fact I’m singing ‘Dich teure Halle’ on this program, and just sang the ‘Liebestod’ in concert at Caramoor. The only other time I did that was in Allentown in 2009. That’s really my only venture into Wagner at this point. I’m not ambivalent about it anymore, but I still plan to hold off on it for a few more years,” she says.

Meade made opera world news in May 2015 with her marriage to Myers at a ceremony in Philadelphia, officiated by Ruth Bader Ginsburg, associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. Ginsburg, an opera fan herself, also presided over the ceremony of countertenor David Daniels the year before. Meade met Myers in 2010, at her European opera debut in Ireland’s Wexford Opera Festival.

“We were doing the same opera together, a production of Mercadante's ‘Virginia.’ I was the title character, and John was doing my cousin Valerio,” Meade says. Apparently, the old advice that to preserve a happy marriage, a couple should never hang wallpaper together doesn’t apply to singing together.

“Actually, we’ve done a number of things together after ‘Virginia’ — a concert in New York, a ‘Traviata’ out in Oregon, an ‘Otello’ where John sang Cassio, and of course here in Allentown,” Meade says. “We always try to find places where we can do stuff together.”

The couple’s operatic paths could not have been more different. Meade’s 2008 Met Opera performance made her one of the few singers in history to make her professional opera debut in a principal role at that legendary opera company. Although she had prepared for the role, she never had sung it before.

“I guess I was a little star-struck by the experience. As it went by, I think I tried to hold on to every moment as it passed, and afterward, I thought to myself, ‘My God, did that really happen?’ I was prepared, though, because I was a cover and we had rehearsals. But it’s still sort of a surreal experience to happen that way,” Meade says.

Myers’ operatic career, on the other hand, has been more typical than Meade’s, in that he came up the traditional way, rising through the ranks of local productions followed by regional opera performances. He made his professional debut in the 2009 production of “Salome” at Opera St. Louis, and last season made his debut with the Los Angeles Philharmonic as Mao Tse-Tung in John Adams’ “Nixon in China.”

“I’ve been kind of working my way through the regional area and been getting bigger and better things,” Myers says. A resident artist at the Academy of Vocal Arts, he’ll be appearing as Bacchus in its production of “Ariadne auf Naxos” in March, and has a huge concert schedule in the coming months. That includes Mozart’s Requiem at Washington National Cathedral later this month, Mahler’s Symphony No. 8 at Carnegie Hall in November and a recital

at the Millennium Stage at the Kennedy Center in January.

Myers did have a magic moment similar to Meade's Met debut. His appearance in "Nixon in China," which the Los Angeles Times called "dazzling," was also as a last-minute replacement. "We're the king and queen of fill-in," Meade jokes.

At next weekend's concert, the pair will share some of the repertoire's most sublime duets. No moment is more cherished than the instant when two lovers recognize their passions, such as in "O soave fanciulla" from Verdi's "La Boheme," sung by Mimi and Rodolfo as the first act ends and the two acknowledge their newfound love.

In Tchaikovsky's "Iolanta," Princess Iolanta has been blind since birth. Count Vaudemont discovers her asleep in her garden, unaware of who she is, and is immediately struck by her beauty. He explains light and color to her, and they fall in love. Their Act 2 duet is a concert favorite.

If the mood is right and love is still in the air, the pair might sing "Libiamo ne' lieti calici" from Verdi's "La Traviata" as an encore. The joyful drinking song will be accompanied by the symphony chorus.

There's not a whole lot of overlap in each singer's repertoire. "Angela does more Verdi and bel canto, whereas I do more contemporary works," Myers says. "I've done more living composers, so our paths are slightly different, and there's not a lot of intersection. I love esoteric and out-there kind of pieces, but I guess Angela does, too, so we're a good pair."

Meade, in addition to "Casta Diva," will sing the equally lovely "Pace, pace, mio Dio!" from Verdi's "La Forza del Destino," and "Dich teure Halle" from Wagner's "Tannhauser." In Act 4 of Verdi's opera, a despairing Leonora, daughter of the Marquis of Calatrava, who is accidentally killed by her lover, has retreated to a monastery. She prays to God for peace, but confesses that her soul is still troubled by the memory of her love.

"Dich teure Halle" is sung by a radiant Princess Elizabeth who has just entered the empty Hall of Minnesingers in a Wartburg castle. She sings to the hall of how she has been beset by sadness since her lover Tannhauser's departure, but now lives in hope that his songs will revive both of them.

Myers will sing a pair of opera's most beloved tenor showpieces. In Act 1 of Verdi's "I Due Foscari," Jacopo Foscari has been accused of murder. When he is led into the Council Chamber and told he can expect the council to be merciful, he explodes into rage in the aria "Odio solo ed odio atroce" ("Only hatred, cruel hatred, is locked within their breasts").

"I first discovered 'I Due Foscari' when Angela did it in Berlin in concert," Myers says. "It's an interesting story based on a Lord Byron play. It's early Verdi, so it's fun to see how his music progressed over time."

One rarely hears Francesco Cilea's "L'arlesiana" in its entirety these days, but three of its arias have become standards in the tenor repertoire. "Lamento di Federico" is one of them, and a big favorite of Luciano Pavarotti — that is, when he wasn't asked to do "Nessun dorma" for the umpteenth time. This tender lament is a perfect complement to the raging "Odi solo."

The two singers, both highly in demand, share a hectic life. But they do manage to find relaxing moments and some down time, in their home in Centralia, Wash., where Meade grew up. "We both like to cook, try new recipes together, and we just got a new puppy," Meade says. "You know, normal people kind of things."

JOHN MATTHEW MYERS

Los Angeles Times

March 4, 2017

L.A. Phil delivers a dazzling reimagining of 'Nixon in China'

By Richard S. Ginell

Very few works can claim to have launched a trend, but John Adams' "Nixon in China" certainly can. A wag called it "CNN Headline Opera," a somewhat pejorative tag that didn't stick. But the concept — basing theater pieces on recent news events and personalities — did take hold, and a whole trail of operas, quasi-operas, monodramas, song cycles and such have followed since the "Nixon" debut at Houston Grand Opera 30 years ago.

"Nixon" took hold, too — much to the composer's surprise, establishing itself in the general operatic repertoire. It has not been easy for some — myself included — who lived and sweated through the Richard Nixon years to fully come to terms with this opera's myth-making mix of facts and fantasies about that period. And when aggrandizing accolades start flying — the Los Angeles Philharmonic website says many regard this as the great American opera — it's time to shout, "Now hold on thar!"

But after hearing Adams, now 70, lead the L.A. Phil in a musically and visually dazzling reimagining of the piece Friday night in Walt Disney Concert Hall, I have to reassess. Dropping "Nixon in China" directly into its historical frame was a brilliant idea that erased labels that have been imposed upon this work — like satirical opera, heroic opera and, closer to the mark, surreal opera — and went right back to the source.

Stage director Elkhanah Pulitzer, allied with film designer Bill Morrison and scenic and projection designer Alexander V. Nichols, rummaged

through the archives in search of film of the 1972 Nixon visit to China. She found some 22 transferred reels of super 8mm home movies (Nixon's chief of staff H.R. Haldeman and deputy assistant Dwight Chapin shot a lot of amateur film) and used them as scenery for this semi-staged production.

The films were shown on a scrim, upon which the projected frame of a 1960s television set was superimposed. The vintage TV screen confronted the audience entering Disney Hall with footage of crowds surrounding the White House awaiting the departure of the Nixons for China.

Ultimately, the most astonishing thing was how well the films were integrated with Alice Goodman's libretto, Adams' music and, to my amazement, the live cast members themselves. In the pre-concert talk, the ever-irreverent Adams described the crescendo leading to the emergence of the Nixon plane in Act I as an "enormous sugar high." But the actual home movie taken from inside the Spirit of '76 as it descends onto the Chinese landscape gave the music even more punch than did Peter Sellars' startling original staging. For Pat Nixon's tour in Act II, when the libretto mentioned a pig farm, an elephant or Chinese schoolchildren, found film for each appeared on screen, and that made soprano Joélle Harvey's soliloquies as Pat more heartfelt.

Placing the singers on the semicircular platform in back of the orchestra or behind the scrim gave most of the audience enough distance so that when we saw Pat Nixon in her red coat on the big screen, Harvey looked like her double. As Nixon, bass-baritone Ryan McKinny must have studied old films to replicate so effectively the hunched-over Nixonian posture, and when Nixon's notorious "News" aria came to the paranoid line "the rats begin to chew the sheets," the lighting suddenly went in shadow, alluding to his dark side.

In profile, baritone Peter Coleman-Wright looked uncannily like the real Henry Kissinger, seeming less of a sinister presence than has been the case in previous productions. Tenor John Matthew Myers' Mao Tse-tung was brightly lighted to match his declaiming voice, while the penetrating coloratura soprano Kathleen Kim (Madame Mao) convincingly switched from hard-line ideologue in Act II to the seductress of memory in Act III. Baritone Joo Won Kang made hushed, delicate work of Premiere Zhou Enlai's moody closing aria.

Liberated from the opera pit and handled by a first-class orchestra, Adams' score has never sounded as clear, nor as attractive. I would credit Adams' increased experience and rapport with the L.A. Phil, as well as his enormous growth as an opera composer since "Nixon," for revealing many unexpected shadings and complexities, and making the Richard Strauss/Wagner parody in Act II blossom voluptuously. The Los Angeles Master Chorale sang with its habitually keen diction; choreographer Leslie Stevens placed the garishly red-lighted depiction of "The Red Detachment of Women" ballet within the TV screen along with period film of the dancers.

The more this production reflected real history, the better it went down. And kudos for whoever had the idea of designing miniature souvenir programs that imitated Mao's "little red book." Nice touch.

JOHN MATTHEW MYERS

The New York Times

April 23, 2013

Noting a Centennial, and Filling In a Résumé Gap

Oratorio Society of New York at Carnegie Hall

By Anthony Tommasini

Oratorio Society of New York The baritone Jesse Blumberg, standing left, and the tenor John Matthew Myers performing Britten's "War Requiem" with this chorus and its orchestra at Carnegie Hall.

During his 30 years of experience as a leading choral conductor in New York, Kent Tritle has performed a wide range of repertory. But there was one major 20th-century work he had somehow never conducted: Britten's "War Requiem."

Mr. Tritle filled in that gap on Monday night at Carnegie Hall with a stirring performance of this profound 90-minute score with the Oratorio Society of New York, the 200-voice chorus founded in 1873, joined by the society's orchestra. Mr. Tritle, now in his eighth season as the chorus's music director, is also the music director and organist at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine. For this performance the society was joined by children's choristers from the cathedral, along with three fine vocal soloists.

This year, the 100th anniversary of Britten's birth, was a fitting time for Mr. Tritle to take on such a formidable work. Given the requiem's genesis, every performance should seem a special occasion. That quality is written into the music.

Britten was commissioned to write a work for the dedication ceremony of Coventry Cathedral in England. That city's 14th-century cathedral had been destroyed by German bombs in 1940. Britten decided upon a requiem, but of

an unconventional and personal kind. The premiere took place on May 30, 1962.

Britten sets passages from the Latin liturgy of the requiem mass for chorus and orchestra, joined by a soprano soloist in crucial episodes. But woven into the work are bitter war poems by Wilfred Owen, who was killed as a young British officer in battle a week before the World War I armistice. Britten turns Owen's poems into reflections on war, sung by tenor and baritone soloists accompanied by a separate chamber orchestra. In addition, the children's choir sings segments of the liturgy accompanied by a positive organ, which lends a touch of celestial innocence to a dark, at times ironic, requiem written by a composer who was an outspoken pacifist.

Mr. Tritle captured the restless solemnity of the opening section, "Requiem aeternam." The strings of the orchestra play a deep, heaving line, as winds and brass lace the music with piercing harmonies, over which the subdued chorus sings the Latin text almost like an intonation. Britten begins the "Dies Irae" ("Day of Wrath") curiously, with echoes of battle music, brass fanfares and nervous choral uttering of the words. This long section of the requiem goes through fitful episodes and builds to near savagery when the full-throated choristers sing of the great quaking that will come on Judgment Day, joined by the frantic orchestra, performed here with chilling intensity.

The soprano Emalie Savoy brought gleaming richness to the solo parts in the Latin texts. The Owen poems were sung with a blend of poignancy and grim honesty by the warm lyric tenor John Matthew Myers and the expressive baritone Jesse Blumberg, with David Rosenmeyer conducting the chamber orchestra, placed stage left. The youngsters from St. John the Divine, singing from a high balcony, brought relieving moments of tenderness to the requiem, led by Malcolm Merriweather. Though this performance had three conductors, Mr. Tritle was the guiding force.

JOHN MATTHEW MYERS

bachtrack

December 15, 2024

Zubin Mehta finds fountain of youth in Los Angeles Philharmonic's *Gurre-Lieder*

By Nestor Castiglione

...Perhaps most affecting of all was the vulnerable, tormented Waldemar of tenor John Matthew Myers, whose honeyed voice and secure word painting gave no impression that he was engaged as a last-minute replacement. His was a voice that made of Gurre's plight an internal drama, a play of shadows projected on the walls of his own mind. Virtually a soloist in its own right was the Los Angeles Master Chorale, whose men as Gurre's undead vassals were transparent in tone and elocution throughout.

Chicago Tribune

August 17, 2024

An epic Millennium Park finale for outgoing Grant Park Music Festival director Carlos Kalmar

By Hannah Edgar

This weekend, Carlos Kalmar — the Grant Park Music Festival's Uruguay-born, Austria-raised artistic director and principal conductor — steps down after 25 years on the podium.

But to parrot a phrase immortalized by one of Kalmar's countrymen, he'll be back. A preconcert ceremony on Friday bestowed Kalmar with the Nikolai Malko Award— the festival's first, named for its inaugural chief conductor — and a conductor laureate title, accompanied by assurances that he'll return in seasons to come.

If one is to step away from this festival, Mahler's Eighth Symphony is the way to go out. In many ways it's the ultimate choral-orchestral work, dubbed, against Mahler's wishes, the "Symphony of a Thousand" because of the musical hamlet necessary to mount it. Friday's performance didn't quite cram a thousand people onstage — a festival spokesperson counted 262 — but the personnel was still overwhelming: eight vocal soloists, a double choir and a Mahler-sized orchestra, offstage brass and all. Add a children's chorus specially flown in from Kalmar's native Austria — and directed by his daughter, Katja — and you have yourself one blowout finale.

Sitting in the pavilion, your eardrums, too, could be blown out. This performance was loud. (Some musicians onstage wore earplugs.) Auxiliary brass, usually placed offstage at Mahler's request, got their own onstage risers in the beginning and finale. Later, as the unearthly Mater Gloriosa, Gemma Nha — a thrillingly evocative soprano, and an incoming Ryan Opera Center singer to watch — sang from the very back of the choral loft, sounding every bit like a voice from heaven. Those placements were pure musical pageantry, in the best way.

Alongside Nha's runaway festival debut, Grant Park favorites of seasons past made this Mahler not merely sensational but sublime. As he proved in last season's opener, tenor John Matthew Myers has one of those rare, full-package voices, with impeccable diction, a radiant tone and unflagging stamina as Doctor Marianus. Maeve Höglund also returned, her explosive voice making a marvel out of the balkworthy upper soprano part ending the "Veni, creator spiritus" section.

Where Höglund's soprano sparkled, Jane Archibald's was smooth, trailing after Höglund like a benevolent shadow in the final Chorus Mysticus. Earlier, as Faust's Penitent/Gretchen, the unflecked purity of her voice was an ideal bridge between her feature and the Gumpoldskirchner Spatzen chorus's, clad in traditional Austrian garb and sounding both crisp and sweet.

Rod Gilfry, a piquant baritone, seized his feature as the Pater Ecstaticus, his voice cannonball-like in its impact. Following him as the Pater Profundis, Kevin Short's delivery was less in-your-face but lofted by a ringing tone that handily mastered the teeming orchestration underfoot. Along with Myers, mezzo Susan Platts built out the solo chorus's sturdy core; her mezzo

colleague Kayleigh Decker was lither but refined as the Samaritan.

The usual Grant Park forces were at the very top of their ever-tall game. The chorus was the lifeblood of this vital performance, balancing Olympian grandeur with pastel subtlety and perfect, bell-like intervals. The brass section, essential to pulling off most Mahler, were the heroes of the orchestral corps, with silkily blended horns and stratospheric solo work. Adding to the valedictory spirit of Friday's performances, Amy Schwartz Moretti — the former concertmaster of the Oregon Symphony, where Kalmar was also the longtime music director — sat first chair and dispatched those solos with lacy elegance.

For all the proceedings' potential sentimentality, Kalmar isn't a sentimental interpreter. In Mahler — that extravagant, aching music — the right amount of clear-eyed objectivity can be a tonic. Kalmar's driving, enunciated, eyes-on-the-prize interpretation was mostly that, if selling some introverted moments short. The enigmatic instrumental prelude to Part II, in particular, seemed to ponder devolving into the domineering, martial character from before.

At the precipice just before the instrumental conclusion, sometimes you'll hear conductors tantalizingly stretch out that final return to E-flat major. Kalmar held onto the chord just long enough, but he's not one to linger. The chord resolved with all the catharsis of homecoming.

It wouldn't be a Grant Park concert without a little open-air excitement. Sirens wailed just before downbeat — because of course they did, to knowing laughter from Kalmar and the audience. And in the sonic tsunami that is the symphony's final few minutes, the skies, too, roared, splitting open with rain and thunder. You couldn't invent a more epic *auf Wiedersehen* if you tried.

JOHN MATTHEW MYERS

New York CLASSICAL REVIEW

Deember 13, 2023

Biondi leads Philharmonic in a subtle, stylish "Messiah"

By Rick Perdian

The New York Philharmonic has a winner in the annual *Messiah* sweepstakes if the capacity audience's response to the first of four performances on Tuesday evening at David Geffen Hall is any measure. The competition is stiff as choruses, professional and amateur alike, perform *Messiah* in concert halls and churches throughout New York City and its environs every December.

Yet Handel's now-warhorse wasn't always a mainstay of the NY Phil's repertoire.The orchestra's first complete *Messiah* came only in the 1956-57 season with Leonard Bernstein conducting. Purists were unhappy as he rearranged it into two long sections corresponding to Easter and Christmas, rather than Handel's three-part structure. Among his other innovations were the use of harpsichord in the continuo, instead of piano which was common at the time, and a male countertenor instead of a female alto. Handel used both voice types depending on the musical forces available to him, but the countertenor was all but unknown in mid-20th-century America.

Fabio Biondi took no such liberties in his approach to *Messiah*. The Sicilian-born conductor is known for an approach which is free from constraints. His quest for what he terms the "original language" has brought him and his period ensemble Europa Galante success in the Baroque, Classical and early Romantic repertoire.

For this *Messiah*, that translated into a flowing, almost delicate performance, which limned the drama of the work with subtlety, not bombast. The orchestra played modern instruments, of course, save for the harpsichord and portative organ in the continuo. Some may have missed the tang of gut strings and the mellowness of period trumpets and tympani, but the Philharmonic members have a definite affinity with Baroque style. The strings played with finesse throughout, especially in the "Pifa," or Pastoral Symphony, which evokes the shepherds watching their flocks on the night Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

The Handel and Haydn Society's connection with *Messiah* makes the NY Phil seem like a Johnny-come-lately to the scene. The venerable Boston choir sang the "Hallelujah" Chorus at its first concert in 1815 and gave the oratorio's American premiere in 1818. That tradition which is carried forward with the leadership of Jonathan Cohen, the English cellist and conductor, who is in his first season as H&H's artistic director and led *Messiah* performances in Boston last month.

With just 36 singers, the H&H chorus was an integral participant in Biondi's intimate reading of *Messiah*. The chorus had the flexibility to sing ever so softly, even with sweetness, as in their light, bright rendition of "And He shall purify." "For unto us a Child is born" was sung with equal lightness, but with an appealing brilliance, underpinned by

rhythmic precision and textural clarity. In the "Hallelujah" Chorus, the sopranos produced sound that rivaled the sheen of the trumpets.

Biondi imparted a remarkable precision to "Lift up your heads, O ye gates." The full sweep and depth of H&H's sound was on display from "And the glory of the Lord" to "Glory to God in the highest," culminating in the sculpted grandeur of "Worthy is the Lamb."

The four soloists were less homogenous in terms of vocal style and personality. They were, however, united in the beauty of their respective voices, plus their ability to embellish Handel's musical lines with dexterity and elan.

Soprano Hera Hyesang Park had the air of a diva about her, both in the manner of her singing and elegant appearance. Her sizable lyric soprano brought excitement to the angel's tidings of the birth of the Christ Child, brilliance to "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion" and fervor to "I know that my Redeemer liveth." She executed fluid coloratura and delightful trills and turns with aplomb. The soprano was in full opera mode for "If God be for us, who can be against us?"

Theatricality was hardly lacking in mezzo-soprano Hannah Ludwig's approach to Handel, but it was much more text driven. She has a voice of great beauty, but isn't afraid to produce harsh, at times growling sounds, to elicit drama. They were employed to great effect in both "But who may abide the day of his coming" and hurling out the words "shame and spitting" in an impassioned "He was despised."

Tenor John Matthew Myers is cut from more traditional, oratorio cloth. He imparts drama through straightforward delivery and the glory of his voice. These are the exact qualities necessary for the "Comfort ye my people" and the "Ev'ry valley shall be exalted. The most beguiling sounds of the entire performance were Ludwig and Myers singing "O death, where is thy sting?" with Carter Brey playing the obbligato cello solo.

Imposing of stature and voice, Joshua Conyers's baritone is remarkably rich and sonorous. He did not, however, bring equal drama to the equation. "Thus sayeth the Lord" did not thunder with the requisite authority and in "The people walked in darkness" neither did he convey an essential mystery and gravity. He was almost a different person singing "The trumpet shall sound" which was topped off by thrilling high notes. Perhaps it was the opportunity to engage in a musical dialogue with trumpeter Matthew Muckey that made the difference.

Chicago Tribune

June 17, 2023

Grant Park Music Festival's opening programs crackle, despite the chill

By Hannah Edgar

It's always *something* on Grant Park's opening week.

Last year, sweltering temperatures and high winds made an obstacle course out of the festival's opening night. In other recent years, monsoon-level rains have deterred picnickers but never the inaugural festivities.

In the 2023 installment of "Grant Park Musicians vs. the Universe," the orchestra and chorus bundled up for unseasonably low temperatures in the 50s and 60s. But for audiences, the festival's two opening-week programs warded off the cold like a piping hot meal: a scattershot but satisfying orchestral opener on Wednesday and Dvořák's moving, underheard "Stabat Mater" on Friday.

The head chef was, as usual, Carlos Kalmar, leading the concerts amid a Title IX investigation into his behavior at the Cleveland Institute of Music (CIM), where he teaches. After that investigation was made public several weeks ago, the Grant Park Music Festival stood by its maestro, with festival CEO and president Paul Winberg telling the Tribune in a statement that CIM's ongoing investigation "has thus far not found evidence that Carlos Kalmar engaged in any harassment."

In the seated section of the Pavilion, subscribers appeared to stand by Kalmar, too. When he strode onto the podium on Wednesday, many rose for a full-throated standing ovation.

Kalmar planned to leave his Grant Park post next season to focus on his CIM duties. If that all happens according to plan, doubtlessly the most-cited of his gifts will be his knack for tying together eclectic programs. Wednesday night's was such a concert, preceding Robert Schumann's Symphony No. 4 with a Saint-Saëns violin concerto and once-recorded rarity by the late Chicago-born composer Robert Muczynski.

Muczynski composed that opening romp, "Symphonic Dialogues" (1965), the same year he decamped to Tucson to head up the University of Arizona's composition department, with which he remains most associated. But the piece, with jazzy syncopations and deliciously tart harmonies, endorsed greater appreciation of Muczynski around these parts, as did the orchestra's supercharged performance. His centenary is approaching in 2029 — presenters take note.

From there, beloved Grant Park concertmaster Jeremy Black stepped into his first solo spotlight in many seasons for Camille Saint-Saëns's Violin Concerto No. 3. Black proved himself just as poised and understated a soloist as he is a concertmaster, playing with grace and alacrity if not heaps of personality. He especially soared in the middle Andantino, achieving a stirring, somewhat pastoral quality that was profoundly moving but never maudlin. Ensemble and soloist nicely put over the work's finer-grained orchestrational detail, from the tremolos opening the

work to a delicate string chorale in the third movement.

Black gamely reassumed his concertmaster perch for a striking Schumann. More sprawling symphonies have said less in more time, but Schumann's half-hour symphony — with four movements which melt into one another — is a masterwork of emotion and economy. Under Kalmar, it unfolded like a living, breathing organism while remaining well-meted from first to last. I can think of several Orchestra Hall performances this season which were not nearly so fresh and thoughtfully plotted. That achievement is all the more remarkable in the hands of a seasonal ensemble, whose members mostly hold full-time posts elsewhere.

The same goes for the Grant Park Festival Chorus. Given the great quartet of vocal soloists assembled for Dvořák's "Stabat Mater," it's high praise to posit the chorus might have been Friday's runaway stars, but that was patently true on Friday night. The tenors' first entrance was deeply felt and iridescent, and chorus sopranos, with a limpid, straight-toned delivery in the upper reaches of their register, all but carried the later "Virgo virginum praeclara" movement.

The festival landed a most impressive "get" in tenor John Matthew Myers, who recently starred opposite Thomas Hampson and Renée Fleming in Opéra de Paris's "Nixon in China." He astonished from his thrilling entrance in "Stabat Mater" and kept listeners at the edge of their seats wherever he appeared, his voice a thing of poignance and power. Mezzo-soprano Siena Licht Miller was also an exquisite blend of vocal brilliance and profound depth, never more clear than in her solo in "Inflammatus et accensus." Bass-baritone Joseph Beutel was vibrant and assured if not as fluidly emotive in "Fac, ut ardeat cor meum," a movement which likewise could have been stewarded more sensitively by Kalmar at key moments, and soprano Olivia Boen — the daughter of orchestra members John Boen (principal horn) and Laura Miller (playing principal second violin for these performances) — was most brilliant at the sun-streaked top of her register.

Dvořák's "Stabat Mater" might be three times as long as Schumann's Fourth, but on Friday it largely winged by on the same interpretive winds which lofted the Schumann. And the orchestra deserves special kudos for faring as well as they did against the chill — one would have expected far more intonation woes than it actually faced on Wednesday and Friday. Oboist Mitchell Kuhn, who joined the orchestra last season, and clarinetist Dario Brignoli were standouts in this week's programs, and the Grant Park brass sounded particularly eloquent, playing with notable finesse and sensitivity.

Whether it feels like it or not, summer is here — and not a moment too soon.

JOHN MATTHEW MYERS

Chicago CLASSICAL REVIEW

June 17, 2023

Kalmar, Grant Park forces deliver rich advocacy for a neglected Dvořák masterwork

By Lawrence A. Johnson

In addition to being one of the world's greatest composers, Antonin Dvořák was also a man of deep religious belief. His Roman Catholic faith was sorely tested in September of 1875 with the death of his infant daughter Josefa.

Dvořák had barely recovered from that sudden tragedy when two more successive blows struck him and his wife Anna. Within a year their other daughter Ruzena died, followed by their only surviving child, a son Otakar.

That devastating period formed the backdrop for Dvořák's writing his *Stabat Mater,* which was performed at the Grant Park Music Festival Friday night, led by Carlos Kalmar.

The work takes its text from the 13th-century Christian hymn to Mary, which portrays her pain and suffering during Jesus's crucifixion. The *Stabat Mater*—literally, "sorrowful mother"—expands from empathy for the suffering of Mary and Jesus to an expansive meditation of overcoming loss, culminating in spiritual rebirth after death. The final stanza states "When my body dies, make that my soul is given the glory of paradise."

The Czech composer's setting of the *Stabat Mater* is epic, spanning 83 minutes and scored for four soloists, large chorus and orchestra. The work is cast in ten slow movements, which—while varied in tempo, scoring and expression—call for a firm yet flexible hand to keep the music on track and guide the proceedings.

And on a chilly evening on Chicago's lakefront, Kalmar provided just that, surmounting a myriad of al fresco distractions to lead a performance of spiritual intensity blended with expressive warmth and, ultimately, glowing benediction.

Nearly an hour and a half of slow music is not what one thinks of in terms of populist summer concert fare. But this is precisely the kind of audacious counter-programming that has been characteristic of the Grant Park Music Festival under the stellar leadership of artistic director and principal conductor Kalmar and chorus director Christopher Bell. (The team also brought Dvořák's *Requiem*, to Chicago audiences in 2010 as well as the cantata, *The Spectre's Bride* in 2012).

Kalmar set the tone Friday night with the vast opening section, "Stabat mater dolorosa," which accounts for nearly a quarter of the work's duration. The orchestral introduction unfolded with

focused concentration and a sense of slow-moving yet inexorable momentum. The entry of the chorus in the rising main theme gave voice to one of Dvořák's most indelible melodies. Despite a screaming siren blast just before the chorus's first entrance, the singers managed to come in together and on cue.

That was just one of numerous distractions on the lakefront, from racing car engines and police and ambulance sirens to helicopter noise and rude, cluelessly conversating patrons—all impeccably timed to disrupt the performance at its most quiet and interior moments.

Yet Kalmar and company kept focus and provided deeply affecting advocacy, rising to the somber majesty of the big choral moments while also bringing out the vulnerability and melancholy of much of the music.

This may be the opening weekend of the lakefront festival but Kalmar's direction of this epic score was masterful, and among his finest achievements over the past 23 seasons. Pacing and varying ten slow movements while keeping keen dramatic grip is no easy task. Yet Kalmar always made the subtle tempo shifts register (Andante con moto to Andante sostenuto to Largo to Larghetto, etc.) and reflect the varied aspects of the devotional text through the soloists, chorus and orchestra. The long journey had a genuine sense of release with the sunburst of choral brilliance on "paradisi gloria" ("The glory of paradise") in the closing section, leading to the final quiet cadence.

The four soloists proved well-equipped to handle their assignments, as a team, with the chorus and individually.

First among equals was John Matthew Myers, whose vibrant tenor has a febrile, aptly Slavic quality. In addition to his pleasing timbre, the singer consistently illuminated the text. In "Fac me vere tecum fiere" (Make me truly weep with you), Myers sensitively rendered the pleading expression of the text as surely as the spiritual confidence of the second section. He also blended gratefully with fellow soloist Olivia Boen in the duet, "Fac, ut portem Christi mortem" (Grant that I may bear the death of Christ.)

Boen's soprano was fitfully sharp at times but the singer—daughter of Grant Park Orchestra members Jonathan Boen and Laura Miller—sang with youthful tone and dedication, soaring over the ensemble thrillingly at the climax of the opening movement.

Joseph Beutel sounded reticent early on yet the bass-baritone's singing gained in strength and projection as the performance unfolded. He rose to his solo in "Fac, ut ardeat cor meam" (Make my heart burn with love for Christ) with ardent expression and sonorous voice.

As with Meyers, the mezzo-soprano of Siena Licht Miller possesses an Eastern European coloring suited to the idiom. She seemed to get behind the orchestra at times Friday night, but her dusky voice added expression to her solo in the quasi-Baroque penultimate section.

The orchestra played superbly but this was really the Grant Park Chorus's night. Scrupulously prepared by Bell, the ensemble sang with impressive polish, cohesion and unanimity, especially for so early in the season. They delivered the multi-layered expression, from the granitic power at the climax of "Eai mater, fons amoris" (Oh, mother source of love) to the flowing grace of "Tui nati vulnerati" (Allow me to share the torments of your wounded Son) and the resplendent catharsis of the finale.

Dvořák's *Stabat mater* is rarely performed in the U.S. or on Chicago stages. (The last local performance took place in 2011 with Alan Heatherington leading the Chicago Master Singers.) Dvořák admirers and aficionados of neglected choral music should cancel any weekend plans to attend the repeat. This is not a work that will come our way again anytime soon and likely not with this level of advocacy.

JOHN MATTHEW MYERS

GRAMOPHONE
THE WORLD'S BEST CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEWS

September 2022

John Matthew Myers: Desiderium

By David Patrick Stearns

Rarely does a tenor-voice recital succeed while so consciously lacking – perhaps avoiding – the 'wow' factor. The programme in John Matthew Myers's relatively demure debut is full of soulful earnestness and enterprising musical intelligence in a symmetrical cross section of American music. Kurt Weill and André Previn were born in Germany but ultimately redefined American music in their own ways. American-born Charles Griffes, Samuel Barber and John Kander have redefined various eras of European music in their own ways. They all share a word-based sensibility that's also the basis of American folk music, which is often said to be more of a literary form than a musical one, with narrative generated more from texts than music.

The album's title, 'Desiderium', refers to the longing for emotional connections expressed by the songs. 'Every song has varying degrees of yearning and some form of being separated, alone, or distant', writes Myers in the booklet. 'I am half-Chinese and half-Caucasian, and have always felt …like an outlier.'

Beyond the emotional element, this smaller-scale performance of *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* reveals meta elements in James Agee's 1938 text – where the child narrator steps back and has a God's-eye view of his world – similar in spirit to Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town*, written the same year. In place of the gauzy orchestration that usually envelops Barber's portrait of small-town America, pianist Myra Huang prioritises the piece's harmonic eco-system down to its essence, revealing the 17-minute work as an ingeniously integrated song-cycle. Though the expansive Griffes songs challenge Myers's sustaining power, Huang's cognitive grasp of the music's saturated harmonies similarly maintains a clear progression.

The 2004 Previn songs, written for Anthony Dean Griffey, suit Myers's voice well: poems by Philip Larkin and William Carlos Williams are treated to thoughtful *parlando* vocal lines, while the piano-writing is built on motifs that are open-ended enough to be expressively malleable but also create a cohesive frame for the song as a whole. Previn achieves a deft, rich harmonic resolution in 'Is it for now' on Larkin's words 'always is always now'. Williams's 'The Revelation' is treated to particularly effervescent psychology from the piano in this poem about a deep soul connection between two people that goes eerily unacknowledged in superficial, everyday encounters.

In contrast to Previn's seemingly natural sense of nationalistic neutrality, John Kander's Broadway scores have a specific sense of time and place. Thus, in 'A Letter from Sullivan Ballou' (1994), whose words are a letter by a Civil War officer facing likely death in a forthcoming battle, 19th-century parlour songs drift around like memories. Both spoken and sung sections of the song – as the officer explains to his wife why he was willing to risk dying for his country – are handled by Myers with eloquent restraint and great impact: the selflessness expressed in such intimate

terms is startling in contrast to today's more prevalent self-interest.

Weill's *Four Walt Whitman Songs* reflect the composer's rage over the 1941 Pearl Harbor bombing but the Myers/Huang performance clearly explores the musical mechanics behind it, transcending echoes of the composer's German period that are more obvious in Anna Prohaska's writ-large performances with pianist Eric Schneider (DG, A/14). Myers shows how anger need not always be shouted.

JOHN MATTHEW MYERS

Chicago CLASSICAL REVIEW

June 30, 2022

Bell, Grant Park forces shed brilliant light on a neglected Britten masterpiece

By John von Rhein

Carlos Kalmar must have particularly regretted having to bow out of conducting a third scheduled program this season of the Grant Park Music Festival. After all, he had long wished to preside over the evening's much-anticipated centerpiece, Benjamin Britten's challenging, rarely performed *Spring Symphony,* with the Grant Park Orchestra and Chorus.

But caution on the part of the festival management prompted the mutual decision that the artistic director and principal conductor withdraw from four concerts at the Jay Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park, thus allowing him additional rest after having recently tested positive for Covid.

Given the difficulties posed by the Britten choral symphony and its companion piece on Wednesday night's absorbing program, Arvo Pärt's choral and orchestral *In Principio,* almost any replacement conductor would have had to junk the originally scheduled program in favor of more standard, easily rehearsed fare.

Happily such was not the case on Wednesday, when Christopher Bell, Grant Park's multi-talented chorus director, took to the podium to lead the combined forces in the Britten and Pärt works. It was in every respect a major event in the year of the Grant Park Chorus's 60th anniversary.

There was indisputable logic behind the decision to deputize the twinkly Ulsterman to fill in for Kalmar. Both choral pieces have long been in Bell's repertory, and Bell, who's celebrating his 21st year as Grant Park Chorus master, had painstakingly prepared his choral charges for the task since the start of the season. Why send out for a replacement when the ideal person for the job is already in the house?

The subbing made for an exceptionally busy week for Bell, who's also scheduled to preside over the festival's annual Independence Day Salute on Saturday night.

But we have long known Bell to be as indefatigable as he is masterful at illuminating challenging, large-scale choral works of this type. He did so with conspicuous clarity and polish on Wednesday, eliciting robust and finely expressive singing from the choruses and vocal soloists, undergirded by committed playing from his orchestral forces.

Stylistic opposites in many respects, the *Spring Symphony* and *In Principio* share a vivid sense of exultation. The Britten takes its cue

from vividly observed rustic imagery from mostly English pastoral poems written as far apart as the 13th and 20th centuries. The Pärt, with Latin text drawn from the first 14 verses of the Gospel of John, is a spiritual celebration of Christ';s bringing God's word and "the Light" to true believers. One piece rejoices, sometimes with wild abandon; the other contemplates, sometimes quietly, the meaning of God's word.

A hybrid work that's part song-cycle, part oratorio, part symphony, Britten's 1949 opus seldom turns up in Chicago, or anywhere else. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus have never touched the score, and the only previous Grant Park performance was in 2001 when conductor James Paul introduced it to the festival repertory.

The four-movement design is fascinating in itself. Mixed and children's choruses, three solo singers and huge orchestra (heard at full strength only in the final section) evoke spring, in all its earthy variety, as the instrument of earth's awakening from the chill of winter. It is one of Britten's most original and inspired creations.

Bell knows the score, with its dozen interlocking sections, inside and out, and, more importantly, knows how to communicate his deep feeling for its musical essence to performers. His attention to detail, color and dynamic markings was acute. He brought out the wintry chill of the icy string figures at the beginning as unerringly as he reveled in the exuberant ode to the merry month of May at the end.

The choral response was committed and well-balanced, the adult voices imposingly full-throated even when singing softly, the children's voices of ANIMA a delight, especially in the grand celebration of May Day in which they crowned the exultant choral phrases (3/4 time) with the medieval canon *Sumer is icumen in,* which Britten has the youth choir deliver in 2/4 time. A pity that the sonic balance favored the adult choir over that of the children, rendering the canon too distant.

There was an excellent trio of soloists in soprano Ellie Dehn, mezzo-soprano Susan Platts and tenor John Matthew Myers. Dehn, in luscious voice, soared sweetly in "The driving boy," where she was joined by the merry whistling of the children. Myers, whose vocal timbre uncannily resembles that of Peter Pears, Britten's lover and longtime muse, delivered his songs with pinpoint diction, beauty of sound and deep feeling for what the words convey. Platts was similarly alive to every musical and expressive nuance, bringing enough dramatic intensity to the Auden setting ("Out on the lawn I lie in bed") to put her interpretation in league with that of Dame Janet Baker in her prime.

Bell shaped a clear, well-organized continuum of austere sound in the Pärt, the declamatory chorus and post-minimalist orchestra each contributing to the aura of Eastern Orthodox religious and spiritual affirmation. This performance marked the festival premiere of this affecting piece.

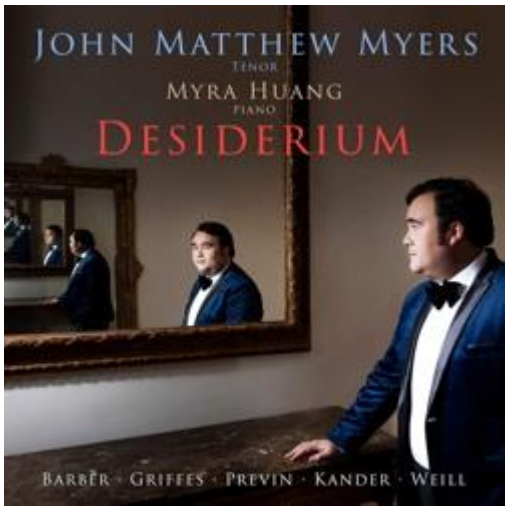
The program had been revised to include Jean Sibelius' greatest hit, the early tone poem *Finlandia*. Bell's inclusion of what is effectively Finland's second national anthem was "not idly chosen" for presentation in these parlous times, he told the audience—given the association of the anthem with the nation's asserting its independence in the face of Russian aggression and domination. He drew darkly majestic chords from the brass choir in the opening pages, and fervent playing from the strings in the central patriotic hymn.

MusicWeb INTERNATIONAL

June 2022

John Matthew Myers (tenor)
Desiderium

By Goran Forsling



For his debut recital disc John Matthew Myers has chosen songs and groups of songs by five American composers, active during the 20th century. The common denominator is a feeling of loneliness, and it all stemmed from Barber's *Knoxville Summer of 1915*, which is the only really well-known work in this album. Myers is quoted in Julian Haylock's liner notes, when he analyses his choices and relates them to his personal background: "I view the entire program as a fragmented arc of a particular person who is, in many ways, on the periphery of his life", and continues: "Every song has varying degrees of yearning and some form of being separated, alone, or distant. I am half-Chinese and half-Caucasian, and have always felt this kind of isolation in not being accepted, because I am not enough of one thing or another – or just feeling like an outlier. All these pieces have a sense of intimacy and longing for connection."

It goes without saying that the overriding mood is that of melancholy and gloom, but the texts and the musical expressions differ greatly, which vouches for a varied programme. Barber's *Knoxville* was composed in 1947 for a high voice and orchestra, and has almost exclusively been soprano territory – it was premiered by Eleanor Steber in 1948 – but it was recently recorded by Nicky Spence on the Resonus set of Barber's complete songs (review), and the accompaniment there as well as on the present recording is Barber's own piano reduction of the orchestral score. Since James Agee's dream-like prose poem from 1938 is written in the persona of a 5-year-old male child, it's logical to have it performed by a tenor. John Matthew Myers sings the many lyrical sections with soft beautiful tone, but he is also apt at expressing the desperation and sorrow in the crucial lines... *and who shall ever tell the sorrow of being on this earth.* The final lines express consolation – or is it resignation? - *but will not, oh, will not, not now, not ever; but will not ever tell me who I am.* He

sings it softer … and softer … and softer … It is a deeply felt reading.

Composed in 1918 The three Griffes songs were among his last vocal works before he died in the Spanish Flu pandemic in April 1920, aged 35. The poems were by Fiona Macleod, which was the penname for William Field, who never revealed his identity until it was read in his will. The songs were orchestrated in 1919, and a couple of years ago I reviewed a recording with Australian tenor Stuart Skelton that I highly appreciated. Like Barber's *Knoxville* the orchestration has an attractive colouring that the piano cannot measure up to, but still it has its own attraction, and since it is the original it's valid and gives the music a more intimate image, more chamber music like. I am happy to have both versions in so convincing readings.

I must say that André Previn's *4 Songs for Tenor and Piano* is a harder nut to crack. Composed in 2004 they are dressed in a rather knotty harmonic language. The mood is gloomy, also in the up-tempo last song, *The Revelation*. I believe that repeated listening might open them up, but at present I must content myself with admitting that the singing and playing are of the highest order. As far as I have been able to find out, this is a first recording, even though the liner notes don't specifically say so.

I have a special liking for John Kander's *A Letter from Sullivan Ballou* ever since I heard it with Lisa Delan a few years ago (review). Sullivan Ballou, a major in the Civil War, wrote it in the battle front to his beloved Sarah, leaving it among his belongings in case he would be killed, which he was just a week later. It is a very gripping letter, which expresses both hope for the future and fear that something would go wrong. But it is also comforting, ending with "Sarah, do not mourn me dead; think I am gone and wait for thee, for we shall meet again …". The setting is wonderful, gripping and it is difficult to hear it without shedding tears. It was premiered by Renée Fleming and Warren Jones in 1994 for Marilyn Horne's 60th birthday celebration gala at Carnegie Hall and a live recording of that occasion was issued on RCA. John Kander is known, at least to Broadway musical enthusiasts, for his collaboration with Fred Ebb in *Cabaret, Chicago* and other Broadway successes. Here, in a quite different vein, he catches all the shifts and nuances of the letter so sensitively. There are certainly echoes from his musical background, which in no way is a drawback. John Matthew Myers reading is just as sensitive as Lisa Delan's, and both discs can be warmly recommended.

Kurt Weill was German and had a brilliant career in the 1920s and early 1930s, often in collaboration with Berthold Brecht. Being Jewish he had to flee Germany when the Nazis came to power. From 1935 he lived in the US, where he had a new successful career at Broadway, and he became a US citizen in 1943. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941 triggered him to set three of the Walt Whitman poems recorded here. He "structured the original three as a gradual decrescendo of militarism from the bullish opening to the wistful intensity of the final dirge", as Julian Haylock says in his notes. Five years later he added *Come Up from the Fields, Father*, which here is placed third in the suite. Weill was a great admirer of Whitman, and said as early as 1926 that he was "the first truly original poetic talent to grow out of American soil." The music is warlike and sturdy in the first song, reminding me of his style in the 1920s, the second song is a funeral march, and the whole suite – I wouldn't call it a cycle – is deeply engaging.

John Matthew Myers can feel satisfied with his debut album, and he is excellently supported by Myra Huang's accompaniment.

JOHN MATTHEW MYERS

bachtrack

January 25, 2022

Life and death collide in Britten and Schubert from the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia

By Cameron Kelsall

Amid the coldest days of winter, the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia offered a program that charted a chilly journey through the valley of death, with a warm, shining reprieve at its center. Benjamin Britten's *Serenade for tenor, horn and strings* stood in start contrast to meditations on mortality from Schubert and Adolphus Hailstork – a study of our nature, to be sure, but not one shrouded in rising anxiety and impending doom. The entire 90-minute program emerged as a comment on the cycles of life we must consider and endure, balancing pain and pleasure in an attempt to give full voice to the human experience.

The *Serenade* skirts the fringes of standard repertory, perhaps due to the demands it places on an orchestra and its soloists. The tenor should possess a voice of stentorian authority, but he also needs a clearly articulated, bright tone that can communicate youthful wonder. The natural harmonics that Britten favored for the French horn solo writing can sound amateurish in the wrong hands. Composing after a brief period spent living in the United States, Britten also selected a series of unfailingly English poetic texts, often with a pastoral theme, that can sound like juvenilia if they aren't imparted with serious consideration.

Conductor David Hayes recruited ideal partners in tenor John Matthew Myers and horn soloist John David Smith. Even singing with carefully controlled dynamics to suit the intimate acoustics of the Perelman Theater, a listener can sense the raw power of Myers' voice; his middle voice is especially rich and supple. Some of the highest notes in *Nocturne* (text by Alfred, Lord Tennyson) came out slightly bleaty, but overall, Myers' sound is evenly produced and gorgeously colored throughout its range. He brought dramatic conviction to each reading, from the creeping uncertainty of the *Elegy* (after William Blake) to the bright and hopeful mythology of the *Hymn* (text by Ben Jonson). Myers' overall performance achieved a certain dreamlike quality that suited the nighttime setting evoked by the work's title, without growing hazy enough to eclipse its meaning or momentum.

Smith matched Myers in purity of tone and assured interpretation. He drew attention to nuances in the *Prologue* and *Epilogue* that charted the work's progression, while also underscoring musical themes that recur throughout the cycle. Hayes brought out a transparent texture and rounded, mahogany color from the string orchestra, which played with greater clarity and cohesion than I've heard since they returned to live performance last fall.

The orchestra sustained that crisp precision in Schubert's *Death and the Maiden*, heard in the arrangement

begun by Mahler prior to his death. Originally written as a string quartet, it gives an almost painfully clear account of the composer's physical decline, with restless repetitions and breakneck shifts from beauty to terror and back again. Hayes kept up a propulsive momentum throughout, building to a tarantella in the concluding *Presto* movement that truly felt like a dance of death.

Schubert's anxious exploration of life's end contrasted strongly with Hailstork's *Essay for Strings* (1986), written in tribute to a colleague who died suddenly. Where Schubert's music overflows with drama, Hailstork instead prefers a sustained mood – it feels like the experience of grief. The brief piece concludes with hopeful glissandi, creating a sense that one can ultimately leave the darkness behind.

The Florida Times-Union
jacksonville.com

February 20, 2021

Masks and on-stage shields can't hold back Jacksonville Symphony

By Timothy Fuller

This weekend the Jacksonville Symphony's Masterworks Series presented "Britten and Schumann," a concert featuring two lesser-heard masterpieces from the 19th and 20h centuries.

First on the program was Robert Schumann's Symphony No. 3 in E flat "Rhenish." Dating from 1850, the work reveals Schumann's orchestral writing at its grandest and most mature. Music Director Courtney Lewis launched into the piece with verve and conviction, and the musicians responded in kind. Melody is always at the forefront in Schumann's writing, and in the opening movement the strings led the way, dispatching the grand, sweeping phrases with sonority and rock-solid intonation.

Schumann, like many of his fellow Teutonic composers of the 19th century, was inclined to reserve some of his most poignant passages for the brass and in particular for the horns and trombones. The symphony's brass section did full justice to these special moments, playing with a particularly touching refinement in the solemn fourth movement.

The second half of the concert offered up the rarely performed "Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings" by English composer Benjamin Britten. This work was written in 1943 and, like much of Britten's output, was composed with specific performers in mind; performers whose abilities would have been well known to Britten.

Guest tenor John Matthew Myers and the Jacksonville Symphony's own Principal Horn, Kevin Reid, met the challenges of this formidable score brilliantly. Both displayed remarkable range and control. Myers in particular is to be commended for such a convincing and uncompromising performance in spite of blatant hurdles. He had to sing not only while wearing a mask, but while also standing behind glass barriers! To be able to render such a successful performance would be difficult in the best of times, but accomplished in spite of such obvious disadvantages, it was truly remarkable. Credit must also go to the rest of the orchestra and Lewis, who surely had to be especially aware of balance and blend under these circumstances, lest the soloists be completely overpowered.

Prior to the concert, Lewis provided some illuminating remarks about the music, and also made special note of the ongoing COVID-19 protocols and the very real challenges these necessary precautions present for the musicians. This was very helpful and led the audience to an even greater appreciation of the current challenges the orchestra must overcome to continue to offer live music to the community. Musicians are spaced farther apart than in normal times, must be masked, and must also navigate a maze of strategically placed shields and barriers in their midst. All of this make it much more difficult for the players to hear each other and to maintain balance and blend. The fact that this reality seemed almost completely compensated for, at least

where I was seated, is a testament to the orchestra's tenacity and determination.

With "Britten and Schumann," the symphony continues to shine despite challenging times, bringing less-frequently performed works to the fore and showcasing amazing artists even under the most daunting safety restrictions.

The Philadelphia Inquirer

December 4, 2017

At Tindley Temple on South Broad, a pipe organ and Messiah equally historic

By Peter Dobrin

It's not hard to find any number of music fans who can (and will) sing the "Hallelujah Chorus" from *The Messiah* on demand. But Sunday afternoon at Tindley Temple United Methodist Church on South Broad Street, many of the parishioners could be seen silently mouthing the words to other, less popular parts of Handel's masterpiece as a choir and soloists performed it.

By now, they should know it by heart. Tindley Temple has been presenting *The Messiah* annually for six decades.

Sunday's 60th appearance of the work was partially professional, and the mix with amateurs only seemed to enhance the aura of authentic joy. The four young soloists are at various points in their emerging careers, and the choir of perhaps a couple hundred, drawn from nearly four dozen area churches — plus students from the Philadelphia High School for Creative and Performing Arts — formed a portrait of the city. David Antony Lofton, long affiliated with the Academy of Vocal Arts, conducted.

That Tindley has kept this tradition alive all these years is a remarkable feat, and it comes with an equally important sense of purpose in the attention it brings to the church's prized Möller organ. Gordon Turk accompanied *The Messiah* at the console, often suggesting shadings of brass and strings, in a loft on the second level where the singers were perched.

But before *The Messiah* came Bach. Aaron Patterson took the Möller for a spin, starting with three Bach works, including the deeply moving BMV 659 *Nun Komm' der Heiden Heiland*. Patterson, 18, who studies with Curtis Institute of Music organ professor Alan Morrison, brought a sense of great immediacy to the instrument, which dates from 1926 and, though sometimes distant-sounding, has a range of colors that fall squarely in the palette of mellow.

Expressive in Bach, Patterson was even more impressive in the *Variations on "From Heaven Above"* by Walter Pelz, whose "Tranquil" variation brought out a dreamy, pastoral side of the instrument.

This *Messiah* was abridged (just part one, plus the "Hallelujah Chorus") and structured with a break in the middle during which listeners heard a pitch to raise money for the organ. The stats are persuasive: more than 4,600 pipes spanning from South Broad Street to South Rosewood on the west, with a restoration 90 percent complete. The last part, restoration of the Aetherial division and its 561 pipes, is happening now.

And then the musical case for support continued with more *Messiah*. Tenor John Matthew Myers, a resident artist at the Academy of Vocal Arts, offered both great polish and warmth. Baritone Norman Garrett had a beautiful sheen to his sound, especially present in the "Thus saith the Lord,"

recitative. Soprano Tessika McClendon and mezzo Pascale Spinney (also an AVA resident artist) each offered a distinct sound and promising, spirited qualities.

Most amateur choirs are spotty, and this one was no exception. You could have heard it as a weakness, and from one perspective it no doubt was. The other way of listening to such a composite of voices is as a reflection of intent — a coming together around a greater purpose, something no one present to experience the vibe in the room could have doubted.

BroadStreetReview.com
where art and ideas meet

January 29, 2019

The truth about human romance

By Cameron Kelsall

Academy of Vocal Arts (AVA) deserves commendation for staying with the times. As operas presented outside the traditional triumvirate of Italian, French, and German become more commonplace, the institution has recognized a need to prepare its students for the kinds of work they will presumably encounter in their careers. Such considerations likely led to the school's first-ever assumption of Antonín Dvořák's *Rusalka*, a haunting mashup of Hans Christian Andersen and Slavic folklore.

The plot shares many similarities with *The Little Mermaid*, as the title character — an ethereal water nymph — leaves her aquatic kingdom to gain a prince's love. With the help of an enchantress, she becomes a woman but loses her voice in the bargain. And she quickly learns that human romance isn't all it's cracked up to be.

The downside of fairy tales

K. James McDowell's production leans into the fairytale aesthetic, sometimes to its detriment. The cast occasionally does battle with Peter Harrison's overcrowded set, festooned in the first and third acts with green garlands and jutting branches ripe to be knocked over. The second-act scenery, meant to evoke the prince's royal palace, looks like a cheap flower display.

Val Starr's costumes, a mixture of fantasy-genre kitsch and overstated baroque grandeur, doesn't flatter anyone in the ensemble. When Rusalka (soprano Kara Mulder) makes her entrance after being transformed in a sheath that barely meets her knees, I wondered if half her outfit had been ripped off on the way to the stage. Draped in unbecoming rags, the supernatural characters — sorceress Jezibaba (mezzo-soprano Alice Chung), water gnome Vodnik (bass Eric Delagrange), and the three wood sprites (Aubry Ballarò, Rebecca Gulinello, and Gabriela Flores) — look more messy than mystical.

Rising voices

AVA presents the opera in a piano reduction, as it has done for several large-scale works, including last year's *Das Rheingold*. Despite the obvious skill of music director Luke Housner, the score loses its lushness. Without the composer's richly textured orchestrations, the various styles Dvořák employed — from simple folk melodies to Wagnerian fanfares — become muddled and sound undistinguished. The approach strips the heroic music of its heroism.

Yet some of the singers rise well above the circumstances. Chung, a first-year resident artist, particularly excels in a role too often ceded to hooting character mezzos. Her rich, well-supported instrument thunders through Jezibaba's warnings to Rusalka about the vagaries of human nature — and when her pessimism proves true, she's chilling.

Tenor John Matthew Myers brings virile energy to the prince Rusalka loves, with ringing top notes and not a trace of strain. As the princess who feels entitled to his affection, soprano Claire de Monteil sings with fiery abandon, though she lacks some necessary nastiness.

But the evening should belong to Rusalka — and here, it only does intermittently. On opening night, Mulder needed much of the first act to warm up. Her high notes in Rusalka's "Song to the Moon," the opera's signature tune, lack the requisite float, and the entire role seems a size too big for her genuinely lyric instrument. Still, she manages some lovely moments in the third act, after Rusalka accepts her fate as an angel of death, and her expressive face suits the long stretches when the voiceless character has nothing to sing.

Among the supporting cast, mezzo-soprano Pascale Spinney impresses as the youthful Turnspit, and baritone Anthony Whitson-Martini bumbles his way through the dotty Gamekeeper. Both singers seem poised to take on more substantial assignments.

Rusalka finds AVA somewhat outside its comfort zone. That doesn't mean it's not a risk worth taking. I hope to hear more Czech and Slavic repertory from the company in future seasons.

Broad Street Review
where art and ideas meet

February 25, 2018

Send in the Clowns

Academy of Vocal Arts presents Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal's 'Ariadne auf Naxos'

By Cameron Kelsall

The intimate, salonlike Helen Corning Warden Theater at the Academy of Vocal Arts (AVA) proves an ideal venue for Richard Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos*. Strauss and his librettist, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, set their 1912 comic masterpiece in the home of the richest man in Vienna, who has commissioned an evening of entertainment to impress his distinguished guests. AVA's ornately furnished digs on Rittenhouse Square act as a stand-in for a stately mansion in the *Innere Stadt*.

Dorothy Danner's smart and savvy staging offers riches beyond its well-placed location. Finding the right balance of humor and pathos in this opera can be challenging. Its first act (called the "Prologue") depicts preparations for the bespoke performance, with a high-minded opera company and a salty troupe of *commedia dell'arte* clowns fighting for supremacy backstage. When their patron announces that, due to time constraints, they must perform their disparate works simultaneously, the opera launches into musical and theatrical overdrive.

The second act shows the fruits of this unlikely amalgamation, with Ariadne's lonely existence incongruously interrupted by plucky Zerbinetta and her posse of tricksters. Strauss's score juxtaposes elements of late Romanticism in Ariadne's two narrative arias, "Ein Schönes war" and "Es gibt ein Reich," with the coloratura fireworks of Zerbinetta's "Großmächtige Prinzessin," a long and witty comic narrative about the fickle nature of love. The opera-within-an-opera culminates in an ardent love duet for Ariadne and the demigod Bacchus, who rescues her from solitude.

We're all merely players

Danner smartly foregrounds artifice in her interpretation; the audience never loses sight of the fact that we're watching a performance. Peter Harrison's set design resembles a makeshift playing space, with wooden stairs and raised platforms; the drawing of a muslin scrim signifies scene changes.

Val Starr's costumes have a similarly improvised quality — in particular, Bacchus's flowing toga and crown of laurels look more *Animal House* than Euripides. The singers compellingly shade their characters in the opera proper, but always remain actors playing roles.

Vocally, the production shows the strengths of AVA's current crop of resident artists. Claire de Monteil sings Ariadne with powerful resonance and appealing *morbidezza*, although her German diction seems a tad too inflected by her native French. John Matthew Myers brings an impressive amount of lyricism to the short but punishing role of Bacchus. In the Prologue, both act with appropriate hauteur as the opera company's tempestuous prima donna and star tenor.

Alexandra Nowakowski possesses a meatier sound than one normally hears from Zerbinetta — a welcome change in a role than can easily turn squally. She shows no trouble reaching the aria's stratospheric (and sustained) Es and Fs, finishing the showpiece with stamina to burn. She receives able support from Daniel Gallegos, Oliver Sewell, Matthew White, and Brent Michael Smith; the quintet leans into the bawdy comedy of the piece without overplaying it.

The production, however, belongs to two characters who sing only in the Prologue. Hannah Ludwig dazzles as the Composer, her richly colored mezzo easily dispatching the role's high-lying tessitura. (Though written for soprano, the role has largely been ceded to heavier voices in recent years). Ludwig communicates the young, headstrong musician's passion for his composition, which he initially refuses to change to meet his patron's demands.

Timothy Renner brings levity and the wisdom of age — not to mention a sturdy, evenly produced baritone — to the Music Master. Even when Renner and Ludwig reappear silently in the second act, they command attention. These are artists ready to take their places on the international stage.

David Aronson leads AVA's orchestra in a shimmering reading of the intricate score. He achieves the full power of Strauss's richly textured orchestrations without ever overwhelming the singers. The thrilling combination of an intelligent production, exciting singers, and a world-class orchestra affirm the Composer's exhortation that *Musik ist eine heilige Kunst* — music is the most sacred art.

JOHN MATTHEW MYERS

Philadelphia
MAGAZINE

February 27, 2018

A Transcendent *Ariadne auf Naxos* at the Academy of Vocal Arts

A terrific evening of music and theater, and a thrilling affirmation of a magnificent work.

By David Fox

How fortunate we are that Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Ariadne auf Naxos*, once thought an oddity among operas, has now become canonical. Recent years have brought more (and more cleverly reimagined) productions in international theaters. Here in Philadelphia, Curtis offered a very fine and intriguingly conceived *Ariadne* in 2015; now the Academy of Vocal Arts steps up with an equally excellent version that is also quite different.

That's all to the good: *Ariadne* contains multitudes. It's a specialty piece for sure, an ironic layering of two favorite Strauss and Hofmannsthal settings—18th Century Vienna, and Greek mythology—in a droll piece that can be viewed as everything from a satire on the impossibility of making art, to a profound exploration of temporality and transcendence. Musically speaking, to me it's the greatest of all Strauss and Hofmannsthal's operas—more economical but every bit as gorgeous as *Rosenkavalier* or *Frau Ohne Schatten*.

In fact, I'll go further—as a combined work of music and literature—as well as a poignant metaphor for a tumultuous period in modern history—*Ariadne* is the greatest opera of the 20th Century. I think that especially when it works as well as it does here in AVA's stylish production. Director Dorothy Danner has some ideas that work superbly, including resetting the framing time period to the period of the opera's composition, between 1912 and 1916. (It helps immeasurably that the specified location—an improvised theater in the house of a wealthy man—almost exact describes AVA's home.) The prologue is full of marvelous details, and while I wish the opera-within-an-opera weren't quite such a hodgepodge, it hangs together and makes comic points.

Of course, AVA chose *Ariadne* in large part as a showcase for their singers, and here too it's exceptionally well-served, in a cast that was strong across the board, and often genuinely distinguished.

Two singers impressed especially, as they had in AVA's recent *Das Rheingold*. Hannah Ludwig's fulsome mezzo-soprano was gloriously potent in the Composer's ardent music, even if the very highest notes call for more float (it's really a soprano role). Ludwig also projected the text with transcribe-able clarity. (Most of the cast need additional coaching on their German, with the "ich" and "isch" sounds particularly tricky.) Baritone Timothy Renner was theatrically and vocally a commanding, polished Music Master.

Claire de Monteil's Ariadne needs more bite in her projection of the words, but her beautifully rounded, voluminous

soprano made some gorgeous sounds, especially launching quiet, high-lying phrases. Alexandra Nowakowski (Zerbinetta) has a lovely lyric soprano with the top notes and flexibility this fiendishly difficult role requires; she's also an engaging actress. Her ascending trills were a bit oddly phrased (but they were genuine trills—brava!), and more often she shaped the line very gracefully. Bacchus is a famously difficult role, nearly impossible to make graceful either vocally or theatrically—but John Matthew Myers brought considerable power and ring to the line, coped with its fearsomely high attacks, and found more dynamic variety than many famous tenors have. Daniel Gallegos was a charming Harlekin, ably assisted by his team of comedians. Among the singers in the glorious Nymph trio, we had two sopranos (Meryl Dominguez and Alexandra Razskazoff) who had played Rhinemaidens last month—resonant casting, as Strauss and Hofmannsthal almost certainly meant these characters as a wink to Wagner. Together, the three (including mezzo Gabriela Flores) were as strong as any I've heard in performance. (Dominguez takes on Zerbinetta at some future performances—judging from her lovely melismatic filigree work here, that will be a treat.) Guest conductor David Aronson molded an elegantly-shaped performance with notably translucent playing from the strings and winds.

In all, a terrific evening of music and theater, and a thrilling affirmation of a magnificent work.

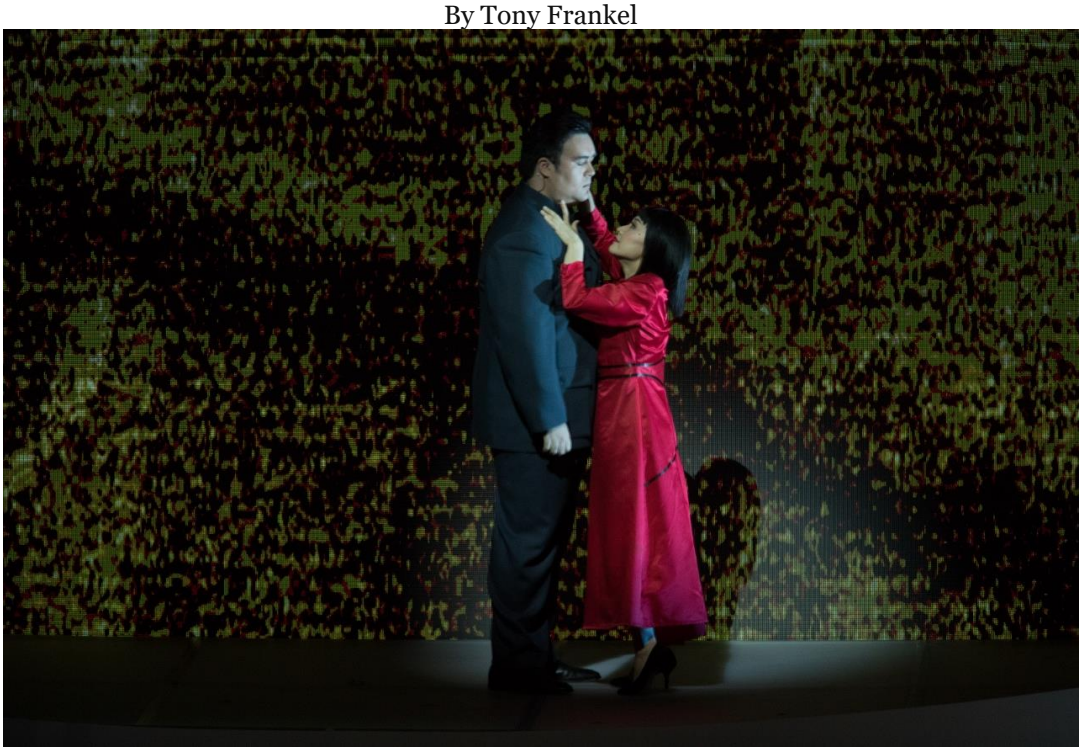
JOHN MATTHEW MYERS
STAGE AND CINEMA

March 6, 2017

NIXON IN CHINA

(Los Angeles Philharmonic at Walt Disney Concert Hall)

By Tony Frankel



Prior to yesterday's matinee, the last of a two-performance run of *Nixon in China* presented by LA Phil, I wondered who would make up the audience for a revival of John Adams' first opera: Opera fans who would see anything labeled "opera"?; those who enjoy that 80s' minimalist style, perfected by Philip Glass?; patrons who have season subscriptions, and this event just happened to be part of their package?; or would they be theater lovers?; or simply curious? I had never seen it before simply because productions are rare.

Here's why I ask: There were a shocking number of scattered empty seats which had been sold ("shocking" given that all of Disney Hall's seats behind the stage were covered over by the set, and that limited tickets). Additionally, even more seats were abandoned during the intermission of the three-hour three-act, one which was given a fantastic, ginormous production conducted by the composer himself. (Sitting in an "obstructed view" seat, I entertained the thought of moving after the break, but I always feel that's a very uncool thing for press to do; in hindsight, while I liked being closer to the players, I would have enjoyed a better view of the visuals much more.)

So here is a universally praised opera in its second and final performance sung by the best and played by the best, but

patrons, from what I can tell, don't seem buzzed about it.

Here's what I believe. *Nixon in China*, which spawned a new era of minimalist opera that continues 30 years later since its premiere at Houston Grand Opera, is a grand experiment more than a fully realized work. At turns it is hypnotic, explosive, terrifying, and intellectually provocative, but other parts—especially in Act I and the latter part of Act III—are repetitive and atonal to the point of being annoying and soporific (and you should know I loved loved loved Philip Glass's minimalist operas, *Einstein on the Beach* and *Akhnaten*).

I was thrilled by the entire second act (from what I could see at my disadvantaged vantage point) and some of the third, but ultimately this piece is similar to Adams' entire oeuvre: All of the orchestrations are interesting (he uses saxophones here); some of it is gorgeous and lush; and some of it soul-pounding and exciting. But too much of it is head-scratchingly implacable and impenetrable. This may be fun, challenging work for players and fascinating to fellow musicians and opera lovers, but I am simply not sold.

It's such a smart idea for an opera, too (it's the brainchild of Peter Sellars, who approached Adams to write what is now one of his most famous compositions): Like it or not, President Nixon's visit to China in 1972 is responsible for the U.S.'s open-trade policy with China. Nixon and First Lady Pat were the first official American visitors to the People's Republic of China since Mao Tse-tung's communist takeover in 1949. This was an important event because the U.S. was seeking to improve relations with a Communist country during the Cold War.

First-time librettist is poet Alice Goodman, whose only other libretto was also a collaboration with Adams: the painfully leaden and equally overpraised *The Death of Klinghoffer* (seen at Long Beach Opera in 2014), which should have been controversial for how it sounded, not what it's about. *Nixon in China* is written in rhymed octosyllabic couplets—stanzas in which each of the two lines contains eight syllables: "Behemoth pulls the peasant's plow." Her language can be fascinating but also dense and esoteric; combined with Adams' highly repetitive, melodically schizophrenic lines, I would warn some to be prepared for ennui cubed. Any possibility for realistic action and expression is intentionally snuffed. Sometimes it's like watching slow motion home movies. And when characters sing passages of self-explanation—announcing their outlook and emotions instead of interacting naturally—it's downright dull. This kind of verse could have them running to the exits. Oh, they did.

Vocally, *Nixon in China* was a resounding success. All of the principals flourished: a solid Ryan McKinny as Nixon; Joélle Harvey, multi-dimensional in diction and style as Pat; baritone Joo Won Kang as Chou En-Lai, the country's first Premier; the magnificent John Matthew Myers, a late replacement to the production, was impressively nonchalant about his ridiculous range as Mao; and powerhouse Kathleen Kim as Madame Mao, the Chairman's fourth wife named Chiang Ch'ing. Henry Kissinger, who accompanied the Nixons on their historic visit, is a smaller role but Peter Coleman-Wright leaves a mighty impression. Overall, the dramatic emphasis here is the difference of these characters, especially as it relates to their public and private sides, and the collision of two great theories on how people should live: Communism versus Capitalism.

Act I leans towards realism, Act II surrealism, and Act III reflection. I like how the score keeps this from being a mere historical travelogue, but interestingly enough, the parts that worked best were those in Act II that did just that: After Pat visits a glass elephant

factory, a pig farm, and a children's classroom, the Nixons attend a State-sponsored performance of Madame Mao's ballet, *The Red Detachment of Women* (the lead dancer, Jasmine Perry, was choreographed by Leslie Stevens to act like a music box dancer *en pointe*). During the performance, which increasingly becomes propagandist camp, Pat is drawn into, and makes comments about, the work, while the villain of the piece is played by the actor playing Kissinger. The dance ends with Madame Mao's defiant aria, "I Am the Wife of Mao Tse-Tung," which saw Ms. Kim slicing through her high notes with incisive creepiness. (Three imperious secretaries were played to the hilt by Lacey Jo Benter, Renée Rapier and Rachael Wilson.)

As with her park-and-bark staging of LA Opera's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, director Elkhanah Pulitzer had mostly stagnant principals here. But she wisely used the actual astounding video footage from the trip, most of it from Super 8 cameras (Bill Morrison was the film designer), projected onto a giant TV screen, behind which is a playing area (this was the space obstructed from my view). A four-step riser was in front of the sometime transparent screen. The work of Alexander V. Nichols (set and projection) and David Finn (lights) was exemplary for this house and the cramped quarters on stage.

Costumer Elizabeth Scott nailed the realistic clothes and hairstyles, and the Los Angeles Master Chorale (which mostly stayed stage right and left) wore pea-green neck scarves over unisex black slacks, shirts and shoes (LAMC is never ever short of flawless). Mark Grey's sound superbly overcame both Adams' youthful conducting and Disney Hall's tricky amplification issues. Nonetheless, I'm glad there were supertitles over the stage, even though bouncing between them and the actors was exhausting from my seat. And whoever created the programs as facsimiles of Mao's Little Red Books should receive an award in design.

Nixon's trip to China was a political breakthrough, but The Tiananmen Square Incident and the new "Made in China" ethic means the U.S. will always have to rethink and reformulate relations with China. Adams' opera may have been critically important at the time it was written, but I think it's high time we rethink and reformulate modern opera.

LEHIGH VALLEY'S NEWSPAPER
THE MORNING CALL

October 9, 2017

Allentown Symphony Orchestra goes grand with season opener

By Steve Siegel

Any record producer seeking material for an "Opera's Greatest Hits" album of arias, overtures, duets, and marches need look no further than the Allentown Symphony Orchestra's program Saturday night and Sunday afternoon at Symphony Hall.

In this opening concert of the 2017-2018 classical series, the orchestra and Allentown Symphony Chorus were joined by superstar soprano Angela Meade and her husband, tenor John Matthew Myers, in a rousing performance of some of grand opera's grandest. Projected supertitles gave the English translations of all the texts.

Saturday's concert got off to a heroic start with the overture to Verdi's "La Forza del Destino," a splendid performance featuring brisk passages of thunderous brass entwined with slow, solemn interludes. Conductor Dianne Wittry's dramatic use of rubato added to the excitement and drama of this perfect opener.

Meade then stepped out on stage — or rather glided out, her bearing was so graceful — wearing a stunning silver-encrusted sequined gown to sing that opera's popular aria, "Pace, pace mio Dio." She possesses a positively regal vocal personality, a combination of sensitivity and awesome power. That silvery voice sounded like it was somehow being decanted, rather than merely sung.

In "Casta Diva" from "Norma," that plush voice had no problem soaring over

the combined orchestra and chorus. It was especially obvious how ideal she is for the bel canto repertoire, with its demanding balancing act of agility, strength, and coloration. I actually heard hints of Maria Callas during her performance, yet without that Callas stridency.

Myers also possesses a voice of vocal grandeur. He really soared in “Odio solo” from Verdi’s “I Due Foscari,” mixing strength and tenderness, and with the uncanny ability to sing softly without losing a trace of clarity. Federico’s Lament from Cilea’s “L’Arlesiana,” rarely heard these days, was an absolute joy, sung with purity and conviction. This famous opera showpiece was a big favorite of Luciano Pavarotti, when he wasn’t asked to do “Nessun dorma” for the umpteenth time.

The duets on the program were absolutely charming, with the undeniable chemistry of two people passionately attached to each other. Such was the case in the lovely delivery of “O soave fanciulla” from Verdi’s “La Boheme,” with its final bars sung offstage, as if heard in a dream. Immediately after the conclusion of the equally passionate “Parigi, o cara” from Verdi’s “La Traviatta,” the couple shared a tender, heartfelt kiss.

Interspersed with the singing were rousing performances of overtures, preludes, and marches, many featuring the voices of the Allentown Symphony Chorus, directed by Eduardo Azzati. The chorus was in fine form throughout, but particularly so in “Va, pensiero” from Verdi’s “Nabucco,” with passionate delivery and excellent enunciation.

The Grand March from Wagner’s “Tannhauser” and the Triumphal March from Verdi’s “Aida” were both real showpieces for the chorus and the orchestra’s brass. Thunderous fanfares abounded, with the “Aida” march especially dramatic, as trumpeter Jan Dobrzelewski played a regal solo from a box up on the left balcony, adding to the theatricality.

Since love was still in the air at the conclusion of the program and the mood was right, Meade and Myers sung a sweet and playful "Libiamo ne' lieti calici" from Verdi’s “La Traviata” as an encore for the way too small but appreciative audience.

JOHN MATTHEW MYERS

Broad Street Review
where art and ideas meet

December 16, 2016

Devilishly good

Academy of Vocal Arts presents Anton Rubinstein's 'The Demon'

By Steve Cohen

This month, the Academy of Vocal Arts (AVA) staged Anton Rubinstein's *The Demon*. Rubinstein was a Russian composer from the generation before Tchaikovsky, whose symphonies, concerti, and operas preceded and influenced what Tchaikovsky wrote.

The musical director and pianist for this production was Ghenady Meirson, a native of Odessa who teaches Russian opera at AVA and also at the Curtis Institute of Music. He also led a concert version of *The Demon* in 2015 with his Russian Opera Workshop. The difference this time is that the cast comes from the roster of AVA resident artists — many of whom already have professional careers — and the production was staged (by Meirson, principally with projections) and costumed (by Valerie Starr).

Until recently, Russian operas were rarely performed in America. Before the end of the Cold War, the only pieces you were likely to see were Mussorgsky's *Boris Gudonov*, which was sung in Italian at the Metropolitan Opera, and Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* which was done there in English. In recent decades, other pieces by Tchaikovsky have been performed (now using the original Russian language), and the Met has staged 20th-century Russian operas by Shostakovich and Prokofiev.

Based on a poem by Mikhail Lermontov that tells of the struggle between Mefistofeles and God, the titular character is a fallen angel. He seduces Tamara, a pure and religious young woman. Bored with creating floods and hurricanes to kill people, he yearns for passion. When she succumbs to him, she dies and is lifted to heaven, leaving the Demon eternally alone.

A devil of a role

Playing the Demon presents great challenges and opportunities. The character has a succession of monologues, several big arias, and a final-act duet where he and Tamara fight for posession of her soul. Three baritones sang the role during the AVA's three-performance run. I saw and heard Christopher Kenney who displayed a silky high-baritone voice. Ethan Simpson and Timothy Renner sang the other performances.

As his first step in seducing Tamara, the Demon arranges the murder of her fiancé. Then he tells her how much he relates to her loss. One of the fascinations of this opera is that when he's wooing Tamara, we almost sympathize with him and his sorrowful pleas. However, once she gives in, he boasts that he has won, and is ruler of the domain.

Rebecca Gulinello was an attractive Tamara, a striking presence with a huge voice; it sounds more lyric than dramatic, but with a solid core and much thrust. John Matthew Myers played Tamara's betrothed sympathetically, with a strong yet tender voice. Two basses provided solid underpinning: Daniel Noyola played Tamara's father and Andre Courville, a servant. Hannah Ludwig and Alejandra

Gomez were lower-voiced, strong supporting players.

Rare treats

The opera contains some choruses that were cut to reduce running time. The remaining choral passages were sung by AVA singers who normally perform leading roles, and their harmonies added greatly to the impact. It was an embarrassment of riches to hear 11 offstage nuns sung by women who appear as stars in other operas.

Act III is almost entirely a duet between the Demon and Tamara as he tries to win her love. The ending is a quiet and lovely chorus that welcomes her to heaven. It is much more affecting than the bombastic finales composed by Gounod and Boito for their operas about the devil.

This production was a worthwhile enterprise, and should be an inspiration to other companies. The Met apparently thought of it as a potential starring vehicle for the great Dmitri Hvorostovsky, who is currently battling a brain tumor. And yet, some patrons, and *Philadelphia Inquirer* critics, choose to not attend these AVA operas because they don't have an orchestra. It's their loss. I've seen revealing productions of Debussy's *Pelleas et Melisande* and Strauss's *Arabella* at AVA with piano accompaniment, to give just two examples. Because of its rarity, *The Demon* was even more rewarding.

JOHN MATTHEW MYERS
EDGEMEDIANETWORK
May 15, 2013

The Tell-Tale Heart/ Van Gogh

By Brenna Smith

With a uniquely adapted theatre space and an unorthodox production, the infamously unconventional Long Beach Opera returns this month with a double-bill of Michael Gordon's "Van Gogh" and Stewart Copeland's "Tell-Tale Heart." Using a converted art exhibition space, the two contemporary operas are performed in the Bixby Knolls Expo Art Center.

The set design for both shows by director/production designer Andreas Mitisek is a beautiful sight to walk in on: four cubes, two by two, and connected by a ramp and set of stairs take up the bulk of the stage. Each cube is defined by metal poles, making for an industrial, cage-like feel, and each cube has a curtain that can be drawn over the front on which images can be projected.

The night begins on a sour note with the highly dissonant and rather slow operatic performance portraying the last day of Vincent Van Gogh. Accompanied by sharp, harsh violin and rock drums from a live orchestra, three singers, a soprano, a tenor and a bass, describe van Gogh's life and decisions, taken from van Gogh's letters to his brother Theo.

The opera begins with the three singers slowly getting dressed for what feels like an eternity while describing what van Gogh wanted to do with his life, as an actor playing van Gogh twists and turns in bed, plagued by madness. The singers play the part of his conscience and aspects of his tortured mind.

After singing about his desire and inability to join the clergy, two of the embodiments of his mind began to engage in a similarly drawn out seduction, reflecting van Gogh's loneliness and resulting in a graphic, yet clothed, sex scene (for which I must applaud the soprano's ability to hold her notes during cunnilingus).

The figments then begin to ascend the stairs to van Gogh's room, slowly, and one at a time, until they are all finally surrounding him, and then they force him to shoot himself. Unfortunately, all these occurrences are so drawn out, and the pacing so slow, that I and other members of the audience found themselves checking their watches.

The singing, while skilled, didn't make up for the pacing of the rest of the production. This is more the fault of the music than the singers, as the note on every other syllable alternated back and forth, punctuated by long held notes, resulting in a grating experience.

The lyrics, sung in English with English supertitles, started off painfully simplistic and expositional, with lines like "I had to choose a profession but didn't know what to choose." Fortunately, as the focus of the show shifted to portraying van Gogh's descent into madness, the lyrics greatly improved, becoming actually lyrical.

Soprano Ashley Knight, the only woman in "Van Gogh," was an extremely strong singer and actress, having to maintain extremely slow and controlled movements, as well as be seductive.

John Matthew Myers, the tenor in the group, was equally strong as a singer, as well as an actor. The pain of a tortured mind was clear across his face, as well as in his voice.

Bass singer Jason Switzer had a lovely, strong voice as well, though his acting was less strong as he tended to overact

to get his aspect of the mind's feelings across.

Throughout the performance, video designer Adam Flemming's images and videos relating to van Gogh's art and life were projected across the stage, adding a brilliant and beautiful texture to the production, as well as a beautifully engrossing visual element. Along with the projections, the lighting was harsh and eerie, mimicking madness, and only lighting van Gogh and the singers from directly above or below.

Despite its serious pacing problems and grating dissonant music, "Van Gogh" is still a very unique opera, and it goes hand in hand with the second performance of the night, a modern telling of an Edgar Allan Poe story.

The production of "Tell-Tale Heart" by Stewart Copeland, original drummer and founding member of the band The Police, followed "Van Gogh" and a short intermission, and picked up the pace of the evening.

The lyrics for the opera version of "Tell-Tale Heart" were adapted from the dialogue of Poe's famous short story about a madman who denies his madness. The protagonist plots and plans the perfect murder, with his only motive being the fact that he found his victim's eye disturbing. This retelling put a modern spin on the old story, and was set in a seedy apartment complex in Los Angeles.

The music went well with lyrics skillfully adapted from the source material, as our wheelchair bound protagonist relates his story to the audience through song, and as a shadow version of his character commits the murder and hides the corpse.

Robin Buck plays Edgar, the protagonist, and gives a strong performance, as both singer and actor. His singing was strong and unwavering, particularly when denying his insanity, but still managed to come across as crazy. The detail in his expression was phenomenal and important, as most of his acting was done into a camera that projected his face onto the screens pulled down over the cubes of the set.

He did, however, have a bad habit of breaking eye contact with the camera (and thus the audience) to look at the screen to make sure his face was in the correct position, but this didn't detract too much from the overall effect.

Ashley Knight returned, this time as a skanky party girl, accompanied by Danielle Bond. Their singing was strong as well, skillfully portraying snotty, gossipy girls in one moment, and switching to singing beautiful backup harmony at another.

John Mathew Myers also returned, playing both a skittish, nerdy neighbor and one of the police officers who show up to investigate the victim's screams. This time, we get to see more of his comedic side as he fends off the party girls as the neighbor and nonchalantly chomps donuts as the cop.

The projection of Buck's face on the various screens on stage makes for an awesome effect, particularly when he maintains eye contact while singing about his grisly deed. There was also some very clever use of flashlights from behind the screens by the other actors as Buck has a particularly scary breakdown.

Interestingly, the operatic singing and classical orchestra clashes entirely with the set design and costumes of the "Tell-Tale Heart," but does so in a way that mirrors the lead's claims of sanity clashing with his insane actions.

While this double feature gets off to a slow start with the sadly unsatisfying "Van Gogh," a full recovery is made by the following "Tell-Tale Heart." Don't skip the first show however, it's still visually stunning, and it helps add to the fun and often explored theme of madness.

JOHN MATTHEW MYERS

theoperacritic.com

June 2013

Bringing The Gypsy Princess back to life

By Steve Cohen

From the evidence provided by this production, I'd rank Emmerich Kálmán as my favorite composer of operetta. He's not as well-remembered as the founder of the genre, Johann Strauss, but Kálmán's music is more varied and exciting. It also relates more closely to our time.

Imre Koppstein was a Hungarian Jew who went to school with Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály. At age 26 he moved to German-speaking Vienna where he started using the name Emmerich Kálmán and went to work in theater.

In 1915 Kálmán wrote *Die Csárdásfürstin (The Gypsy Princess)*. Outstanding among his later works were *Gräfin Maritza (Countess Maritza)* in 1924, *Die Zirkusprinzessin (The Circus Princess)* in 1926 and *The Duchess of Chicago* in 1928. Kálmán sought refuge in the United States in the 1930s. After the war he returned to Europe and died in Paris in 1953.

Kálmán was 57 years younger than the waltz-king Strauss and 12 years younger than Strauss's Austrian successor Franz Lehar. Kálmán's music included American influences, especially dance music in the speakeasies of Chicago. What was most distinctive was his Hungarian background and his employment of that land's folk rhythms.

His hometown was Budapest, the hub of the eastern half of the Hapsburg Empire which contained many more gypsies, Jews, Magyars and Turks than did Vienna. In addition to fast and slow waltzes, he used the czárdás, a dance in 2/4 or 4/4 time with syncopated beats that started slowly and accelerated.

Because the Hungarian language stresses first syllables, its music has a strongly-accented rhythm. Kálmán also wrote scales that used plaintive minor thirds, a musical interval using three half steps, and wide-arching melodies. We also hear cadence-like clicking of heels in his music. Last weekend this prompted rhythmic clapping by members of the audience.

Unlike his Viennese predecessors, Kálmán did not rely as much on sentimentality about life in the old Empire but, more so, on rebellion against the aristocratic system. His plots poked fun at the pomposity of the entitled class. In *The Gypsy Princess* we see a prince who falls in love with a commoner cabaret singer. His royal parents feel that it would be more acceptable for him to marry a divorcee than a nightclub performer, and the show's surprise denouement reveals that his own mother had been a burlesque singer and dancer known as High Kickin' Hilda.

This is operetta, so it had a happy ending with the ensemble proclaiming "Let Me Dance and Let Me Sing."

In my childhood, radio broadcasts featured Jan Peerce, Richard Tucker and others singing Kálmán ballads like "Play Gypsy, Dance Gypsy." Now that music is almost unknown. Bravo to Pantano and his Concert Operetta Theater for bringing it back for our enjoyment, and teaching the genre to young professional

singers who can take it to other audiences.

Jeffrey Halili excelled as Prince Edwin, with beaming face and ringing high notes. He's been impressive in many opera roles for the Academy of Vocal Arts but never was as dashing a leading man as here. Almost equal in stage time was another tenor, John Matthew Myers, as Edwin's fun-loving best friend. His genial presence and strong voice were unexpected pleasures because I never before heard him sing. It would be a treat if we could see an opera where he shares the stage with his fiancee, the Metropolitan opera leading soprano Angela Meade.

Jennifer Holbrook brought some parody to her role as the extroverted cabaret singer and Evelyn Rossow presented a contrast as a lower-key, more mellow woman. Brian Major was impressive as the baritone lead, the Baron Feri.

All five of these principals were excellent in their roles and the supporting ensemble was fine. The costumes were glamorous and staging minimal. Richard Raub at the piano deserves kudos for training the cast with precision in the style.

JOHN MATTHEW MYERS

Broad Street Review
where art and ideas meet

June 18, 2013

Why princes marry showgirls

Concert Operetta's "Gypsy Princess' (1st review)

By Tom Purdom

He's a prince. She's a cabaret singing star, "a woman of the people with a contract in America."☐ He commits himself to marriage before she leaves for her American tour, but his father orders him home, to announce his engagement to a more suitable fiancée.

Their romance takes place in Budapest and Vienna (where else?), to the accompaniment of humorous dialogue and a banquet of song. At every opportunity, the protagonists launch into musical enticements whose titles summarize the profound moral teachings of Viennese operetta— "Life is Worth Living,"☐ "Grasp with Open Arms,"☐ "Let Me Dance and Let Me Sing."☐

They sing about romance, which creates "Loveliness All Around."☐ They revel, male and female, in the knowledge that "Girls are the Thing for the Gents."☐ They proclaim that "Cupid Isn't Stupid"☐ and, then again, maybe he is.

The plot of *The Gypsy Princess* (1915) resembles Sigmund Romberg's most famous operetta, *The Student Prince*(1924), but the Hungarian composer Emmerich Kálmán applied a lighter touch. In Romberg's version of the story, the prince abandons his youthful romance and assumes the responsibilities of royalty. *The Gypsy Princess* ends with the revelation that the prince's mother was herself a cabaret star, unbeknown to her husband, who must admit that "High Kicking Hilda"☐ has made a satisfactory consort.

The other woman

The treatment of Prince Edwin's official fiancée is a good example of *The Gypsy Princess's* essential buoyancy. In other hands, the fiancée might have been an ice-cold aristocrat.

Instead, Countess Stasi is an attractive young woman: a levelheaded, intelligent orphan who grew up with Edwin. They've been friends and confidantes since they were children. One of the operetta's most appealing scenes is the duet in which Edwin and Stasi envision the unromantic but pleasantly friendly life they will lead if they fulfill their elders' plans and marry.

Fortuitously, Stasi finds herself romantically attracted to Prince Edwin's funny friend, Count Boni, who is pretending he's married to Edwin's true love, Sylva, who has cooked up the masquerade so she can attend Edwin's engagement party and find out why he betrayed her, which he really hasn't because he thinks she deserted him, which leads to complications and misunderstandings that provide suitable excuses for the aforementioned musical enticements.

Lapse into nostalgia

Daniel Pantano's Concert Operetta Theater performs operettas concert-style, without scenery, but Pantano suggested the glamour of the operetta's setting with well-chosen gowns for the women performers as well as a profusion of glittering jewelry.

An operetta can work its magic without a setting, but it can't do it without a good cast. Pantano has won a loyal audience over the past 12 seasons by

drawing on Philadelphia's pool of young, operatically trained vocalists.

In this production, mezzo-soprano Evelyn Rossow did such an appealing job as Countess Stasi that I was afraid she was going to upstage the leading lady, soprano Jennifer Holbrook. But Holbrook reclaimed her eminence when she dropped Sylva's extroverted showgirl exterior and produced an exceptionally touching lapse into nostalgia, "Where Are They Now?"☐

Rhythmic clapping

In the two male leads, Jeffrey Halili and John Matthew Myers proved that two tenors can occupy the same stage and convince the audience they're good friends. In addition to their technical vocal prowess, both created believable characters, Halili as the prince and Myers as the kind of sensible humorist a woman like Countess Stasi would find attractive.

Pantano's young singers all possess strong voices trained to fill opera halls that can accommodate audiences ten times larger than the seating at the Academy of Vocal Arts' tiny Helen Corning Warden Theater. The production would have gained had they put less effort into projection and more into clear pronunciation of the operetta's appealing lyrics.

But every creative enterprise has its weaknesses. Overall, Pantano's cast fulfilled the composer's intentions. The audience left the theater with smiling faces and the general air of people who'd been touched with fairy dust. They even burst into spontaneous clapping during a song based on Hungarian dances. Some opera lovers believe that Viennese operetta achieves that effect by fogging our minds with the clueless dreams of a simpler, less tumultuous era. If that notion persists among any readers of this review, let them note that *The Gypsy Princess* received its premiere in Vienna in the year 1915. That was not, I believe, a time less troubled than our own.♦