

From the Heart

FOR A QUARTER CENTURY, MIKAEL ELIASEN HAS GUIDED CURTIS SINGERS ON STAGE AND IN THE STUDIO.

BY HEIDI WALESON



Mikael Eliassen PHOTO: DARIO ACOSTA

“The difference between shopping at Macy’s and shopping in a really good boutique.”

That’s how stage director Chas Rader-Shieber compares working with the singers in the Curtis voice and opera programs to working almost anywhere else. Mr. Rader-Shieber, whose resumé includes frequent work with established professional companies from New York City Opera to San Francisco Opera to the most prominent stops in between, has been directing opera at Curtis almost annually since 1991. In that time, he says, “there has not been a student at Curtis who was not unique in some way. It’s not a cookie cutter.” Those singers—about twenty-five of them at a time, both undergraduate and graduate—are nurtured in an unusually intimate environment that fuses the demands of the professional world with careful attention to individual progress and needs.

The Curtis vocal program is the vision of Mikael Eliassen, who celebrates his 25th anniversary at Curtis this year. The Danish-born accompanist and coach arrived at Curtis in 1986 and assumed direction of the vocal program in 1988 at the request of Gary Graffman. He quickly restructured Curtis’s voice and opera training in his own unique way.

Mr. Eliassen auditions and selects the singers himself. He tracks their progress, meeting with them in classes and coachings several times a week as well as informally, and shapes opportunities to fit each one. He waits to plan each Curtis Opera Theatre season until after annual auditions in March, so he can fit roles to the needs and development of each singer. “In some ways, Mikael is an impresario of the old school, with a keen awareness of today’s world and what is needed to prepare singers for careers in opera,” says Charles MacKay, the general director of Santa Fe Opera. “Curtis is a customized, deluxe, incredibly important program that is vital to companies like ours.”

On Mr. Eliassen’s watch, such singers as Eric Owens, Juan Diego Flórez, John Relyea, Rinat Shaham, and Meredith Arwady have graduated from Curtis. Three recent graduates are currently members of the Metropolitan Opera’s Lindemann Young Artist Development Program; one of these was a Met National Council Auditions winner last year. Three more are now in Lyric Opera of Chicago’s young artist program, the Ryan Opera Center. Curtis singers are regularly chosen for summer apprenticeship programs such as those of the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis and the Santa Fe Opera, and go on to sing leading roles in those companies and others. Ms. Arwady, for example, takes on the title role in Vivaldi’s *Griselda* at Santa Fe next summer.

LEARNING FROM LIFE

When Mikael Eliassen took charge of the Curtis vocal program in 1988, he devised his curriculum without reference to how any other school trained singers, since his actual academic experience was limited. “I barely graduated from high school,” he says. “My parents traveled, so I was an exchange student in the U.S. and Montreal, and then I got a grant to study accompanying in Vienna. I didn’t like the Hochschule, and after a very short time I left and went to Dieter Weber, a great piano teacher. My life consisted of working with him and going to the opera in standing room every night. That was my education. I’ve seen thousands of live performances, and that colored greatly my way of thinking when I started here. I thought that the most important thing was to get up and perform.”

As it happens, Mr. Eliassen’s mindset was a perfect fit for Curtis, which had always espoused a “learn by doing” philosophy—at least in its instrumental programs. With a goal to center the singers’ training around performance to a comparable degree, he instituted the Curtis Opera Theatre as the core of the performance curriculum. To guide students toward professional standards, he retained conductors, designers, and directors—like Mr. Rader-Shieber—who were active with respected opera companies.

Mr. Eliassen's unconventional background led to some unconventional choices. While many of the singers now study with Curtis voice faculty members Marlena Malas or Joan Patenaude-Yarnell, he also gave Curtis singers the option of studying with any voice teacher that met with his approval. "They have, more or less, the East Coast available to them. No other school does that. It gives them a wide variety of teachers, and makes it incredibly easy to switch if something doesn't work out."

In contrast to other conservatories, there is no jury of voice teachers weighing in on admissions. Mr. Eliassen listens to the auditions on his own—from about forty a year in the late 1980s, to nearly four hundred in 2010. Mr. Rader-Shieber says bluntly, "It's a benevolent dictatorship. There's no consensus breeding mediocrity."

"I'm looking for something that has to do with heart, and everyone who comes out of here is stemming from my taste," Mr. Eliassen says. "It's hard to have a discussion [with other faculty] about a seventeen-year-old. You have to believe some instinct, and go with that one singer rather than have a discussion about it, because nobody knows! I'm willing to take the responsibility, not just for the successes, but also for the people who don't make it—who can't—because it turns out that they don't have discipline or the heart."

But most have both, according to colleagues who have come to know the Curtis product. "Mikael has an incredible set of ears, superb taste in voices, and a rare ability to identify potential," says Mr. MacKay. Adds Ms. Malas, who talks to Eliassen daily to discuss their charges, "He takes singers other [programs] don't. He listens for something else. It's not just the voice—he listens for what they *say*." Gianna Rolandi, a 1975 Curtis graduate who now directs the Chicago young artists program, concurs: "He hears things that aren't there yet."

IMMEDIATE DEBUTS

From the moment they arrive at Curtis, whether as seventeen-year-olds fresh from high school or as twenty-two-year-old graduate students, all the singers are cast in operas, of which there are usually four a year. Those early experiences may be dramatic—Diego Silva, a young Mexican tenor, was eighteen when he sang Don Ottavio—or less demanding, but they are geared to what the singer is ready for at the time. Kirsten MacKinnon, a Canadian soprano now in her third undergraduate year, recalls, "My first performances were so exciting, because everything was new. You have a responsibility in the show, and you have to step up. If you have nerves, you are forced to confront this in a positive way. Younger students get roles that require work and preparation," but that are usually smaller, "so it's not such a huge weight. It's responsibility you can deal with, and pushes you to work and grow in a safe way."

Ms. MacKinnon started out at Curtis with a small role in *The Medium*, and went on to sing Lisa in *La sonnambula*. This year, she has been cast in three leading roles: Micaela in *La Tragédie de Carmen*, the Fox in *The Cunning Little Vixen*, and Elettra in *Idomeneo*. Operas at Curtis are double-cast (and sometimes triple-cast) to maximize performance opportunities. At the same time, enrollment is so small that everyone takes a turn in the chorus or ensemble, as Ms. MacKinnon did for the November double bill of *Il Signor Bruschino* and *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*.

It all makes for a lot of stage time, and quite a few roles. In the same double bill, for example, Mr. Silva sang a lead in *Bruschino* and a smaller featured role in *Mamelles* in the first and third performances. In the second and fourth performances, he sang different small roles in both operas. Mr. Eliassen says, "I have had people come here after doing their undergraduate studies, and they have not been onstage—just maybe a scenes program. By the time a Curtis undergraduate is twenty-two, he's done thirteen or fourteen shows."

Curtis offers many other opportunities for its singers as well. They can request sessions with coaches—diction, language, repertoire—and get several in any given day. Beginning with the current year, adds Ms. MacKinnon, "Curtis is paying for personal trainers who work on strengthening the muscles you need for breathing and getting rid of tension—and we get credit for it!" Performance opportunities range beyond the walls of Curtis. Last season, Ms. MacKinnon played Annina in the Opera Company of Philadelphia's *La traviata*.

Mr. Eliassen has also created a relationship with the Opera Company of Philadelphia and Kimmel Center Presents. Each year, a Curtis production is performed at the Kimmel

Mr. Eliassen coaches each Curtis singer regularly. From top: Meredith LaBouff, Christopher Tiesi, Allison Sanders. PHOTOS: DAVID KATZENSTEIN



Video Online

Go behind the scenes as Mikael Eliassen talks with Heidi Waleson

www.curtis.edu/video

Center and offered to OCP subscribers. OCP Music Director Corrado Rovaris, who has conducted a number of these collaborations including *Ainadamar* and *Wozzeck*, leads *The Cunning Little Vixen* in March 2011. “Our subscribers have responded very well to this opportunity to hear rising stars and rare works in a smaller venue. It’s an exciting model for us.” In addition, students regularly take on small roles in other OCP productions.

Rovaris has taken the relationship even further: Last fall, he shepherded several Curtis students to Italy for a co-produced *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* that OCP will put on next season. Elizabeth Reiter, a Curtis student working toward a master’s degree, will reprise the role of Blondchen in Philadelphia. In 2009–10, Ms. Reiter took on the challenging title role in Bellini’s *La sonnambula* at Curtis; this spring, she will sing the Vixen. It’s a succession of roles that, she says, has “progressively taken me out of my comfort zone.”

This extensive experience pays off in the professional world. “Curtis singers are more comfortable onstage,” Mr. MacKay says. “They are polished in terms of their presentation skills and they are encouraged to hone their communication skills. The training goes beyond just developing the virtuoso into molding a great communicator, someone who is capable of expressing a broader musical idea and conveying drama or comedy.”



(Top) The Curtis Opera Theatre performed Bellini’s *La sonnambula* in concert with the Curtis Symphony Orchestra in February 2010. Shown here with Christopher Tiesi (left) and Jazimina MacNeil (right), Elizabeth Reiter (center) sang the title role.
PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

(Above) The Curtis Opera Theatre presented Rossini’s *Il Signor Bruschino* in November 2010. Tenor Diego Silva and soprano Sarah Shafer sang the romantic lead roles.
PHOTO: DAVID SWANSON

A SAFE PLACE TO GROW

The pace of the program puts considerable demands on the singers, and with Mr. Eliassen always aware of what they are doing, there is no place to hide. “In other, bigger programs, students can fall through the cracks,” Ms. Malas says. “At Curtis, there are no cracks.”

“I say to them a lot, it’s not a kindergarten,” notes Mr. Eliassen. “I try to treat them as young colleagues. I perform with them a lot; it’s a very strong motor in me that drives this department. I think they all understand that I am interested that they develop themselves to the best of their abilities. I tell them at the beginning of the year that they are here because I think their abilities are extraordinary—and they have to live up to that.”

At the same time, the students feel that Curtis is a safe place for them to grow and develop. Indeed, their tenure can be lengthy. All graduates of the bachelor’s program in voice are invited to continue in the master’s program in opera, and a student who goes through both programs can conceivably stay at the school for as long as eight years. Arts consultant and former artist manager Matthew Epstein, who visits Curtis regularly to hear and advise the students on real-world issues, says, “Mikael is an example of what should be done. He gets these splendid young talents and he protects them for four to seven years. I see how they progress: I’m blown away by seeing how they’ve grown by their third or fourth year: physically, in their repertoire, in how they pull off an audition. Then I watch them at the Met or San Francisco auditions, and I see that they have taken advice on board. They own it.”

Protecting the students can also mean keeping them from the rigors of the real world until they are ready. Mr. Silva, now in his third year, had been thinking about leaving at the end of the year, at twenty-two, but conversations with Mr. Eliassen persuaded him to stay longer. “I’m always trying to eat the world in one bite instead of waiting for things to happen,” the tenor says. “Mikael really knows me well. Whenever he sees that there’s something going on, he says, ‘Diego, we have to talk. How have you been? What is going on in your head? You have to realize that the world outside is like this ...’ and he puts me again in the ground. Sometimes it’s hard for me to accept things, but he puts me in the reality. I’ll stay as long as I feel like I keep growing.”

Mr. Eliassen sees his role as educator, mentor and guide, underscored by his deep passion for singers. “Singing is an emotional thing to be involved in, and I’m involved in it sixteen hours a day,” he says. “I love it. I am so fortunate. If you want to have this relationship with music, with these people who make music, that’s what the price is. You have to let yourself be squeezed emotionally by these people. Otherwise, how can I ask my kids to do it?”

“You have to give more from your heart. It all comes back to heart.” ♦

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