



Stages to Success

The Curtis Opera Theatre gives students professional-level experiences and polish, plus a degree of versatility unusual for young singers.

BY ELIZABETH RACHEVA

A provocative juxtaposition

of 17th- and 20th-century vocal works.

An utter reinvention of a Mozartean staple.

A workshop to premiere a brand new opera.

All in two dizzying and dazzling short months.

This is life as usual for the Curtis Opera Theatre, which provides an unparalleled environment to prepare young artists for professional careers. This juggling of varied repertoire, and the speed with which students absorb and perform it, is the best kind of “real world” preparation—a fact unanimously emphasized by Curtis faculty, students, and alumni.

The highly selective and personalized program encourages freedom of expression

Johnathan McCullough as Papageno
in *The Magic Flute* PHOTO: KARLI CADEL



Two Papagenos backstage at a dress rehearsal: Johnathan McCullough and Sean Plumb PHOTO: KARLI CADEL

and demands a high degree of professionalism from each of its 25 students. Under the artistic direction of Mikael Eliassen, the Hirsig Family Head-of-Department Chair of Vocal Studies, programming for each season is in no way arbitrary. Operas are selected specifically to provide crucial training at pivotal moments in the singers' development. "Mikael has a real talent for steering all of us in the right direction—not too quickly, not too slowly," says undergraduate baritone Johnathan McCullough. "The rep is so carefully decided for who is here, for what will be challenging but not insurmountable."

With four fully staged productions per year, students graduate with confidence stemming from vast practical experience onstage—and often, blossoming professional careers (see sidebar). "It's incredible that in a school setting, this training approach is embraced," remarks faculty member Chas Rader-Shieber, who has directed more than 25 Curtis Opera Theatre productions. "These young artists are prepared to be singers of consequence—they're going to be ready."

Process

The production process for a typical opera at Curtis lasts just under a month, "just like in the real world," says Johnathan. "We are expected to show up prepared, knowing our part on the first day." The stage director and designers are working professionals who are active in the field, and the students are naturally inspired to rise to their example.

Concepts for Curtis productions often push boundaries. Last fall's black-box production, *DIDO+*, offered Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* alongside short works of Luciano Berio and Kurt Weill, revealing unanticipated connections. Chas Rader-Shieber's surprising vision of Mozart's *Magic Flute*, performed in November, imagined a land where the protagonists, having survived their own psychological trials (rather than physical tests), ultimately reject Sarastro's supposed ideal as a colorless world of anonymity and sameness. Student Vinay Parameswaran, who conducted the production, enthusiastically embraced the concept. "What was most exciting was that Chas wanted to do something different without taking anything away from the score."

Character

When asked why he programmed *The Magic Flute* this season, Mr. Eliassen responds, "I'm doing it for two singers: Johnathan McCullough and Sean Plumb. I ask myself, 'Who needs to do this role now?' It's time for them to do Papageno." Johnathan and Sean, both third-year baritones who have been friends since high school in their native Los Angeles, were double-cast in the bird-catcher role, each taking two performances. They agree on the key challenge the role presents: balancing its physicality, comic delivery, and vocal demands. Papageno carries the show.

Johnathan has been acting since the age of five, beginning with commercial work in California. But he emphasizes that Curtis offers something unique, allowing him to hone his skills with exceptional directors and an extraordinary amount of onstage time. Although Mr. Rader-Shieber set out the overarching idea, "we really had the freedom to create and define our own version," Johnathan notes. "Sean and I have two very different takes on the character in terms of persona and his psychological approach."

Collaboration

Mr. Eliassen pulls together different production teams as each work demands. Direction and design are crucial. Mr. Rader-Shieber adds, "Opera is not just the singer, especially now. And at Curtis, don't forget, the level of music-making is exceptional." Musicians from the Curtis Symphony Orchestra accompany each production. Increasingly student conductors are learning by doing as well, taking the podium for Curtis Opera Theatre productions. Eliassen invited Vinay Parameswaran to lead *The Magic Flute*, following his success with

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Sarah Shafer sang Giulietta in the Spring 2012 production of Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*, with Nian Wang as Romeo. PHOTO: DAVID SWANSON



Sarah Shafer

PREPARING FOR PROFESSIONAL LIFE

"A career doesn't just suddenly happen." That's why being a student at Curtis is no typical college experience, says Mikael Eliassen. "You must be fit to sing every day, to be ready, to be prepared."

Soprano Sarah Shafer, at 24, is a case in point. When she entered Curtis in 2006 as an undergraduate, she was immediately cast in her first operatic role, a small part in Cavalli's *L'Ormindo*. Over seven years she has appeared repeatedly in Field Concert Hall and taken on roles of increasing complexity and range—Debussy's *Mélisande*, Rossini's *Rosina (Il barbiere di Siviglia)*, Mozart's *Ilia* and *Pamina*, Henze's *Elizabeth (Elegy for Young Lovers)*, Bellini's *Giulietta*. She spent summers at the Songfest and Marlboro music festivals, toured to Asia with Curtis On Tour, and is assembling an impressive list of debuts.

Below is a summary of Sarah's activity in the current season alone, as a third-year Masters student—and though the *Philadelphia Inquirer* recently noted of her time at Curtis, "her journey from green talent to a formidable personality is remarkable," Mr. Eliassen emphasizes that her experience is typical for Curtis students. Sarah is the Alfred Greenberg Memorial Fellow in Opera.

June 2012	Glyndebourne Festival and BBC Proms	Mozart: <i>Le nozze di Figaro</i> (Barbarina)
October 2012	Curtis Opera Theatre	Purcell: <i>Dido and Aeneas</i> (Second Witch, Ensemble)
October 2012	Curtis Symphony Orchestra	Tchaikovsky: Duet from <i>Romeo and Juliet</i>
November 2012	Curtis Opera Theatre	Mozart: <i>Die Zauberflöte</i> (Pamina)
December 2012	Philadelphia Chamber Music Society	Recital with pianist Richard Goode
December 2012	Town Hall, New York City (debut)	Recital with pianist Richard Goode
January 2013	Philadelphia Chamber Music Society	Recital with guitarist Jason Vieaux
February 2013	Opera Memphis	Donizetti: <i>L'elisir d'amore</i> (Adina)
March 2013	San Francisco Opera	Gasser: <i>The Secret Garden</i> (Mary)
March 2013	Maryland Symphony Orchestra	Mozart scenes and arias
April 2013	Curtis Opera Theatre	Handel: <i>Rinaldo</i> (Almirena)
April 2013	Opera Philadelphia	Mozart: <i>Die Zauberflöte</i> (Papagena)
May 2013	Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra	Faure: Requiem



October's black-box production, *DIDO+*, juxtaposed Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* with 20th-century works by Luciano Berio and Kurt Weill. The chorus played a key role, commenting on the action throughout. From left: Alize Rozsnyai, Shir Rozzen, Thomas Shivone, Julian Arsenault, Spencer Lang, Meredith LaBouff, Sarah Shafer
PHOTO: CORY WEAVER



Conductor Vinay Parameswaran rehearses *The Magic Flute*. PHOTO: KARLI CADEL



Rachel Sterrenberg (Pamina) and Spencer Lang (Monostatos) in *The Magic Flute*. PHOTO: KARLI CADEL

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a COT double-bill in Fall 2011. He accepted wholeheartedly. “The best thing about Curtis is the people you get to work with. I learned a ton from the singers. Their level of artistry and preparation is unmatched.”

Balance

While the standard operatic canon factors heavily into each season, students also learn operas of the 20th and 21st centuries, as well as select baroque works. The current season boasts full stagings of *DIDO+*, Handel’s *Rinaldo*, and Britten’s *Owen Wingrave* (the latter in a co-production with Opera Philadelphia and the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts). Mere weeks after the Mozart production closed, students mounted a workshop for a brand-new opera: *Cold Mountain*, by Pulitzer Prize-winning composition faculty member Jennifer Higdon.

“I thought it spoke volumes as to the professionalism and skill of the students that they could rehearse and perform *The Magic Flute* while rehearsing my opera,” Higdon says. Several students had significant roles in both works—soprano Rachel Sterrenberg simultaneously prepared Pamina and Ada, the heroine of *Cold Mountain*—and the Higdon workshop involved an intimidating list of attendees: author Charles Frazier, librettist Gene Scheer, director Leonard Foglia, and artistic leaders from the co-commissioning companies, Santa Fe Opera and Opera Philadelphia. Adds Higdon, “I thought the level of preparation was absolutely outstanding. I was impressed by the level of singing, and the incredible enthusiasm each of the singers brought to the experience. I don’t think you could find that at any other school in the world.”

Modeling

“This is a practical training program,” Mr. Rader-Shieber says. “The learn-by-doing approach works. These singers, he adds, “leave Curtis with a point of view, with stamina.” He likens the Curtis Opera Theatre to high-level sports training: “You have to play the game. And oftentimes, you get better by playing with teams that are better than you.” For undergraduates the opportunity to work alongside graduate students offers an inspiring example, says Johnathan McCullough, who well recalls performing in his first year with Joseph Barron (’12). “Being onstage with Joe when he had just won the Metropolitan Opera Auditions—that was incredible!” Similarly, graduate students benefit from professional opportunities that speed their development and their careers, with the full encouragement of Mr. Eliassen and the school. Tenor Christopher Tiesi withdrew from his assignment as the Priest in *The Magic Flute* this fall to sing Nemorino in *L’elisir d’amore* at the Dresden Semperoper—with only two days’ notice. (He was immediately reengaged.) Meanwhile baritone Jarett Ott, another graduate student, stepped in seamlessly to perform the Priest’s role, also on minimal notice, even while immersed in the leading role of *Cold Mountain*.

Exposure

No singer would disagree: A performance is the best audition of all, far better than waiting hours to sing for five minutes at the end of a long day of auditions in a New York ballet studio with horrible acoustics and an even worse piano. Fortunately for Curtis students, many companies and management firms seeking young talent come to Curtis Opera Theatre performances. Students are regularly cast in roles at Opera Philadelphia, where Mr. Eliassen formalized a relationship as artistic advisor in 2011.

“Getting paid introduces new expectations,” he acknowledges, “although no one can predict if a student will have the discipline, how they will deal with people, how they will take advantage of opportunities, and if they will have the drive to really make a career.” But the success of legions of Curtis vocal alumni seals the verdict: Curtis’s student singers are perfectly poised to do just that. ♦

Elizabeth Racheva is Curtis’s senior director of external affairs and patron engagement.

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www.curtis.edu/Eliassen