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.
and demands a high degree of professionalism from each of its 25 students. Under the artistic direction of Mikael Eliasen, 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. Eliasen 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. Eliasen 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. Eliasen invited Vinay Parameswaran to lead The Magic Flute, following his success with continued on p. 20
**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 Eliasen. “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 Méliande, 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. Eliasen emphasizes that her experience is typical for Curtis students. Sarah is the Alfred Greenberg Memorial Fellow in Opera.

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Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro* (Barbarina)
Purcell: *Dido and Aeneas* (Second Witch, Ensemble)
Tchaikovsky: Duet from *Romeo and Juliet*

Recital with pianist Richard Goode
Recital with pianist Richard Goode
Recital with guitarist Jason Vieaux
Donizetti: *L’elisir d’amore* (Adina)
Gasser: *The Secret Garden* (Mary)
Mozart scenes and arias
Handel: *Rinaldo* (Almirena)
Mozart: *Die Zauberflöte* (Papagena)

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 Arsenaault, 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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d平衡

虽然歌剧的正统剧目在每个学年都会起到重要作用，但学生也会学习20世纪和21世纪的歌剧，以及一些巴洛克作品。本学年的演出包括全剧演出的《DIDO+》，亨德尔的《里纳尔多》，以及布里顿的《奥文·温格雷夫》（后者与歌剧费城和卡米伦中心合作制作）。几周后，莫扎特的演出结束，学生们为一部全新的作品《冷山》（Cold Mountain）进行了工作坊。由普利策奖获得者，作曲系教授珍妮弗·希格顿（Jennifer Higdon）编曲。

“我认为这说明了学生们的专业精神和技能，他们能在排练我的作品的同时排演《魔笛》。”希格顿说。几位学生在两部作品中扮演了显著的角色——女高音瑞秋·斯特伦伯格同时准备了帕米娜和阿达，这是《冷山》的女主角，希格顿的工作坊汇集了令人 intimidation的出席者：剧作家查尔斯·弗雷泽，作曲家和编剧，导演伦纳德·福格利亚，以及来自共同制作公司，圣达菲歌剧院和歌剧费城的领导。希格顿说：“我认为准备工作的水平非常高，我被那些学生的表演水平和无比的热情所震撼。我认为这在世界上任何其他学校都找不出来。”

“这是一个实践型的培训项目。”拉德·希比埃说。“学做实践的方法。这些歌手，他补充说，“留下曲士与一个视野，和耐力。”他将歌剧系与高水平体育训练相提并论。“你有球赛可打，而且有时候，你打得更好。因为你和更好的球队打球。”

若为本科生，与研究生一起工作为他们提供了鼓舞人心的例子。约翰纳森·麦格鲁洛夫（Johnathan McCullough）还记得他在第一年与乔依·巴伦（Joseph Barron）的合作。“在与乔依一起演出的时候他刚刚赢得了纽约大都会歌剧院的选秀——那真是不可思议！”同样，研究生也从专业机会中受益，他们为自己的发展和职业生涯服务，得到了全面的鼓励。艾利森先生和学校。男高音克里斯托弗·蒂伊（Christopher Tiesi）从他的角色中退出。他将扮演《魔笛》中的神父。他被重新签约。与此同时，男中音杰瑞特·奥特（Jarett Ott），另一位研究生，不断地无缝地表演神父的角色，即使在沉浸于《冷山》中。没有一名歌手会不同意：一次演出胜过千次面试。等待数小时在纽约芭蕾舞团的音乐教室中演唱五分钟，而糟糕的声学和更糟糕的钢琴。幸运的是，曲士的学生被许多公司和管理公司寻求年轻人才的歌剧费城歌剧院的演出所吸引。学生经常在歌剧费城的角色中扮演角色。艾利森先生在2011年正式建立了一种合作关系，作为艺术顾问。

“赚到报酬会带来新的期望”，他承认，“虽然没有人能预测如果学生将会有这种纪律，他们将如何与人们打交道，他们将如何利用机会，以及他们将是否有追求事业的意愿。”但成功数辈的曲士的声乐校友的信条是曲士的学生歌手完全有资格做到这一点。

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