



BY HEIDI WALESON

# A PERSONAL INVESTMENT

Alumni of the Curtis vocal studies program reflect on their studies with Mikael Eliassen.

Mikael Eliassen coaches soprano Emily Pogorelc, a current voice student.

PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

**For 30 years, Mikael Eliassen has nurtured young singers at the Curtis Institute of Music.**

Whether they entered straight from high school or with several years of college study behind them, he has ensured that each singer in his charge has performed early and often, and he has taken a personal interest in every one.

Singers from throughout his long tenure are remarkably consistent in identifying the key elements of that experience. They cite the intimate, nurturing nature of the vocal studies program, and the fact that they were allowed to stay at Curtis as long as necessary. They value the professional environment of the Curtis Opera Theatre, in which they learned by doing: three to five productions a year, permission to perform elsewhere as opportunities arose, and all the coaching and teaching they could fit in.

Most of all, they remain grateful for Mr. Eliassen's attention to them as individuals. From the moment he chooses each singer at auditions, he is invested in them as people and as artists, developing their gifts, programming operas that specifically suit and stretch them, building their confidence, and pushing them to look beyond what they might have envisioned for themselves.

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## A NECESSARY FOUNDATION



**SHULER HENSLEY**  
(OPERA '93)  
BARITONE

"I have always thought of myself as an actor who sings, and classical training was a necessary foundation," says Shuler Hensley. "There is no better place to get that training than Curtis."

Mr. Hensley's career has been largely devoted to musical theater and film, starting with *Phantom of the Opera* in Germany (and in German), and continuing with long award-winning runs in *Oklahoma* in London's West End and on Broadway, and a starring role in the film *Van Helsing*.

His three years at Curtis gave him the tools he needed. "It enabled me to look at any piece of music, any piece of art, and read it, analyze it, and see what's underneath. The lines are always being crossed in my career, so I never say never to anything, and the training that I had there gives me enough confidence to know that with right kind of rehearsal, I can learn anything. Even more importantly, it taught me how to sing healthily, even when I'm doing eight shows a week.

"Mikael's focus is on the individual singer, and he knew what my desires were, so he would have me do Sondheim. And he's one of the best accompanists ever. I learned about collaboration from him. It is rare to find someone who is that talented, but doesn't take things too seriously. Mikael not only brought humor into things, but also made you believe you could do just about anything."



Shuler Hensley won a Tony Award for his portrayal of Jud Fry in the 2002 Broadway revival of *Oklahoma!*—a role for which he had won London's Olivier Award two years earlier.

"The training that I had there gives me enough confidence to know that with right kind of rehearsal, I can learn anything." —*Shuler Hensley*

## UNORTHODOX ... BUT FUN



**JUAN DIEGO FLÓREZ**  
(VOICE '96)  
TENOR

When Juan Diego Flórez decided to leave his native Peru and study abroad at the age of 20, his family sold their car for \$1,000 so that he could travel to the U.S. and audition at Curtis, Juilliard, and the Manhattan School of Music. In New York, he sang for Marlena Malas, who was teaching at all three schools. "She recommended that I go to Curtis, because I was an international student and I would be taken care of in a family atmosphere there," he recalls.

The young tenor arrived without a solid technique, and he had never sung an opera, a full concert, or a recital. In the voice program at Curtis he "gained a lot of experience," appearing with the Curtis Opera Theatre in productions ranging from *Sunday in the Park with George* and *Die Fledermaus* to works that would ultimately become his core repertoire as the world's reigning male star of bel canto.

"Mikael Eliassen and the program are the same, because he designed it," says Mr. Flórez. "It prepared me for the real world, with real productions—with orchestra, costumes, and make-up, in a proper theater, and with great stage directors." Of Mr. Eliassen, he adds, "I liked his directness. He was a person who always listened, and when we had problems or concerns, he was there to help us solve them. And he always supported me in my decisions. For example, when I decided not to have a voice teacher in my last year, he was fine with it.

"He was a very unorthodox teacher, but fun, and he made us laugh a lot," says Mr. Flórez. "He also made us explore different ways of expressing ourselves through singing, and he made us feel relaxed and at ease."



Juan Diego Flórez as Prince Ramiro in the Metropolitan Opera's *La cenerentola*  
PHOTO: KEN HOWARD/METROPOLITAN OPERA

# NO NEED TO RUSH



**MATTHEW ROSE**  
(OPERA '03)  
BASS  
PHOTO: LENA KERN

While a college student in his native England, Matthew Rose met Mr. Eliassen at a singing course in Italy. "My singing was really not of any standard whatsoever, though I enjoyed it. I did a couple of things with Mikael. Years later, he told me that he heard two or three notes in my voice that he thought, aha, I can do something with that."

Encouraged by Mr. Eliassen, the youthful bass left England for Curtis and stayed there for five years. "The great thing is that it's open-ended. You are there as long as you feel you need to be there and can get something from it," he says. "There are so many facets to being a singer that you have to learn in such an expert way, and it's amazing to know that you have a very long period to be in that supportive environment, and you don't have to rush."

Student singers at Curtis "are always performing, always learning the process, which is the most important thing. You can't learn the process by sitting in the classroom or doing opera scenes. Actually doing operas is how you learn to become an opera singer, how to use your potential to its maximum ability." At Curtis, he stresses, the studio of 25 singers performs in three to five operas each year. "That's unprecedented in any music school—or even young artist program—in the world."

"Mikael is so intuitive," Mr. Rose adds. "He knew I would be interested in doing art songs, so we did seven or eight big lieder projects in my time there. That's such an important part of my work now, and it opened my eyes to what I could do."

Mr. Rose went from Curtis into the young artist program at Covent Garden. A few years later, his debut as Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Glyndebourne catapulted him into an international career that is now edging towards Wagner. He credits Mr. Eliassen with giving him the foundation to do it. "I cannot say enough about how wonderful that man is in understanding how people need to be trained, how to think about having a career as a singer, and what quality you need to have in every facet of what you do."



Matthew Rose as Baron Ochs in *Der Rosenkavalier* at the Lyric Opera of Chicago  
PHOTO: CORY WEAVER/LYRIC OPERA OF CHICAGO

"Curtis does not foster competition ... it's wonderful to have that kind of supportive environment, while your voice is changing and growing."

—Meredith Arwady

# STRETCHING, SAFELY



**MEREDITH ARWADY**  
(OPERA '04)  
CONTRALTO  
PHOTO: SIMON PAULY

Before coming to Curtis, Meredith Arwady worked with Mikael Eliassen at the Chautauqua Institution during the summers. Her unusual voice type made her choice of a graduate program easy. "Curtis does not foster competition," she says, adding that Mr. Eliassen "chooses the operas that stretch you but are safe. As a big wild voice, it's wonderful to have that kind of supportive environment, while your voice is changing and growing and you're exploring. He makes you feel that Curtis is a place that wants you to succeed, and gives you the resources, but you have to be willing to put yourself into the process. It's not going to do the work for you."

In college, Ms. Arwady recalls, "I had done one opera scene every other year, in English." At Curtis her very first opera assignment was Ottavia in *L'incoronazione di Poppea*. At first she thought her casting was a mistake. "It was a full-length opera in Italian, higher than anything I'd ever sung, a different style from anything I'd ever sung." As it turned out, "Ottavia is my repertoire. I realized that even if something doesn't have your voice type specifically on the list, it has less to do with what *fach* you are than how a piece sits in your voice. Mikael's view was, if it didn't fit, you didn't have to do it. It was never 'this or nothing,' but 'I see this for you, I know we can get there. Let's try.' By the time I got to the other operas, I felt as though I could try anything." Today, her assignments range from Erda in Wagner's *Ring* to Pasqualita in John Adams's *Doctor Atomic*, and from Sondheim's Mrs. Lovett to music written especially for her.

Ms. Arwady and Mr. Eliassen have remained musical collaborators. "Mikael is my recital partner. We both feel very strongly about singing in the vernacular wherever possible, and singing in different styles. He is incredibly gifted about how a recital flows and it's wonderful to have a partner at the piano who knows me so well."



Meredith Arwady in *The Impresario* at Santa Fe Opera  
PHOTO: KEN HOWARD/SANTA FE OPERA





Layla Claire in *The Enchanted Island* at the Metropolitan Opera  
PHOTO: KEN HOWARD/METROPOLITAN OPERA

“If you were just up there making a pretty noise, he would say, ‘What are you *saying?*’ He would really get after us.”—*Layla Claire*

## PERMISSION TO FAIL



**LAYLA CLAIRE**  
(OPERA '09)  
SOPRANO

PHOTO: SEBASTIAN BESSON

Layla Claire chose Curtis over a young artist program in her native Canada, and it changed her life. The heart of the Curtis curriculum for singers, she recalls, was “the seminars we would do with Mikael a couple of times a week. We would all get together and sing for each other. We would be super-nervous, and he would just make you get up there—no matter if you didn’t feel like it, or you didn’t feel prepared, or you didn’t feel very well.

“It is so nerve-wracking to sing, and just by repetition, getting up there, doing it, and totally failing, we learned. He let us fail. He made it a safe place to take risks and to fail. And if you said you didn’t feel like it, he said, ‘Well, guess what? You’re not going to feel like it for most of your career. It’s not about singing on your best days. It’s about learning how to sing always.’

“He treated us like we were all going to be working singers. He expected us to want to be the best versions of ourselves, and to push ourselves artistically, and to find our artistic voice. We had to bring ourselves to the music, and have something special to say with it.” And, Ms. Claire adds, he wouldn’t let singers get away with anything. “If you were just up there making a pretty noise, he would say, ‘What are you *saying?*’ He would really get after us.

“I was insecure and hard on myself, and he really made me believe in my talent,” she says. “He challenged me to go beyond the repertoire and range that I felt comfortable in. I didn’t love singing high notes, and he made me do that. He encouraged me to think beyond a Canadian regional career, to think maybe I could sing with great orchestras and great musicians all over the world, which is what I’m doing.” Today, Ms. Claire sings at the Metropolitan Opera, Munich, Salzburg, and the like; her coming season is all Mozart. Not surprisingly, Mr. Eliassen had cast her as Donna Elvira and the Countess at Curtis. “Those two roles are the staples of my repertoire now.”

## FATHER FIGURE



**ELLIOT MADORE**  
(VOICE '09, OPERA '10)  
BARITONE

PHOTO: KRISTIN HOEBERMAN

Elliot Madore entered Curtis directly from high school, and spent the next five years there. “My voice had dropped very suddenly without any cracking when I was 13, and at 18, I had a mature voice with a natural sound. Mikael and Marlena [Malas] made sure that they kept the naturalness and didn’t harm me. They didn’t fuss too much, but they let me enjoy singing and opened my ears to opera and to being onstage.

“Mikael was very much like a father figure,” Mr. Madore recalls. “He really looked out for me and cared about my well-being, not only how I sang, or how my voice was feeling, how my performances went, and my development—he cared about me as a person. When you have someone who is in your corner, it means a great deal, especially to a young singer trying to find his way.

“I won the Met competition at 22, and the very next day, I got a call from Met Young Artists Program. Of course, it is every singer’s dream to go to the Met. I had lunch with Mikael, and he said, ‘look, you don’t have to go, you can stay here if you want.’ I understood what he meant by that. But he knew me. He knew I was an incredibly ambitious, driven person, so he knew that I had to go, and he had to let me go.” Mr. Madore went from the Met to a fest contract in Zürich. Today he is a busy freelancer, dashing from Mercutio in a new *Roméo et Juliette* at the Met program to *Pelléas et Mélisande* in Australia. “I know for a fact that I would not be doing what I am doing today without him. Curtis and Mikael gave me the very solid foundation for the house I’m still trying to build.”



Elliot Madore in *Sweeney Todd* at Santa Fe Opera  
PHOTO: CORY WEAVER/SANTA FE OPERA