



Danielle Orlando

Infectious Enthusiasm

Danielle Orlando motivates young singers to be their best on the stage.

BY DAVE ALLEN

Having spent much of her career in some of the world's grandest opera houses, Danielle Orlando now prefers homier environments. At Curtis, where she has taught since 1986, the Salzedo Room is her favored space.

The third-floor room overlooking Rittenhouse Square is not especially large, and with as few as three people—two singers and Ms. Orlando herself at the piano—the sound borders on overwhelming. To imagine it filled with every singer in the vocal studies department, as it is when she convenes the entire cast at the start of a Curtis Opera Theatre production, is an exercise in excess. “It’s a big group and we’re always on top of each other,” Ms. Orlando says. For the student singers, “it really teaches you to be sensitive to the person next to you and not distract them, and to really know your part and not slow down rehearsal.”

As the principal opera coach at Curtis, Ms. Orlando combines the technical skills of an ace accompanist with repertoire knowledge that’s both deep and broad. One of seven vocal coaches in Curtis’s vocal studies department, she steps in where the technique taught by individual voice teachers meets the realities of the stage.

Though Ms. Orlando has prepared operas written in every commonly sung language, Italian opera is her chief domain, owing in part to her prior role as accompanist, judge, and artistic coordinator for the Luciano Pavarotti International Voice Competition. She worked very closely with the legendary Italian tenor, and with countless other notable singers, conductors and directors. Her approach to interpretation and characterization also draws on what she calls “live experience” from several decades spent in opera houses—notably with the Opera Company of Philadelphia, now known as Opera Philadelphia, from 1979 to 1993. This fount of knowledge informs her teaching, whether directed to a large group of singers or during a one-on-one coaching.

Baritone Dennis Chmelensky treasures the moments when Ms. Orlando gets everyone together before the intensive coachings begin. “She works at such a high level, and she’s always very present,” he says. “She’ll push you to the max of what you can do, but she also has the ability to get people excited. It makes you want to push yourself.” Often, amid queries about

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Ms. Orlando in a coaching with soprano Elena Perroni.
PHOTOS: PETE CHECCHIA

character, text, or pronunciation, personal questions crop up: “How are you feeling? How’s your stamina? Are you getting enough rest?” Amid the mid-semester busyness, her students take comfort in this insistent but caring approach. “She always expects the most from us because she truly believes in each one of us,” Dennis explains.

For soprano Elena Perroni, Ms. Orlando has provided a unique balance of motivation and inspiration. “I think she has this incredible gift of mentorship, which is a talent in itself and not easy to come by,” Elena says. “She gives you the sense that there’s a lot of work to be done—but that you’re capable of doing it.”

Ms. Orlando served as principal coach for the two productions that, to date, have bookended Elena’s time at Curtis: Donizetti’s *L’elisir d’amore*, and Puccini’s *La rondine*. “I grew so much as a musician in that time,” Elena recalls. As they worked together on the leading role of Magda in *La rondine* last April, she adds, “Danielle gave me the freedom and the confidence to reflect on all the hard work that we’ve done.”

PROVOKE AND CONVINCe

Tasked with shaping performances and bringing details from the score to singers’ attention, Ms. Orlando describes the essence of her job as “to provoke and convince.” For her, provocation comes in the form of tossing out questions about their role: what the character thinks and feels, or how the character fits in with others and with the opera’s plot. Convincing, on the other hand, might take the form of narrowing down the options for a particular scene or aria or, occasionally, reining singers in if they stray too far. With this two-pronged approach, Ms. Orlando says, “I feel I’m helping them get ready to go out into an opera house and sing a role with their own convictions.”

Mikael Eliassen, Hirsig Family Dean of Vocal Studies, says he relies a great deal on Ms. Orlando’s well-informed opinions about repertoire and interpretation. “She’s so important within the vocal department because she’s so strong in her beliefs,” he says. He and Ms. Orlando arrived at Curtis around the same time, with Mr. Eliassen becoming department chair shortly thereafter. Though they’ve traveled different paths—Ms. Orlando’s length of service in opera houses and at festivals contrasts with Mr. Eliassen’s focus on lieder, art song,



Close friends as well as colleagues: Mikael Eliassen with Ms. Orlando PHOTO: KARLI CADEL



and contemporary music—they share a fierce dedication to sparking creativity and fresh perspectives from young singers. “I consider her one of my closest friends, and to have such a close friendship with someone you work with is very rare,” Mr. Eliasen says.

With the vocal studies department’s rise in stature throughout Mr. Eliasen and Ms. Orlando’s tenure at Curtis—due in no small part to their collective efforts—voice and opera graduates are making international careers and finding their way to the venues where Ms. Orlando amassed the skills that have driven her career. Soprano Amanda Majeski has made numerous appearances at the Metropolitan Opera, among other major stages, since graduating from Curtis in 2009. She calls Ms. Orlando “the most detailed coach I have ever worked with.”

“Her love of the music shines through her exquisite playing, and that excitement and eagerness to get it right is infectious when you’re working with her,” Ms. Majeski says. That approach matches up nicely with Ms. Orlando’s words of encouragement at the start of an opera production. “I tell them, make this as important as it can be so that we’re all engaged,” she says, “and keep the energy level high so that it’s contagious. We don’t want to lose that.” ♦

Dave Allen is publications and social media manager at Settlement Music School in Philadelphia. His writings on music have appeared in *Chamber Music*, *Overtones*, *Symphony*, and the *Courier-Post*.

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WHY CHOOSE CURTIS?

—DANIELLE ORLANDO

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“There are so many reasons, starting with Mikael [Eliassen]: He’s always foraging for opportunities for singers, and he gets a lot of people from the opera world to come here and hear them, which can really help you make connections in your career. Apart from that, there’s the plethora of outstanding coaches, the high level of the Curtis Opera Theatre’s productions, and the chance to work closely and interact frequently with instrumentalists—they’re the musicians that will be accompanying you in the pit one day! In an atmosphere like this, there are so many different ways to learn.”

PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

