

## Opera in Review

moving. The Edmonton Symphony Orchestra, led by Robert Tweeten, handled the many different challenges of the difficult Beethoven score commendably. —*Bill Rankin*

### HALIFAX

This year's **Dalhousie Opera Workshop** (Feb. 2–4) presented Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*, directed by Brent Krysa and with musical direction by Adam Burnette.

Sondheim belongs on the opera stage, but the challenges are great. His texts are complex and must be heard. His music is difficult and can tax the abilities of even seasoned performers. The large amount of spoken dialogue provides an extra-musical challenge to the acting abilities of the performers. In this case, the risks in staging this work were worth it. Apart from some rather stiff spoken dialogue, the production was most satisfying.

Iain MacNeil sang the title role. His voice and diction were excellent and he easily portrayed the conflicted anti-hero. Jonathan MacArthur was equally impressive in the pivotal role of Tobias Ragg. His clarity of diction and an innate sense of drama (and comedy) allowed him to bring a true sense of compassion and empathy to this character, especially in "Not While I'm Around."

The young lovers were played by Ryan Josey (Anthony) and Stephanie Fillman (Johanna). Sondheim wrote some of the most complex music and text for these characters, and they were not always successful in enunciating clearly the quick patter of the words amid the rapid pace of the music (especially in "Kiss Me"). However, Fillman's "Green Finch and Linnet Bird" perfectly captured the essence of the music and the text, and Josey's performance of the iconic "Johanna" was mesmerizing and quite moving.

Ellen Denny, as Lucy, was extremely impressive and one felt a true sense of her tragedy at the end. Matthew Beasant (the Beadle) and Patrick Simms (Pirelli) performed well for the most part, although Beasant's accent was a little forced.

Faculty member Gregory Servant made his Judge Turpin completely detestable (a good thing), and Marcia Swanston's



Emilia Boteva (Azucena) in *Opera Hamilton's Il trovatore*

Mrs. Lovett was the production highlight. Her magnificent voice and uncanny sense of comic and dramatic timing provided the most memorable moments of the evening, especially in "Not While I'm Around" and "By the Sea."

The chorus deserves special mention for their remarkable diction and big sound. Krysa imagined them as zombie-like victims of Sweeney's murderous razor and this worked well. So did a set that enabled the many scene changes to flow seamlessly from one to the other. —*Michael Parker*

### HAMILTON

**Opera Hamilton** closed its inaugural season in the Dofasco Centre for the Arts with four performances of Verdi's *Il trovatore*. In spite of its loopy story, Verdi's music stands head and shoulders above the tale, easily making the opera a repertory staple.

OH's Apr. 14 opening night audience wasn't stingy with its "Bravos," even if the four leads occasionally ran roughshod over Verdi's indications to sing softly. True, we heard Richard Margison's lovely melting tones in his Act IV scene with Azucena, but earlier he had made nothing of Manrico's "Non ferir," words supposedly heard

from Heaven and indicated to be sung sotto voce. On this night, however, his money notes were in place, blazing on two interpolated high Cs in "Di quella pira."

As Leonora, Joni Henson, too, hit her money notes, even though they sounded a bit pinched a few times. But "Tacea la notte" and "D'amor sull'ali rosee" were rendered affectively. James Westman, making a role debut, was a standout, cutting a dashing, yet ultimately abusive, figure as the Count di Luna, and electrifying the audience in "Il balen." Emilia Boteva was a sympathetic Azucena with a big sound. Her account of "Stride la vampa" was finely detailed.

Taras Kulish commanded attention as Ferrando, though fared better vocally on "Abietta zingara" than in his opening recitativo. Two Hamilton based singers made their company debuts, with Mia Lennox-Williams as Leonora's confidante, Ines, and Jason Hales exuberant as both the Messenger and Ruiz.

What little set there was—some nondescript flats, a Spanish style fence, a large cross, some cannons and prison bars—was filled in either by one's imagination or director Valerie Kuinka's scenic

PHOTO: PETER OLSENKOVICH

or mood-intensifying projections on the cyclorama. The placement of the cyclorama cut off a portion of the upstage, not necessarily a bad thing since it's a real battle to sing from back there against the theatre's high fly loft and its proscenium arch. On the other hand, the placement reduced the playing area available.

OH used Bryan Higgins's orchestral reduction of Verdi's score, with the OH Orchestra (the Hamilton Philharmonic in all but name) consisting of just 29 players. The thinly staffed string section sounded scrawny, and using only two cellos was an invitation for intonation problems. At times, conductor David Speers had trouble keeping the orchestra and the 32-voice OH Chorus in sync, though this wasn't a problem in the arias and ensembles —*Leonard Turmevicius*

### MISSISSAUGA, ON

On Mar. 23, **Opera Kitchener**, under the guidance of Artistic Director Emilio Fina, presented *Don Giovanni* at the Mississauga Living Arts Centre. Conductor William Shookoff took the music at a good

pace, which is fortunate given that there were no cuts to the score and some rarely performed scenes (such as in Act II, when Zerlina threatens a chair-bound Leporello) were included. Mark Gardner (Don Giovanni) had the menacing dark good looks to be effective in the title role; his voice was a full-throated baritone and his acting left no one in doubt that he was a rake. Douglas Tranquada (Leporello), a regular performer with the company, was a wonderful comedic foil to Gardner's Don and matched him in vocal strength. Outstanding performances also included Dylan Wright as a powerful Commendatore and Caroline Déry as Zerlina. Déry's lyrical coloratura easily embraced Mozart's score as she transformed herself from innocent victim to cunning vixen. Fina (Don Ottavio), Catherine Gardner (Donna Elvira) and Natalie Donnelly (Donna Anna) were particularly effective in their masked ball ensemble. My main fault finding is with the Hammerson Hall venue itself. Although there are inherent difficulties in staging a single performance in any hall, the lighting in this production was

distracting—the audience audibly groaning when the house lights were dimmed and brightened several times during the first scene after the intermission. Uneven ensemble work was exacerbated by the poorly implemented sound reinforcement. Nonetheless, the audience was appreciative of Penelope Cookson's staging of this timeless opera. —*Dawn Martens*

### MONTREAL

**Opera McGill** delighted its audience with a sensual and visually appealing production of Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (seen Mar. 17). The sets were intelligently conceived: though simple, they managed to give an allure of nobility and to transport one to Ancient Rome.

Requiring a large number of solo and ensemble singers, *Poppea* is an excellent choice for a student production. The role of Nero, originally written for castrato but now most often taken by a countertenor, was very well sung by soprano Katherine Maysek. The voice was first rate, the acting good although emotion was sometimes lacking. Her Nero was a slightly

## Domoney ARTISTS 2012 Roster



Charlotte CORWIN  
Soprano



Virginia HATFIELD  
Soprano



Marianne BINDIG  
Mezzo-Soprano



Marion NEWMAN  
Mezzo-Soprano



Maria SOULIS  
Mezzo-Soprano



Scott BELLUZ  
Countertenor



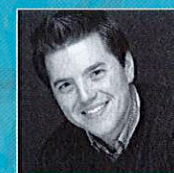
Adam FISHER  
Tenor



Joseph SCHNURR  
Tenor



Anthony CLEVERTON  
Baritone



Benjamin COVEY  
Baritone



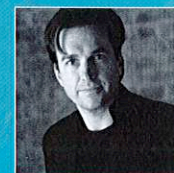
Andrew LOVE  
Baritone



Giles TOMKINS  
Bass-Baritone



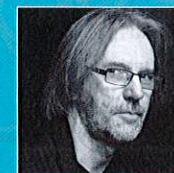
Ernesto MORILLO  
Bass



Leslie DALA  
Conductor



Kevin MALLON  
Conductor



François RACINE  
Director

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