Some thoughts on La Rondine

A woman asked me the other day why I chose Puccini’s La Rondine for OCM’s eighth season, and I gave my stock reply. “Gorgeous music,” I said, “some of the most beautiful music Puccini ever wrote.” Puccini said of this score, “I let my pen run,” as if even he was surprised by the glorious stuff that came out of it. With the largest orchestra we’ve assembled at Town Hall Theater and a superb cast of professional singers, all under the baton of our new, world-class conductor Emmanuel Plasson, La Rondine is sure to be a stunning musical event.

But I should have said more to that woman. In truth, I chose the opera for the story as much as for the music. That might seem odd, as critics have decided that the story is the reason why La Rondine has seen so few productions over the years. Yes, the plot is a copy of La Traviata—a “kept woman” tries vainly to forge a new life for herself. And yet, to me, La Rondine feels brand new.

The difference is Puccini’s central character. Magda, who is “the swallow” of the title, seems more real to me—flesher, more thoughtful, more like women I know—than Violetta of La Traviata. Magda isn’t given to histrionics or coloratura trills. When this swallow sings, what comes out is pure and real and good. Because of her, as played by our superb soprano, Anna Noggle, the old story becomes fresh and, in the end, devastating.

Puccini takes us deeply into a woman’s heart, in a way you won’t soon forget.

Douglas Anderson
Artistic Director
**OCM Guild Activities**

Members of OCM Guild continue to bake cookies, serve refreshments, stuff envelopes for mass mailings, and perform various services in support of the Opera Company of Middlebury.

All proceeds from refreshment sales benefit the Company.

We are grateful to Jerry Shedd for presenting lectures to help our audiences understand operas in Wagner’s Ring cycle. He will do so again next season.

Once again, we will honor our volunteers at an afternoon tea in July. We will meet for a social gathering and then hold a round-table discussion to think up ways in which the Guild might further assist the Company. Watch for further details about our tea.

If you wish to get involved in the Guild’s activities, please go to our website for details.

---

**Raffle Fundraiser**

Edgewater Gallery, the Swift House Inn and OCM have donated items to be raffled during the live performances of the Opera Company of Middlebury.

Raffle tickets will be sold during Meet the Singers and at the live performances of *La Rondine*. The drawing will be at the end of the last performance.

You need not be in attendance to win.
Suzanne and Andrew will return to THT

Suzanne Kantorski-Merrill and Andrew Cummings broke our hearts in their portrayals of Leila and Zurga in The Pearl Fishers. They return to THT on Saturday, September 24, for an exciting recital. As both have recently been blessed with children, the program will feature arias and songs about parenthood and family.

It will be an exciting evening for our members and for our community: with a performance by them at THT and a reception at the Lodge at Otter Creek. We can hardly wait. Check our website for further information.

Schedule of Events

Sunday, May 22, 5-7 p.m.  Meet the Singers, Middlebury Inn, $25

Wednesday, June 1, 8 p.m.  La Rondine, Dress Rehearsal for High School Students, by invitation.

Friday, June 3, 8 p.m.  La Rondine and Gala, Town Hall Theater, $50 Orchestra $55 Balcony
7 p.m. Pre-performance talk, Memorial Baptist Church, Free

Sunday, June 5, 2 p.m.  La Rondine, Town Hall Theater, $40 Orchestra $45 Balcony
1 p.m. Pre-performance talk, Memorial Baptist Church, Free

Monday, June 6, 8 p.m.  La Rondine, Town Hall Theater, Understudy Performance  $10 (Piano only)

Wed., June 8, 8 p.m.  La Rondine, Town Hall Theater, $40 Orchestra $45 Balcony
7 p.m. Pre-performance talk, Memorial Baptist Church, Free

Fri., June 10, 8 p.m.  La Rondine, Town Hall Theater, $40 Orchestra $45 Balcony
7 p.m. Pre-performance talk, Memorial Baptist Church, Free.

Town Hall Theater Box Office  www.townhalltheater.org  802-382-9222
Visit our website for more information www.ocmvermont.org

Ticket Sales for Met HD Broadcasts
2011/2012 Season

Metropolitan Opera Members - Friday, August 19th
Opera Company of Middlebury Members - Friday, August 26th
General Public - Monday, August 29th
Meet the Singers - May 22nd

Meet Our New Singers

Anna Noggle
Paolo Buffagni
Matthew Garrett
Adam Hall
Rachel Hall

Come and meet our new and returning singers. Have a drink and chat with our talented performers. They will each sing a favorite aria.

The Middlebury Inn
Sunday, May 22nd from 5 to 7 p.m.
Tickets are available at the THT box office. $25 per person.
802-382-9222

Jeanai La Vita
Sarah Mayo
Chad Armstrong
Robert Aaron Taylor
Meet Our Returning Singers

*We welcome back Henrik, Marcello, Nadir, and members of the The Pearl Fishers ensemble.

Meet the Singers sold out last year.
Be sure to order your tickets early.
Call 802-382-9222

*Ben was Henrik in *A Little Night Music*
Daniel was Marcello in *La Bohème*
Matt was Nadir in *The Pearl Fishers*

Justin, Bevin, Sara and Elisa were part of the glorious ensemble in *The Pearl Fishers.*

Leesa Dahl will accompany our singers.
Audition, Audition!

Meredith Parsons McComb, a graduate of Middlebury College, is a Founding Artist of the Opera Company of Middlebury. Meredith portrayed Carmen in our first opera.

by Meredith Parsons McComb

It’s no great shame to audition, but it’s no great honor either. For those who haven’t experienced it, entry-level classical singing auditions may be open to those who think they can sing five arias with some range of languages, eras and style. They must have developed a resume outlining their training and roles (either performed or prepared), paid for a head-shot (an 8x10 photograph, not a death wish), and mounted a research-and-letter-writing campaign to get assigned a time slot. Do not be late, though they will likely keep you waiting. Dress in layers, as there may not be heat or a/c where you wait. As an evil doctor once said, “Now there will be pain… RELAX!”

There is no such thing as a natural classical singer, Charlotte Church notwithstanding. Training is essential. Vocal chords evolved to keep food from going down your windpipe, and are the last thing in the body to complete formation. Thus, by the time you find out if you even have the physiological equipment to sing with a hundred-piece band in a thousand-seat house without a microphone (age 26-35), you’ve missed the apprenticeship age for any normal profession. Only ballet—which demands the sacrifice of childhood—seems crueler.

Earliest audition experience is likely tied to trying to get into a music school or a private teacher’s studio so that you can select and prepare those five arias. It is not for the faint of heart: In 1981, I paid $25 to audition to be a student of Marlena Malas in New York, and on her piano sat a framed cartoon: “You must never try to teach a pig to sing; it wastes your time and it annoys the pig.” A major problem for those without ice water in their veins is the basic premise of an audition: “Take the next five minutes to show us what you’ve been working on for years, and, please, start at the emotional high-point.” If that first aria goes well, you get to sing a second, often for contrast.

For competitions—the major source of significant financial support for young singers—my experience was that a flashy aria was needed to win first prize, though I won plenty of seconds and thirds without one. I finally determined to master one, and Marlena and I settled on an obscure kamikaze Handel ditty, “Furibondo sospira il vento.” I would start with it, hoping to then sing my forte, Wagner. This was the biggest vocal contrast imaginable—bordering on a party trick—and the judges went for the bait each and every time. Needless to say, if you come up with a party trick like mine, practice the two back to back, over and over and over. Music can be a business as well as an art, and strategizing should be part of any business plan.

For a job audition, begin with any short piece you do exquisitely under all circumstances, and then have something close to what they are casting on your list. Do not practice party tricks on job prospects: I crashed and burned at a St. Louis Opera audition the first time I tried, “Furibondo sospira il vento,” and I never did work for them.

Persistence and a pig-headed belief in one’s talent despite repeated failure will likely be necessary, as no matter how well you sing, they may decide that the timbre of your voice isn’t quite what they had in their ear when they conceptualized this production. Or those two selections were so different that they aren’t sure you really know yourself as a singer. Or they were so much alike that they worry about your range. Or you look too old, too young, too fat, too flat, too buxom, too short, too tall, or or or.

Despite all this, auditions are a very real part of the process of creating artists, and if you think they are tough, just wait until you get the job!

Note: Meredith has appeared on American stages from New Mexico to Maine and from Savannah to Seattle. She has sung leading roles in operatic productions in America, France, Israel, Canada and Mexico, and has been featured in national radio broadcasts in Israel, Germany and Holland, as well as on NPR broadcasts with the Metropolitan Opera and the Boston Symphony at Tanglewood. She appears on Deutsche Grammophon/Metropolitan Opera recordings and DVDs of Wagner’s “Ring Cycle,” including the Grammy Award-winning “Die Walküre.” Orchestral song cycles by Mahler, the Verdi “Requiem,” song recitals, and a wide range of oratorios were staples of her career. She and Emory Fanning collaborated on dozens of appearances, and his training and support were key to such success as she achieved.
**Accompanist at Auditions**

Leesa Dahl has been OCM’s audition accompanist for several years. She will be our accompanist at Meet the Singers.

by Leesa Dahl

Playing auditions for the Opera Company of Middlebury is always a highlight of my year. I’ve played since December 2007 when the company was auditioning for *La Bohème*. Each year the company auditions higher and higher levels of singers. Everyone wants to be a part of this company!

I don’t do a lot to prepare for auditions; it is part of my job. Making a living playing for singers is exciting and unpredictable, and requires flexibility. My skill level as an audition accompanist is based on experience. It is not just about being a good pianist; it is about years of experience playing for auditions. With a certain level of confidence, an accompanist is ready for almost anything.

I’ve been accompanying for a long time. I played for the school choir in fifth grade and loved it. In junior high I played for fellow instrumentalists at solo and ensemble contests. I continued through high school and on through college where I earned a bachelor’s degree in piano performance. During those four years I constantly collaborated with other musicians, which made going on to a master’s degree in piano accompanying seem natural. I then attended the Merola Opera Program of San Francisco Opera, and my immersion into opera world began.

In an opera audition, when a singer walks in, I have no idea what is going to happen! I don’t know ahead of time what they plan to sing, what their temperament is, and whether they will be pleasant or irritating. If they audition for a particular opera or role (such as for the OCM auditions), I suspect they may sing either a selection from the show or something similar (for instance, we heard a lot of *Chi il bel sogno di Doretta* from sopranos this year). Some singers are laid-back and friendly, while others are nervous or a little rude. I greet the singer with a smile and a compliment, and assure them that I will listen to what they are doing and follow them. Ninety percent of the time I know the music they put in front of me, but sometimes I have neither seen nor heard what they have chosen to sing. This past year we had someone sing Iago from Verdi’s *Otello*. It went well, but it was quite a surprise (and loud).

Sometimes a singer will forget a word or three, jump to the wrong section, or just stop. My job as an audition pianist is to find where they jumped and to make it sound as though nothing happened. At the end, some singers thank me while others grab their music and never look me in the eye. I’m happy to say that the singers that OCM hires are ALWAYS the ones who not only sing wonderfully but who are also lovely people. This is something I wish other opera companies would pick up on, and it is also what makes OCM so very special!

**Note:** New York pianist Leesa Dahl has been OCM’s audition accompanist at their annual New York City singer auditions for several years. Her ability to play anything put in front of her with impeccable musicianship and style is amazing. She also has impressed us with her unflappability in the face of any manner of unexpected and potentially disastrous (or hilarious) occurrences, e.g., singers’ memory lapses and uncertain wanderings into foreign keys and tempos. She has become indispensable to OCM’s search for the best possible singers for our productions. We enthusiastically welcome her to her first appearance here in Middlebury.

by J. Scott Morrison

a member of OCM’s audition team