

## Wolf Trap Opera Company **First Look 2012**

### First Look 2012: Announcing the Wolf Trap Opera Company 2012 Season

*Kim Pensinger Witman, Director, Wolf Trap Opera*



If you've been around us for a while, you'll know that Wolf Trap Opera is both an opera company and a young artist program.

**Next to Normal** [[see video clip](#)]

But the thing is, we're not exactly a normal opera company. If we were, we would've sat down three or more years ago to choose some operas for our 2012 season. Perhaps we would've identified a star singer with box office power and mounted a new production for her. We could have identified a director who's a

hot property and offered him a show. We might have selected an opera that our music director desired to conduct or looked for a production rental from another company with a stage similar to ours.

We would have negotiated with artist managers, traveled to other companies to hear singers in whom we were interested, and probably brought in a few people to audition on our stage.

A year or more ago, our directors and designers would've started working on creating any new productions, and our shops would already be building them.

We would have announced our season before last season was over, and would have had tickets on sale since last summer. And I wouldn't be standing here four months before opening night finally announcing our season.

Neither are we a normal young artist program.

If we were, we would have picked our operas over a year ago. We would have started accepted applications last fall, and we would have embarked on an audition tour to hear the best of those applicants. We would have chosen the best 2 or 3 dozen of them as members of our program. Then we would have fit them in the operas already chosen – almost always in small roles, chorus assignments or as understudies.

But that's not the way we do things.

We start out by acting like a young artist program. Last August and September we received 1,070 applications for our 2012 season. We chose 598 of them to hear in our month-long audition tour, and then we picked 12 singers to be our featured artists. And in a crazy gesture, we chose the operas while we were choosing the artists.

And only then, we finally started acting like a normal opera company, choosing conductors, directors, designers, production and music staff, crew and technical staff; designing, building and rehearsing.

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## The Singer-Driven Philosophy

It's a crazy and wonderful thing.

Crazy because we have fewer than 6 months to do what other people do in several years. But wonderful in the way that it allows us to zero in on our mission. Thirty years ago, this company seized on the idea that the singers come first. We exist primarily to identify and promote the best of the next generation of talent in our industry, and we know that this is the best way to do it. Find the best emerging talent, choose a small group to whose careers we feel we can make the biggest contribution, then create opera productions and concert performances to accomplish the job. It creates an unparalleled opportunity for these artists and it results in an annual cycle full of adrenaline and excitement. And I'm guessing it's one of the reasons that you all wait patiently every winter until we finally announce our summer season.

## The Annual Search for Talent

Last October and November, we visited 8 cities, including our own Vienna. We traveled over 11,000 miles and



heard well over 1,000 arias. The audition tour is pretty extensive (and we cover more bases than any other program) for a number of reasons. We choose our cities based on where the best feeder programs are: big house young artist programs at companies like Chicago, New York, Houston, San Francisco and Houston and high level conservatories and strong university programs in cities like Philadelphia, New York and Cincinnati. It's expensive and unsustainable for a 20-something aspiring singer to travel to many different locations multiple times during the fall audition season, so we do our best to pop ourselves down where they can get to us easily. It's exhausting and exhilarating.

## Best of the Best



The Harvard University website tells me that its acceptance rate is 6%. Kind of breathtaking. Unfortunately for aspiring opera singers, it can be as hard if not harder to break into our business. Our Filene Young Artist acceptance rate this year was 1.5%. (It gets even tougher in certain categories: our three sopranos this summer represent the top .08% of applicants.) A tough supply-and-demand scenario for the artists, to be sure; but an amazing testament to the talent of the singers who end up on our stage.



This little graphic gives you an idea of where else in the country our 12 artists have appeared this year – with opera companies from the Met to San Francisco, in Seattle and Chicago, at Glimmerglass and Saint Louis and beyond. And *you* only have to travel to The Barns to hear them!

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How to describe their experience here? I often liken their place within their careers to that of a medical resident. They've typically completed anywhere from 5-8 years of training in their field and have been through various types of apprenticeships. They come here to learn, to be sure, but mostly to have a chance to practice their craft. Being on stage at Wolf Trap gives them an experience that is designed to prepare them for what's ahead. No more singing in the shadow of the star performer, no more understudying, no more classroom instruction without strutting the footlights. It's kind of like a low-risk, well-designed laboratory.

### **Bad Boys of Summer... Times Two?**

Singers can come to Wolf Trap twice before they have to move out of the way and open up their spots. It's no surprise, then, that some of our rep choices emerge based on the profiles of potential returnees. This year we have five singers from our 2011 season, and three of them are pivotal members of the cast of our first opera, Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Our biggest dilemma in casting *Giovanni* was deciding what to do with the title role. It was an abundance of riches, for two of our returning singers are perfect for that assignment.

My colleague and audition tour partner in crime, Lee Anne Myslewski, was the brains behind this solution. I was fretting about whether to cast Craig or Ryan as Giovanni (and the other one as Leporello), and she didn't see what the problem was. "Cast both of them," says she.

It was crazy and exciting enough for us to go to both of these gentlemen and see if they shared our enthusiasm. And, as you can see, they did. So, for our four performances of *Giovanni*, they will swap roles, each performing Giovanni twice and Leporello twice. Not only will this be a unparalleled experience for these two guys, it will be fascinating for their colleagues and the audience a chance to see how a production can change, depending on the way different artists approach the same character. (It doesn't hurt that these two gentlemen are both friends and colleagues, having discovered shared geeky interests when they performed together in last season's *Curious Women*.)

[\[See artist greetings in video clip\]](#)



Returning artist **Ryan Kuster** spent his winter as an Adler Fellow with the San Francisco Opera Center, and we caught up with him last October during our audition tour as he was singing Masetto opposite an alum of the WTOC, mezzo-soprano Kate Lindsey.



His Giovanni alter ego **Craig Irvin** recently finished his training at Lyric Opera of Chicago's Ryan Opera Center, and he just had the pleasure of premiering the role of Lieutenant Horstmayer in Minnesota Opera's *Silent Night*, a role that he'll reprise when that opera goes to the Opera Company of Philadelphia next year.



Our third returning artist in *Giovanni* is soprano **Marcy Stonikas**. If any of you remember her from last summer, you'll understand why she's particularly pleased to return to Wolf Trap and not be "the pregnant one." Son Henry was born in September, and Marcy has taken a few well-deserved months off. Right after Wolf Trap, she goes to Seattle Opera to sing the title role in Puccini's *Turandot*.

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New artist **Jason Slayden** also greeted us in our little video. Jason is part of the Seattle Opera Resident Artist Program. Last summer, he debuted at Santa Fe opera as Rodolfo in *La bohème*, going on with 45 minutes' notice to replace an ill colleague.

### **New Production**

Our *Giovanni* team has had a handful of meetings, and although I don't have any designs or mockups to share with you because of our maddeningly fast turn-around, I can tell you that this production will be a modern one, set in our own time. More than many operatic vehicles, the story of Don Giovanni's hubris is truly timeless, and every fresh look at it brings welcome new insights.



I know there are those of you who welcome new takes on traditional repertoire, and those of you whose hearts sank a little when I said that. If you're in the latter group, I invite you to take this journey with us as I chronicle the development of this production on the blog over these next few months. hope you'll follow along, ask questions, and engage with us as we take a new look at the Don.

### **The Women Who Love Them**

During the audition tour, we began referring to this season as "Bad Boys of Summer and the Women Who love Them." Giovanni is of course, the iconic bad boy. But if you know the opera, you'll realize that we've only introduced one of the three women in Mozart's opera. Here to offer us one of Zerlina's arias from *Giovanni* is one of our new artists, soprano **Andrea Carroll**. [\[see video clip\]](#)



Andrea is a hometown girl, a native of Bethesda, MD. I recently had the pleasure of hearing her win both the Audience Choice prize and the judges' Grand Prize at the Houston Grand Opera McCollum Competition.

And yes, there is one more woman who loves Don Giovanni. Donna Elvira, probably the most difficult case of all. It so happens that our Elvira is also with us today.



Mezzo-soprano **Olivia Vote** is also from the DC area, claiming St. Mary's City MD as her hometown. She is a resident artist at Philadelphia's Academy of Vocal Arts. Just last night, she performed with the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Consort at the Smithsonian. Olivia's also an audience favorite, as she was the winner of last year's Opera Idol competition in Philadelphia!

Instead of offering Mozart this afternoon, Olivia has something a bit different to kick us into our next segment! [Olivia sings "Ideale" by Tosti. [See video clip.](#)]

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### ***From Bel Canto to Can Belto***



Olivia is one of four artists who will have the pleasure of working with Steve Blier this summer. In mid-July, Steve returns with a wonderful concert devoted to the music of Italians and Italian-Americans, called “From Bel Canto to Can Belto!”

Steve has a wellspring of music and concert themes ready to go at any moment, and at the end of every summer, he always sends me ideas for next year. We were considering a few options, but when he heard who his cast members would be for this July, he gravitated quickly to the Italian inspiration. Although this program hasn’t been fleshed out yet, Steve tells me that we could expect music from composers like Bellini, Verdi, Corigliano, Musto, Harry Warren (né Salvatore Guaragna).

### ***Vocal Colors***



We also return this summer to our partnership with DC’s Phillips Collection museum, *Vocal Colors*. Four singers and one of our pianists will have the privilege of browsing the Phillips’ exciting collection of art works and choosing paintings to which they will pair a range of songs from their repertoire. This concert will be held at The Phillips Collection, as part of their Thursday evening series.

### ***Aria Jukebox***

This year, there’s a new concert at The Barns, one I’m particularly excited about, because I get to play for it.

*Aria Jukebox* will feature our Filene Young Artists singing some of the most beloved arias in the repertoire. How do we know that the arias will be your favorites? Because you’ll choose them.



Our singers will offer multiple aria choices, and starting an hour before the performance, you’ll have a chance to put your quarter in the jukebox to choose the one you want to hear! Come early, grab a snack from the bar and peruse your choices!

### ***Beethoven’s Ninth***

#### **Beethoven’s 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony** with the National Symphony Orchestra



This summer we won’t be doing an opera at the Filene Center with the National Symphony Orchestra, but we’re thrilled that four of our artists will be featured in a performance of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony on July 28. All four of them will be making their NSO debut, they will be joined in the stirring “Ode to Joy” by the Washington Chorus, and the performance will be led by NSO @ Wolf Trap Festival Conductor and audience favorite Emil de Cou.

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## **A Boy Turns Bad**

And finally, we get to our other Barns opera production for the summer. [[see artist greetings in video clip](#)]



One of our returning artists plays a boy who turns bad in our August opera, Stravinsky's *Rake's Progress*. Tenor **Eric Barry** played the leading man in last summer's *Curious Women* at The Barns, and he will join us in July after performing in a rare Rossini opera at the Carmoor Music Festival.



The other returning artist in *Rake* is mezzo-soprano **Maggie Gawrysiak**, who stunned us over a year ago with her rendition of Baba the Turk's aria in her audition. As you just saw, Maggie is in Miami, singing Countess Ceprano in *Rigoletto*. If any of you got to Virginia Opera's *Hansel and Gretel* this past December, you would have seen her (in a breathtaking orange wig) as the Witch!



New to us this summer is bass-baritone **Craig Colclough**, who also said hello to us from Miami, where he is a member of the Florida Grand Opera Young Artist Studio. He's working hard this month, singing Count Ceprano in *Rigoletto* and Rambaldo in Puccini's *La rondine*. Craig is also singing the Commendatore in our *Giovanni* – a role that he tells us he's as excited about as Nick Shadow in *Rake's Progress*. He says that the final scene of *Giovanni*, between the Commendatore and the Don, is a powerful scene that initially attracted him to opera, and that he's just been waiting to sing!



We also welcome **James Kryshak** as Sellem the Auctioneer. James just finished his residency with the Lyric Opera of Chicago's Ryan Opera Center, where he is performing this season in *Ariadne auf Naxos*, *The Magic Flute* and Handel's *Rinaldo*.



Bass **Aaron Sorenson** is also doing double duty this summer, as Father Trulove in *Rake* and Masetto in *Giovanni*. Aaron spent his last two summers at Glimmerglass, where he performed Zuniga in *Carmen*. He's currently finishing up his studies at Yale Opera, singing Collatinus in Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia*.



And finally, our heroine in Stravinsky's opera – the aptly named Anne Trulove – will be sung by soprano **Corinne Winters**. And she's here today to sing us a portion of Anne's aria from *The Rake's Progress*. [[see video clip](#)]

It's a little odd that the performers we welcomed to represent the season of "Bad Boys" are all ladies... but somehow all of the gentlemen in the company managed to position themselves in far-flung locations all over the country this month. It's a lovely coincidence, though, that these three ladies call the DC region home, as Corinne hails from Frederick, MD. They were gracious enough to make the trip from New York and Philadelphia to be with us today, and we thank them all!

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## Stravinsky's Time



We expect that our *Rake* production will take the 1940's as its jumping-off point. Although this time period isn't the 18<sup>th</sup>-century setting of the original Hogarth prints that provided inspiration for this opera, it will reflect the decade during which Stravinsky was collaborating with W.H. Auden and writing the score for *Rake*. He saw the Hogarth prints in an exhibition in Chicago in 1947, and *Rake* was written over the next four years, premiering in Venice in 1951.

## The Studio: Our Secret Weapon



So far I've unjustly ignored one of the most critical parts of the Wolf Trap Opera Company. Our Studio, formed in 2007, has become such a marvelous part of our summer that I have no idea how we lived without them! This year, we welcome 12 Studio Artists. These amazing young people range from college juniors through first-year graduate students, and they are all at a point where they are making a transition to the emerging artist portion of their career.

This year for the first time, we are placing some of our Studio members with housing host families. Some of you out there are already part of our housing host program, but if you're not, and the idea of contributing to our success and that of our artists in this way appeals to you, be sure to find a staff member with a name tag during the reception and ask us about it!

These folks are our chorus, they prepare and perform their own opera scenes program, and they benefit from a curriculum tailored to enhancing their development – including instruction stagecraft, dance, language skills, auditioning, and being a smart self-employed musician!

## Always Learning...

Our artists aren't the only ones who are always learning. You too can find out more than you ever thought you needed to know about opera.



For over a decade now, I've been getting together with patrons an hour before curtain time of every opera performance at The Barns for *Inside the Opera*. I do my best to untangle snarled opera plots, give you an idea of what to expect during the show, and answer your questions.

Starting a few seasons ago, we gave some other members of our company a chance to tell you their side of the story. In our **Backstage Buzz** Artist Panels, you'll hear from singers, conductors, directors, designers and staff members. They'll

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tell about how they got into this crazy business, what intrigues them about the production they're working on, and why and how they do what they do. *Backstage Buzz* is free, and it's held right here on the Sunday afternoon before each of our productions opens.

And if there's a young person in your life, you might be interested in our Family Day event, called ***Behind the Curtain***. On a Tuesday morning in August, we'll welcome children and adults to tour The Barns, craft a project, meet our artists, have a family photo made onstage, and enjoy lunch.

This summer, we're also convening a two-day symposium called ***Discussions on the Future of Opera***. I've particularly excited about this, for it's been a dream of mine to find a way to engage our young artists and company members in the all-important national discussion about our industry, our art form, and how shape its future and prepare for what's ahead.



There are already many opportunities for industry leaders to have these discussions, in the context of national conferences and think tanks. But I find that the artists themselves are often disenfranchised, and I'm thrilled to make this small step in bringing them into the center of this topic where they belong.

We'll have closed door small group sessions, but there will also be one afternoon session on each day that's open to the public, and we hope you'll join us. Stay tuned for more details!

### **And We're Off!**

If you're a Wolf Trap member, you'll enjoy priority ticketing at the beginning of March. (And if you're not a member and would like to be, just ask me about it!) Single tickets are available to the general public starting March 24. I know it's hard to imagine summer on a day like today, but it'll be here before we know it, and I look forward to seeing you at The Barns!

