

Kim Witman wagers that your habit of steering clear of opera is about to end.

WE CANNOT STOP

BY JOHN GREENYA

Kim Witman knows most people think opera is the musical equivalent of lima beans.

JOSHUA ROBERTS

“I’m aware that there’s a part of the opera subculture that shuts people out,” says Witman, general manager of the Wolf Trap Opera Company. She came to opera from the outside. Her first career was as a musical therapist and, after returning to grad school for music, Witman fell madly for swirling overtures and arias. “I perceive opera the way a lot of the audience does, and not as an aficionado.”

That less-than-traditional route to the top (she loves jazz, plays chamber music, does musical theater and opera—but also played piano bars in resorts in the Poconos as she worked her way through college) helps to explain why Witman’s offerings are simultaneously somewhat unconventional and very popular.

No one can dismiss the company’s success. In 2009, the recording of Wolf Trap’s presentation of “Volpone,” which the company, with its characteristic irreverence, billed as “unfaithfully based on Ben Johnson’s classic comedy,” was up for a Grammy award in the Best Opera category. The kudos piled up, including one from the industry bible, *Opera News*: “‘Volpone’ adds a touch of levity to the new opera scene, which seems to have gotten stuck in a rather gloomy groove.”

Getting stuck and being gloomy are not terms one hears about Wolf Trap’s Opera Company under the stewardship of Witman. While the two operas—along with four concerts and three other musical events—that make up the roster for the summer of 2012 are relatively conventional choices, Mozart’s “Don Giovanni” and Stravinsky’s “The Rake’s Progress,” the former will feature an interesting Witmanian twist.

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For one performance, amazing rookies will rule. Baritone Craig Irvin will sing Don Giovanni, and bass-baritone Ryan Kuster will sing the role of Leporello. For the next performance, Kuster will be Giovanni, and Irvin will be Leporello. Says Witman, “Because we’re a company dedicated to emerging artists, the whole point of our focus is on these 20- to 30-year-olds who are just getting into the business.”

While she stops short of saying that difference makes her company more accessible, Witman believes that it translates, for the audience, into a musical experience that she diplomatically labels as “less foreign.” It also helps, she believes, that the theater is small. “We only seat 375 people [in The Barns], so it’s not like you’re sitting way in the back and can

only see stick figures. You get to see the artists, because at Wolf Trap you have a terrific view from almost every seat in the house,” she says.

The Wolf Trap Opera Company can innovate (like having two singers share the same role) because of the unusual way it chooses its artists for each season, which is to pick the singer first and then, after determining his or her voice, range, and other attributes, choose the song.

Witman explains, “We hold auditions in Washington, D.C., New York City, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Chicago, San Francisco, Seattle, Houston, and in most years, Los Angeles. And we cast our whole company. When we go out—and this is also where we are different—we don’t know what operas we’re going to do. We listen to what’s out there. Maybe it’s a good year for mezzos, or for baritones. And then we pick operas that are ideal for the best talent we’re hearing.”

Opera’s “American Idol”

Another difference between Witman’s and the other emerging artist programs and small opera companies is that Wolf Trap chooses from such a large pool of talent. At the risk of sounding heretical, *Flyer* suggested that Wolf Trap’s approach to finding each season’s new company of singers closely resembles that of “American Idol,” TV’s current 500-pound gorilla.

“The structure is the same,” says. “We both pick the big markets in the country, and then we go and plop ourselves down in that market for five days or a week and the singers come to us. The difference is that “Idol” puts out a cattle call where everybody comes, whereas we only accept applications from people who have a certain amount of training and experience.”

This year’s 12 Young Artists and 12 Studio Artists were culled from an initial group of 1,070 applicants. The result, says Witman, is “an acceptance rate that is, on average, less than 2 percent.”

If Wolf Trap is bullish on its young artists, the same can be said of the artists’ feelings toward the company (to which they can belong for two years, either consecutively or in separate years, but no longer than that).

Ryan Kuster, who is in his second season with Wolf Trap (and his second year as an Adler Fellow with the San Francisco Opera Company, a year-round program), is one of the Giovanni-Leporello doppelgangers. He says of Witman and her group, “They really treat you like you’re professionals. They provide a low-key atmosphere with the right amount of good stress on the things you *should* be stressed about, like going out there and putting on a good performance and giving a good show. I’d always heard that Wolf Trap is where working artists go for the summer, and that’s really true.”

Kuster and local-girl-making-good Corinne

Winters are both graduates of the prestigious Academy of Vocal Arts in Philadelphia. “I’d known about Wolf Trap for a while because I went to some rock shows at the Filene Center with my dad as a child,” she says. “And then in 2005 I heard a friend sing a role in ‘Romeo and Juliet’ there, and I kept hearing what an amazing company it was to work for. It truly is a bridge between young artists and professionals.”

Witman is justly proud of well her young artists are treated. Once accepted in the program, the singers are paid a weekly stipend and given a place to live with a host family. Witman likens the position of the opera company’s young artists to that of medical residents training to become doctors.

“The singers have already had apprenticeships and taken workshops and studied, but here we say to them, ‘OK, you’re not going to watch someone else do this; you’re just going to do it. But we are going to do the best we can to put you in an environment where you have a good chance for success.’ That’s why we choose the productions based on the artists and their talent, instead of shoe-horning them into a pre-planned repertoire.

“And that’s why artists love to come here,” she adds. “They tell us, ‘I’m finally being treated like a grown-up!’”



Kim Witman

Favorite Restaurant: “We love Chef Geoff’s [chefgeoff.com], both in Tysons Corner and in the District. The Virginia location is our artists’ preferred post-show gathering place.”

Favorite Museum: The Phillips Collection [phillipscollection.org]. “I’ve had the privilege of performing in their beautiful music room. In the past few years, our singers have been doing concerts there that pair paintings from their collection with songs inspired by them. (“Vocal Colors” will be part of the Phillips Collection’s Thursday evening concert series this summer.)

Travel Destination: “I adore visiting Seattle every year in our audition tour, but the trips have been too maddeningly brief. Our son is moving there in July, and we’re looking forward to spending a lot more time in the Pacific Northwest.”