



Opera For All!

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In Memoriam, H. Elvira Gonnella Welch **(September 21, 1930 – January 8, 2021)**

It is with sadness and deep respect that we note the passing of Elvira Gonnella, one of the principal vocal artists and pedagogues in the development of Nova Scotia's musical life and culture over the last 50 years.

When Associate Professor of Voice she had exerted a profound influence upon the growth of Dalhousie University as a centre of excellence for professional training in musical performance. She was always ready to share her lovely mezzo soprano artistry through her solo work in recital, oratorio, and opera presentations.

Born in Dundee, Scotland, she studied voice in Edinburgh and London, was a competition winner (Kathleen Ferrier Scottish Area Finals 1st Prize, Edinburgh Competitive Rosebowl), sang two seasons with Glyndebourne Festival Opera, and gave solo recitals on tour and for the BBC. She came to Halifax in 1967 when her husband Philip was appointed Professor of Human Genetics at Dalhousie. On the invitation of Prof. Peter Fletcher she joined the Dalhousie Department of Music voice faculty in 1974, rapidly becoming exceptionally active in the Atlantic Region as soloist, clinician and adjudicator. In opera she was featured in the Dalhousie-sponsored premieres of Charles Wilson's *The Summoning of Everyman* and Dennis Farrell's *The Birthday of the Infanta*; also at Dalhousie she appeared in a production of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* (Dorabella) and concert versions of Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mamma Lucia) and Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (Orfeo, with Sheila Piercey as Euridice). She became founder/President of the Maritime Association of Teachers of Singing, and maintained a lively and effective support for such organizations as the Dalhousie Theatre Department and the Halifax Grammar School.

Elvira contributed significantly to the early foundational years of Opera Nova Scotia, and her contribution within our



Association moves forward based upon her shaping of gala events such as New Year's and especially Opera Valentine where her organizational effectiveness, talents in décor (not everybody knew she was a trained art teacher), author of playlets, and mistress of the terrifying Quiz set the tone for the evening.

My own special memories of Elvira in my capacities as Chair, faculty colleague and director of the Dalhousie chorale I shall add to the next issue of our Newsletter. At this time I would simply say: she was a great lady, and a warm human being.

Present conditions do not permit any public gathering to celebrate her life and legacy, but this will occur when our social gathering is renewed. We hope to announce during February a special project in tribute to her memory on the part of ONS. You also should be aware that before her retirement Elvira set up a scholarship in her name for Dalhousie voice students, information on which should be obtainable through the Fountain School of Performing Arts. Her obituary was published in the Halifax Chronicle-Herald, January 12; this, and an obituary with photographs and community messages are available on line.

At this time we send our sympathy to Elvira's family, assuring them that hers was a name that will never be forgotten in the story of our musical heritage.

Walter H. Kemp
ONS Artistic and Administrative Director

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In Memoriam, H. Elvira Gonnella Welch (continued)

Opera for All reached out to a number of Elvira's colleagues and former Dalhousie students with an invitation to offer their own particular memories and tributes. These will commence below, with more to follow in the next issue. Further responses may be sent to Walter H. Kemp at this email address: vkemp@bellaliant.net.

The Legacy of Elvira Gonnella

Elvira Gonnella was an artist of the highest order and had a huge influence on me, not only when I was a student, but throughout my career. Her interpretive ability and coaching insight were second to none, and to share the stage with her meant that your performance would be better and more meaningful because she was so intense and passionate about absolutely every word she sang. Articulate, intelligent, compassionate, humorous, realistic: her praise meant so much to every student - and it had to be earned! Elvira was a gift of artistry to Nova Scotia and to Canada because her students and influence are everywhere. And *she* was everywhere - travelling to symposia and workshops with her inimitable friend and colleague Helen Murray, always seeking new information and insights. Elvira was also the image of elegance; I can still see her noble bearing, and her hands that portrayed so much in one simple gesture. While being a devoted wife, mother, and active singer, Elvira championed scores of students with sage advice and mentorship. She will live on in the memories, hearts and songs of a multitude of grateful students, friends and colleagues. Rest in peace, Elvira. Your songs have been beautifully sung.

Lorna MacDonald,
Professor, Lois Marshall Chair in Voice,
Head of Vocal Pedagogy, University of Toronto Faculty of Music.
Cape Breton's Lorna MacDonald holds the degrees of BMus Ed from Dalhousie and MMus in voice from the New England Conservatory. She is a long-time supporter of ONS, to which she has brought her presentations of 'Marrying Mozart' and 'Lois Marshall in Russia', plus starring in Spring Productions of three Mozart operas: *The Abduction from the Seraglio* (Costanze), *Don Giovanni* (Donna Anna), and *Zaide* (title role).

* * *

It is difficult to put into words just how great of an impact Elvira Gonnella has had upon me. Meeting her was truly one of the pivotal moments in my life. I can truly say I have drawn upon the wealth of wisdom and advice she imparted to me during my early days as a singer in some way or another on a daily basis as I have enjoyed my career as a singer and teacher of singing. She approached everything she did with poise and dignity. She gave freely of her time and knowledge and taught me to value myself as well as the art form she loved so much. Her legacy lives on daily.

Lucy Hayes-Davis (BMus'96)

Lucy holds a Masters Degree in vocal pedagogy from Westminster Choir College, and pursued opera studies at Hartt music school. She has taught voice performance and diction at Dalhousie and Acadia universities. For ONS she has sung at informoperals, featured as Frederica in the 2013 Spring Production of Verdi's *Luisa Miller*, and as off-stage vocal understudy saved the 2009 production of Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* as Baba the Turk.

* * *

Elvira Gonnella was a beautiful, formidable woman; a tower of strength, devotion, kindness and, above all (and particularly in my case) patience. As a voice teacher she imparted her experience, musical knowledge and deportment to all her students. Elvira made each and every one of us feel special; like we could fly, like we were all opera singers (and at the time that's what we all wanted to be). I remember how she would stand back, quietly, and smile as a student achieved their personal best; scales, repertoire, performance, it didn't matter. Elvira took pride in every single thing her students accomplished. Perhaps that's what I remember most, the pride in her students and her job as our teacher and mentor. I have never met anyone like her, before or since, and will forever hold her memory close to my heart. The older I get the more I appreciate exactly who she was and the role she played in my life as a young student and singer. I am blessed to have known her.

Kristin Kuttner (BA'93)

For ONS Kristin sang the role of Jenny in the 2011 Spring Production of *The Threepenny Opera*.

2020-2021 Events Cancelled

The implementation of our Season has proven to be not feasible. We regret to confirm that *Opera Valentine*, scheduled for Friday February 12, and the postponed 2020 production of *Così fan tutte*, must be cancelled. We are able to look forward positively to renew these offerings in Season 2021-22, for which we already have reserved the customary performance sites and dates.

But we are not sleeping — what a great title for an aria! We are concocting a special musical libation to St. Valentine's Day, and plan to create some entertaining and informative issues of *Opera for All*. Check out the new merchandising email site, and take advantage of the events listed for you in the weekly dispatch from the Office.

SINCERE BEST WISHES FOR A
HAPPY NEW YEAR!!

Opera Quiz by Dappertutto



The term “social distancing” has dominated our individual and collective lives for almost a year, mandated and practiced for reasons of health and safety. However, voluntary or enforced separateness between individuals, between an individual and the community, or among groups within a community, has been a feature of human existence for over two thousand year. Story-tellers, dramatists, poets, authors and film makers have demonstrated how central to the human condition have been the various types of “social distancing”. Opera has been no exception, as it has adopted and adapted the metaphors of separateness. So here is an opportunity to take a few minutes to identify some operatic distancing, while we rely on each other’s good sense and compassion to guarantee the return of a healthy society complete with a renewed performing arts scene.

Name the operas and their composers whose plots outlined below focus upon a particular instance of “social distance”.

1. She is abandoned by her ungrateful lover on a desert isle which she thinks is uninhabited except for nature spirits. However, her isolation is interrupted first by a group of comedians and then by an Olympian. Her rise will not be from rags to riches, but from involuntarily imposed isolation to becoming a star (in fact, a constellation)!

2. This Thracian singer-song maker did not observe Cupid’s injunction that he should optically isolate from his wife during her resurrection. “Why didn’t I stay the blazes home instead of descending to the blazes of Hades?” he probably thought. All he had left was a lovely aria, ‘What shall I do without her’, which affected Cupid so much that everything ended happily ever after.

3. Having unwittingly killed his father, and brought about the suicide of his mother/wife, this king separates himself from his realm and from visual contact with the world into which he walks. His psychoanalytical state will be a “complex” one.

4. Two European women live in enforced isolation from Western contact, sequestered to satisfy exclusively the desires of a Pasha and his Harem keeper. How happy they are to learn that their European lovers are at hand, even though each is a tenor.

5. A Russian gentleman holds himself in superior aloofness from provincial society, but after years abroad he returns to realize that he has fallen in love with the girl to whom he should have responded in earlier days. Now a Princess, she must reject his pleadings; he is doomed to face a lonely future of ignominy and anguish.

6. As punishment for disobeying his orders, her father places her in fiery isolation upon a rock, whose bubble can be broken only by a Hero.

7. Burdened by the guilt of having caused her father’s death, a Spanish lady seeks solitude and repentance by taking refuge in a cell at a mountain monastery. She desires only a life of isolation and atonement, “*Pace, pace, mio Dio*”.

8. The folly of a youth misspent as a gold digger wreaks its vengeance beside a Louisiana road, as the heroine suffers

the fears of expiring in self-inflicted isolation from love and life, “*Sola, perduta, abbandonata*”.

9. A devout Christian, who has chosen a life of Cenobite communal monasticism, leaves his desert isolation from metropolitan society in order to convert a famous courtesan who enjoys what certainly is the opposite of an isolated life in Alexandria. By the final curtain each has wrought a complete change in the other: having taken secluded refuge in a desert convent the expiring converted courtesan experiences an ecstatic beatific vision, while the monk grovels in frustrated carnal desire as he rejects his monastic beliefs and practices.

10. A messianic prophet baptizing in the wilderness, who had subsisted on his foraging for a diet of locusts and wild honey, submits to solitary imprisonment and eventual decapitation rather than cease his condemnation of Herod’s incestuous wife and nymphomaniac daughter-in-law.

11. The self-righteous citizens of an English fishing village distance themselves from the misunderstood visionary who lives outside the Borough in a cliff-top hut.

12. In 20th century France, a woman lives alone, separated from her lover who has taken another partner. Her only means of connecting with the outer world is through the telephone, upon whose potential for connectivity she has become fixated. She painfully, and passionately, attempts to break the bubble of her socially distanced existence “All alone by the telephone”, an instrument which may become the cause of her death.

Answers

1. Richard Strauss. *Ariadne auf Naxos*.
2. Gluck. *Orfeo ed Euridice*.
3. Stravinsky. *Oedipus Rex*.
4. Mozart. *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*.
5. Tchaikovsky. *Eugene Onegin*.
6. Wagner. *Die Walküre*.
7. Verdi. *La forza del destino*.
8. Puccini. *Manon Lescaut*.
9. Massenet. *Thaïs*.
10. Richard Strauss. *Salome*.
11. Britten. *Peter Grimes*.
12. Poulenc. *La voix humaine*.

Honoring the Life of Marilyn McLaren (1941-2021)

Opera Nova Scotia joins the province's theatre production world in mourning the passing of Marilyn McLaren on January 10th. A graduate of the Costume Studies Program at Dalhousie University Theatre Department (in which she had enrolled at the age of 52), her talent was championed by Robert Doyle, her Professor and mentor, upon whose recommendation she was hired by the Royal Nova Scotia International Tattoo for a 25-year career as Head of Wardrobe running the costume department, and assuming the duties of costume designer. She oversaw production of the hundreds of Doyle's costumes which he had designed for the 1999 Pan Am games in Winnipeg. She served as a costume designer and creator for Eastern Front Theater.

Among her other active interests were figure skating (as an executive director, a coach, and a founder of the Bedford Skating Club), ballet (with Halifax Dance, and in the formation of the Atlantic Ballet Company), and archery (a provincial tournament medalist, certified coach and provincial judge, and a board member at Asprey Archery Club). A more complete account of her multifaceted life is available on line from her Obituary prepared by her beloved husband and activities companion John, from which this notice is drawn.

Opera Nova Scotia celebrated Marilyn's talents in scenography and costume design primarily through her establishing of the atmosphere of chivalric fantasy within which our production of Purcell's *King Arthur* was set,

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but in addition over the years we could always rely on her advice and practical assistance when implementing our staged performances.

She stood up for the values of her profession and suffered no foolishness that could be detrimental to the standards of the artistic product: a much appreciated courageous trait for which she will be remembered, together with her zest for life and the warmth of her chosen friendships. She will be remembered, with appreciation and gratitude.

WHK

Laura Johnston Wins Piercey Award

Congratulations to Laura Johnston, who in December was announced by the Nova Scotia Talent Trust as the first winner of the \$2000.00 Sheila K. Piercey (Legacy) Award in vocal studies. The award is supported by a Bequest left by Sheila to the Trust, who will administer it.



Laura Johnston as Casilda.
(Photo: Stoo Metz).

The award, chosen from among the annual current pool of gifted voice recipients of a Talent Trust scholarship, is given to an artist "who shows exceptional commitment and potential in the field of voice". Currently completing her Master's degree in voice (opera) at Memorial University, Laura is a former ONS Board Director of Education, and after several ONS Seasons performing cameo roles in concert operas and participating in Musicales was a featured cast member in the 2019 Spring Production of *The Gondoliers* as Cassilda. We think it so appropriate that someone whose developing public career was closely associated with ONS has been selected for this new celebration honouring the life of Sheila, whose belief in our Association motivated her outstanding sponsorship of our activities. Well done, Laura, and best wishes for your graduate studies.

Opera For All!

Layout by David Keenan

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