



Opera For All!

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

On my arrival in September 1977 as Chair of the Dalhousie Department of Music, a particular aspect of the program which I recognized and came to highly value was the very special relationship held among the three members of the Voice Department: their cheerfulness in being busily active as performing artists balanced by their obvious dedication to their students as pedagogues. Each had a firm grasp of the total repertoire and its idiom-specific characteristics, but how fortunate for students and community audiences alike that each had been prepared with in-depth experience in certain specific areas of vocal arts and each had been trained in complementary but differing teaching approaches.

Jefferson Morris, an Ohio native and joint American-Canadian citizen, had studied with Gigli's teacher and was thoroughly imbued with the Italian opera tradition, a veteran of several dozen tenor roles from his career in Basle and Saarbrücken. Soprano Sheila Piercey, Nova Scotia's gift to the early development of the Canadian Opera Company, possessed first-hand experience in the fields of operetta and musical theatre. As for Scottish-born, London-trained Elvira, she could draw from a collective background absorbed in an omnivorous musical appetite. To her thorough knowledge of the German and



Elvira with Dr. Kemp on her Dalhousie retirement. Photo courtesy of Andrew Welch.

French art song treasury she could add the concert and salon miniature gems of the UK composers such as Roger Quilter, Michael Head, John Ireland, and Ralph Vaughan Williams. One of the treats to which I looked forward annually was the end-of-term voice juries, where the interpersonal chemistry of the team guaranteed that high standards were encouraged through assessment based on collegiality, candour, and, when necessary, compassion. And at the Christmas juries there were always Elvira's absolutely delicious, and authentic, Dundee shortbreads, touched up with eggnog – in which the students were invited to partake but only after their performances.

I owe to Elvira several of my most memorable evenings on the podium, through her percipient interpretations of Elgar's larger works: *The Music Makers*, and most effectively *The Dream of Gerontius*. Equally, she loved the simple airs of her roots: the Kathleen Ferrier North British folk songs, the Marjory Kennedy-Fraser Songs of the Hebrides. We shared an affection for Gilbert and Sullivan – she had sung with the Glyndebourne Chorus in several of Sir Malcolm Sargent's recordings of the Savoy operas, sitting, as she told me, with her friend of student days, Janet Baker.

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Elvira possessed a seemingly infinite capacity for wanting to sing, with and for the people; she never lost the essence of what it is to be a truly “amateur” musical person; that was who she was. At the same time, as a professional performer she was seldom if ever averse to taking on challenges of contemporary compositions, particularly by Dalhousie colleagues, plus some masterpieces of twentieth century avant-garde for Nova Music. She enjoyed sharing her effectiveness as an ambassadress for the department traversing the Atlantic Provinces as clinician and adjudicator. I warmly recall collaborating with her in a *Messiah* with Charlottetown community choristers and orchestra, and in a Dalhousie faculty guest tour to Bangor PBS and the University of Maine.

Her role during the founding years of Opera Nova Scotia brought out other dimensions of her skills and acumen, as art-instructor, program coordinator and a master of the English language displayed through her skits, playlets, and the mighty Opera Valentine Quiz. She admitted to me that she would have preferred ONS to have gone in the direction of being a non-professional Musical Club, again manifesting her “amateur” propensities. Nevertheless, she was one of our reliable financial donors, and we were pleased to create her an Honorary Member for her unvarying, vital support.

Perhaps I shall remember her best for character traits too often rare in the snake pits of academe and the professional music business. I never heard her raise her voice in anger or in reprimand. She did not speak in self-justification, or even hint at boasting. She would avoid complaint or a judgmental word against a colleague. She championed fair play in any situation of conduct. She was the personification of charity. She was a great lady, and we are blessed by her legacy of achievement and example.

Dr. Walter H. Kemp
ONS Artistic and Administrative Director

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It is with much sadness that I recently learned of Elvira Gonnella's passing. I knew and admired Elvira's vocal artistry since my student days at Dalhousie in the early seventies. I was privileged to make my operatic debut as Guglielmo alongside her radiant rich-voiced Dorabella in a Dalhousie-Atlantic Symphony performance of *Così fan tutte* as part of the Dalhousie Arts Centre's inaugural 1971 season. This was just the beginning of dozens of performances of operas, oratorios, recitals, and chamber music we participated in together over the years.

When I began teaching at Dalhousie in 1992 Elvira and I quickly became steadfast colleagues. Her collegiality and welcoming generosity were evident from day one, Elvira's unwavering support of our voice student activities spanned from all things vocal to preparing a batch of her mouthwatering homemade chili for our opera workshop cast parties.

Upon retirement Elvira continued to be ever present at our students' voice recitals and opera workshop performances. I would always eagerly await her razor-sharp post opening night critiques. Elvira was never one for bestowing effusive false praise. When her note said simply " Well done Greg! " you knew you had achieved something worthy!

She lived her life as she performed onstage: with great dignity and humanity, and with appropriateness of expression while always remaining true to her convictions. To all who knew her Elvira truly embodied the gracious ideals of an earlier generation and will be missed.

Dr. Gregory Servant

After graduation from Dalhousie's Music program, Gregory completed his Doctoral studies in opera at Hartt College. Returning to Dal, he served as Professor of Voice, Opera Workshop Director and Department Chair. In addition to Così, he shared the stage with Elvira in a concert performance of Cavalleria Rusticana, and in the premiere of Dennis Farrell's The Birthday of the Infanta. He was artistically involved with Opera Nova Scotia from its inception, and by the year he retired to Niagara-on-the-Lake he had starred in the leading bass-baritone roles of six full productions and eight Informoperal concert adaptations.

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From 1984-88, I studied voice with Elvira Gonnella at Dalhousie University, and my lessons were always a highlight of my week. I was one of her many voice students, but I learned from Elvira much more than voice. Elvira taught by example and treated everyone with warmth and kindness, yet her expectations were high. She encouraged all her students to work toward their full potential, whether they aspired to be a professional singer or, as in my case, a music educator and choral conductor – she extended a sincere “Toi, toi, toi!” to all. Her studio didn't have any windows, yet she and Helen Murray created a bright, positive

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environment – everyone looked forward to their special hour with these two talented and supportive women. I am grateful for the knowledge I gained not only about the voice but also about being a positive and effective teacher. The understanding of the fundamentals of singing I acquired during these formative years of my musical studies are now the foundation of my work as a choral director and music educator.

Karen Newhook-MacDonald

Since 1997 Karen (BMusEd'88) has been founder-director of the much-awarded Cantatrice Ensemble Girls' Honour Choir, offering choral experience to girls in Grades 7-12, through regional and touring performances.

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In addition to being a mentor and Opera Nova Scotia advocate, Elvira was one of its earliest and most enthusiastic supporters and Board Members. Her generation of vision was manifested in so many ways. My favourite was Opera Valentine. Her idea of opera, Italian food, community and the romantic theme of Valentine's Day came together to create a potent institution for the Association. And, of course, her devilishly clever and imaginative live opera quiz tested the most seasoned opera connoisseur! I have so much appreciation, respect and affection for who she was and what she was able to do to uplift and positively influence Opera Nova Scotia, the Nova Scotia Arts Community, and anyone who had the good fortune to spend time with her.

Jason Parkhill

Soon after his arrival in Halifax from Ontario, Jason became a company baritone soloist with the NS Gilbert and Sullivan Society, featured in such roles as Bunthorne and Giuseppe among others; he also appeared in concert opera presentations by the Dalhousie Music Department. As a member of the voice faculty at the Maritime Conservatory, he saw the potential for a NS Opera Association to be a collaboratively functional opera school wing of the Conservatory program. Together with Ted Rhodes and John Rapson he undertook the creation of what would become Opera Nova Scotia, also participating as a soloist at its events. Jason's departure for Western Canada was our loss, but British Columbia's gain.

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I am very sorry to hear that Elvira passed away. She has been the foundation of my career, and without my beginnings with her, I don't think I would have been able to work these 20 years in Europe as I have. I learned so

much from her in my first couple of years at Dalhousie, not only technique for concert and opera productions, but also how to be an opera singer in everyday life. These life lessons are ones that I try to bring in the lessons for all of my students as well.

Dan Chamandy

(Dan shares with us a vignette from 1989, when he left Elvira a message on her door to the effect he could not attend his noon-time lesson, begging her to accept him at an alternative time that afternoon; on his return he found the hand-drawn note which he still prizes.)



The sketch Elvira drew on the note Dan Chamandy sent to her, begging for a change in his lesson time.

After Dalhousie Dan attended the certificate program in opera at U of T, and for three years was a member of the COC Ensemble. A year performing in Amsterdam and winning the 1999 Belvedere Operetta Prize in Vienna led him to a nine-year association with the Tiroler Landestheater, Innsbruck. Since then he has been heard in over 30 different opera and operetta tenor roles for German companies, including being a fixed guest at the Stadttheater, Giessen. He also sang at the New York City Opera (Die Tote Stadt). Dan centres his engagements and teaches in Vienna, where he lives with his Austrian wife; their son has successfully auditioned for a two-year contract as a bass soloist at the Opera Theatre, Berlin.

Opera Quiz by Dappertutto



Putting Two and Two together: a name formed by a repeated monosyllable e.g. 20th century artistic movement which was anti-art = Dada; 20th century avant-garde composer = Nono); French dancer/actress wife of choreographer Roland Petit, starred in the film 'Hans Christian Anderson' with Danny Kaye = Zizi Jeanmaire; fashion designer = Coco Chanel; one of Frank Bailey's daughters in the Capra film 'It's a Wonderful life' = Zuzu; not to overlook Lady Gaga and Zsa Zsa Gabor.

- M. Perished seamstress, with whose name the tenor ends the libretto.
 - N. Heroine in a Zola novel, subject of an opera by the 20th German composer Manfred Gurlitt.
 - Z. Leoncavallo's "piccolo zingara".
- Bonus: Three others waiting at Maxime's D, L and J.

Identify the following figures from opera, operetta, and musical film, named similarly to the above. Their initial is given.

- B. Tom Rakewell's bearded lady.
- C. Her lepidopterous name without her title of respect.
- F. One reason to go to Chez Maxime.
- G. Colette's heroine, in a film musical with songs by Lerner and Loewe.
- K. The cutting edge official in Titipu.
- L. Leslie Caron and Mel Ferrer sang the Oscar-winning song from this film.
- L. Countess Geschwitz's beloved.
- M. Turiddu sobbed filial farewell to her.

Answers

- Bonus: Dodo, Lolo, Jon-Jon
- Z. Zaza
- N. Nana
- M. Mimi
- M. Mamma Lucia (*Cavalleria Rusticana*)
- L. Lulu
- L. Lili
- K. Koko (*The Mikado*)
- G. Gigi
- F. Frou-frou
- C. Cio-Cio (*Madama Butterfly*)
- B. Baba the Turk (Stravinsky, *The Rake's Progress*)

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