

Opera in the Upper Midwest

By José Rincón, Lyndsay Werking and Megan Young

Tucked somewhere between fruited plain and purple mountain majesties sit Minnesota and Wisconsin. Though the region may first conjure images of sing-alongs on the shore of Lake Wobegon, opera has a longstanding history and fervent support in this arts-rich area. In this installment of *Opera America's* regional spotlight series, we consider the vibrant creative community at the heart of the Upper Midwest.

FOCUS ON NEW AND UNUSUAL WORKS

Approaching its 78th season, **Florentine Opera Company** (Milwaukee, WI) is the eldest of the group. The company began its life as the Italian Opera Chorus, growing to produce Italian and German grand opera. Over the years new works and baroque opera have come to play a bigger part in the company's repertoire. In 1995 Florentine Opera produced the American premiere of Lowell Lieberman's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; the 2010-2011 season included the world premiere of Don Davis's *Rio de Sangre* and a double-bill of *Dido and Aeneas* and *Venus and Adonis*. The introduction of baroque opera to Florentine's offerings also brought the company to Vogel Hall at Milwaukee's Marcus Center for the

Performing Arts — a smaller, more intimate space. General Director William Florescu hopes the new venue will attract new audiences.

Like many arts organizations across the country, Florentine Opera recognizes the importance of attracting younger audiences and increasing audience diversity. Florescu finds that younger audiences tend to be more receptive to new work. The company is collaborating with the Milwaukee-based new music ensemble Present Music on a production of Kamran Ince's *Judgment of Midas*. Florescu also sees new work as an



Saira Frank in Fresco Opera's production of *Ding Dong the Diva's Dead* as Juliette in the death scene of Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*. Photo by Max Wendt.

opportunity to increase audience diversity, noting that the challenge is to find programming that is relevant to Milwaukee's ethnically diverse population.

In 1963, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis commissioned an opera for its performing arts program and **Minnesota Opera** was born. Since then, the company has grown and developed into an independent presenting organization that has its own administrative offices, scenic and costume shops and rehearsal facilities. Mainstage productions are presented in the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts in St. Paul, for which Minnesota Opera was one of the founding tenants. Currently, the company is transitioning into new leadership as Allan Naplan, until recently general director of Madison Opera, takes the reins from Kevin Smith, who retired after 30 years with the company.

Minnesota Opera's strong commitment to contemporary work is showcased by its New Works Initiative, launched in the 2008-2009 season, which pledges to complete three commissions by American composers, three revivals of American works and an international co-production in seven years. The company has already completed the co-production of *The Adventures of Pinocchio* by Jonathan



Vanessa Gamble in Nautilus Music-Theater's production of Cohen's *I am Anne Frank*. Photo by Ben Krywosz.

Dove and Alasdair Middleton with Opera North (U.K.), as well as the revivals of Dominick Argento's *Casanova's Homecoming* and Bernard Hermann's *Wuthering Heights*. World premieres of *Joyeux Noël* (Kevin Puts/Mark Campbell) and *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* (Ricky Ian Gordon/Michael Korie) are scheduled in 2012 and 2013, respectively.

Since 1986, **Nautilus Music-Theater** (St. Paul, MN) has been dedicated to the development of new operas and other forms of music-theater. The company's goals include the formation of partnerships between creators, performers and audiences, and the creation of professional training programs for artists such as the Wesley Balk Opera Music-Theater Institute. Artistic Director Ben Krywosz credits the new works-friendly climate in Minnesota to two important factors: the choral tradition that came out of Twin Cities churches put music at the heart of the community, and the regional theater movement, led by the seminal Guthrie Theater, generated interest in new works.

"Over the years, the funding climate in Minnesota has been good for the development of new works," Krywosz adds. "In 2008, a constitutional amendment known as the Legacy Amendment was passed to preserve the arts and culture heritage of Minnesota. Legacy funding has enabled Nautilus to take our production of *I am Anne Frank* to Bemidji and Plainview, MN. The Jerome Foundation is also based here, and their focus is on supporting emerging artists and the creation of new works."

Founded in the summer of 1959, **Skylight Opera Theatre** (Milwaukee, WI) produces works in varied styles throughout the season. Managing Director Amy S. Jensen states, "Skylight's vision is to bring the full spectrum of music-theater to the stage." The company's variety in programming



Minnesota Opera's production of Herrmann's *Wuthering Heights*. Photo by Michal Daniel.

is complemented by the Skylight-owned and -operated Broadway Theatre Center. The center is home to the intimate 99-seat Studio Theatre, as well as the larger 358-seat Cabot Theatre. Two other groups — Milwaukee Chamber Theatre and Renaissance Theaterworks — perform in the center, providing many opportunities for collaboration. For instance, Skylight, which constructs most of its own costumes and sets for each production, has begun to build sets for Milwaukee Chamber Theatre. Where possible, stagehands find ways to reuse and repurpose set elements among productions.

Contemporary works are a standard inclusion in Skylight's programming. The 2011-2012 season features two world premieres: *The Rivals* by Kirke Mechem and *Daddy Long Legs* by Paul Gordon. Additionally, the final production of the past season was Josh Schmidt's *Adding Machine*. Before achieving success as a composer, Schmidt graduated from a local high school and worked as an assistant to the artistic director of Skylight Opera Theater. Schmidt says that when he wrote *Adding Machine* he had Skylight in mind. This statement speaks volumes about the creative inspiration and learning environment found within Skylight's artistic community.

SPOTLIGHT ON LOCAL TALENT

Lyric Opera of the North (LOON), founded in 2004 by Dr. Ruth Jacobson and since helmed by Sarah Lawrence and Calland Metts, has focused on using the local talents of Duluth, MN. In the past, LOON presented one production a year in the month of June. After assuming leadership, Lawrence and Metts presented a production of *Amahl and the Night Visitors* in the winter of 2010. In keeping with Jacobson's core belief in the value of using local artists, the entire cast and crew was hired from the local talent



Lindsey Falduto as Dora and Kathy Pyeatt as Flora in Skylight Opera Theatre's production of Mozart's *Così fan tutte*. Photo by Mark Frohna.



Patricia Risley as Sharon Falconer in Florentine Opera's 2010 production of Aldridge's *Elmer Gantry*. Photo by Richard Brodzeller for Florentine Opera Company.

pool. Lawrence notes, "The mission of the company is to put the spotlight on local and regional talent, both professional and amateur." Additionally, she explains that the community support for LOON is strong: "Here it is very much like an old baseball team — people get to know their home teams and they can't wait to see what we're going to do next."

Founded in February 2010 by Rich Frevert, **Heartland Concert Artists** is an artist management company that focuses exclusively on representing musical talents based in the Twin Cities. The company's roster includes vocalists, instrumentalists and ensembles, including soprano Nora Long, who has worked at the Guthrie Theater and Skylark Opera; Bruce Henry, jazz vocalist; Charles Lazarus, trumpet player, composer and arranger; and the Juilliard-trained Phenix Quartet. Frevert explains that he is selective in the artists he represents, wishing only to work with Minnesota-based individuals and groups who are exceptionally talented and approach their work with a congenial camaraderie.

UNCONVENTIONAL PRODUCTION MODELS

The **Gilbert and Sullivan Very Light Opera Company** (GSVLOC) has been producing the works of Gilbert and Sullivan since 1979. The GSVLOC operates under an inherently collaborative business model: each year, auditions are held and an artistic team is assembled for that season's productions. All artists and technical/production personnel of any given production are considered members of the GSVLOC, and a board is selected from this membership. The board is then responsible for hiring a creative team for the next year's productions in addition to the administrative duties that come with putting on a show. Producer Stephen Hage feels this

unusual model has been successful because it allows those involved with the productions to take ownership of the work being presented.

In recent years, the company has expanded its repertoire to include operettas by Offenbach and the lesser-known team of Sullivan and Hood. The company performs with full orchestra at multiple venues in the Twin Cities area: mainstage shows are held at the Howard Conn Fine Arts Center in Minneapolis, and each summer an operetta is presented in concert at the Lake Harriet Bandshell. The GSVLOC frequently performs with the Minneapolis Pops Orchestra to audiences made up of people who have supported the company for over 20 years, as well as folks who are new to the G&S canon.

Fresco Opera Theatre is relatively new to the Wisconsin opera scene, having been around for only two years. The company's productions have included *Ding Dong the Diva's Dead*, a selection of death scenes from various operas, and *Dueling Divas*, an evening of opera highlights in which the audience has a chance to participate by voting for their favorite singers. This flexibility in programming appears to be attracting younger opera patrons. According to Artistic Director/Co-Founder Melanie Cain, much of Fresco's audience is in the 25-to-35 range, which she credits in part to performing in venues known for rock and roll concerts, such as the Barrymore Theatre (Madison). Fresco Opera Theater's operating model also allows the company to tour to different venues throughout Wisconsin such as the Trout Museum of Art (Appleton).

While newer work is not a staple of Fresco Opera Theatre's programming, the company has found creative



Seong ShinRa as Cio-Cio San in Music by the Lake's production of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. Photo by Paul E. Burd.



Gilbert & Sullivan Very Light Opera Company's production of *The Mikado*. Photo by Jo Pasternack.

ways to occasionally integrate contemporary opera with more traditional fare. At *Dueling Divas II*, "live commercials" were presented in between battles. One commercial, for instance, paired an advertisement for a local restaurant with Lee Hoiby's *Bon Appétit!*. Fresco Opera Theatre is also making a conscious effort to reduce its carbon footprint by projecting its programs on theater walls instead of using paper programs. Cain thinks of her work with Fresco Opera Theatre as advocacy for opera in general, with the hope that audiences will go see a fully staged production after attending a Fresco Opera Theater sampling.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVES

Celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, **Madison Opera** is dedicated to producing opera of the highest artistic standards. Former General Director Allan Naplan explains that many cultural institutions in the Upper Midwest are supported by patrons with a strong personal commitment to philanthropy. He notes also that there is an expectation in Madison that corporations will give to the arts. As both a thank you to the community and an invitation to newcomers, Madison Opera has been offering *Opera in the Park* for the past 10 years. A summer concert held outdoors in Garner Park, free and open to the public, the event features highlights from the upcoming mainstage season, as well as popular Broadway standards. Brian Hinrichs, director of marketing and community engagement, states, "The role of Madison Opera is to give the community a sense of pride. Opera is viewed as a community builder. Newcomers to Madison are

pleased and surprised to see a company doing three full productions a year."

The company has grown significantly in recent years in response to the opening of the Overture Performing Arts Center in 2004-2005 season. Home to nine performance spaces including a 2,200-seat auditorium and a 300-seat theater in the round, the center has allowed the company to be more adventurous and varied in its programming, while simultaneously driving the company to maintain high-quality artistry.

Also based in Madison, **Opera for the Young** has been bringing educational productions to schools throughout the Midwest since 1970. This year, the group presented 200 performances in Wisconsin, Illinois, Minnesota and Indiana, reaching over 75,000 schoolchildren. With costs of around four dollars per student, the program is affordable for schools and engages the students as performers, designers and audience members. The chorus for each performance consists of singers from the school's choir. After each 45-minute performance, students are invited to participate in a 15-minute question-and-answer session with the performers. Additionally, the company holds an annual Design Contest to which students are invited to submit drawings for the sets of each show. With roughly 1,000 submissions each year, 100 winners are chosen, and production designers incorporate elements of the drawings into their designs for the season.



Hyung Yun as Escamillo, with the Madison Opera Chorus and Madison Youth Choirs in Madison Opera's 2009 production of Bizet's *Carmen*. Photo by James Gill.

General Director Daniel Plummer explains that the seven shows in repertory use excerpts from the original scores, with productions updated to be more accessible for contemporary children. For instance, *The Magic Flute* is set in outer space, *The Elixir of Love* occurs in the Old West and *Barber of Seville* takes place in the 1950s. Each production is triple-cast, providing opportunities for young singers to perform 40-50 times in a season. Plummer recounts a particularly fulfilling moment: “This year, I auditioned a singer who vividly remembers seeing our production of *Hansel and Gretel* as a fourth-grader.”

Located in St. Paul, MN, **Skylark Opera** performs a combination of opera, operetta and musical theater. Sponsored by the Twin Cities Opera Guild, Skylark Opera presents an educational performance in high schools titled *Opera Demystified*, which begins with recognizable opera melodies followed by a description of both the history and drama of opera, culminating in a discussion of contemporary opera. The company cultivates relationships with choir directors at individual schools and will often return to the same school after three or four years.

Artistic Director Steven Stucki says he has always been interested in the synthesis of acting and singing. Mainstage productions are staged in an intimate 300-seat theater with no amplification. Generally, the company produces two works during its festival season in June, with tickets starting at \$25, and two or three smaller-scale works, which are free and open to the public, during the rest of the year.



Jeffrey Madison and Vicki Fingalson and the cast of Skylark Opera's 2010 production of Lehár's *The Merry Widow*. Photo by Susan Johnson Hanlon.



Opera for the Young's 2011 touring production of Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance*. Photo by Vince Fuh.

SPIRIT OF COLLABORATION

The history of **Music by the Lake** begins in 1959, and for 17 years the outdoor festival brought some of the leading classical musicians to Geneva Lake in Wisconsin, including Robert Merrill, Isaac Stern and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. The festival was discontinued in 1968 due to financial reasons. In 2001, it was revived with a performance by Sylvia McNair and the Chicago Symphony Pops Orchestra and has thrived ever since. Executive Director Christine Flasch attributes the first festival's demise to exhausting major donors and failing to respond to their programming tastes. Flasch makes a point of surveying Music by the Lake's audience to see what type of programming they would like to see. This strategy has been successful and has brought an eclectic mix of opera, jazz, big band and musical theater to the Ferro Pavilion, the new outdoor space where the company performs.


Music by the Lake has fostered collaborative relationships with other classical music producers, such as Light Opera Works in Evanston, IL, with whom Music by the Lake is co-producing *Brigadoon*. Flasch feels that the recent economic slump has had a positive effect on the spirit of collaboration among local arts producers. “Suddenly everybody was struggling and companies stopped seeing each other as competition. Instead, they started to talk about how they could help each other.”

Duluth Festival Opera began in 2005 as a summer opera festival on Lake Superior, but in the short time since its inception has grown to serve the entire Arrowhead region of Minnesota. Duluth Festival Opera (DFO) enjoys a collaborative relationship with other local opera providers: Nautilus Music Theater is incorporating its production of *I Am Anne*

Frank into DFO's 2011 season, and faculty from the University of Minnesota Duluth have performed in past productions. Artistic Director Craig Fields hopes to create a more formal partnership with UM Duluth in the future.

Fields endeavors to choose repertoire that reflects the local audience's taste — a combination of traditional opera favorites mixed with baroque and contemporary works. He says the key to getting people to come back to Duluth Festival Opera is to stay in tune with what the audience wants and not sacrifice the artistic quality of what the company puts on stage. In the summer of 2010, Duluth Festival Opera brought a production of Handel's *Acis and Galatea* to Leif Erikson Park. A recent grant from the state of Minnesota is enabling the company to embark on a five-city tour with a fully-staged production of *Pocahontas: A Woman of Two Worlds* by Linda Tutas Haugen and Joan Vail Thorne. Members of the Arrowhead region's large Native American population will be performing in the opera.

Opera options — from the home-grown to the internationally-renowned — abound in the Land of a Thousand Lakes and the Badger State, and they're only getting better. Local pride, community engagement, artistic integrity, generous public support, adaptability and collaboration all point to a bright future for opera in the Upper Midwest. ☺



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