

The Art of Opera – Deirdre Roberts

A Celebration of POV's Production Artists and a Fundraising Benefit for POV



Deirdre Roberts

I'll never watch opera the same way again!

These are the words of celebrated watercolour artist Deirdre Roberts, who has spent this season with Pacific Opera as Artist in Residence, working behind the scenes with POV's performers, production team, and technical artists.

During her days at the production shop, rehearsal hall, and theatre, she has observed the creative artists and performers at work and has taken hundreds of photos for a marvelous new series of paintings about the art behind the opera.

POV is deeply grateful to Deirdre for her extraordinary generosity, and honoured by this beautiful opportunity to celebrate POV's artistic team.

For many years Deirdre worked in radio and television, starting at the BBC in London, England. After coming to Canada in 1973, she spent 25 years with CBC, involved in many areas of arts programming and documentaries. Now a full-time painter, she has exhibited for the past ten years with Winchester Galleries in Victoria.

Deirdre marvels at the skills and care of POV's creative team: *I've grown to respect their incredible artistry, their dedication to the tiniest nuances as well as the grand gestures.*

What a magical journey it has been. I fell in love with these people who give so much to their art and enrich our lives beyond measure. In these paintings I have tried to capture some of this experience. They are my way of saying thank you to the wonderful people of Pacific Opera Victoria.

The Art of Opera – Deirdre Roberts

Friday June 17, 6:30 pm to 8:30 pm

Presentation with Deirdre Roberts

Winchester Galleries, 758 and 796 Humboldt Street

Pre-sales begin Thursday, June 16, at 10 am

Paintings shown until Saturday, June 18, at 5:30pm

www.winchestergalleriesltd.com

www.pov.bc.ca

Deirdre has watched costumes being cut and stitched, props being crafted, sets built and painted. She has stood in the wings at rehearsals and performances, capturing moments with her camera. Out of these moments, she is creating another kind of art – approximately 20 paintings that will be exhibited and sold, from June 16 to 18, the proceeds of which will benefit Pacific Opera Victoria.

Long-time POV sponsor Winchester Galleries will show the works from June 16 to 18, and on Friday June 17 will host a special event, *The Art of Opera – Deirdre Roberts*, that will feature Ms. Roberts and celebrate POV's talented production artists.

VANESSA at the Royal Theatre

OPENING NIGHT: April 28, at 8 pm. SATURDAY MATINÉE: April 30, at 3 pm

PLAYING May 3, 5, and 7, 8 pm

Pre-performance lobby lecture at 6:45 pm (2 pm on April 30). In Italian with English surtitles

Events Calendar

COMMUNITY OUTREACH EVENTS

INSIDE OPERA with Robert Holliston.
Sunday, April 17.

TWO SESSIONS: 10 am and noon.

Phillip T. Young Recital Hall, MacLaurin Music Wing, University of Victoria.

Robert Holliston and guests present a guided tour of Samuel Barber's *Vanessa*, an American classic and a fascinating study of obsession and desire.

Bring your friends. It's free. And so is parking!

Please reserve before noon April 15, specifying which session you plan to attend.

250-382-1641 or rsvp@pov.bc.ca

Sense of Occasion

Thursday, April 28, 6:30 pm.

East Lobby, the Royal Theatre.

Pre-performance reception to celebrate the opening night of *Vanessa*. Gourmet finger foods and wine. Space is limited. Dress is festive. \$25 per person.

Call 250-382-1641 to reserve with payment.

Monday Masters

Monday, May 2, 7 pm.

West Lobby, the Royal Theatre. Free.

Selected members of the POV chorus are coached by a principal member of the cast of *Vanessa*.

Reserve at 250-382-1641 or rsvp@pov.bc.ca.

DONOR EVENTS

President's Circle Working Rehearsal

Monday, April 25, West Lobby, The Royal Theatre.

6 pm: Coffee & cookies. 6:20 pm: Discussion with creative team members.

7 pm: Orchestra Tech Rehearsal begins.

For all President's Circle members and Director level donors (\$250). Invitations will be sent by mail.

President's Circle Stage Door Party

Saturday, April 30, 6:30 pm

On the set of *Vanessa*, at the Royal Theatre

Hors d'oeuvres, wine, and the opportunity to meet the Principal Artists of *Vanessa*,

For all President's Circle and Impresario Circle members. Invitations will be sent by mail.



OPENING THE WORLD OF OPERA

TO PACIFIC OPERA VICTORIA SUBSCRIBERS

APRIL 2011

Key Notes

Vanessa

BARBER

Samuel Barber: An Iconic Voice in American Music

Samuel Barber always knew he wanted to be a composer, but suspected very early that it was not the most respectable of professions. At the age of nine, he wrote in great distress to his mother:

I have written this to tell you my worrying secret. Now don't cry when you read it because it is neither yours nor my fault. ... I was not meant to be an athlete [sic]. I was meant to be a composer ... Don't ask me to try to forget this unpleasant thing and go play football. — Please — Sometimes I've been worrying about this so much that it makes me mad (not very).

Young Samuel had some grounds for his concern. His aunt Louise had married a composer, causing consternation among the family lest he be unable to support a wife. But by the time Samuel was considering his own future, Louise had been singing at the Metropolitan Opera for two decades, and Uncle Sidney Homer had become a loving mentor for young Samuel.

Barber entered the Curtis Institute at 14, where he studied voice, piano, and composition and met Gian Carlo Menotti, who would be his life partner, artistic collaborator, and the librettist for *Vanessa* and *A Hand of Bridge*.

Barber quickly became a very successful composer. While in his twenties he wrote the iconic *Adagio for Strings*, which was premiered to a radio audience of millions by the great Arturo Toscanini ... a real coup for a young composer.

The *Adagio* is now so familiar and beloved that it has become an unofficial American anthem of mourning. It has also firmly embedded itself in popular culture. It's in the movies *Platoon*, *The Elephant Man*, and *Lorenzo's Oil*. It's been arranged, covered, synthesized, sampled, and remixed; it pops up in genres such as disco, rap and trance, and has even been featured on episodes of *Seinfeld*, *The Simpsons*, and *South Park*.



Although the *Adagio* is a riveting piece, stunning in its utter simplicity, it tends to overshadow Barber's many other masterpieces – chamber, choral and orchestral works, ballets, works for solo piano, operas, and vocal works.

Barber was at the heart of mid-century America's artistic life. Many of his compositions were commissioned or premiered by some of the 20th century's most famous artists, among them Eleanor Steber, Jennie Tourel, Leontyne Price, Francis Poulenc, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, and Serge Koussevitzky.

Menotti recalled the string of luminaries who visited the home he shared with Barber: *I remember wonderful evenings with Vladimir Horowitz, Martha Graham, Marcel Duchamp, Laurence Olivier, Vivien*

Leigh, Jerome Robbins, Tallulah Bankhead. I can't begin to recall all the famous people who were part of those years.

Samuel Barber ranks as one of the most important American composers of the 20th century. In a century of atonality, serialism, and other waves of musical fashion, Barber went his own neo-Romantic way, incorporating modern techniques if they suited the music, but staying true to himself with lyrical, dramatic, wonderfully accessible music.

His editor Paul Wittke called Barber a *maverick romantic lyricist in a turbulent age*, and said of him that *he demanded very little – only intelligence and perfection.*

Maureen Woodall

PUBLIC FUNDING



PRESIDENT'S CIRCLE & IMPRESARIO CIRCLE SPONSOR



EDITOR: MAUREEN WOODALL

Barber's Songs and Poets

Not every great opera composer has found himself equally at home in the intimate world of song. And vice versa: the operas of Schubert and Schumann have never found a place in the permanent repertoire, while the songs of Verdi, Puccini, and the *bel canto* composers are only rarely heard on the recital platform.

Since the late 19th century however, many composers have contributed significantly to both genres: Debussy, Ravel, Poulenc, Berg, Korngold, Bartók, Falla; above all Richard Strauss and Benjamin Britten. To this list we must add Samuel Barber, whose songs have long been universally well-loved and whose operas are just now beginning to assume the position they merit.

For his opera libretti, Barber relied on the collaboration of his personal and professional partner, Gian Carlo Menotti (himself an opera composer of significant success and distinction). But in choosing texts for his songs, the composer was remarkably far-reaching, perceptive, and (an old-fashioned but nonetheless accurate word) tasteful.

Samuel Barber had two great advantages: first, he was a singer; as a student at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, Barber took voice lessons alongside studies in piano and composition. Secondly, he was never without a volume or two of poetry at his bedside.

Although Barber was at home in many languages, the only songs for which he used poems in a foreign language are the *Mélodies passagères* (Rainer Maria Rilke). *Setting French to music is ticklish. The French are very, very particular about it.* Barber's success in this language can be

attested to by the fact that the cycle was given its first performance by Pierre Bernac and Francis Poulenc – in Paris.

Barber had a life-long passion for Celtic poetry: James Stephens, William Butler Yeats, and James Joyce feature in many of the composer's earliest songs.

One of his earliest masterpieces is a setting for baritone and string quartet of Matthew Arnold's melancholic *Dover Beach*. Barber said of it, *The emotions seem contemporary. Dover Beach is one of the few Victorian poems which continues to hold its stature; it is a great poem.* And a great song: when Barber played it for Ralph Vaughan Williams, the older composer was enthusiastic: *I tried several times to set Dover Beach, but you really got it.*

Barber's taste in poetry could be eclectic: the *Hermit Songs* of 1952-53 (premiered by Leontyne Price with the composer at the piano) are settings of poems by anonymous Irish monks and scholars of the 8th to 13th centuries.

Barber set many texts by English and American poets, none more poignantly than James Agee. *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, a musical setting of an excerpt from Agee's story *Knoxville*, was premiered in 1948 by Eleanor Steber, with Serge Koussevitsky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. This remains one of Barber's best-loved and most frequently performed scores. Another setting of Agee, *Sure on this shining night*, is equally esteemed and frequently heard in recital.

One of Barber's most ardent champions, the great American pianist John Browning, wrote

about the composer's highly personal style, *[Barber] possessed a musical knowledge so comprehensive and a craft so well-honed that there were virtually no colors, textures, or forms beyond his ability.*

Certainly this mastery is apparent in Barber's last collection of songs, written in 1972 for Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, on poems by James Joyce, Christopher Middleton, and Czeslaw Milosz. There is an overlay of chromaticism and dissonance in these songs that reflect the poems with great immediacy.

Throughout his life, Barber was somewhat conscious of a tendency on the part of the academic musical establishment to dismiss him as an anachronism; the perceived Romanticism of his scores was not considered valid for a composer of the twentieth century. Barber himself, late in life, put it very simply:

I think that what's been holding composers back a great deal is that they feel they must have a new style every year. That, in my case, would be hopeless ... I just go on, as they say, doing my own thing. I believe this takes a certain courage.

Critic John Simon, who considers Barber a genuinely great American composer (and who rates his music higher than Copland's) suggested that it did, indeed, take a certain courage, especially if 'my thing' was some of the most unfashionably romantic, songful yet classically restrained music ever written.

Robert Holliston

Vanessa Synopsis

Vanessa is set in 1905, in a luxurious home in a snowy, unnamed northern country. All the mirrors and portraits are covered, and the reclusive Vanessa shares the house with her niece Erika, and her mother, the Baroness, who has not spoken to Vanessa for years.

An important guest is expected – Vanessa's former lover. On the visitor's arrival, before he can so much as speak, Vanessa pours out the emotions from 20 years of waiting – and demands that he leave her house if he no longer loves her. But the man is a stranger. Vanessa staggers out, leaving Erika to deal with their guest, who explains that he is Anatol, the son of Vanessa's old lover, who has died. Anatol has come to see the woman his mother hated and his father longed for.

That very first night Anatol seduces Erika, and although she falls passionately in love with him, she senses he is incapable of love.

FURTHER LEARNING ABOUT Vanessa

For musical excerpts, more detailed articles, artist bios, links and much more, visit www.pov.bc.ca

Anatol then turns his attentions to Vanessa. The evening his engagement to Vanessa is announced, Erika slips out into the cold and is found unconscious the next morning, having miscarried – but she tells Vanessa nothing of her brief affair with Anatol or of the child.

Anatol and Vanessa marry and leave for Paris, Erika, left alone with her silent grandmother, orders all the mirrors to be covered and the gate locked. It is now her turn to wait.

Background

Just before its premiere, Barber pointed out that *Vanessa* wasn't actually his first opera:

At nine I wrote my first opera ... The Rose Tree. The libretto was by our cook, Annie ... Once when my mother asked her what we were having for dessert she answered, "Madam, a little something of my own. It is called a Bird's-Eye View of Death." (For the record, it was left-over cake with varying sauces.) Quick to pounce on literary talent ... I asked her to write the text for me. She complied according to her moods, evasive or enthusiastic, like all librettists ...

The hero was a tenor on vacation from the Metropolitan Opera Company who fell in love with a soprano. This opera did not progress beyond Act I, not because the cook left, for they didn't leave in those days. Annie died.

Barber's jibe at librettists came from his own experience. Menotti wrote the libretto for *Vanessa*, but theirs was not the easiest collaboration, as Barber recalled:

By late summer the [first] scene was finished ... I asked him for more words ... He explained that I would have to wait until January ... This was at the point in my opera when, after Vanessa's aria, Anatol first appears, silhouetted in semi-darkness in the doorway. She turns to him and screams. He remains standing.

And standing there in that drafty doorway in a northern country in deep winter, Anatol remained for four months until January. Once again my errant librettist asked for a reprieve ... Not to mention the trials of Anatol (for no tenor must ever stand in a draft, even for a second), this composer was not fit to live with that winter ...

When, the next spring, Menotti was at last free, I refused to write a note until the complete libretto was finished ... My tactic succeeded brilliantly.

All Barber now had to do, besides write the music, was choose a name for his heroine – from a book – *How to Name Your Child!*

The role of Vanessa was intended to be a star turn for Maria Callas, but she turned it down, probably because she feared being upstaged by the character of Erika. As Barber put it, with enormous delicacy, *Being very astute, she noticed certain things about the libretto which gave a little too much importance to the mezzo-soprano, the role of Erika, which is a very strong role.*

Callas is also said to have declared that she couldn't possibly be expected to fall in love with a man who had already slept with the mezzo soprano.

Callas had a point. Although Vanessa walks off with both the man and the title credit, the role of Erika is certainly just as compelling; in fact the performances of Rosalind Elias as Erika and Eleanor Steber as Vanessa in the 1958 premiere are both legendary.

The opera premiered at the Metropolitan Opera to sold out houses and rapturous reviews. The *New Yorker* gushed that *Vanessa* was the finest and most truly 'operatic' opera ever written by an American ... one of the most impressive things ... to appear anywhere since Richard Strauss's more vigorous days. The conductor Dimitri Mitropoulos rhapsodized: *At last, an American grand opera!*

Vanessa won the 1958 Pulitzer Prize and later that year made its European premiere in Salzburg – the first American opera at the festival, and the first in Salzburg's history to be sung in English. But avant-garde European critics criticized the opera as chromaticized Puccini, plus a few ounces of Strauss, Wagner and Tchaikovsky with a shot of Debussy. They dismissed Barber as a hopeless conservative, shameless neo-Romantic and lushly tonal panderer.

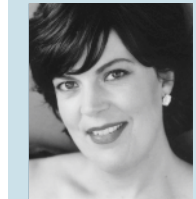
Given the critical backlash, it's not surprising that *Vanessa* fell out of fashion for a while. It has seen several recent revivals, and for good reason.

As *New York Times* critic Peter Davis says, *Vanessa can ... be devilishly effective... the vocal writing has a lyrical consistency that one seldom hears in new operas these days; the musical and dramatic pacing is amazingly assured; and the final 20 minutes — that glorious quintet, similar in tone and wholly comparable to the famous trio in Strauss's "Rosenkavalier" — are as inspired as anything in American opera.*

Maureen Woodall

About the Artists

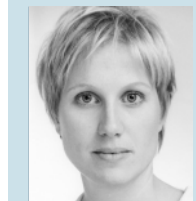
Welcome to our artists – all Canadian, and all making role debuts in *Vanessa*.



Wendy Nielsen (Vanessa) has a long history with the Metropolitan Opera, where she has sung Fiordiligi (*Così fan tutte*), Micaela (*Carmen*), Donna Elvira (*Don Giovanni*) and the Countess (*Le Nozze di Figaro*). Other roles include Tosca, Ariadne auf Naxos, and Donna

Anna (*Don Giovanni*). She has performed in opera and concert across Canada, the US, and in Europe. We welcome her in her POV debut.

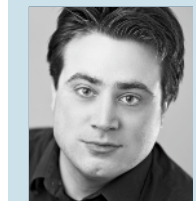
The consummate opera star ... powerful beyond belief
Winnipeg Free Press



Stephanie Marshall (Erika) came to international attention for her brilliant turn in the British and Canadian premieres of *The Handmaid's Tale*. She has performed with the English National Opera, Opera North, the Hallé Orchestra, and at Wigmore Hall. Opera roles

include Annio (*La clemenza di Tito*), Cherubino (*The Marriage of Figaro*), Wellgunde (*The Rhinegold, Twilight of the Gods*), Proserpina (*Orfeo*), Sonya (*War and Peace*), Mercedes (*Carmen*), and Myrtale (*Thais*).

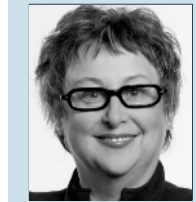
An incandescent performance, vocally and dramatically
Opera News



Adam Luther (Anatol) is an alumnus of the Canadian Opera Company Studio Ensemble where his roles included Der Steuermann (*Der fliegende Holländer*), Arbace and the High Priest (*Idomeneo*), Rodrigo (*Otello*), Jaquino (Fidelio), the title role in Gazzaniga's *Don*

Giovanni, and Lysander in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Other credits include Alfred (*Die Fledermaus*) and the Male Chorus (*The Rape of Lucretia*) with the University of Toronto Opera School.

Special kudos go to Canadian tenor Adam Luther.
La Scena Musicale



Glynis Leyshon has directed 20 POV productions, as well as productions for Vancouver, Calgary, and Edmonton Opera, Opera Lyra Ottawa, the Shaw Festival, Tarragon Theatre, and Bard on the Beach. She has been Head of the Opera as Theatre Programme at The

Banff Centre, Artistic Director of the Playhouse Theatre Company in Vancouver, and Artistic Director of Victoria's Belfry Theatre in Victoria.

Glynis Leyshon's superlative dramatic sense galvanizes this opera-made-from-a-play.
Review Vancouver

Behind the Scenes: Artists at Work

POV's Production shop is where much of the magic behind every opera takes



Jo-Ann Richards, Works Photography

place. Before every production, props and wardrobe professionals source out supplies and fabrics; carpenters, painters, cutters and stitchers work to bring to life the visions of the director and designers.

If you are a POV subscriber or donor, you'll be receiving an invitation to share the magic at the **Hard Hat Shop Tour, Saturday, April 16**, from 10 am to 2 pm at our Production Shop.

Meet our stagecraft professionals, and see the set and costumes for *Vanessa* just days before it's all packed up to be trucked the dozen blocks to the Royal Theatre stage in time for final rehearsals and opening night.

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