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**Events
Calendar**

MARIA STUARDA at the Royal Theatre

April 12, 14, 18, 20, 8 pm
Matinée: Sunday, April 22, 2:30 pm
Pre-performance lobby lecture an hour before curtain
In Italian with English surtitles

COMMUNITY OUTREACH EVENTS

INSIDE OPERA with Robert Holliston
Sunday, April 1

TWO SESSIONS: 10 am and noon

Phillip T. Young Recital Hall,
University of Victoria.

Robert Holliston and guests present a guided tour of *Maria Stuarda*. Bring your friends. It's all free, including the parking. Please reserve before noon Thursday, March 29, specifying which session you plan to attend. Space is limited.

Reserve at 250-385-0222 or rsvp@pov.bc.ca

Sense of Occasion

Thursday, April 12, 6:30 pm
East Lobby, the Royal Theatre.

Pre-performance reception to celebrate the opening night of *Maria Stuarda*. Gourmet finger foods and wine. Space is limited. Dress is festive.

\$25 per person.

Reserve with payment: 250-385-0222.

DONOR RECOGNITION EVENTS

President's Circle Working Rehearsal

Saturday, April 7, The Royal Theatre

6 pm Coffee and cookies
6:20 pm Discussion with Director Maria Lamont & Designer Camellia Koo
7 pm Piano Dress Rehearsal begins

For President's Circle Members and donors at the Director level (\$250) and above. Invitations have been sent by mail.

Impresario Circle Celebration
Monday, April 16, 7 to 9 pm

A wine and hors d'oeuvres reception with a private concert by Principal Artists from the cast of *Maria Stuarda*.

For Impresario Circle members (\$10,000 level). Invitations have been sent by mail.

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OPENING THE WORLD OF OPERA TO PACIFIC OPERA VICTORIA SUBSCRIBERS MARCH 2012

Key Notes



Bel Canto
then and now

Robert Holliston

Any discussion of Donizetti's musical characteristics must begin with *bel canto*, or "beautiful singing," a term which encompasses not only a school of Italian operatic composition but a technical approach to singing and even the delivery of Italian text.

Historically we encounter the term for the first time in mid-17th century Italy, where a highly idiomatic and technically systematic approach to vocal writing and performance had developed since the early days of the Florentine *camerata*. It didn't become widely used, however, until a century or so later, during the heyday of Handel and the international star system, those charismatic (sometimes notorious) sopranos and castrati whose mastery of vocal technique remains the stuff of legend.

Thus many historians will point out that the operas of Monteverdi, Cavalli, and Piccini – to say nothing of such foreigners as Handel, Gluck, and Mozart – contain vocal writing that is *bel canto* in virtually every aspect.

The majority of opera-goers, however, identify the term *bel canto* primarily with a generation of Italian-born composers working in the first few decades of the 19th century, and specifically with the mighty triumvirate of Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1868), Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835), and our man of the hour, Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848) who among them produced no fewer than 116 operas.

In later life, while mourning its loss even in Italian opera, Rossini commented on the essential components of *bel canto* singing:

- the Instrument – the voice – the Stradivarius, if you like;
- technique – that is to say, the means of using the Instrument – and the intensive training necessary to sustain a long,

legato, espressivo line as well as the agility demanded by faster coloratura writing;

- innate taste and feeling – or Style. Rossini emphasized that this really cannot be taught, but must be acquired as the novice listens to and studies great singers. "Style is Tradition."

Coloratura really just means "colouring," although for many years the term has referred to rapid, virtuosic passagework and also to the high soprano voice type associated so frequently with florid display (this is misleading, as one encounters coloratura writing for all voice types in the *bel canto* repertoire). Among the qualities of fine coloratura singing are the ability to maintain a single vowel throughout an elaborate run, and the absence of intrusive aspirants or "aitches."

Unsurprisingly, then, the focus of *bel canto* opera is on the singing. First, there is considerable variety in the declamation and accompaniment of Donizetti's recitatives, allowing the fundamental storyline to be conveyed not only succinctly and economically, but with arresting drama.

But of course what reigns supreme in a *bel canto* opera is melody, and Donizetti was blessed with a seemingly inexhaustible and richly varied supply. Whether slow, lyrical, and expressive, or fast, dramatic, and fiery, this composer unerringly comes up with exactly the right tune for each dramatic situation, providing the singer with opportunities to display not only character, but artistry.

The early 19th-century *bel canto* composer, like his 17th- and 18th-century counterparts in the world of Italian opera, allowed and even expected his singers to "improvise" additional embellishments and ornamentation, sometimes to the extent of re-writing the vocal line entirely. Whether this practice was embraced or tolerated by the composer is a matter for conjecture, although I suspect it was more the latter than the former.

There must be many reasons why *bel canto* opera fell out of favor in the latter part of the 19th century. It was an inevitable casualty of the Romantic era's loudly-proclaimed search for "truth" in art – and perhaps after Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti, there was no more, stylistically, to be said in this idiom.

Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) inherited much from these three composers, and without ever entirely abandoning their principles, expanded on them to an extent unimaginable in the century's early decades.

New music in a wide variety of genres was being produced in more countries than ever before (Italy continued to produce her most notable masterworks in the sacred and operatic fields alone) and by the end of the 19th century, due in great part to the stupendous innovations of Richard Wagner (1813-1883), the Germanic-Viennese school of composition was almost universally regarded as the apex of accomplishment.

Finally, if, as Rossini insisted, the qualities of vocalism we associate with

to p. 2



bel canto were an intrinsic part of “tradition,” we must acknowledge that, as younger artists in pursuit of the new come to the fore, traditions must be set to one side, albeit temporarily.

Now, in the 21st century, the term *bel canto* is usually uttered with more than a hint of nostalgia for a long past “Golden Age” of singing, a past dimly recalled, scratchily recorded, and (perhaps) idealized.

Certainly when I think of the paradigms of *bel canto* singing, the names that come to mind are few and from a previous era: Rosa Ponselle, Maria Callas, Joan Sutherland, Montserrat Caballé, Marilyn Horne. All of these singers sang other repertoire, but to me they were at their greatest in Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi (keeping in mind that I know them all only through recordings).

The mid-20th-century resurgence of interest in *bel canto* traditions owes an incalculable debt to Mme. Callas (although the diva's more rabid fans should be reminded that she did not accomplish this feat single-handedly; her allies include that maestro of maestri, Tullio Serafin). However, without the contributions of the other great artists on my list (and many ... well, several) others, the interest might have been short-lived.

In any case, it wasn't a truly exhaustive revival: Gaetano Donizetti was the most prolific of *bel canto* composers, completing some 66 works, and most of these continue to languish in obscurity.

But unquestionably – despite all the vicissitudes that have plagued our beloved, recalcitrant, obstreperous, impossible art form since the first public opera house opened in 1637 – the works in our permanent repertoire include *L'elisir d'amore*, *Don Pasquale*, *La fille du régiment*, and *Lucia di Lammermoor*, operas by Donizetti that will be performed as long as some people want to sing them and others want to listen.

It looks as if *Maria Stuarda* is well on her way to joining them, and all of us involved in Pacific Opera Victoria's first ever production of this masterpiece will do whatever we can to help!

Synopsis

Maria Stuarda is based on Andrea Maffei's Italian translation of Friedrich von Schiller's play *Maria Stuart*.

As the opera opens, Queen Elizabeth is toying with the idea of marrying the King of France, more out of a sense of duty than any real inclination, for she actually loves Leicester. But when Leicester pleads with Elizabeth to meet with Mary Stuart, the exiled Queen of Scotland, who has been languishing in prison, he praises Mary's beauty a little too ardently and Elizabeth's jealousy is aroused. Although furious that her rival is trying to steal both her crown and the man she loves, she nevertheless agrees to the meeting.

It does not go well. Urged by Leicester to be submissive, Mary kneels before Elisabeth to ask forgiveness. However, Elisabeth responds by reminding her of her sordid past, accusing her of adultery and the murder of her husband. Even as Leicester and Talbot urge her to hold her tongue, Mary, provoked beyond endurance, lets loose and flings at Elizabeth the worst possible invective, calling her the unchaste daughter of Anne Boleyn, a harlot and (no translation needed) *vil bastarda*. Elizabeth calls the guards to take Maria away.

Elizabeth's advisor, Lord Cecil, urges her to have Mary executed, but she stalls, until Leicester's arrival provokes her into signing the death warrant. Leicester's intemperate pleas for mercy incite her further, and she orders him to watch his lover's execution.

Mary prepares for death by confessing her sins to Talbot. Absolved, she leads her household in a prayer, announces her forgiveness of Elizabeth, and urges Leicester not to avenge her death.

Duelling Legacies

Elizabeth I has been called the greatest monarch in British history, her eponymous era a golden age that established English supremacy in the arts, commerce, and politics; that saw voyages of exploration and the rise of English naval power and a sense of national identity. Though by no means free of conflict, her 44-year reign provided a breather of relative tolerance, stability and peace amid centuries of turbulent see-sawing between Catholic and Protestant rulers and power struggles between Parliament and the Monarchy.

About Elizabeth's cousin Mary Stuart, who languished in prison for nearly 20 years until Elizabeth had her beheaded, there is less agreement. Mary has always evoked complicated responses, beginning with

Elizabeth's own, for she famously delayed the execution, reluctant to behead another queen and knowing the political implications both at home and abroad. In fact Elizabeth described Mary as *the daughter of debate, that eke discord doth sow* and, despite Mary's requests, refused to ever meet her.

Was Mary a bloodthirsty harlot and an inveterate conspirator against the life of her cousin? Or a martyr and the rightful Queen of England? Or simply a victim of the convoluted *Realpolitik* of her times?

Certainly Donizetti comes down on the side of Mary, although his portrayal of Elizabeth does not lack complexity. To those of us who know just a little history – usually what has been written by the victors – Donizetti sheds a novel perspective, bringing the two queens together in a dramatic, if fictional, meeting. He may take egregious liberties with history, but in so doing, he invites us to get to know these characters and their legacies.

The Characters

Let's meet the historical personages behind the characters in the opera ...

Queen Elizabeth I (Elisabetta): When her father, Henry VIII, divorced his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, and married Anne Boleyn, establishing himself as Head of the Church of England, many Catholics (and the Pope himself) considered Elizabeth, the child of that union, to be illegitimate. They thought that Mary Stuart, granddaughter of Henry VIII's elder sister, was the rightful queen of England.

Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots (Maria Stuarda): Although Donizetti portrays Mary as practically a saint by the end of the opera, her lurid past is lightly alluded to when she and Elizabeth trade insults and when Mary confesses her sins to Talbot.

Over her 44 years, Mary amassed three husbands and a claim to three thrones. The daughter of King James V of Scotland, she became Queen of Scotland in 1542, at the age of 6 days. At 15 she was married off to Francis II, who died after only 18 months as King of France.

Mary returned to Scotland, now a Protestant country, and in 1565 married her cousin Henry Lord Darnley. A nasty piece of work, Darnley is believed to have had Mary's secretary David Rizzio (or Riccio) stabbed to death in front of her when she was pregnant. Darnley himself was murdered in 1567; three months afterward, Mary married the chief suspect, Lord Bothwell.

Amid accusations of adultery and murder, she fled to England, where she was taken into custody and imprisoned for the last 19

POV's Production: Framing the Drama



Say what you will about Donizetti's embellishments of the story of Mary Stuart, they do bring his characters to life in a quite wonderful way. It is through art – music, literature, painting, tapestry, architecture – that we experience much of the past. It is through art that history is both transformed and enriched, and that the legacies of lives lived long ago can touch us here today.



Director Maria Lamont and designer Camellia Koo have chosen to frame this production of *Maria Stuarda* through the legacy of art, to capture the complexity of an historic time through the lens of modern sensibility.

The setting will be a grand Tudor house that has been transformed into a present-day museum. As museum staff assemble historic portraits of the two queens and tapestries of the times for an exhibition, the art comes alive, and, at least for the brief hours of the performance, we share the lives of these amazing characters.

At left: portraits and tapestries being used in the production.

Top: The Coronation Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I in her coronation robes, patterned with Tudor roses and trimmed with ermine. Painted by an unknown artist about 1600, it is probably a copy of a lost original, c. 1559, also by an unknown artist. National Portrait Gallery, London.

Centre: Mary, Queen of Scots in Captivity, c. 1610. This is one of a number of portraits of Mary that are known as Sheffield portraits. Painted after Mary's death, it was inspired by an original by Nicholas Hilliard c. 1578, when Mary was a prisoner at Sheffield House, one of Talbot's many large houses. National Portrait Gallery, London.

Bottom: The Unicorn in Captivity 1495-1505. Among the most beautiful and complex works of art from the late Middle Ages, this is one of seven hangings known as The Unicorn Tapestries. Woven in fine wool and silk with silver and gilded threads, the tapestries depict scenes from a hunt for the elusive, magical unicorn, here finally captured, fenced in, and tethered to a pomegranate tree. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The Characters, continued

years of her life. She was convicted of treason for her apparent involvement in the Babington Plot of 1586 against Elizabeth, and was executed in 1587.

But when the childless Elizabeth died, she was succeeded by Mary's son, who became both James VI of Scotland and James I of England. Queen Elizabeth II is a descendant of Mary Queen of Scots.

Robert Dudley, 1st Earl of Leicester, was such a close friend of Elizabeth that many believed – or feared – that the Queen would marry him. Oddly enough, in 1563 Elizabeth had suggested Dudley as a husband for Mary Stuart, possibly so that Elizabeth could control the Scottish queen. However, Leicester wanted no part of such a scheme. Early on he supported Mary Stuart's succession rights to the English throne, but gradually turned against her, and after the Babington plot came to light, he advocated her execution.

William Cecil, 1st Baron Burleigh, was Elizabeth's chief advisor and did indeed want Mary executed, for he believed she was a magnet for Catholic conspirators. To foil a continuous series of plots against the realm, he established a spy network under Francis Walsingham, who is often called the father of the British Secret Service. Some scholars believe that Cecil is the model for the character of Polonius in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

George Talbot, 6th Earl of Shrewsbury was Mary's jailer during much of her time in custody. It was a luxurious imprisonment; Mary lived at various of Talbot's properties, had her own court, kept horses and dogs, played billiards, and worked on embroideries. There is no historic evidence that Talbot was a Catholic priest, as depicted in the opera.

Maureen Woodall

The Artists



Internationally acclaimed soprano Tracy Dahl has performed at La Scala, the Metropolitan Opera, San Francisco Opera, Santa Fe Opera, Canadian Opera Company, and the

Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris. Making her POV debut, the globetrotting Canadian coloratura is performing the role of Maria Stuarda for the very first time.



We had the thrill of seeing Sally Dibblee's first Violetta (*La traviata*) and her first Butterfly – now, she performs her first Elisabetta. She has sung across North America, performing

many of the great roles in opera, including Lucia di Lammermoor, Desdemona (*Otello*), Mimi (*La bohème*), Liu (*Turandot*), Donna Elvira (*Don Giovanni*) and Micaëla (*Carmen*).



Director Maria Lamont is making her mainstage Canadian opera debut at POV. She has been an assistant and revival director for opera companies all over the world, including La

Scala, De Nederlandse Opera, Opéra du Rhin, English National Opera, Théâtre du Châtelet, and the Canadian Opera Company. She recently made her European directing debut at Le Grand Théâtre de Luxembourg. Maria has worked closely with internationally known Canadian director Robert Carsen, who made his own mainstage Canadian operatic debut in 1986, directing Pacific Opera Victoria's *Il Trovatore*.



Also making her POV debut is Toronto based designer Camellia Koo. She is a regular Assistant Designer to Michael Levine and his Associate Designer on revivals of *The Magic Flute* (Budapest State

Opera) and *Candide*, directed by Robert Carsen (English National Opera /Hyogo Performing Arts Company). Her opera designs include *Dido and Aeneas* (Opera on the Avalon); *La Bohème* (Against the Grain Theatre); *Giiwedjin* (Native Earth), and *The Shadow* (Tapestry New Opera).