

PEDAL POWER

Canadian opera shifts gears

Larissa Koniuk is a Toronto-based singer, actor, and she is also an avid cyclist. She holds a vocal performance degree from Wilfred Laurier University, and has been performing in many genres including opera. In late-June and July, Larissa was a driving force behind the Bicycle Opera project – touring six Canadian opera scenes through Southern Ontario, with stops in Toronto, Peterborough, Cobourg, Picton, Kingston, and Gananoque. In addition to admiring the novelty and entrepreneurial spirit of the musicians, we here at *Notations* were excited to learn that three CMC associates were being programmed including Brian Harman, Anna Höstman, and Juliet Palmer. We spoke with Larissa to find out how the project got started, and how a tour can be pulled together with limited resources.

Inspiration?

Nadia Chana and myself had been wanting to collaborate on a project for a while and after considering a number of traditional works, we realized we wanted to delve into contemporary music. Both of us have been cyclists for many years, and I've gotten into long-distance cycling over the last three years. We thought it would be great to attempt a car-free method of touring and to bring contemporary opera scenes to communities in Ontario who might not otherwise get an opportunity to hear them.

How do you address opera's unmet needs?

Opera is such an amazing art form, and yet most of the public doesn't ever see it. We wanted to reach audiences who had never heard opera, demythologize the opera singer, and break down the idea of opera as elitist. We can change a flat tire; we can cycle and sweat; we get dirty too!

Why contemporary composers, and the six composers in particular?

Both Nadia and I had really loved working on a few contemporary Canadian pieces in the past, but we both felt that we had barely scratched the surface of the wealth of fantastic music that is being written here in Canada and is largely under-performed.

We underwent a research phase in which we began contacting



TOP Brian Harman
MIDDLE Anna Höstman
BOTTOM Juliet Palmer
PHOTO Adam Coish

composers we had worked with before and asking for works that would translate well for a small ensemble. It was also important to us to find works that had some sort of social relevance. Many composers referred us to colleagues who had works that would fit with our project, and so we poured over a lot of scores and finally six pieces stood out for us.

How was the collaboration with the composers while developing each scene?

We were thrilled to find that most of the composers wanted to work directly with us to help us adapt the scenes for our singers and instrumentation, which consisted of guitar, violin, and in one case, melodica. With many of the composers we suggested cuts that we felt would work well for the overall program and they were very supportive. We also got the help of Adam Scime, who wrote *At Another Table* specifically for our project and who arranged a few of the works for our instrumentation. Most of the composers were able to attend rehearsals and help us with the interpretation as well, which is so rewarding.

Can you tell us about a DIY approach to opera?

Well, as an emerging singer, I am realizing that in order to do work I really care about, I have to make opportunities for myself. Nadia and I put the project together in just two months and had missed grant deadlines, so we decided to go ahead, funding the project with just ticket sales, sponsorships, and fundraising. We launched an online crowd-funding campaign, asking friends and family to contribute small amounts in exchange for hugs, tickets, and living-room performances, and were happy to reach these goals.

How important was it to document the performances?

We won't really know the effect of documenting our performances until the coming year. We happened to acquire a documentary team along the way -- two young filmmakers heard about our project through a mutual friend and wanted to document the journey -- I am hoping that this footage will help us establish ourselves as a new company and help open the doors to granting opportunities. In terms of participants, we were happy to



read a number of enthusiastic reviews that helped establish us as an emerging company. One of my favourites is from a cycling blog out of Peterborough called "A Peterborough Peddler" -- this review focused on how non-opera fans found the show to be accessible since it was all in English, about current themes, and moved at a fast pace!

Most memorable moment?

I would say the opening of the show in Prince Edward County, just outside Wellington. We played at Fields on West Lake in a beautiful restored barn. The big barn doors were open, and looked out onto rolling hills and the sun was setting as we performed. The calming country atmosphere helped us reach a new depth to our performance and the audience was grinning ear-to-ear.

Low point of the tour?

The cycle from Peterborough to Cobourg! That Kawartha area is very, very hilly! This was our first big day of cycling, and we were learning how to pull the trailers with our props and instruments for the first time. It seemed like we would never get there!

Best audience reaction?

The audience really fell in love with Chris Thornborrow's piece, *Hannah & Paige and the Zombie Pirates*. It takes place in the imagination of two 8 year-old girls as they play pretend and rescue their teddy bear from zombie pirates. It was fun hearing some hoots and hollers as the audience realized we were really, in fact, going to run around like children for the full length of the piece.



TOP Larissa Koniuk

MIDDLE The bikes en route

BOTTOM Nadia Chana (left) and Larissa Koniuk (right) in character as Hannah and Paige

PHOTO Diana Piruzevska



THE BICYCLE OPERA PLAYLIST

Golden Boy by Darren Russo & Anusree Roy

At Another Table by Adam Scime & Larissa Koniuk

'Seagull Aria' (from *Rob Ford: The Opera*)

by Anna Höstman & Michael Albano

Hannah and Paige and the Zombie Pirates by Chris Thornborrow

Sewing the Earthworm by Brian Harman & David Brock

Shelter (Act 1) by Juliet Palmer & Julie Salverson