

OPERA AROUND THE CLOCK



1941: *The Apothecary*



1965: *Il trionfo dell'onore*



1975: *Le nozze di Figaro*

IT WAS THE AFTERNOON OF THURSDAY, MARCH 20, 2008. Soprano Angela Meade, a fourth-year resident artist at the Academy of Vocal Arts, had just been fitted for her gown as cover for Sondra Radvanovsky in the Metropolitan Opera's production of Giuseppe Verdi's opera *Ernani*. After taking a train home to Philadelphia, she hailed a cab and set out for her apartment.

En route her cell phone rang. It was the call that practically every gifted young singer dreams of—and fears. Radvanovsky was indisposed and would not be appearing in the leading role of Elvira the next evening, and Angela was on as her replacement. This would be her Met debut.

Nerve-racking, one might think. Not for Angela, who was so excited that as soon as she got home “I called everybody I know.” She had studied the role through and through at AVA. She also had won almost every vocal competition she'd entered; with 53 wins she arguably holds an all-time record in the vocal world's version of the Guinness Book of Records. These grueling tests of vocal skill are not won by the faint-hearted.

After the performance *Opera News* called Angela “a model of imperturbability” and described her voice as “plush,” “precise” and “sumptuous.”

Such debuts are the stuff of legend, and certainly most singers don't break into the big time that way—if at all. However, AVA has seen more than its share of singers moving quickly up the ladder of success.

Tenor Michael Fabiano, along with Ms. Meade, won the Metropolitan Opera auditions in 2007 and was given a first opportunity to sing at that house in January, 2010, as Raffaele in *Stiffelio*. In 2008 he was engaged for a four-month period by English National Opera, singing the Duke in *Rigoletto* under the direction of Jonathan Miller. When La Scala found itself without a Rinuccio for *Gianni Schicchi*, they turned to him—even before his 2009 graduation.

“I always tell people that one of the glories of AVA is the repertoire you learn here,” Michael says. “While I was a student, I performed 12 standard repertory roles, ten with orchestra.”

Among other recent graduates, tenor James Valenti was engaged to sing Alfredo in *La traviata* this season at the Met. Soprano Ailyn Pérez took on the role of the doomed heroine at the Salzburg Festival's performance of *Romeo et Juliette*, and her husband, Stephen Costello (they met at AVA) received excellent notices for his Met debut as Arturo in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, just months after his 2007 graduation.

News travels fast about up-and-coming young singers, and because AVA has such a remarkable track record, it is not unusual for opera company managers and artists' representatives to attend performances and even to hold auditions at AVA. That's a far cry from the cattle call many younger singers have to face in starting their careers.

How is it possible that so many success stories come out of the small conservatory housed at 1920 Spruce Street?



1984: *Il tabarro*



1994: *Hansel and Gretel*



2004: *Elektra*

One reason is that those who teach and coach at AVA are among the best in the business, and their devotion to the art form of opera and to the human voice as its instrument is total and unswerving. Demanding only the best of themselves, the faculty will accept nothing less from the students who are chosen to attend the school—some 25 or 30 in all, four or five being accepted each year out of 200 applicants. Every one of them is on a full scholarship, currently amounting to \$70,000 per school year.

Those admitted are chosen not on vocal ability alone. AVA looks for singers with unique musical personalities—something special that sets them apart. They must be able to work hard and flourish in an environment that, though supportive, demands their very best all the time. While at the school, they will of necessity develop a toughness that enables them to deal successfully with the demands, challenges, and disappointments of a profession that is not always concerned with their vocal wellbeing.

This philosophy is not new to AVA but was present at its origins. In fact, it is the principle on which the school was built. AVA was founded in 1934 by Philadelphia philanthropist and opera lover Helen Corning Warden and a group of her friends. Mrs. Warden's generosity could not have come at a better time. The nation was in the midst of the Great Depression, and even the essentials of daily life were denied most people. The chances of gaining a higher education in a specialty like grand opera were almost nonexistent.

Mrs. Warden, a woman of foresight and determination, was committed to establishing a unique program aimed at training some of the world's best young operatic voices. The cost of their intensive training over four years would be covered by the school. In effect she created the only tuition-free institution in the nation devoted exclusively to the training of opera singers. By 1938 AVA was housed in its present building, an elegant

19th century townhouse.

Mrs. Warden remained a strong presence at AVA until the 1960s, at which time her daughter, Adele Warden Paxson, along with her husband Henry D. Paxson, took up the mantle of leadership. At the beginning of the 21st century Adele Paxson's daughter, Sally Paxson Davis, continued the AVA lineage. Her untimely passing in 2008 was a great loss for the school.

By the 1970s the success of Mrs. Warden's enterprise was recognized in opera circles everywhere. More and more graduates began to appear on the Metropolitan Opera roster, including such luminaries as bass-baritone James Morris, whose mastery of the Wagnerian repertoire made him a key figure in the company for fully a half century, and Ruth Ann Swenson, who established a notable career in the coloratura repertoire. Since 1980, more than 30 AVA alumni have performed on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera.

The training at AVA today continues much as it was, with voice lessons, coaching, language training, and a focus on the roles each singer will be most likely to take on in a professional career. A series of fully-staged operatic productions is presented each year, most with full orchestra (the AVA orchestra is composed of musicians from the highly-regarded Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia). Operas are typically double-cast. AVA's tiny Helen Corning Warden Theater fills up quickly, so AVA brings its operas and concerts to a variety of area venues, including the Kimmel Center. Critics take these performances seriously and review them regularly.

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“Students grow hugely through these performances,” says K. James (Kevin) McDowell, AVA’s executive/artistic director. “They might put the role away for five or ten years after graduating, and then pick it up. Every experience they’ve had in those intervening years will manifest itself in revisiting the opera.”

Experienced stage directors are engaged for all of AVA operas, and Dorothy Danner, who has also directed top Broadway musicals and plays, is among them. In the productions with full orchestra she has shown great skill in staging for a tiny stage, but the piano-reduction productions give her more leeway. For Richard Strauss’s *Capriccio*, Ms. Danner decided to utilize the theater itself, a beautiful example of French Empire style, as the salon of the Countess Madeleine, where the opera takes place. And, after intermission the audience was treated to hot chocolate, just as the Countess’s guests were.

Texas-born soprano Jan Cornelius sang the role of Countess Madeleine in *Capriccio*. Her final scene is a soprano tour-de-force demanding vocal stamina, a vibrant stage presence, and a mastery of the dense libretto. Jan maintains that her three years at AVA “have pushed me beyond the limits of anything I had done before. Your own expectations of yourself are raised here.”

Assuring the vocal longevity of AVA students is a constant concern, for life today presents many challenges for opera singers.

Opera company managers and agents sometimes push singers too far too fast by placing them in roles they are not ready for and/or scheduling them for too many performances. While at AVA, students cannot accept outside engagements unless authorized to do so, but once they have graduated they must exercise good judgment in order to avoid vocal problems that can lead to a sadly curtailed career.

The leadership of AVA has remained remarkably stable, with two individuals at the helm whose combined tenure encompasses over half a century. Mr. McDowell came to AVA as a student in 1977. While working on his M.B.A. at Temple University, he returned to AVA as concert manager and public relations director. He subsequently replaced Dino Yannopoulos as administrative and artistic director.

Improvement of the physical plant has been an important goal for Mr. McDowell as the need for adequate space became more and more apparent. The original AVA home was one of three contiguous buildings. After purchasing the second building in 2000, AVA made renovations, adding a recording studio, practice rooms, and additional office space. In 2008, AVA purchased the third building at 1916 Spruce Street with the goal of housing a large library, a board room that would double as a lecture hall and reception venue, as well as housing for first-year resident artists. Mr. McDowell was also responsible for developing the fellowship program, which provides a living stipend to each resident artist.

For 32 years music director and conductor Christopher Macatsoris—the man revered (and sometimes feared) as “Maestro”—has passed on his vast knowledge and experience in opera. A conductor who trained under Tullio Serafim at La Scala and studied composition with Vincent Persichetti, he is a pianist as well, having toured frequently with Metropolitan Opera singers. He has also been associated with top opera programs throughout the nation. Today Mr. Macatsoris is as excited about AVA as he was in 1977. “Every day when I come in the front door I feel I am going someplace very special,” he says.

Tenor Taylor Stayton, a third-year student at AVA, says “Maestro Macatsoris is by far the greatest musician I’ve ever worked with. He won’t let you get away with anything. He wants you to know everything he knows about this art. And he relays his information in so many ways that sometimes you don’t always realize it is happening—it’s magic. You never have learned a role until you learn it with him.”

Taylor saw the results of this training in a rather dramatic fashion. No sooner had he sung the role of Fenton in Verdi’s *Falstaff* at AVA this season than he was contacted by Rome Opera, which itself was suddenly in need of a Fenton for a run of performances. Given the maestro’s full support, he hopped a plane to Rome and to a venue that would seat 2,500 instead of 150. No problem, he says. “You can’t train a voice to sing in a specific place. You sing in a small house just as you would in a large hall.”

Mr. Macatsoris works closely with all those involved in an artist’s education, including coaches, stage directors, and voice, language and acting instructors. At rehearsals he is a strict taskmaster, his eye and ear on every musical phrase, every gesture, every vowel and consonant. When something is not right, he works on the problem with the student until he is satisfied. And woe to the singer who comes to a rehearsal unprepared; he or she might end up getting pulled from the cast. No wonder that opera company managers and conductors consistently praise AVA singers as exceptionally well-prepared. Maestro Macatsoris also takes pains to assure that no artist, no matter how gifted, is always given plum roles. A debut at La Scala might be followed by a stint in the AVA chorus.

Maestro Macatsoris recognizes that it is the standard works that fill the hall. But he would like to present more contemporary works, as he did some years back when AVA presented the world premiere of Richard Wargo’s *A Checkov Trilogy*. Next season will see the world premiere of an opera by local composer Margaret Garwood, based on Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, and the highly-regarded Philadelphia composer Kile Smith is also being commissioned to compose an orchestrated song cycle for AVA.

AVA’s vocal instructors, all of whom teach on-site, are very involved in the day-to-day activity of the school. Renowned voice teacher Bill Schuman has been associated with AVA for two decades. His roster of students includes some of the greatest performing musicians in the world, and they remain with him throughout their careers.

Mr. Schuman is known as the “miracle worker,” a man without airs or secret formulas for voice production. Rather, he relies on the basics. “Dancers still use their bars,” he says, “and here we do ballet bars for the voice.” Mr. Schuman says unabashedly that he believes in old-fashioned vocal training. There is no

rush, he tells students. “If they want you now, they’ll want you more in two years.” Vocal longevity is what he’s after—not a singer who’s a flash in the pan.

For Mr. Schuman, there is no institution that develops talents as AVA does, and he personally experiences no greater delight than building his students’ vocal abilities—and their confidence. “I feel that voices like those at AVA are a gift from God,” he says, “and they should take joy in that. A beautiful voice is the best thing we’ll hear till we get to the other side.”

Master vocal coaches play a crucial role in the resident artists’ development. David Antony Lofton leads the sacred music compendium “Jubilate!”, Richard A. Raub conducts fully staged operas such as *Il barbiere di Siviglia* in 2006 and *Don Pasquale* in 2009, and Danielle Orlando prepares and accompanies the annual Giargiari Bel Canto Competition, held at the beginning of the season in the Kimmel Center’s Perelman Theater. All of AVA’s master vocal coaches accompany internationally recognized artists, including AVA graduates. For Ms. Orlando, the ambience of AVA is very special. “It’s not like a scholastic place, but rather like a small opera house,” she says.

That small opera house was the venue for one of AVA’s most exciting events of the 75th anniversary season when Maestro Macatsoris invited the legendary Argentine opera director Tito Capobianco to direct Giuseppe Verdi’s final opera, *Falstaff*. Best known for his groundbreaking productions with soprano Beverly Sills at the New York City Opera in the 1970s, Mr. Capobianco is a master of the Verdi repertoire. He was hardly a new face at AVA, for here, 40 years ago, he began his illustrious career, when he was engaged by Mrs. Warden to be the school’s resident stage director. His return would be a dramatic meeting between past and present.

From the minute Maestro Capobianco arrived, a spirit of excitement filled the halls, as students and faculty alike reveled in his warmth and his wisdom. Maestro Capobianco could not have been happier returning to the school he had helped usher into its present renown.

“*Falstaff* is one of the most difficult operas in the Italian repertoire,” he says, “and all the young artists were at a very high level in responding to my demands. I was very proud to come back to my American alma mater. From the beginning AVA has been something very special. Each resident artist is taught according to their needs and their talents. There are no formulas. Each artist is a single project. That is what was and is its greatness. Individuality is the most important thing, the singularity of each voice. Nothing in the world is equal to AVA in focusing on every aspect that makes an artist.

“AVA is really fulfilling the dreams of the Warden family.”