



# There's No Business Like Opera Auditions

*Reality and Mozart inspire 'The Audition,' an original production by the Curtis Opera Theatre*

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PHOTOS BY DAVID SWANSON



A SOPRANO SHEDS HER WINTER COAT and boots, wrapping on a boa and squeezing into high heels as she warms up with a range of sounds that only babies, actors, and singers can accomplish comfortably. A melody emerges from the *brrr*-ing, *nyeah*-ing, and humming, and by the time she is properly dressed and vocally limber, she has sparked a nervous rivalry.

From the sidelines, another soprano emerges. She swooshes over to the pianist—who was about to duck out for a cup of coffee to fortify herself for a day of accompanying auditions—and pleads for just a bit of time to

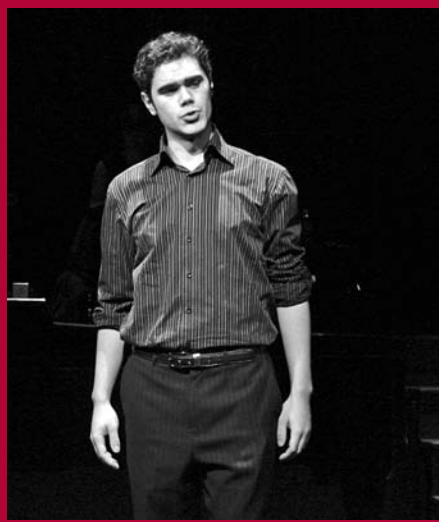
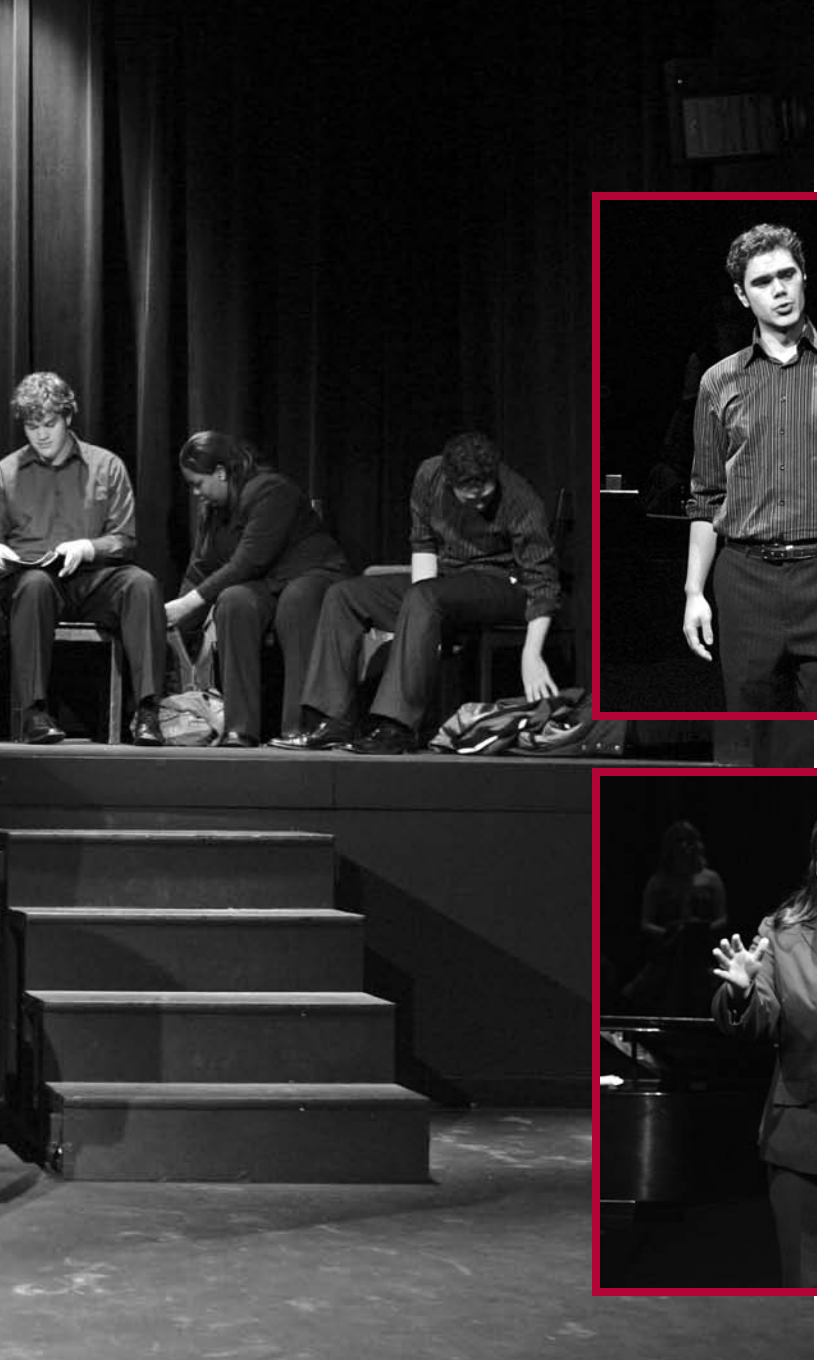
check the tempo and run a spot or two of her aria, Mozart's "Bester Jüngling! mit Entzücken" from *Der Schauspieldirektor*, or *The Impresario*. It's a showpiece, as highly decorated as the singer's gold strapless gown.

Any confidence that this friendly singer gains by the run-through dissolves when Soprano No. 1 informs her, with artificial sweetness, that it's not a suitable piece for Soprano No. 2's voice—and it's *also* on her own repertoire list for this audition.

Reality?

Almost, according to those who know auditions from either side of the table.

This time, however, the dramatic conflict was all in the name of fun—and experience. These two numbers opened the Curtis Opera Theatre's original production *The Audition*, loosely based on Mozart's *Der Schauspieldirektor*. It was conceived by Mikael Eliassen, head of the Vocal Studies Department, and staged by guest Susan Fenichell with Lisa Keller, a Curtis opera and voice coach, as music director. Held in the Curtis Opera Studio in early December, the run was extended from two sold-out public performances to a third, for an invited audience.



Mozart's opera features two rival sopranos vying for the attention of a producer and offering vocal fireworks in the process. Mr. Eliassen adapted this plot into the framework for a program that would give many of the Vocal Studies Department's students a chance to perform solo repertoire multiple times, with piano accompaniment, before an audience. Two arias and the quartet from *Der Schauspieldirektor* were retained, and opera arias by Rossini, Richard Strauss, Verdi, Donizetti, Handel, and Puccini were added, along with musical theatre works by Irving Berlin, Richard Rodgers, Kurt Weill, and Villa-Lobos. Design elements were minimal; lighting by Drew Billiau helped to define the space and mood.

Tenor Brian Zachary Porter took on the role of the producer (a former tenor who still dreams of a glamorous career), with mezzo-soprano Katherine Lerner as his buttoned-up assistant with her own fantasies. The rest of the cast—Brandon Cedel, Evan Hughes, Elliot Madore, Amanda Majeski, Rinnat Moriah (Soprano No. 1), Allison Sanders, Sarah Shafer, Joshua Stewart, and Ashley Thouret (Soprano No. 2)—played the types of people they've encountered in auditions.

In their first rehearsal with Ms. Fenichell, cast members sang through the pieces, then discussed what they've experienced, wondered, and observed at auditions:

"It's an act, as soon as you step out of the practice room. You have to be super nice to

(Facing page) The finale wraps up auditions  
 (Above left) Elliot Madore; Allison Sanders  
 (Above) Sarah Shafer; Evan Hughes

the other singers and the panel.”

“Auditions are terrifying. You’re on the spot with nothing, you’re horribly nervous.”

“They’re always writing. What are they writing?”

“How much do you act the character? What’s too much or ridiculous?”

“They offer water, but it’s like a dare to use it.”

“The music is either very organized or falling apart.”

“Some singers talk to themselves: ‘I am a dramatic soprano. I am a dramatic soprano.’”

“How you dress is part of the package.”

“It’s so intense, with fake energy, and everything is big. The performers hate either the pianist or themselves.”

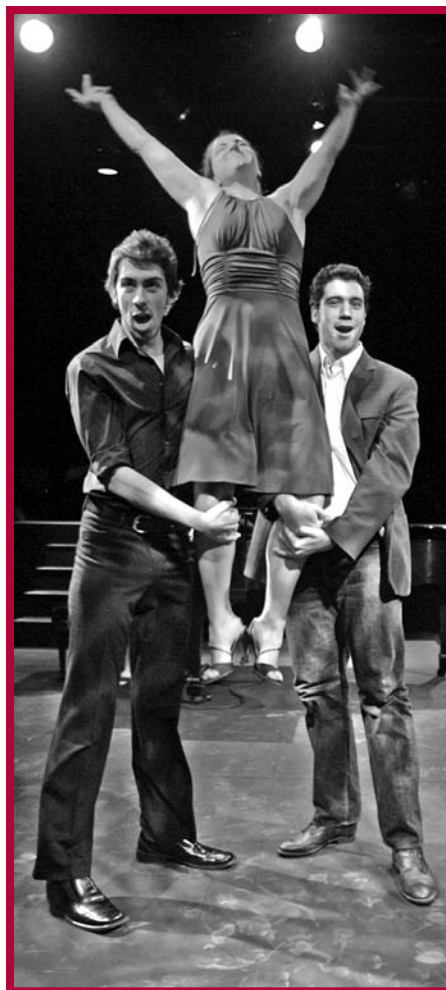
“Who are all those people in the back row? They’re scaring me.”

The conversation sparked character bits that made their way into the performance, which was essentially a series of individual “auditions.” Dialogue was developed from improvisation, then tweaked for dramatic effect. Ms. Keller rehearsed the vocal numbers individually and Ms. Fenichell shaped the lighting, songs, and dialogue into a theatrical program. The cast had less than a month, with an interruption for Thanksgiving break, to pull *The Audition* together. The final dress rehearsal had to be rescheduled because, in an example of life imitating art, many of the singers needed to be in New York City to audition for Music Academy of the West, a summer program.

Throughout the performance, most of the cast sits on the stage in the Curtis Opera Studio—studying their scores, listening to their iPods, drinking water, and sending text messages on their cell phones as they await their turns. At the other end of the room, on the top of the audience risers, sits Mr. Porter, nearly in the dark; his assistant has the tiring job of trekking from the stage, across the performance space, and up to his table to gather and distribute résumés and music.

“Sarah Shaff-er,” she calls out in monotone before one such trot.

A soprano approaches her. “It’s SHAY-fer.”



“That’s what I said,” comes the snippy reply.

Then there’s the singer who is missing. (“That’s one way to burn a bridge,” Mr. Porter comments.) When he finally shows up, apologizing for being stuck in traffic, Mr. Madore’s character is begrudgingly given a chance to audition, even though they’re running behind schedule and he wants to sing the lengthy “Soliloquy” from *Carousel*. (Mr. Eliassen makes a “surprise” appearance as the pianist for this piece.)

A bass-baritone, played by Mr. Hughes, begins a classic aria, “Donne mie, la fate a tanti!” from *Così fan tutte*, to the producer’s delight. But he stops, explaining that it’s a “tired” piece, he’s sick of it, and he’d really rather perform “one of the greatest love songs of our time.” He receives a reluctant okay to continue, then sweeps into “Some Enchanted Evening.” The mousy assistant is enraptured. When the piece ends, she rips off her glasses, lets her hair down, and joins Mr. Hughes in a bit of tango (under tropical lighting) and then the rest of the cast in a congo line to “Food for Thought” from *Magdalena* by Villa-Lobos. The audience responds with delightful cheers and applause.

Evan Hughes, Katherine Lerner, and Brian Zachary Porter in a fantastical “Food for Thought” from *Magdalena* by Villa-Lobos

And what of those rival sopranos? They one-up each other with “Anything You Can Do (I Can Do Better)” from *Annie Get Your Gun*. Later Ms. Moriah enters in a gaudy period costume, complete with a cotton-candy-pink wig. They try enticing Mr. Porter with the musical confections “Die Wiener Herrn verstehn sich” (Ms. Moriah) from the party scene in *Arabella* by Richard Strauss and “Caro nome” (Ms. Thouret) from Verdi’s *Rigoletto*. While Ms. Thouret performs, Ms. Moriah waits on the other side of the theatre door, face pressed against the glass with a comic expression that calls to mind Lucille Ball.

When given music to look over for the Mozart quartet, Ms. Moriah loses her bluster. “I didn’t think reading music would be required,” she admits.

“Usually for opera it is,” Mr. Porter says.

Both sopranos plus Mr. Porter and Mr. Cedel perform the quartet, “Artists have a sacred mission,” choreographed as a Baroque dance.

Within the world of *The Audition*, the sopranos’ efforts are for naught. Amanda Majeski, barely noticeable throughout the show, steps in with “Chi il bel sogno di Doretta” and wins the lead role in the production they are casting—*Magda in La rondine* (a promotion for the Curtis Opera Theatre’s next performance, a concert production on March 30 and April 1).

The entire company joins in the finale, “There’s No Business Like Show Business.”

As one of the students said about auditions back in the first rehearsal: “It’s so good to be on the other end of it.” ☺

### **THE CURTIS OPERA THEATRE REMEMBERS ANNA MOFFO**

The Curtis Opera Theatre’s March 30 performance of *La Rondine* will be dedicated to the memory of alumna and overseer Anna Moffo, who passed away last March. F. Paul Driscoll, editor in chief of *Opera News*, will pay tribute at intermission. ☺