



Most Fall Opera Gala performers will be in masks; all will perform in the audience section.

FALL OPERA GALA

Scenes from 'great operas' to be featured

With its traditional fall production sidelined due to COVID-19, the University of Kentucky Opera Theatre will present a virtual Fall Opera Gala in November. (Stay tuned for exact dates.)

The production will feature about 50 current students performing “the great repertory from the great operas,” said UKOT Director Dr. Everett McCorvey. Included will be a scene from UKOT’s production of *The Crucible*, which was originally slated for this fall.

The goal of the gala is twofold. First, McCorvey wants to give current students in the School of Music’s bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral programs the all-important “real-life” experience in roles they will perform after graduation.

“We’ll be focusing on a lot of our seniors and students who are in their last year of being at UK,” McCorvey stated. “Those are the ones who experienced a shortened semester in the spring and a shortened semester in the fall. So, we want to make sure they have those capstone experiences.”

Second, he is hopeful the gala – broadcast across several online platforms – will introduce opera to a wider audience.

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Reginald Smith Jr.

Back to the Future

Unscheduled down time prompts return for advanced degrees

It is no secret that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted nearly every facet of everyday life. Even the best-laid plans were upended when the virus shut down nearly everything in mid-March. Two University of Kentucky alums – one a highly sought-after opera singer and the other a busy voice professor – were not content to “wallow” in their unscheduled down time, however. Instead, they found another outlet for their creative energy and focus: They went back to school.

Reginald Smith Jr.

Reginald Smith Jr. never intended to get another degree. With two bachelor's degrees already and a flourishing career as an international opera singer, it just didn't seem necessary, he said.

Then COVID-19 hit, and the renowned baritone's packed spring schedule – including a run as Jake in the Atlanta Opera's production of *Porgy and Bess* – came to a “screeching halt.”

“Every time I checked my email, it was one cancellation after the other,” the Atlanta native said.

Soon, Smith's summer commitments also would be canceled, including his much-anticipated appearance as Amonasro in the Cincinnati Opera's centennial production of *Aida*.

“I can only sit and wallow for so long,” he said. “After a while of twiddling my thumbs, I decided I have to do something.”

So, from his home in Houston, Texas, back to the classroom he went – virtually – working on a master's degree in vocal performance at UK, where, as an Alltech scholar, he completed his undergraduate degrees in May 2013.

“Obviously, my goal has been and still is to be a

performer,” he said. “But I decided, ‘Hmmm, if I can go ahead and take these classes while I have some down time, it will just make me a more well-rounded performer.’”

Smith spends his newly acquired free time doing homework, while also learning new music and trying to remember all the Italian for his upcoming performances. He particularly enjoys his voice pedagogy class, taught by Dr. Noemi Lugo, learning about the anatomy and physiology of the voice and what goes into singing.

“I've been able to learn from some of my colleagues in the class just based on some of their own experiences, and I've been able to share some of the experiences I've had myself,” he said. “I feel as though I appreciate the class much more now than I probably would have if I'd just continued on to my master's straight out of undergraduate.”

Although Smith said he does not need the master's to further his singing career, he does think it will be beneficial when he lives out another of his dreams: to become a vocal teacher.

“I have the greatest job in the world, but I've always wanted to be a teacher. I always wanted to be a choir teacher,” he said.

Smith loved the idea so much that he earned one of his

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Iris Fordjour-Hankins

With all the negatives associated with COVID-19, it might seem impossible to turn it into something positive. But that's exactly what Iris Fordjour-Hankins did. Everyday life slowed down just enough when the pandemic first took hold that she was able to work on finishing her doctorate in voice at UK.

“I'm not saying COVID is a good thing ... it just happened that the timing made it so that I could focus on finishing this degree,” said Fordjour-Hankins, an assistant professor of voice at Oakwood University in Huntsville, Alabama.

Focus was the key for the Michigan-born soprano. That's the thing she lacked back in 2013 when, needing only to take two of three exit exams required for completion of her doctorate, “family tragedies” struck. Fordjour-Hankins' husband, Ernest Hankins, became “deathly ill,” requiring her to become his caregiver. Then her mother and sister passed away within 18 months of each other.

Plus, she no longer had the time to study and prepare for the exams. Because her husband could no longer work, she had to find a job to support the family of four.

“Life just hit so hard there was no way I could focus on finishing the degree,” she said. “I don't like to leave things unfinished. But I just couldn't find the mental clarity to do it.”

With her doctorate on the back burner, Fordjour-Hankins turned her attention to her husband's care, her family, and teaching. Initially, after taking the job at Oakwood University, she and her children, Iman and EJ, had to drive back and forth from Huntsville to Lexington, where her husband remained in the hospital for weeks.

One thing she spent little time doing, though, was “wallowing.”

“You don't wallow in negatives. That's the way I was raised,” she said. “There's a time for everything. I wallowed when it was appropriate to wallow.”

The same can be said for when COVID-19 shut everything down, including a Strauss opera in Germany



Iris Fordjour-Hankins

she was preparing for and the in-person classes she was teaching at Oakwood.

“When COVID came, I had the opportunity to be at home here with my family. Of course, things slowed down a bit and I was able to focus on voice not just for the sake of teaching but because I like to perform,” she said.

Fordjour-Hankins, who received a bachelor's degree from Oakwood University and a master's from Boston University, originally pursued a doctorate after winning second place – and a full scholarship to UK – in the Alltech Vocal Scholarship Competition in 2013. She and her family, who were living in Detroit at the time, packed up and moved to Lexington.

“It was the best choice I ever made,” she said. “Someone saw a talent in me and planted the seed that I should obtain a doctorate.”

Now, along with teaching online classes at Oakwood, Fordjour-Hankins is working with a tutor to prepare for

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Smith

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bachelor's degrees in choral music education.

“It was actually very tough for me to choose the performing career road at the time,” he said. “But I reminded myself ... people will always need good teachers.”

And, he added, he was aware that “the window of opportunity to perform is only open for so long.”

Smith is grateful for the time the pandemic has given

him to work on his master's, as well as to continue some of his other pursuits, including teaching master classes, mentoring young people, working one-on-one with high school students to prepare for undergraduate auditions, and even doing an online cooking show with opera star Denyce Graves.

This fall, Smith will perform two recitals, both of which will be recorded. He is also putting together performances with the Atlanta Opera Players' “reimagined” season, as well as performances with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra.

How does one teach during a pandemic?

By Dr. Everett McCorvey

That is the question that I have been asking myself since March 13 when it was evident that the University was going to finish the rest of the spring semester online. A year ago at this time, none of us used the word Zoom! Then, all of a sudden, everybody was talking about it. In the beginning, teaching on Zoom was a challenge. The sound quality was awful, the internet was unstable, and my wife chided me for screaming into the laptop as if I were trying to reach them in their homes simply by talking louder.

After March 13, the first thing that we had to learn was how to access Zoom. Luckily, the University made it a little easier for us. But once we got on, we realized it was meant for speaking voices and not for operatic voices. Typically, what happens on a Zoom call is that the audio sound is quashed after a certain decibel. So, the minute a soprano or tenor or baritone with a big voice would sing an ascending scale, the decibel levels were quashed to zero and the listener wouldn't hear anything.

After musicians everywhere had trouble with Zoom, sound engineers and virtual learning enthusiasts began working on new solutions! The best one we found was an audio site called Cleanfeed. So, whenever I have a lesson with a student, I will send them a Zoom link, but I will also send them a Cleanfeed link. I will then put the audio for Zoom on mute and instead use the audio from Cleanfeed to listen to the student.



Student Wagner Pástor sings via Zoom for Dr. Everett McCorvey.

Some singers also used FaceTime, which is through the Apple platform, and that was OK, but internet instability is still a challenge. Another challenge that has yet to be figured out is latency – the time that it takes for the transmission to reach the two parties over the Zoom platform. The result is that singers cannot sing in real time. I am sure engineers somewhere are working on a solution to this problem so that a teacher, a singer, and a pianist can all be in separate rooms and collaborate and perform together in real time! I really look forward to when that can happen! But actually, what I really look forward to, is being together again.

Fall Opera Gala

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“More people around the country and, indeed, around the world will be able to see it,” he said.

The gala is part of the School of Music's Concerts in the Classroom series. It will feature no scenery, no

costumes, and no orchestra. Only two pianos will accompany the performers. However, newly purchased recording and lighting equipment will enhance the experience, McCorvey said.

Most numbers will be performed in masks, McCorvey said, to follow the safety guidelines for COVID-19. To enable the students to spread out

further during their performances, they will also perform in the audience space of the concert hall of the Singletary Center for the Arts, facing the stage.

“We can spread out further and better if the singers are in the audience,” McCorvey said, “so we can adhere to the social distance guidelines.”

Fordjour-Hankins

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the two exit exams she still needs to take and will later write her dissertation. She also works virtually in Dr. Angeliqye Clay-Everett's studio preparing for her final recitals. She

plans to be finished by the fall of 2021.

“Studying at this level is exciting and keeps me moving forward. I am gaining knowledge and an expanded skill base that challenges me and gives me what I need to perform for audiences and teach others at a high level of performance,” she said.

Fordjour-Hankins said she would have finished the degree eventually, but COVID provided the impetus to do it sooner rather than later.

“The calling was so strong in me that this is the time that I need to do this,” she said.

Terri McLean

APPLAUSE!

NEWS TO CLAP ABOUT

Tawengwa steps into inaugural role

Castle of our Skins, Boston's prolific producer of concerts and other cultural programming that celebrates Black excellence in classical music and beyond, welcomed University of Kentucky doctoral student Tanyaradzwa

Tawengwa as its inaugural creative-in-residence. As a composer and scholar of historic Black composers, Tawengwa said that she feels “bliss” to step into a position officially titled the Shirley Graham Du Bois Creative-in-Residence — named for the composer-activist Shirley Graham Du Bois, wife of the writer and activist W.E.B. Du Bois.

Tawengwa studied voice, piano, and cello throughout childhood in Harare, Zimbabwe. During college in the United States, she picked up mbira (a family of “thumb pianos” with plucked tines, essential to traditional Shona ceremonial music in southern Africa) and began to archive the songs of her grandmothers on trips home. She majored in music at Princeton, where her 2014 senior recital blended original compositions with the “chimurenga” anthems of Zimbabwe's War of Liberation, first-person narratives of the war taken verbatim from interviews with



Tanyaradzwa Tawengwa

family members, and projections of archival footage. She received her master's in vocal performance from UK.

She later developed these pieces into her first opera, *Dawn of the Rooster: A Choral Drama*, which toured internationally. She also co-created an off-Broadway musical (*Africa My Beautiful*), provided mbira arrangements for Danai Gurira's *Familiar* at Yale Repertory Theatre, and formed the Mushandirapamwe

Singers with fellow Black opera students during her studies at the UK. A June 2020 Facebook post recounting her experience in Glimmerglass's Young Artist Program ignited a fury of online discussion about racism in the opera world, a topic of much discussion over the past year.

For her dissertation at UK, where she is a student of Dr. Everett McCorvey in the UK Opera Theatre, Tawengwa is creating a critical edition of an opera by Edward Boatner. She is a touring member of McCorvey's American Spiritual Ensemble

and is the founder of MUSHANDIRAPAMWE Trust, a cultural arts organization dedicated to developing vocal talent in Zimbabwe. She is also founder and CEO of Nhanha INC., a benefit corporation whose mission is to preserve Zimbabwean culture in the form of books, music, and cartoons for children.

Mary Powell

Metropolitan Opera National Council auditions go virtual

In past years, one of the recurrent pleasures of the fall opera season in Lexington has been attending the Metropolitan Opera National Council auditions at the Singletary Center on the University of Kentucky campus to cheer on University of Kentucky Opera Theatre students. However, with the advent of COVID-19, the 2020-2021 season will be different: all District and Regional MONC auditions will be conducted virtually.

This year, the national competition opened with a required Qualifying Round in September, said Cacey Clarke Nardolillo, director of MONC auditions for the Kentucky District. All applicants submitted a video audition before the Oct. 5 deadline; after review by a panel of judges from the Met to determine who would advance to the district level, all applicants were provided with written comments by the judges, intended to encourage vocal improvements in future competitions.

The singers selected for the district level were informed

by Oct. 12, so that they could choose a district competition whose audition date best suited their schedules. The Kentucky District auditions will be held virtually on Sunday, Nov. 8, at 11 a.m. EST.

Unfortunately, due to copyright rules, the auditions will not be open for audience viewing. Dr. Cliff Jackson (UK School of Music) will provide pre-recorded piano accompaniments for all of the UKOT contestants. Singers will perform by appointment and will receive verbal feedback from the Met-appointed panel of judges, who will choose up to three winners to move on to the Central Region round on March 21, 2021.

The Kentucky District will announce its winners the day of the auditions and will provide additional Encouragement Awards for those singers who the judges feel show great promise but who are not yet ready for the next level of competition. Regional winners will advance to the MONC Semi-finals and then on to the Grand Finals.

Mary Powell

Clarke awarded honorary doctorate

The Board of Trustees of the University of Kentucky voted in February to award an Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters to OperaLex Vice President Dr. Harry Clarke.

Clarke was associated with the UK School of Music for 43 years after arriving there in 1965 as a teaching assistant for the marching band while working on his doctorate. In 1968, he became director of bands, a position he held for 21 years. During that time, the Wildcat Marching Band grew from 30 members to 300, transitioned to include women, and became recognized as one of the best in the country. Clarke also served as director of the UK



Dr. Harry Clarke

School of Music and received the Kentucky Music Education Distinguished Service Award for his outstanding contributions to the field

of music.

After retiring from UK in 2011, Clarke was elected to the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Council. He joined the OperaLex board in 2015 and has served on other boards, including Planning and Public Works, Public Safety, Friends of the Arboretum, Picnic with the Pops, and the Tree Board.

The UK Board of Trustees approved awarding the honorary doctorate upon the recommendation of the University Faculty Senate and the Joint Committee on Honorary Degrees. This honor was to be bestowed during the spring, but due to the pandemic there has not yet been a ceremony.

New newsletter editor named; Carfagno thanked for years served

After 10 years as the BravoLex editor, Jacalyn Carfagno has retired. Stepping into the role is Terri McLean.

Carfagno, who oversaw the newsletter through many changes, is recognized for her "dedication, determination, and patience," said Sylvia Davis, a Bravo Guild representative to the OperaLex board and newsletter copy editor.

"One of the highlights of my life over the past several years has been working with editor Jaci Carfagno," Davis said. "Jaci is the consummate professional who never gives up until a piece is just right. We worked together with never an argument and were able to joke about the 'comma wars.' With the rules on the use of commas ever changing, we simply agreed to be consistent in dealing with those little critters. It is thanks to her talent that the newsletter, already a good one, became a superior one."

Carfagno took over the newsletter in 2010. In 2014, when the organization changed from Lexington Opera Society to OperaLex, the newsletter name changed to BravoLex and she and designer Janet Shedd added color, giving it a more vibrant look. She also introduced the feature "Happenings" to expand the calendar listings

and "Applause" as it became more common that UKOT grads, students, and teachers went out and achieved more in the world.

"I'm deeply indebted to the many volunteers who wrote for the newsletters, to Dr. (Everett) McCorvey and his assistants who were invaluable in helping us track down grads, find photos, nail down dates and facts, and to no one more than Sylvia Davis, who carefully copy edited each issue, keeping me out of trouble and educating me along the way," Carfagno said.

McLean brings 40 years of writing and editing experience to the position. She worked for many years at the Lexington Herald-Leader, as well as two other newspapers. She also worked for the UK College of Agriculture, Food, and Environment's news service. Currently, she works part-time for the Down Syndrome Association of Central Kentucky and maintains a freelance writing and editing business.

"I've already met some amazing people associated with UKOT and the Bravo Guild, and I'm looking forward to helping showcase the great work that goes on in front of and behind the scenes," McLean said.

Alternate renditions offer rich experience

By Dr. Tedrin Blair Lindsay

The imprecise term "grand opera" is used to describe large-scale operas of the 19th century, epic four- or five-act affairs based on stories from history or literature, with spectacular scenic effects, gigantic orchestra and chorus, and featuring at least one sumptuous ballet as a highlight of the long, loud evening! Three of these works have been lifelong favorites of mine, partially because of resplendent recordings that I have treasured. However, I recently decided to familiarize myself with alternate renditions, and while none can replace the versions I have known and loved, they are all worthy supplements.

First, I have long listened to Rossini's last and greatest opera *Guillaume Tell* (1829), originally in French with five acts, in its standard four-act Italian version, *Guglielmo Tell*, as recorded by Riccardo Chailly and the National Philharmonic Orchestra in 1980 (London 417 154-2). This legendary recording boasts an all-star cast headed by the marvelous baritone Sherrill Milnes as William Tell, with renowned tenor, soprano, and bass Luciano Pavarotti, Mirella Freni, and Nicolai Ghiaurov in other leading roles. The dramatic excitement is palpable and the vocalism thrilling in this traversal, but I have long felt I needed a worthy French original version. Lambert's Gardelli's *Guillaume Tell* with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra actually pre-dates my beloved Italian version, and also features a starry international cast including Gabriel Bacquier in the title role, and Nicolai Gedda and Montserrat Caballé as the lovers. As great as these artists are, they can't match the vocal luster of Chailly's cast, but it is wonderful to hear the expansive, full-length original French grand opera as Rossini conceived it. (Warner Classics 50999-6-40763-2-4)

Next, I have often wondered whether the kind lady who brought me an opera record when I was sick as a child hadn't meant to present me with the popular *La Traviata*, but instead mistakenly got me *Les Troyens*, Berlioz' colossal 1858 epic of the Trojan War and subsequent adventures of Aeneas. Never mind ... from first listening, I was lost in the Homeric story and the lush, descriptive music as rendered in 1969 by Sir Colin Davis and the Covent Garden forces (Philips 416 432-2). With the reigning Heldentenor of the day Jon Vickers as Aeneas, the lustrous-voiced mezzos Josephine Veasey as Queen Dido and Berit Lindholm as the doomsayer Cassandra, and a host of British stars in the supporting parts, it is really just perfect. However, Charles Dutoit's 1994 recording with his



Orchestre Symphonique de Montreal is a solid achievement. Gary Lakes, Françoise Pollet, and Deborah Voigt give worthy accounts of the leading roles. The orchestra sounds particularly voluptuous in this stunning masterpiece of French grand opera. (Decca 478-3043)

Finally, one of my favorite operas of all is Ponchielli's turgidly melodramatic *La Gioconda* (1876). The creaky, improbable story by Victor Hugo pits individuals of different social classes against each other in unhappy amorous intrigues, with dramatic scenes featuring large crowds and scenic spectacles, including the celebrated ballet "The Dance of the Hours." Full of famous arias, this opera is one of the few actually to put forth six leading roles comprising the six voice types, and I especially love Act 2 with its maritime setting so redolent of the sea than one can practically smell the salt air. I will always cherish the 1959 recording starring the divine soprano Maria Callas in the title role, my favorite mezzo Fiorenza Cossotto as her enemy/savior Laura, tenor Pier Miranda Ferraro as the love rival Enzo, baritone Piero Cappuccilli as the villainous Barnaba, contralto Irene Companeez as Gioconda's blind mother, and bass Ivo Vinci as Laura's vengeful husband, a production of La Scala under the baton of Antonio Votto. (EMI 7-49518-2) In all honesty, I can't imagine a more perfect, atmospheric rendition, but I discovered one that comes close, also mainly because of the superb cast, the subsequent generation's answer to Callas' power-cast: Montserrat Caballé, Agnes Baltsa, Luciano Pavarotti, Sherrill Milnes, Alfreda Hodgson, and Nicolai Ghiaurov. This excellent alternative was led by Bruno Bartoletti in 1981 with the National Philharmonic Orchestra. (London 414-349-2)



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