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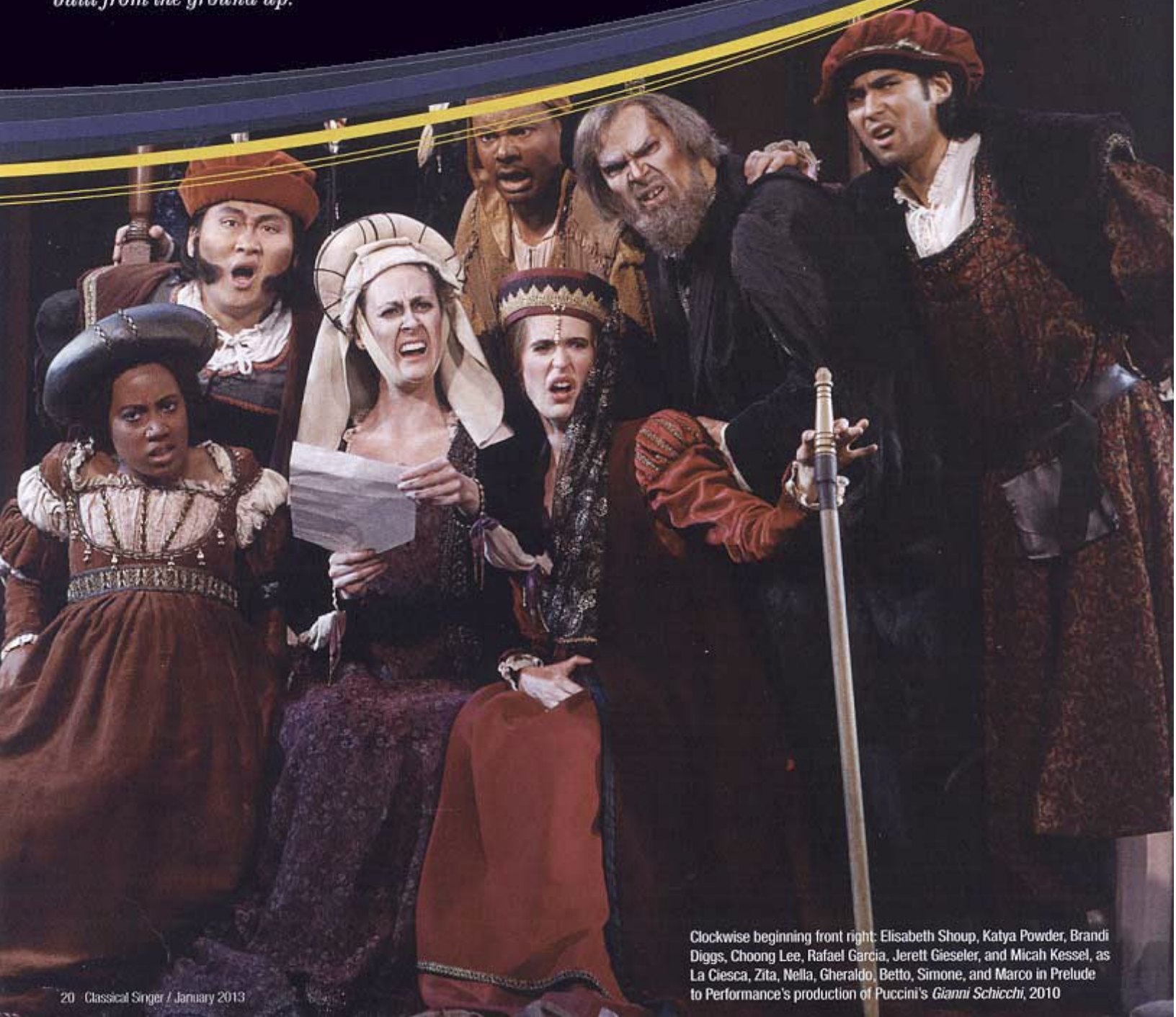


# Prelude to Greatness:

Martina Arroyo's Gift to the Next Generation of Singers

BY MICHELLE LATOUR

*Soprano Martina Arroyo enjoyed an illustrious career singing the lirico-spinto roles in the largest opera houses around the globe during the '60s, '70s, and '80s. Her interpretations of Verdi, Puccini, Strauss, and Mozart have become legendary, and she has also premiered new works for William Bolcom, Carlo Franci, and Samuel Barber. During her career, Arroyo discovered a gift and a love for teaching which ultimately landed her at Indiana University. Now she sits down with CS to discuss how she has continued teaching singers over the last 10 years in a remarkable summer program she has built from the ground up.*



Clockwise beginning front right: Elisabeth Shoup, Katya Powder, Brandi Diggs, Choong Lee, Rafael Garcia, Jerett Gieseler, and Micah Kessel, as La Ciesca, Zita, Nella, Gheraldo, Betto, Simone, and Marco in Prelude to Performance's production of Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*, 2010



## Wanted:

Thirty to 45 young singers to participate in a six-week intensive training program in New York City. A unique opportunity to prepare the complete interpretation of an operatic role, culminating in four fully staged performances of two complete operas with orchestra in a pre-eminent New York venue. Fifteen world-class faculty members instruct you about the use of language to convey character, the use of body and voice in the interpretation of character the psychological motivations of character, and stage and combat movement. In addition, you will have weekly individual coachings and be engaged in four hours of daily rehearsals with a prominent stage director. Of, yes, and the best part? This is a tuition-free program!

Does this sound too good to be true? It is true and, even better, you get to work with the wonderful Martina Arroyo. This program, called Prelude to Performance, is part of the Martina Arroyo Foundation and will celebrate its tenth year in 2014. I was fortunate enough to speak with Ms. Arroyo via Skype about her career, her philosophy on teaching, and her commitment to the next generation of singers through her foundation.

Arroyo is recognized as one of the pre-eminent lirico-spinto sopranos of our time and is famous for her interpretations of Verdi, Puccini, Strauss, and Mozart. She has performed in many of the world's most prestigious opera houses-including Paris Opera, London's Covent Garden, Milan's La Scala, Vienna State Opera, and Buenos Aires Teatro Colon-as well as having the honor of three opening night performances at the Metropolitan Opera. She has made more than 50 recordings of major operas and orchestral works and has appeared on NBC's *The Tonight Show* over 20 times ([www.martinaarroyo.com](http://www.martinaarroyo.com))

Arroyo is indeed a superstar with an incredibly illustrious career, yet her work with the Martina Arroyo Foundation demonstrates her dedication to nurturing future generations of singers. "As both performer and teacher, Ms. Arroyo has always perceived that it is essential to understand all aspects of an operatic role in order to achieve a personal interpretation that is effective," states the Martina Arroyo Foundation website. She first created a course in role preparation while serving as Distinguished Professor of Music at the Indiana University School of Music. This became the basis of a program she later offered to young singers in New York City, and the success of that led to the establishment of the Martina Arroyo Foundation in 2003.



Joshua Conyers and Megan Picerno as the title role and Zerlina in Prelude to Performance's *Don Giovanni*

photo by Jen Joyce Davis

### **You conceived Prelude to Performance while teaching at Indiana University. What was the inspiration for the creation of this course?**

The idea for helping young singers in the preparation and interpretation of an entire operatic role actually began when I was teaching at Louisiana State University. I found myself working with wonderful talents who had done little in the way of acting and investigating of their characters in depth. I also thought that they needed to spend more time working on the language so that they would understand exactly what they are saying-and by that, I do not mean just translating the text, but really knowing the idioms of the language.

Having greatly benefitted personally from this in-depth study, I was inspired to start a little class-first at LSU with just a few people from my studio, and later at Indiana University, where it was offered to all voice students. It was just amazing how strongly the young people felt about this class, some signing up over a year in advance.

At Indiana University, the class was offered as an elective course rather than a core requirement, because of university regulations and other degree restrictions. Nevertheless, it grew and grew, which made me think that if this was working here, it would be valuable in New York as well. Several of the students from IU came and took the class with me in New York City

during the summer, and so that is how it started.

In New York, the class became Prelude to Performance, an intensive six-week training program. In the beginning we could not afford anything more than presenting three performances of a full opera (The Marriage of Figaro), fully costumes and staged, with piano accompaniment. In addition, we also performed several complete acts from various other operas, costumed and staged, as well as concert versions of these operas in their entirety; all with piano.

After this first year, we moved to a larger space and decided that we needed an orchestra. The intention was to have something closer to a real performance, and an orchestra makes all the difference in the world in terms of how you shape

the phrases and how you work with the range of instrumental colors, etc. We were able to get an orchestra together thanks to the incredible people on our foundation board who said, "OK, let's go for it." At that time we were charging a tuition fee of \$3,000 per participant which also helped, along with the money raised at our annual gala. After that year it was clear that we wanted to put on only entire performances.

**The Prelude to Performance program now culminates in four fully staged opera performances of two different operas. The Martina Arroyo Foundation website describes the program as "A method of specialized training that incorporates learning the historic framework of the drama and musical style, exploring the psychology**

**and motivation of each character, and studying ways to use the body and the voice, including language and diction, to understand and express character."** **What does a typical daily schedule look like for Prelude to Performance?**

Classes run Monday through Friday, from 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., and some Saturdays. In the morning, singers work in four different classes: a foreign language study class, a libretto study class, a role study class, and a stagecraft class. In addition, there are weekly elective classes on topics such as stage combat, makeup, and costumes, as well as career management seminars.

In the foreign language study class singers work through the language of the entire opera. In the libretto study class ("Speak Your Part") they speak their part as prose, exactly how they would say it as a native speaker.

Martina Arroyo (lower right corner) with the 2011 Prelude to Performance Singers





It is always very telling, as is clearly demonstrated how a young singer understands the real meaning of a phrase. In the role study class, they probe deeper into the character as well as [think about] "before page one". It is always very telling, as is clearly demonstrated how a young singer understands the real meaning of a phrase. In the role study class, they probe deeper into the character as well as [think about] "before page one," [as they] examine stagecraft class, taught by Stephen Mo Hanan (a Tony-nominated actor, who just performed the role of King Lear in New York City), they explore character study on a more physical level—for instance, how the character would move on stage. Cori Ellison, dramaturg, and Ken Benson, consultant, have also offered wonderful masterclasses.

I have to tell you that the girls always beat the heck out of the guys! It began as a masterclass, but was so valuable in teaching participants how to fall, how to slap another character, and how to use a sword, that we incorporated it into a regular Friday class.

Steven Horak, who has been on the makeup department staff at the Met for 19 seasons, presents masterclasses as does Charles Caine, who was a resident costume designer at the Met for 16 seasons. Both Steven and Charles do the makeup, wigs, and costumes for our productions as well. These people do this for little or no money but they come year after year, working like crazy because they believe that it needs to be done. Speaking of costumes, we always have wonderful ones, because truly

understanding the nuance of the character has a lot to do with how you look and how you walk. Elisabeth de Valois would not walk the same as Carmen, so feeling the difference between the queen's costume and Carmen's costume will help the singer feel the character even more.

The afternoons are comprised of staging rehearsals, musical rehearsals with the conductor and individual coachings. IN the beginning of the program, there are two days of doing nothing but singing through the opera with the conductors, because the students must know their parts from the beginning. The program culminates with a highlights concert and the four opera performances. The singers work five days a week, sometimes six, for six weeks. It is not easy.



“Since going tuition free, we have almost doubled our applicants and are receiving over 400 applications a year. We are overjoyed with this, but that comes with the additional responsibility of picking the best singers we can.”

Prelude to Performance is no longer a tuition-based program and, instead, has been tuition free since 2011. Can you elaborate on this?

We did go tuition free a few years ago, which helped us to invite many of the wonderful singers who could not afford to pay \$3,000 and there are so many talented singers out there who just do not have the extra money. The Martina Arroyo Foundation is a nonprofit organization, and Prelude to Performance has been generously

supported by several sources, including the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.

Since going tuition free, we have almost doubled our applicants and are receiving over 400 applications a year. We are overjoyed with this, but that comes with the additional responsibility of picking the best singers we can.

However, we do accept auditors and covers, as we recognize that some

singers can be very young and not quite ready. They are invited to get into the atmosphere of learning how to approach a role. We cannot ask a 19-year-old to sing some of the repertoire we present, but there are still 19-year-olds who understand how they might want to portray a character in the future.

**In addition to a world-class faculty, you also offer guest masterclasses that are given by some of the world's finest opera performers singing today. I noticed on your website that last year's guests included tenor Anthony Laciura, mezzo-soprano Stephanie Blythe, and soprano Elizabeth Futral.**

We have over 15 teachers for the six-week course, but we also want the participants to be aware of not only our opinions but also to opinions of people out there in the business. When we get highly acclaimed artists as honest and as caring as Stephanie Blythe, Elizabeth Futral, and Anthony



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Angela Gribble as Queen of the Night in Prelude to Performance's *Die Zauberflöte*, 2010

Laciura to share their experiences and thoughts with the participants, the students become even more encouraged about where they are going.

These young singers constantly hear from teachers and coaches about the areas of their voice that need work, refinement, or improvement. Our guest clinicians tell the students how they must be prepared when they get out into the business, and this helps the young artists become even more successful.

**Right! So many talented singers become overly critical and discouraged because all they hear is negative feedback about the voice, their acting skills, or even their looks. I have participated in masterclasses where the guest clinician taught through fear and intimidation. It is encouraging that you give so much of yourself to these students, because obviously there is much they can learn from you, from the amazing faculty you have gathered together, and from the entire Prelude to Performance experience.**

Yes, they can even learn what not to do. Fear cannot help anybody's growth ever. And don't think that I am not tough with them, I am-but not through fear and not through intimidation. You are only as good as your last performance. You offer the young singer advice, suggestions, and feedback. I do not have a magic bullet, but I can tell singers what helped me, and if you figure out what works well for you, then you keep growing.

**Ultimately, it is up to the student to either accept or reject what you are offering. They might finally understand the information you were trying to impart to them five year down the road.**

Absolutely! I cannot tell you how many singers come back to me years later and exclaim, "You know what you told me three years ago? I thought you were crazy!" But something will click with



## ALUMNI FEEDBACK

And what about alumni from the Prelude to Performance program? Many have gone on to launch highly successful careers and can be found performing on professional stages around the world. Bass-Baritone Ryan Speedo Green (2011-2012) is with the Metropolitan Operas Lindemann program; soprano Lenora Green (2011) has sung with Glimmerglass Opera, Sarasota Opera, Michigan Opera Theater, and is now with New Orleans Opera; and bass-baritone Patrick Guetti (2011), baritone Joshua Conyers (2011), and bass-baritone André Courville (2007, 2011-2012) will all be young artists at Santa Fe Opera this summer. Several other accomplished past participants took time out of their busy singing schedules to share their experiences.

Tenor Taylor Stayton participated in Prelude to Performance in 2006 and 2007 while still an undergraduate performance major at Ohio State University. Although one of the younger participants, Stayton gained invaluable knowledge that put him on the right track for a successful start in his very challenging career. Prior to completing the program, Stayton admits, I was very unaware of what it took to 'learn' an opera and I was completely unaware of the amount of work it took to really understand all the nuances going on within an opera. With Prelude's guidance, I left the program with abounding confidence, and it gave me the foundation that I still rely on today:

And where is Stayton today? Singing in several major houses across the globe, including covering three roles at the Met. He made his operatic debut with Teatro dell'Opera di Roma three years ago singing the role of Fenton in Verdi's *Falstaff*, and made his debut at Glyndebourne Opera and Bayerische Staatsoper this past summer. He has sung roles with New York City Opera, Opera Company of Philadelphia, Chicago Opera Theater, and Des Moines Metro Opera in addition to having future engagements with national and international companies.

Another success story and adamant supporter of the program is tenor Noah Stewart, who felt that "Prelude provided a much needed bridge that was an essential and significant jump starting my early career." He attended Prelude to Performance in 2005 after graduating from Juilliard, where Stewart found himself "working, auditioning, taking lessons and trying to break out of a cycle that left me asking what comes next when Ms. Arroyo called and asked if I would be interested in singing Nemorino with Willie Waters conducting, I jumped at the opportunity. I can only describe my experience as a privilege and a blessing. It brought back a fire and a desire which I had lost along the way. Shortly afterward, I was accepted into the San Francisco Opera Merola Program and then the SFO Adler Fellowship Program.

Stewart has since made his Royal Albert Hall debut in London and his Royal Opera debut in Judith Weir's *Miss Fortune*. He was signed as an artist to Universal Records/Decca, and his album, *Noah*, was number one on the classical charts for seven weeks. Stewart has even performed on the UK's show *Dancing on Ice* with Torvill and Dean. He is headed back to London and Lisbon for future productions.

Soprano Eleni Calenos discovered her love for classical singing and opera later in life, since she already had a career as a cellist and Greek singer. She sang the role of Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni* in 2006 with Prelude to Performance. I was very impressed when I received a glowing review on the day following my performance by *The New York Times*. Not bad for the new kid on the block." The most important lesson she learned? "The opportunity to be on stage and to try my stamina. Learning how to pace myself, and managing my nerves under the pressure of a performance."

And now? "My career has taken a steady ascent," Calenos explains, singing operatic and concert repertoire with regional companies throughout the U.S. and presenting her first international engagement as Hanna Glawari in *The Merry Widow* in Belgium. Upcoming performances include Countess Almaviva with Austin Lyric Opera and her debut as Nedda in *I pagliacci* with Shreveport Opera.

Tenor Michele Angelini, a 2005 alumnus, who earned a Bachelor degree in bassoon and vocal performance and discovered singing while in college, reveals this of his experience: "I learned how to function as a singer. Playing in an orchestra and getting up on stage are two very different experiences that require diverse skill sets. Not only was the opportunity to work with established industry professionals an extraordinary gift, but the fact that they would not allow me to lower my standards of preparation or to doubt myself was in itself an amazing gift."

Since then, Angelini has been fortunate to work and perform in national and international venues such as Brussels, Bologna, Rome, Florence, Siena, Savonlinna, Stockholm, Bilbao, Oslo, Düsseldorf, Denver, Connecticut, Fort Worth, Austin, Los Angeles, and New York City. Upcoming engagements include performances in New Orleans, Miami, Atlanta, and London.

As Angelini eloquently sums up, "Any singer who is serious about performing should absolutely participate in Prelude to Performance. It gives such a well-rounded, fantastic experience from the moment you crack open the score to the moment it is put on stage. I have made life-long contacts, mentors, and friends—and the pay off, if one does the work and stays dedicated, is incredible:



Jason Plourde as the title role in Prelude to Performance's production of Verdi's *Falstaff*, 2012



then in a rehearsal or a performance or a voice lesson, and they will think, "Oh, that is what Ms' Arroyo meant!" Then that happens, this accomplished one of the goals.

**You have made your mark as a teacher since 1985. What draws you to teaching?**

I started teaching at LSU because the music department dean at LSU, Dr. Daniel Sher—who is now dean of the College of Music at the University of Colorado-Boulder—heard me sing in a concert with tenor James McCracken. He came backstage after the concert and asked if I would come teach for him. I said, "Absolutely not! No, no, no. I am not a voice teacher. No, thank you."

He persisted, and I finally started teaching at LSU to the most wonderful and appreciative students. Until then, I had only given masterclasses. The students were so glad to work.

photo by Jen Joyce Davis



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Rogelio Penaverde, Kelli Butler, Yulung Bae, and Fleur Barron, as Tamino, First Lady, Second Lady, and Third Lady, Prelude to Performance's *Die Zauberflöte*, 2010

Sometimes you go to a more prominent school and they are a little bit nonchalant, But there were no attitudes at LSU, only gratitude at receiving new ideas. One of the people in those classes was tenor Paul Graves, who worked his way right to the top. **I love your description of opera as "the melting pot of many art forms." You go on to elaborate that it takes years of study and dedication to become a mature artist. What advice can you give to young singers who are interested in pursuing a career in opera?**

It takes a lot of work, and you cannot achieve everything in a one-hour weekly voice lesson. There have to be classes: there have to be different people working with a singer to bring it all together. Acting is reacting to something else, and you have to know what you are reacting to, which means you have to know what is being said to you. You have to know



Photo by Jan Joyce Davis

What do singers at the Met, San Francisco, Chicago, Paris and Covent Garden share?



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Yiselle Blum and Clara Heikyoung Yu as Dorabella and Fiordiligi in Prelude to Performance's *Così fan tutte*, 2012

photo by Jen Joyce Davis

what is being said about you. You have to know where you are from a historical perspective. You have to know the political context of the opera. You have to do all the work. Your teacher, in one hour, cannot lay it all out.

**I found fascinating your description of your early training when your voice teacher, Marinka Gurewich, felt that you were not taking your training seriously enough. As a teacher, have you found yourself in this position with other promising singers?**

I have found that if a singer has a beautiful instrument, I crack down even harder because they have to be made aware early on of how much is involved. Having a great instrument means nothing if it does not say anything-and in order for it to say something, you've got to know what you are saying. When I was a young girl, if you got up there

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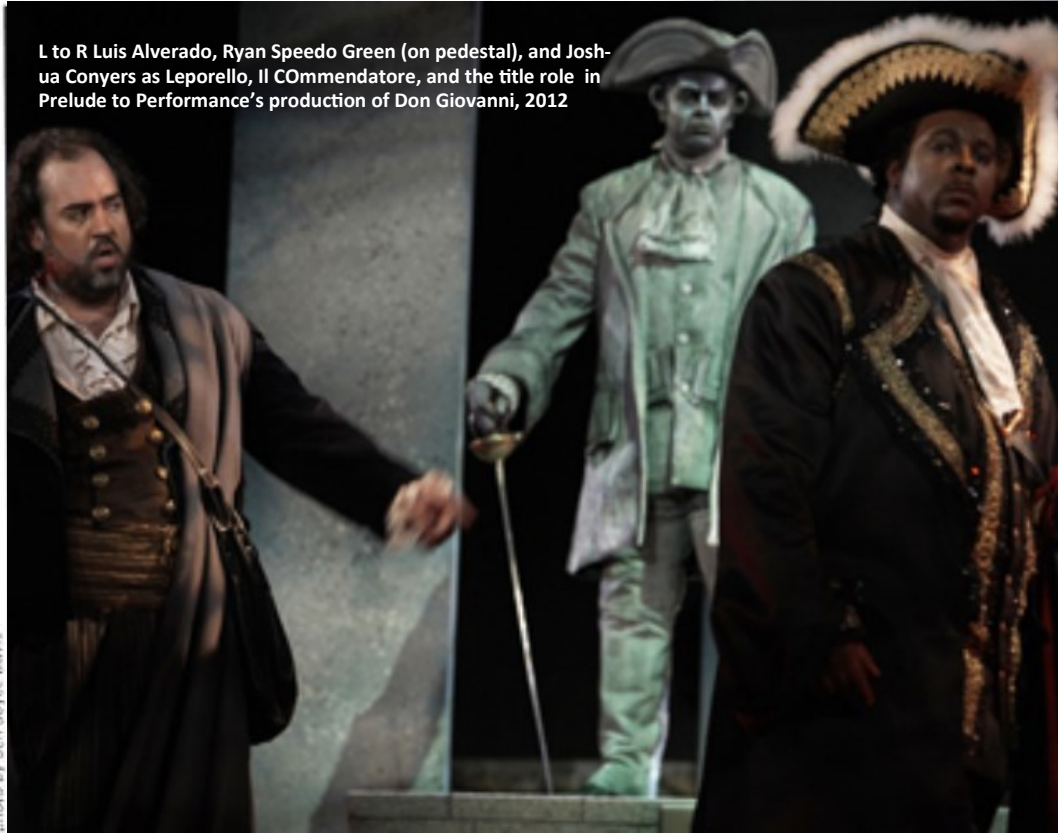


and sang beautiful high C's, opened up your arms and "directed traffic," many people were very happy. Now it is different. But even then there were always exceptions to the rule-singers like Claudia Muzio and Maria Callas-artist that were so outstanding because they made characters live.

Now you are not only judged by what you do and how you do it, but you have to be thin as well, which I think is ridiculous. Certainly taking care of yourself and looking good on stage is important, but that does not mean you have to be model thin, especially if you are sacrificing the growth of your voice for how you look.

**In your early years, you describe the difficulties of juggling a full-time job with studying singing, first teaching English at the high school level and then turning to being a social worker. What advice would you give to singers facing a similar dilemma with balancing full-time work and full-time study?**

It is difficult to give advice because each situation is different. When I was working for the welfare department, I had two incredible directors. My immediate director would let me take voice lessons during my lunch hour, as long as I got my work done. His supervisor was a big support of music and always wanted to know how my career was progressing. When I won the Met auditions, they were prouder



L to R Luis Alverado, Ryan Speedo Green (on pedestal), and Joshua Conyers as Leporello, Il COmmendatore, and the title role in Prelude to Performance's production of Don Giovanni, 2012

than anybody. Another singer might be in a situation where their boss is not going to let them have those privileges of taking an extra hour here or there for an audition or taking a lunch break at 4:00 rather than 12:00. If you are in an untenable situation then I would advise to try to get out of it and find another job. I have to tell you, I have been fortunate all my life. I had a great family life and a wonderful husband. When you have people around you who really care about you and nurture you, it is much easier than for those who are not

there fighting on their own. If you can find a mentor, find someone who cares. They can help make the path easier. But it is hard work.

*Soprano Michelle Latour is part of the full-time voice faculty at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas and is the NATS Nevada State Governor. She is active as a singer, teacher, writer, adjudicator, and workshop presenter throughout California, Nevada, and the Midwest. Visit her online at [www.michellelatour.com](http://www.michellelatour.com)*