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OPERAVILLE

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The Irene Dalis Vocal Competition



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The Fifth Annual Irene Dalis Vocal Competition was blessed with some awesomely good young singers, a few welcome moments of mirth and the reappearance of its namesake, the Met legend and Opera San Jose founder, who returned after a nasty car accident and subsequent hospital stay. Miss Dalis was greeted with a much-deserved standing ovation.

The competition is a tribute to that form-within-a-form, the aria, and should not be confused with an opera performance contest. (Speaking to a favorite singer who didn't make the finals, I told her that her own talents take a full three-hour opera to make themselves known, which is precisely why I like her so much.) The Dalis Competition also carries an intriguing element of chance. Each singer submits several arias, and begins by performing one of their own choosing. The second entry is requested on-the-spot by the three-judge panel.

It's much fun to turn this into a handicapping affair, and this year I fared pretty well, picking two out of three on the opera exacta. One of my choices was the winner, Alexandra Lobianco, who was listed in the

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BLOG ARCHIVE

- ▼ 2011 (3)
 - ▼ May (1)
 - The Irene Dalis Vocal Competition
 - ▶ April (1)
 - ▶ February (1)
- ▶ 2010 (14)
- ▶ 2009 (20)
- ▶ 2008 (23)

ABOUT ME



MICHAEL J. VAUGHN
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program as coming from Russia but actually hails from St. Petersburg, Florida. (Whoops!) Lobianco began with Turandot's challenging "In questa reggia" and sang with great power, shaking the walls of the California Theater with her dramatic soprano. She also went against the evening's animated trends and delivered the piece from a static posture, an excellent choice for the Ice Princess. The judges then took her to middle Puccini with Tosca's "Vissi d'arte," perhaps seeking a sensitive side to her skill-set - which is exactly what she delivered.

Second Prize went to California baritone Evan Brummel, whose primary skill is that ineffable quality we call "presence." He simply took over the stage, with a powerful rendering of Rigoletto's "Pari siamo," displaying a high range that was quite affecting. He finished his set with Faust's "Avant de quitter ces lieux" and its thunderous final phrase. Opera San Jose fans will be happy to know that Brummel will be performing with the company in the 2011-12 season.

Third prize went to local favorite tenor Christopher Bengochea, a local favorite who has gone from ringing lyric to muscle-car spinto and now back to an blend of the two that is quite moving. He began with the grand "O Paradis!" from Meyerbeer's "L'Africaine" and was asked to sing "Parmi veder le lagrime," the more challenging of the Duke's pieces from Rigoletto. Bengochea was so intent on his opening aria that he was halfway into Daniel Lockert's piano intro before he realized he hadn't told the audience exactly what he was going to sing.

The rest of the finalists brought highlights aplenty. Guyana soprano Shawnette Sulker began the evening with a vigorous reading of Die Zauberflote's "Der Holle Rache," creating a buzz by employing a few optional notes in the famed staccato passages (and what an intelligent audience to notice such small changes!). Soprano Jennie Litster sang "O luce di quest'anima" from Donizetti's Linda di Chamounix with incredibly seamless phrasing. Soprano Jasmina Halimic employed Deniro-level acting with "Tutto nel cor" from Mozart's Idomeneo, channeling Electra's lunacy so intensely that we were a little concerned for her health. After recovering from some early breathiness, soprano

Rebecca Davis played Dvorak's Song to the Moon with ultimate tenderness.

I was also impressed with the audience's impartiality. Faced with five of ten singers with Opera San Jose connections, they agreed with the judges and voted Lobianco the Audience Favorite. This added \$5,000 to her \$15,000 First Prize. Second prize was \$10,000, Third \$5,000, and the other finalists took home \$2,000 apiece. Soprano Jouvanca Jean-Baptiste won an additional \$1,000 from the Wagner Society for her performance of "Traft ihr das Schiff im meere an" from Die Fliegende Hollander. The \$50,000 total came from the same anonymous donor who has funded the previous four competitions.

Photo by Robert Shomler

Michael J. Vaughn is a 25-year opera critic and author of the novel Operaville, currently available at amazon.com

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