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OPERAVILLE

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Betany Coffland: Putting the "Bel" in Bel Canto

By Michael J. Vaughn

With its unique four-year residency program, Opera San Jose offers its patrons a chance to cultivate actual relationships with its singers: perhaps to develop a list of favorites, or even identify that rare performer who has what it takes to make it in the broader world of opera. Since these singers are also steadily improving during those four years, often these true talents sneak up on you. You might not even remember when it was they first came to your attention. Fortunately, critics have old reviews to jog their memories.

The first thing that struck me about mezzo Betany Coffland was the most obvious: pure vocal power. Singing Dorabella in a February 2009 production of *Così fan tutte*, Coffland paired up with Rebecca Davis's Fiordiligi to make divine ear candy with Mozart's female harmonies. She also delivered an excellent rendition of "Smanie implacabili," Dorabella's hilariously overwrought lamentation. (Coffland later performed the aria in the 2010 Irene Dalis Vocal Competition.) Mental checklist: strong voice, musical wit.

The next revelation came in the November 2009 production of Rossini's *La Cenerentola*, when Coffland took that vocal power and added "lightness, agility, birdsong." She also demonstrated the warmth and charisma a singer needs to "carry" a show. Her performance of the finale, "Non più mesta," was simply masterful. Add to the list: dexterity, star power.

In February 2010, Coffland made her trouser-role debut with the ultimate: Cherubino of *Le Nozze di Figaro*. Here, she illustrated a quality I call the Audience Comfort Quotient. This happens when a patron attends a favorite opera, sees a performer's name on the program, and knows that he can simply sit back and enjoy. "I have already developed the belief," I wrote, "that mezzo Betany Coffland can do no wrong on a stage." She also had the chance to demonstrate a talent for slapstick that was only hinted at in her previous roles. List: audience confidence, physical humor.

In February 2011, everything on the list came together with Rosina of *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. The physical humor was cast-wide, and Coffland offered an intriguing interpretive choice, playing Rosina much

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ABOUT ME



MICHAEL J. VAUGHN

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“feistier” than the usual. Feeling that I was beginning to run out of superlatives, I wrote that the performance “should confirm Coffland’s genius in the special discipline of bel canto mezzo.”

As far as next-big-thing predictions go, here’s the clincher. Not only does Coffland possess the perfect skills for the Mozartean/Rossinian mezzo – she knows it, and seems fully capable of resisting the Puccini-Verdi temptations that have ruined many a singer before her. Even a rather intriguing venture into a Mendocino Carmen was undertaken with the understanding that she would sing with Betany’s voice, and not the usual double-wide Spanish sultry.

I had the pleasure of bumping into Betany at this summer’s San Francisco Ring Cycle, two Italophiles feeling a little lost in the German bigness. We spent our intermissions chatting about bel canto, Opera San Jose and her upcoming role as Idamante in Idomeneo, and I asked her if we could continue our conversation for the readers of The Opera Critic.

How did you first get into singing?

I was surrounded by music as a child. One of my first singing memories is my mother playing the guitar while myself and my three siblings would harmonize to “Jeremiah Was a Bullfrog.” My mother also loved to sing opera and I grew up with her singing “Ch’ il bel sogno” and “Depuis le jour.” To this day, they are still two of my favorite arias.

I began taking voice lessons at age 12 and when I was 15, I started performing in musicals and plays. That first year, I think I juggled school and performing in five different productions. I was constantly busy with late-night rehearsals. I ended up wearing myself out and even getting mononucleosis. Yet, I loved every minute of it.

How did you discover opera?

I was interested in becoming an actress, but knew that I had a voice. The option of going into musical theater was thrown out by my lack of dancing skills. I had a huge “Aha” moment when I attended The Missouri Fine Arts Academy during high school. It was the first time I was completely surrounded by artists: singers, writers, painters, dancers, actors and instrumentalists. These people were creative, interesting and strange. I was hooked. It was that experience that convinced me to choose to attend New England Conservatory of Music. However, the drama and being an honest actress is still an integral part of my creative process and interest in performing opera.

Regarding the Rossinian mezzo repertoire: Did you have an early exposure to this area of opera, or was it a later discovery?

For the first seven years of my singing studies, I sang soprano. It wasn't until my second year of conservatory that I made the switch to mezzo-soprano. At first, this was a really difficult change for me. We singers are so emotionally connected to our voice type and it is a bit of an identity crisis when we switch vocal fachs. However, now I'm so grateful to be a mezzo. It fits my personality.

While I was an undergraduate at New England Conservatory, I auditioned for the graduate program's Opera Workshop Class. It was there that I was assigned my first Rossini aria. During that time I was singing some Handel which also can involve a lot of coloratura singing. Even back then, I knew that it was a good fit.

However, it wasn't until my second season at Opera San Jose that I was given the chance to sing a full role as a Rossini heroine - Angelina, in *La Cenerentola*. I loved it, and people began to pay attention.

What is it about this area of singing that you enjoy?

There are definitely difficult technical aspects about singing Rossini and I like that challenge. I'm a hard worker and enjoy finding those moments of finally letting go and trusting that the technique is there. Part of our job as a singer is making it all look easy. Believe me, it's not. For 30 seconds of Rossini's coloratura you hear on stage, I spend literally hours and hours trying to work that all out. It's amazing to me to think that I have the patience to do that, but ultimately, my voice likes the workout. Finding the body coordination and trust to finally let the voice go is what the audience is waiting to hear. There's something so exquisite in letting go and trusting. Inherently, I believe it's one of the most beautiful things we can do in art and in life. It's extraordinary to think that Rossini brings this out.

Is there a difference in the way you approach trouser roles? What's been your experience with these?

I believe that passion and raw emotions aren't gender-based, regardless of the boundaries society attempts to put on the sexes. When performing a pants-role, in an attempt to be less feminine, I might change my gait and gestures, but ultimately, I don't consciously attempt to "act like a boy." While getting my Masters at Juilliard, I sang Miles in Britten's *The*

Turn
of the Screw and I covered L'enfant in Ravel's L'enfant et les sortilèges.
I've also sung Cherubino and will be doing Siebel this coming Spring.
I'm
currently singing Idamante in Opera San Jose's production of Mozart's
Idomeneo. I love that the name Idamante literally means "from the
heart."
He's such a beautiful character caught in the emotional juxtaposition
of
some major drama. I think ultimately there's something about the
timbre
of a lyric mezzo-soprano's voice that captures the sentiments of young
men
who are coming of age.

How has Opera San Jose helped your development as an artist?

To be a part of the only resident artist opera company in the U.S. has
been
such a blessing. Imagine that I've been able stay in one place for four
years and gain all this experience! I feel so lucky to have been a part
of Irene Dalis's vision and hard work. Ms. Dalis and my experience at
Opera San Jose have taught me lessons for which I will be forever
grateful.

The main thing I take away from Opera San Jose is confidence.
Confidence
in my singing and performing, confidence in "carrying a show," and
confidence in hard work. I've worked with so many different
personalities
of stage directors, conductors and singers, and it's been important to
learn how to be a good colleague to all those personalities. I will leave
OSJ as a resident with so many good memories and lifelong friends.

You don't seem the type (vocally) for Carmen. What was your strategy
in
approaching that role? Also, what was it like performing in
Mendocino?

The most important thing I can say about my adventure with Carmen
is that
Opera San Jose told me to sing her with my own voice. I also got the
green light from my teacher, Cesar Ulloa, which was very important to
me.
While I'm definitely not a "Mama Mezzo" voice that most people are
used to
hearing sing Carmen, that doesn't mean that I can't sing her. The

range
is perfect for me and she feels so good for me to sing. Honestly, I
thought I didn't want to tackle the role because my Finnish/English
heritage doesn't contain an ounce of Spanish blood. However, after
taking
flamenco dance lessons for a year and donning a dark brown wig, I
really
inhabited the role quite easily.

Fortunately, I was able to perform Carmen for a second time at the
Mendocino Music Festival last summer. Music Director, Allan Pollack,
has
something really special going on up there. This glorious coastal town
just bustles with energy from the music-making for three weeks
during the
summer and I had a lovely experience. This festival really is a gem.

How far along are you in your OSJ residency?

I'm just beginning my fourth and final season. Of course, I hope to
return as a guest artist!

Any plans for your post-OSJ career?

I'll be thrown into the abyss of unemployed singers auditioning for
work.
Finding work now is even harder than it was four years ago due to
opera
companies cutting back. It's a scary and exciting time, but I definitely
have a great support system behind me.

What would be the absolute perfect situation for you?

Honestly, I don't like being away from my husband, Joseph, for very
long.
As a computer software engineer, he works from home and,
fortunately, we
really like to be around each other. Therefore, that means that I don't
want to be traveling ten months out of the year, living out of hotel
rooms.
That lifestyle just doesn't appeal to me. However, he is able to travel
with me a bit.

The perfect situation? Settling in the Bay Area and working on
the West Coast for four months out of the year. Then working
regionally in

the U.S. or internationally for 4 months (with Joseph coming along for the ride) and the other four months saved for learning new roles.

What's the weirdest thing that's happened to you on stage?

As opera singers who are trained to have excellent diction, we spit a lot on stage while emoting or attempting to get out those consonants. It's an interesting thing to have gotten used to my colleagues spitting on me.

Recently, in our production of *The Barber of Seville*, one of my dear friends spit and it landed directly on my own lip. Of course, I had to remain in character and smile as if that was normal. And I guess in some weird way, I have gotten used to it.

What's your favorite popular aria and lesser-known aria?

Popular aria: "Ombra mai fu" from Handel's *Xerxes*. Lesser known aria? "Perfect As We Are" from Mark Adamo's *Little Women*.

What's your absolute favorite role and opera?

That I've performed: Dorabella in Mozart's *Così fan tutte* My favorite opera that I would never sing in is Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*. My dream role? Melisande in Debussy's *Pelleas et Melisande*.

I note that Idamante is also being done by a tenor in the alternate cast. Are there different versions for each voice type, or is he more of a countertenor?

Yes, the other Idamante is being sung by a tenor. Mozart originally wrote Idamante for a castrato, which has now been taken over by mezzos. A revision of the score by Mozart was written for a tenor. The notes we are singing are the same, but obviously, I'm singing an octave above the tenor.

Mozart's *Idomeneo*, with alternate casts, Sept. 10-25 at the California Theatre, 345 South First St., San Jose, California. Tickets are \$51-\$101. 408/437-4450, www.operasj.org

Michael J. Vaughn is the author of the novel *Operaville*, available with a companion CD by soprano Barbara Divis at amazon.com. He is also a contributing editor to *Writer's Digest*.

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