



Where the 1780s Met the 1960s:

THE HALIFAX SUMMER *Opera Festival*

BY REBECCA SCHNEIDEREIT PHOTOS MJ PHOTOGRAPHICS AND THE HALIFAX OPERA FESTIVAL

Love, death, deceit and intrigue once again took the stage at 2013's Halifax Summer Opera Festival. This year's major productions — *The Marriage of Figaro*, *les dialogues des carmélites*, and *A Little Night Music* — helped Haligonians cheat the August heat, inviting locals to dive into dramatic librettos, amusing intermezzos, and a show-stopping aria or two.

Co-founders, Nina Scott-Stoddart and Tara Scott, set the Halifax Summer Opera Festival (HSOF) — previously the Halifax Summer Opera Workshop — in motion in 2005. "When I was a young singer in Upper Canada, I owed a lot of my experience to summer opera workshops," explains Scott-Stoddart. So when she "noticed that, at the time, there was nothing east of Toronto in terms of a summer opera education program," she organized one herself. The workshop gave (and gives) fledgling opera stars a chance to spread their wings onstage, while offering established singers an opportunity to visit one of the east coast's most charming cities. Nine summers in, the festival's still going strong, performing works by composers from Bizet to Handel to Mozart and beyond.

The *Marriage of Figaro*, Mozart's 1786 survey of nuptials gone haywire, was previously performed by HSOF in 2008 — but there's plenty to be gleaned by revisiting the score, says Scott-Stoddart. "Mozart is one of the best composers for young voices. So even though there's a world of opera out there, we wouldn't perform all the operas in this context, because they're not all really good for young voices... Mozart is perfect." Furthermore, Scott-Stoddart notes, Mozart arias often become "audition fodder" for professional opera singers. "It's just so important to be able to do it well."

HSOF's 2013 production of *Figaro*, staged at Dal's Sir James Dunn Theatre, received a *Mad Men*-esque makeover. The show's directorial team, explains Scott-Stoddart, "saw the parallels in the *Figaro* story... and England in the early 1960s, in terms of the class structure... what he [the director] used as a window into this period was the Profumo Scandal of the early 1960s."





In addition to its incisive allusions to 20th century gender politics, the *Swinging Sixties Figaro* gave HSOF an opportunity to indulge in some deliciously retro-costuming choices. “We’ve got a fabulous costume designer who worked with Stratford for a number of years: Anne Morrison,” Scott-Stoddart explains during our pre-Festival interview. “She’s hand-building these costumes for *Figaro*. It’s amazing.”

Figaro was HSOF’s first show with a full orchestra. Performing alongside an orchestra, says Scott-Stoddart, was an especially valuable experience for HSOF’s younger performers. “It’s a skill. At a certain point, all young singers... have to start stepping up to work with orchestra” — and doing that well takes practice. “It’s not all one percussive colour. Your pitches sometimes feel different, the way you have to pick them out of the texture of an orchestra.” The orchestra was also beneficial to audience members in pursuit of authenticity, since “unless it’s a modern opera written for piano... [orchestral performance] is the way the composer meant it to be heard.”

Francis Poulenc’s *les dialogues des carmélites* depicts the tragic demise of

a nunnery in revolutionary France. While composing the opera in the 50s, Poulenc eschewed the atonal pretensions of his musical peers. “He said ‘I’m so sorry, but my nuns only sing tonal music,’” Scott-Stoddart laughs. Taking a melodic stand paid off for Poulenc.

“It’s one of the most beautiful operas I’ve ever heard, ever encountered. It is so lush, so gorgeous,” says Scott-Stoddart, who performed in HSOF’s production: “I’m singing the old, crazy prioress... it’s just such a great role!”

Stephen Sondheim’s *A Little Night Music* rounded out HSOF’s summer showcase. Like *les dialogues des carmélites*, *A Little Night Music* was a product of the 20th century: based on Ingmar Bergman’s 1955 film *Smiles of a Summer Night*, and first performed in 1973. *A Little Night Music* is often considered to be more musical theatre than opera, having premiered on Broadway, but “it’s really operetta... late American operetta,” says Scott-Stoddart. “It’s gorgeous, really hard music... as an opera singer, if you can show this kind of flexibility, it’s going to be really good for your career.”

A Little Night Music — which, like *Figaro*, is chiefly concerned with the exploits of a uniformly lovelorn ensemble cast — alternated with *les dialogues des carmélites* at Neptune’s Scotiabank Studio Theatre. The two shows marked HSOF’s first move away from its usual Dalhousie home base. “We wanted to separate the shows with piano from the shows with orchestra,” explains Scott-Stoddart. “I think it [the Scotiabank Studio Theatre] is a great hall for musical theatre.”

HSOF was originally created to train singers; however, audiences in Halifax continue to benefit enormously from the festival, which provides a welcome divertissement from unrelentingly action-packed summer movies and Crystal Crescent crowds. And although opera buffs (buffos?) had three separate shows to sate their operatic appetite this time around, it’s already tempting to wonder what HSOF has in store for next year. FLH

TOP RIGHT Beth Hagerman
BOTTOM L-R Giovanni Spanu, Willis Bote, Ed Franko, Lenard Whiting