

# Opera in Review



(From left) Geoffrey Sirett (Alexander Graham Bell), Allison Angelo (Mabel Bell), Giles Tomkins (Gardiner Hubbard) and Stephanie Tritchew (Gertrude Hubbard) in the world premiere staging of *The Bells of Baddeck*

## CANADA

### BADDECK, NS

Cape Breton in August, the gorgeous town of Baddeck, the **Alexander Graham Bell Museum** and the excitement of a locally produced opera world premiere—what could possibly be better? *The Bells of Baddeck* proved a tour de force production, with more than 40 participants, a small orchestra conducted by Stuart Calvert and an incredible venue, with the official replica of the Silver Dart, the first powered, heavier-than-air machine to fly in Canada, overhead. This drama of hope and triumph spans the lives of the illustrious Bells: Mabel Hubbard's from childhood, her great romance with Alexander Graham Bell and their choice of Cape Breton as their home.

Lorna MacDonald, creator, producer and librettist, and composer Dean Burry, delivered an exuberant musical tribute to this part of Canada and to the extraordinary couple that left such a mark on its history. The premiere production was a successful blend of mostly original opera, some Celtic music, speech (in the *Singspiel* tradition) and even a bit of barbershop quartet harmonizing.

The opera begins with 9-year-old Mabel Hubbard trying to convince a panel of judges that deaf children are not dumb and entitled to an equal education. Bethany Reid's interpretation of the clever and vivacious child made a delightful introduction. Along with several other young performers, the students at the school for the deaf convincingly captured the typical speech frailties that

Alexander Graham Bell, strongly sung by baritone Geoffrey Sirett, was invited to cure. His voice was well suited to the heroic role, and his onstage piano playing a pleasant surprise. Soprano Allison Angelo was a warm, lovable and very convincing Mabel Bell, while mezzo Stephanie Tritchew and bass-baritone Giles Tomkins gave voice to her parents most impressively. A duet for Mabel and Christopher Enns' Lt. Selfridge was particularly memorable.

This production was clearly a labor of love for its creators and many performers (too many to give adequate notice in this review). The piece appeals with both its historical seriousness and the lightness of humor and romance in its presentation. For its inaugural run of 19 performances, it achieved an impressive 86% sellout, and

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the production will be remounted Jul. 2–Aug. 2, 2016. —*Daphna Levit*

### BANFF, AB

At the **Banff Centre** this summer, Joel Ivany and his creative team at **Against the Grain Theatre** completed his adaptations of the three Mozart/da Ponte operas with a new take on *Così fan tutte*—here retitled *A Little too Cozy*.

At once brashly new and also old, the company draws its name from Joris-Karl Huysman's 1884 novel *À rebours*, often thought the starting point of the type of zany modernism seen more directly in the works of Alfred Jarry and the later Dadaist artists. I mention this because it is crucially necessary to put away all thoughts that this is Mozart's opera to "get" Ivany's approach. Although the production retains Mozart's score, it reworks the libretto so completely that it becomes virtually a new opera, even though something of the spirit of the old is retained.

The plot of the original opera remains an oddity. Da Ponte's libretto looks at love in a cynical, even mechanistic way, while Mozart's music surrounds the story with smiling comedy. Going to the heart of this strange mixture of cynicism and sentiment, Ivany's new production deftly transplants the story to the realm of TV dating and plays off the air-headed notions of reality TV. In this version, our two feckless heroes meet their brides for the first time on a TV set, with the TV host betting that the brides will indeed be unfaithful. Anyone who has seen the original opera can guess what comes next. Remarkable here, however, were the seamless integration of new and old and especially the consistency of the plot and the many, many hilariously funny jokes. In fact, it was the sheer fizz of the comedy that drove home da Ponte's original point in the Mozart opera: how strange a thing is love, and how much of what we imagine about love can easily be shown to be "mere chemistry"—all very cynical, of course, but hardly more cynical than reality TV. This was indeed a performance for today.

The performing forces were as effective as the reworked opera itself. Central to all

the fun was the stage direction, as clever as the libretto, which unfolded against a simple though effective set and spot-on costumes. The many electronic gags blended in smoothly, and the pacing was both swift and eye-catching. Remarkably, Mozart did not get lost. As in previous productions, Christopher Mokrzewski was the Music Director, leading the Rolston String Quartet from the piano. The quartet was solid and secure, and Mokrzewski was splendid on the keyboard, his choice of tempos and projection of character as exemplary as the technical execution in

Artist Development Program, was at his strongest here, his singing securely focused, and his voice projecting easily into the hall. Cairan Ryan as Donald L. Fonzo (Don Alfonso) made a fine TV host, his voice smooth and attractive, if not having quite the carrying power of the other male singers.

I would happily return to this production, which, especially for younger audiences not accustomed to the conventions of opera, blows away the cobwebs. While it may well have been the brainchild of Ivany, it was not director's opera



(From left) Cairan Ryan (Donald L. Fonzo), Pascale Spinney (Dora) and Shantelle Przybylo (Felicity) in Against the Grain Theatre's *A Little Too Cozy* at the Banff Centre

purely pianistic terms.

The singers were part of that growing group of young Canadian artists just on the brink of moving from promising to established. Shantelle Przybylo and Pascale Spinney played Felicity (Fiordiligi) and Dora (Dorabella), both making the most of their comic moments and singing with clear Mozartean tone and incisive rhythm. Spinny, in particular, milked the comedy for all it was worth. In this, she was well matched by Caitlin Wood as Despina, the perfect foil for the two girls.

Brent Calis sang Elmo (Gugliemo) to Aaron Sheppard's Ferrando, both of them fine characterizations. Sheppard managed his high-lying role remarkably well, if not yet quite with the polish of Léopold Simoneau of beloved memory. Calis, heard frequently with Calgary Opera's Emerging

of the kind that is today so often risible. Rather, this was a fresh, modern performance, as careful about the music as it was effective at telling da Ponte's story in an imaginative new way. —*Kenneth DeLong*

The Banff Centre, in collaboration with the **Canadian Opera Company**, in mid July debuted *Cmish*, a daring and enthralling remake of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Reset smartly by librettist Anna Chatterton to a cleverly composed score by James Rolfe, the new production turned The Club, housed below the Eric Harvie Theatre, into a dingy, red-light district nightclub of a very different kind, featuring heart-shaped mini candles, a dancing pole and a variety of provocatively suggestive, larger-than-life toys adorning the bar pillars that the production crew apparently had an amusing