

Key Change Bonus Episode: In Conversation with Rebecca Caine

SPEAKERS

Rebecca Caine, Julie Mclsaac, Robyn Grant-Moran

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:18

I'm Robyn Grant-Moran...

Julie Mclsaac 00:19

... and I'm Julie Mclsaac.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:22

And welcome to a very special bonus episode of Key Change!

Julie Mclsaac 00:26

Last week on the podcast: we opened up our audience mailbag to answer your opera questions. And, to help us out, we invited some friends from across the industry to weigh in and share their stories and perspectives.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:38

One of our guests was soprano Rebecca Caine. Because she was Canada's first Christine and the "Phantom of the Opera," we reached out to her to get her thoughts on why the production is considered a musical and not an opera. But our conversation stretched way beyond the Phantom.

Julie Mclsaac 00:54

Yeah, we had such a great time chatting with her! There were lots of good stories and a lot of laughter, so, it just didn't feel right to keep all that insight and delight to ourselves. So, we thought we would share it with all of you in this Bonus Episode: In Conversation with Rebecca Caine. Is there anything particular to Phantom of the Opera, Rebecca, in the sense that have people asked you over the years, "Now, is it an opera? Is it a musical? How do you classify it? How do you navigate that crossover in that boundary?"

Rebecca Caine 01:32

It's difficult, isn't it? Because you see, I would say, Sweeney Todd is probably the finest opera of the second half of the 20th century; "I wouldn't place Phantom in that category," she said pointedly. I guess if you do it in an opera house and it starts being worked into the rep[ertory], you can consider it an opera. As far as I'm concerned, you know, I was always a very old-fashioned legit musical theatre singer; I sang exactly the same way. Stylistically, you change things a little but then you wouldn't see [Claudio] Monteverdi the same way as you would sing Richard Strauss, would you? So, for me, it was

all singing and acting, and there's a wonderful quote, Gershwin and Alban Berg – both of them very close to my heart, actually; I'm a big 20th century girl – and he said to Berg something about, you know, "Is this good enough?" and Alban Berg said, "Good music is good music." So, I'm a great believer in that.

Julie Mclsaac 02:24

Now, Rebecca, in preparing for this episode, we mentioned to Perryn Leech – so, our new COC General Director – that we'd be chatting with you, and it turns out there's a bit of a small opera world connection in there, and that he was a lighting technician at Glyndebourne around the same time, we believe, that you were there and where you made your premiere Glyndebourne in *The Coronation of Poppaea*.

Rebecca Caine 02:45

Oh, my god! Yes, I was *Amore* and I was up on a shelf all night, [it] was a Peter Hall production, and then I had my little tiny aria and I remember the operator... (And I was pulled up on a wire, I flew, the agony! I'd always wanted to fly; I didn't realize how painful it was.) And the operator was drunk – one night he flew me into the wall. Richard Bradshaw conducted that actually! Yeah, so, I'd been in the chorus the year before and that's when Trevor Nunn had seen me – I'd already done a few musicals for Cameron Mackintosh but I wanted to be an opera singer, and everybody said you can't do both. So, I turned down "*West Side Story*" and went and sang in the chorus of Glyndebourne where I was sighted by one Trevor Nunn, and without even really asking, I was washed and brought to his tent at the Royal Shakespeare Company and ended up in a musical called *Les Misérables*, and that became that! So, yeah, Glyndebourne was a big thing. That's amazing, how wonderful! The first year I was there I sang in the chorus of "*Arabella*" and I then I went into *Les Mis[érables]*, and then they asked me back to do my *Poppea* debut – I think because Trevor had taken such an interest in me and I had a nice pair of legs on me as well, which was good for that role, they asked me back. So, that summer I spent my time commuting between playing Cosette in *Les Misérables* and *Amore* in Glyndebourne. So, I was singing opera and musicals at the same time, and I remember there were weeks of time I didn't get a day off because sometimes we would have Sunday performances. That was the summer of '86 – so, 85 was my chorister year, and then 86, and then my opera career took off after that thanks to the Canadian Opera Company.

Robyn Grant-Moran 04:33

Phantom was already a big hit by the time it arrived in Toronto. Did you anticipate what a lasting legacy it would have?

Rebecca Caine 04:41

No! You know, all these things you now know with the gift of hindsight – it's like when people ask me what it was like to make *Les Mis*. Well, we didn't realize it would be a musical that would then run for 35 years, you know. And, so, it was the same with *Phantom*: having already done *Phantom* in London, I realized that it was going to be a big hit, and it was beautiful and glamorous and you know, it'd been very well sold in Toronto. But it's only years later when people come to you and they say, "I saw you and I was a kid at the stage door and you took me backstage for a backstage tour," or "I used to draw your costumes, so I became a costume designer," or, you know, "I used to sing along with the recording

in my bedroom and then I became Christine in the 'bus and truck' tour and went on to play Christine on Broadway." So, you hear all these things much later but, you know, at the time, you're just doing the job and, frankly, with that job, I was just trying to, you know, stay healthy, stay upright and get through singing six performances a week of [Andrew] Lloyd Webber.

Julie Mclsaac 05:48

And we know, Rebecca, that you've also appeared in many COC productions: "Lulu," "[The] Cunning Little Vixen," Pamina in "The Magic Flute," Despina in "Così [fan tutte]," and Micaëla in "Carmen." And of these, we're curious: is there a standout role or a particular behind the scenes memory that comes to mind?

Rebecca Caine 06:05

Well, I mean, I think because Brian Dickey had left Glyndebourne and was running the COC, I had, you know, fond dreams because I kept being pulled back into musicals; I'd been a young opera singer and I had done a couple of musicals and then gone to Glyndebourne, and I was told that you couldn't do both and then I was pulled into Phantom. And, you know, I never really trained: I left the Guildhall [School of Music and Drama] at 19 and, so, I just took the work that came along but my heart was always in opera. So, when I went to the COC, I had this little dream that maybe they might ask me to do something, but in my head, it was going to be something like Barbarina in "The Marriage of Figaro;" it was going to be a tiny little part for which I would be incredibly grateful to be doing. So, when I got a letter in my post at the Pantages [Theatre] – or the Ed Mirvish [Theatre], as it now is – saying, "Would I consider taking on the role of Lulu?" I had to sit down because I can't think of anybody that would have taken such a chance on me. And I remember that I went along to the press launch of that season, and I sat down to... (Who was the man who was the critic at The [Toronto] Star for years and years?) William Littler, that's right. I sat down next to him and he turned to me and he said, "I expect you'd like to sing here one day." And I said, "Yes, well, you know, maybe I will!" And then they handed out the press release and he flipped the page – everybody flipped the page over – and it said, "Rebecca Caine, Lulu," and there was this audible intake of breath because no one thought I could do it, no one thought I could do it. And I knew I had the high notes, and I trusted Brian, who was a very good judge of voices, and I had a year and a half to learn it. And, so, it's basically what kept me sane: singing six shows a week of Christine [in Phantom]. In some ways, it's my greatest acting role because I was having to play a woman so naive that she would take singing lessons from somebody standing behind a mirror in her dressing room, and then follow this perfect creep down to a damp basement, you know. I mean, at heart, I'm much more of a Mrs. Lovett [in Sweeney Todd], so, this is the great acting role that I was doing. But, you know, it's very hard to extract the juice [for] six performances a week, but it was my job and I did it. So, I had this fantastic thing that, once a week, I would go to the Canadian Opera Company and I would work on Lulu, and I did this for a year and a half. And I love that kind of music, I live for it! So, for me, it kept me sane: I'd never done a role in an original language – so, that was my first time singing a major role in an original language, never done any role in an original language; I'd only ever sung opera in English before; I'd never sung a huge major role like that; and I'd never signed a major role with a major opera company. So, I mean, it couldn't have been more in the deep end and, all the while, while doing, you know, this big role and trying to keep myself sane. So, it was wonderful! And I remember the company was so kind to me, and the Ensemble [Studio] kids would always be hanging around in the sofas outside my practice room, and they really had every reason to hate my guts, you

know, because I'd come in with very little experience and I was doing this incredible role, but I ended up feeling part of them – I ended up feeling like I had been part... I could cry talking about it! People like Wendy Nielsen, you know, and they became my friends and they will support... I think once they hung outside the dressing room door and they realized how hard I worked and that I had the chops to do it, they were hugely supportive. And the other one was [The Cunning Little] Vixen, which meant a huge amount to me because it was the Maurice Sendak production and I had been the first – I was gonna say the first cast of ["Where the Wild Things Are"], but actually, I don't mean the opera; I mean that I was that age that I read Where the Wild Things Are as a little girl and I was very much a wild thing, and that's very much a North American production, with raccoons and just the whole physicality of it all. So, to me, I think the Vixen was me in a way – I loved playing that role! And my father died during rehearsals. And I did it the following summer in Italy as well, so that means a huge amount to me. The company was so supportive for me because I had to get on that stage in a giant fox costume. I mean, it shows the, kind of, ridiculousness of what we do for a living because I went down to Philadelphia – [University of Pennsylvania Hospital] in Philadelphia – I saw my mom and sister for a couple of days, and then got on the plane, and came back, walked into rehearsal hall, but put on my fake tail, got on my hands and knees and began biting the thighs of the women of the chorus, pretending they were chickens. I mean, you know, there's nothing going to take you out of tragedy and losing your dad... That was a very rough job. So, Vixen meant a lot to me – and all of them! I love singing at the COC, I was very, very proud to be a member of the company, they were very good times.

Robyn Grant-Moran 11:28

So, you've spoken about the challenges of being cast as a certain type of singer of a certain age. What would you like to see the industry embrace in terms of how roles and casting are reimaged for the stage?

Rebecca Caine 11:43

I'm a musical theatre performer and also an opera singer, and I'm also a straight actress now – I've also started doing plays. I'm terrified I'm going to get a television or a film job because I just feel like I can't cope with another genre at this point in my life. So, obviously, being a light lyric soprano, we're the first to walk the plank, which is heartbreaking because you just get to 40 and, suddenly, the jobs start to dry up. But in some ways, I remember being about 46 and going to New Zealand Opera to do [The Elixir of Love], and I got there and he [Daniel Slater] said to me, "Right, I've set it in Napa Valley High School in 1985, and you're the prom queen." And I thought, "Oh, I was 25 in 1985. So, we're now playing back to a time that I actually lived in, and I'm playing younger than I was when I actually existed during this period of time," and it did my head in. Apart from the fact that at 45 you don't want to be playing an 18-year-old prom queen – you want to be playing a complicated 45-year-old woman – but this voice is considered to be a young person's voice, and it still sounds like an ingenue voice. And it was interesting: I did a musical a few years ago and they decided – it was [a] beautiful, beautiful musical – and they decided after the first production that my voice didn't match the character, and I said, "But I'm playing a refined, elegant woman of a certain age and I am a refined elegant woman of a certain age, and I sound like this." So, why is there this idea that, as you get older, your voice has to get lower and it gets harsher? I mean, I faked my way through Katisha [in "The Mikado"], which is a great role – you know, chewing the scenery with musical theatre people around me, so, their voices are lighter – and I do Mother Abbess in ["The Sound of Music"], which is hilarious because, you know, if only they'd given

me some cleavage and some lipstick, it would be fine; I just can't bear the costume. It's a wonderful role and I keep coming back to it because it's one of the few things that sopranos can do at my age in in musical theatre. But I don't really think on the right voice for it, in some ways. It's very tricky. You know, I did a wonderful piece called "Abomination" for the Belfast Ensemble about a year-and-a-half ago, and it was written by a composer I've been working for for years, Conor Mitchell, he's brilliant, and it sounds weird, but it was about Northern Irish politics and this politician who hated homosexuality and was caught out having an affair with a 16-year-old boy. And it was this stonking roll that was written for me about a woman my age who sounded like me! And it was going to be a huge... it was a huge hit, and we were going to take everywhere: it was coming to the South Bank in London, it was going to go to all the festivals and, boom, the pandemic happened. So, yeah, it's difficult but I, sort of, feel like as long as I can still stand and I can still sing and I can still add – and having been lucky enough to always have a varied career from the age of 19 – I will just continue to show up and do what I can. I'm about to do a lovely livestream of the Dave Malloy musical – Dave Malloy wrote "Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet [of 1812]" on Broadway, and this is a piece I did about a year-and-a half ago about Rachmaninoff, and we're going to do a livestream of that. So, although that's mainly an acting role, I do a little bit of the Vespers at one point, but it's mainly an acting role. But yes, it's heartbreaking in a way that just for, like, lyric sopranos, just when you're getting to really get on top of your craft – and you can't help feel that, in some ways, you've failed in some way by aging, even though... (You won't be able to tell this on the podcast but, dear listeners, I look fabulous!) You know, you can't help feeling that you've let yourself down by aging. And I was talking to somebody who was a wonderful Cherubino and I said, "You must miss that role," and she saidm "I don't want to be playing a 14-year-old boy!" And I didn't understand at the time, but I do now, you know?

Julie McIsaac 15:46

Well, and it's part of a conversation we've had with other singers, too, Rebecca, around the sense of "I exist. I am who I am in the fullness of who I am with the voice that I have. So, why isn't that reflected on the stages and the stories that we tell?" So, it's lovely to hear. like, this project Abomination, of projects and new roles that are being created so that we can show up in the fullness of who we are on stage, and we'll be keeping our ears and eyes out for that project. Is there anything else – any sort of pandemic musings that have come to the fore, things you've been working on that you'd like to share with us?

Rebecca Caine 16:15

I think, like a lot of people, the first six months, I found it very difficult to sing, because every time I opened my mouth, I just wanted to cry. So, I left it and then I thought, "Come on," you know, "You've got to sing at this age. You will lose it." So, I went back to the Vaccai exercises with the practical Italian guide to singing – I don't know what the impractical guide is, god forbid. But, anyway, they're these little songs that he wrote and you sing the intervals, and I got back into it and then I was booked to do the Chichester Festival Theatre Christmas concert [A Merry Little Christmas Celebration], when we were briefly open for social distance concerts, and that was a very classy gig, and that was livestreamed, so, I had to get my chops up to do that. And then about the time that Biden got voted in and Trump got voted out – and I felt like I could stop staring at the television and being on constant alert for, you know, the rise of fascism and the virus – I realized that a lot of sopranos were contacting... I have a very lively presence on social media and Twitter, and so people were contacting me and saying, "Can you tell me

how to sing this phrase or this phrase," and I was singing into my phone and trying to give notes. And I had taught on a musical theatre course at the [Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance] here in my 40s about the time when things really flatlined for me, before I reinvented and went back to being an actress again, and going into musical theatre again, because I had to basically start from the beginning again, and that took a lot of energy, so I had some years where nothing was happening, and I taught for about four years there. And I thought, "This is silly," you know. "I should not be giving this away; I should be putting it out." And now that's amazing because it's something that this pandemic has brought us, which is [to] democratize us in a way because I teach everybody from, you know, young women who are trained and could be singing the roles that I used to do tomorrow. I decided I'd specialize in legit musical theatre singing, old-school legit: so no belting, no mixing – you know, the sound that I like to hear, which we're losing a lot because everybody mixes and belts, so we don't get the difference between the different voices like Maria [in *The Sound of Music*] and Anita [in *West Side Story*] and the Rodgers and Hammerstein – you know, the voice that has always, sort of, indicated virginity, this purity, and I really wanted to try and get that back again. But I also teach... I have a blind woman who works for Google in California, I have a little girl who sings in her dad's car workshop to me once a week in Alabama, you know. And some of these people, they don't want to be singers but after half an hour [or] an hour with me, they've found their voice, they've sung a little better, and they've done something creative, and they've expressed themselves for an hour and I can see the joy that that brings them. It's very tiring because you have to be even more performative when you're talking to your screen, and particularly with people who are amateurs because you have to show them the level of energy you need to expend to really be a singer and to be this kind of legit singer. So, I just started doing that in February and, so, that's what I'm doing basically with my afternoons now: I just teach all afternoon. So, um, I didn't see myself coming back to teaching and I hope that I go back to doing more performing but, until then, you know, it keeps me off the sofa eating éclairs and watching boxsets, which is what I was doing before.

Julie Mclsaac 19:47

Do you have a favorite from the Vaccai songbook?

Rebecca Caine 19:50

Oh, yeah! [Sings] I don't remember which one it is [Sings more]. What is that – Fifth [intervals]? I think it's the Fifths. I love that one. It's so pretty, it's so pretty. I don't know what's about – probably about, you know, "I have a trout that swam upstream and got eaten by an eagle," or something like that, I don't know. I'm not connecting to the text, which is very naughty of me.

Robyn Grant-Moran 20:14

So, we were wondering what you were really looking forward to once this is all done?

Rebecca Caine 20:20

I think I'll have to keep teaching. I quite like showing young women that, you know, you can be a strong, mouthy, articulate, happy woman in her 60s and doing all this stuff. So, I like that side of things very much, I like helping people. What am I looking forward to? I want to go to the ballet, I really want to go to the ballet, I love the ballet so much, you know. It's where I can sit there and I can listen to the music – I could never do it in a million years, so, there's not that brain going, "Oh, I could do that better," or

"Why didn't I get that job?" or "Oh, maybe I should do more straight acting" – there's nothing like that: I just sit there and I'm just lost in wonder at what these people can do. Karen Kane was one of the, sort of, few people outside the show that I became really good friends with when I was in Toronto and, you know, I've been desperate to see the [Alexei] Ratmanskyy "Romeo and Juliet" [that] the ballet do. So, yeah, I want to do that. I'd love to go and go somewhere other than, you know, my house, my four walls; I'd love to travel a bit. I think we all feel that way, don't we, you know?

Robyn Grant-Moran 21:46

What's the last show you got to see live?

Rebecca Caine 21:49

"Madama Butterfly." With this amazing Welsh soprano. I can't pronounce his last name. Natalya Romaniw, I think it is. She is phenomenal. She's the next [Anna] Netrebko.

Julie McIsaac 22:03

On any given Sunday morning, where would we find you?

Rebecca Caine 22:06

Um, probably on a yoga mat tied up like a pretzel.

Julie McIsaac 22:12

What is the last show that you binge watched?

Rebecca Caine 22:16

Oh, we've had a lot of binge watching. During the éclair period, first of all we did "Mad Men" right from the beginning to the end, which is a work of genius when you watch it back to back, because he [Matthew Weiner] sets it up right from the beginning all the way through – all the themes, absolutely incredible! Then we did "Band of Brothers" and the one that's set in the South Pacific ["The Pacific"] which was also deeply moving. So, yes, I mean, the last one: I mean, you never stop binge watching, do you really, [for even] a moment?

Robyn Grant-Moran 22:45

Is there an artist or song in your music collection that might surprise people?

Rebecca Caine 22:52

Oh, yeah! I love that Eminem one – you know, the famous one? [Clip of "Lose Yourself" plays] I would give you my rendition but I don't think the world is ready! I've got some really strange things. I love the Talking Heads one, you know, the famous one. I love that...

Robyn Grant-Moran 23:13

Oh, the "Once in a Lifetime"?

Rebecca Caine 23:13

I've got some really, really... Yes! You know, I've got some really strange things in my iPod.

Julie Mclsaac 23:14

Love it!

Rebecca Caine 23:21

This is a bit crazy. Now you'll be going to the knicker drawer next.

Julie Mclsaac 23:26

Our last one is a burning question from one of our producers, actually: so, you created the role of Cosette in Les Mis, and we understand that your solo in the original was "I Saw Him Once," which was replaced...

Rebecca Caine 23:36

Right.

Julie Mclsaac 23:37

...with "In My Life" for the Broadway production. So, if you had to choose one: which one has your heart of those two songs? Well, absolutely, In My Life. I mean, because the other one is not really a solo; it's the same tune as the trio ["Love Montage: I Saw Him Once/In My Life/A Heart Full Of Love"]. So, what that means in the U.K. is the role has now been reduced to featured ensembles, so they don't even pay her as a soloist. The reason that was cut apparently was because it was felt to be very like the love theme from the [Franco] Zeffirelli "Romeo and Juliet" film, which I think is Nino Rota. [Sings "I Saw Him Once" to the melody of the "Romeo and Juliet" theme] A little bit, but I just think they thought, "Oh, she's a dreary character. Let's cut everything," and then the role has been cut and cut and cut and cut and cut. Everybody sings about all night, but it's just been made smaller and smaller and smaller, you know, which is a shame but there you go. I'm very fond of Les Mis, I'm very proud of something that is, you know, whenever they erect a barricade anywhere in the world, it's sung and that show's very close to my heart. Great. Well, thank you so much, Rebecca. We know we only reached out to you a little while ago, and the fact that you were available, and open to doing this after a day of teaching, we really appreciate it.

Rebecca Caine 25:02

You just tell Toronto that I want to do Sweeney Todd as Mrs. Lovett with my old mate Russell Braun. That's what I want to do.

Robyn Grant-Moran 25:10

Yes, please!

Rebecca Caine 25:11

That's what I'd like to come back to Toronto: Russell Braun and me doing Sweeney Todd. Because I'm much more Mrs. Lovett than I was ever Christine Daaé.

Julie Mclsaac 25:22

Thank you

Rebecca Caine 25:23

All right. Tons of love!

Robyn Grant-Moran 25:25

Thanks so much, Rebecca. We absolutely loved chatting with Rebecca for our Mailbag Episode and for a special bonus edition of Key Change.

Julie McIsaac 25:39

Thanks for listening and stay tuned for the first episode of our spring season on April 13, when we talk opera and contemporary art with Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson, and Adelina Vlas of the Art Gallery of Ontario,

Robyn Grant-Moran 25:52

You'll hear what a great time we had.

Julie McIsaac 26:01

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