

Key Change Episode 11: Ask Us Anything

SPEAKERS

Perryn Leech, Teiya Kasahara, Julie Mclsaac, Anne Midgette, Robyn Grant-Moran, Jonathan Christopher, Liz Upchurch, Rebecca Caine, Nick Davis, Johannes Debus

Julie Mclsaac 00:00

Hi, everyone. Welcome to Key Change: A COC Podcast, where we explore everything about opera from a fresh perspective.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:18

We're your hosts, Robyn Grant-Moran...

Julie Mclsaac 00:21

...and Julie Mclsaac. Hello, everyone, and welcome to Episode 11, our very special audience mailbag edition.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:29

For the past few weeks, we've been asking for your opera-related questions. Maybe you're just starting to get into opera, or maybe you're a diehard opera fan. We told you to ask us anything – anything at all!

Julie Mclsaac 00:41

And whenever we felt like we couldn't answer something between the two of us, we called up some friends to give us a hand. Who are those friends? Well, keep listening to find out.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:50

So, today's the day! Let's reach into that mailbag and find out what you wanted to know about opera and the operagoing experience.

Julie Mclsaac 01:09

Okay, so here's a good one for starting out: John in Victoria, B.C. wrote in and wanted to know, "What is the difference between opera and operetta? Who and what defines the difference?" Full disclosure, John is my father. He's a dedicated listener and thanks for listening, dad, and thanks for sending in your question! We hope that we do it justice.

Robyn Grant-Moran 01:30

Julia and I could probably give you a very textbook definition of what the difference is. But we've got the entire COC team at our disposal. So, we decided to pull in Johannes Debus. Johannes has been

COC's Music Director for over a decade. He's conducted Salome at the Metropolitan Opera, appeared on the BBC Proms, and has led orchestras everywhere from Berlin to Baltimore to San Francisco. Johannes began by telling us that, for him, he usually looks to the prominence of text for a clue.

Johannes Debus 02:00

I would say that one main aspect to define the difference between opera and operetta is the element of text – or how important the text is versus the importance of the music. Obviously, music plays a key role in both art forms, but maybe in the operatta the text is even more so in the foreground than in opera. In operatta most often – no, actually, I think always – you have dialogues, which, on the other hand, is also something that we see in opera repertoire early on. However, then it's called "singspiel". For example, [The] Magic Flute: that's, sort of, a prime example for that. Maybe we reconsider this singspiel as an early form of operetta. I personally do not buy into the notion or the idea of, "Oh, you know, operetta is, sort of, just the lighter genre and, therefore, it's maybe not as valuable as opera can be." I don't think that's true and I think it requires an immense talent to entertain, at a very, very high level – which maybe is one important aspect of operetta, where you often have lighter subject matter. Do you know any operatta where someone is dying? In opera, unfortunately, we encounter that element quite often. So, there is some truth to the idea that operatta has a lighter touch. Maybe also dance elements appearing more often [in operetta] than in operas. But I think it's hard to draw a clear line and to say, "Okay, this is clearly operatta; this is clearly opera."

Robyn Grant-Moran 03:57

Yeah, I felt pretty much the same as Johannes: it's the "no dying thing", really. It's shorter, lighter, and nobody dies.

Julie Mclsaac 04:09

It's funny because the no dying thing hadn't ever crossed my mind, even though the moment Johannes said it, I went, "Oh, of course, you're right!" In terms of the whole temperature of the plot, it's... you know, there isn't those same high stakes that we encounter in the opera context. So, thanks, dad, for sending that question and for giving us a reason to chat with Johannes and to dig into this really great topic. Now we're going to bring back Johannes for a question a little bit later in the episode. But, Robyn, how about you introduce our next audience question?

Robyn Grant-Moran 04:53

Pat B. is curious about voice types and how those are assigned to different roles. "Why are countertenor roles often sung by mezzo-sopranos?"

Julie Mclsaac 05:02

When it comes to understanding the voice and operatic traditions around character and story, we knew exactly who we wanted to reach out to. Liz Upchurch is one of the most sought-after pianists and vocal coaches in Canada. She's head of the COC Ensemble Studio and, in her time at the COC, she's helped to train an entire generation of Canadian opera singers, including artists such as David Pomeroy, Krisztina Szabó, and Emily D'Angelo. Liz began by telling us what a countertenor is.

Liz Upchurch 05:29

Well, a countertenor is the highest male voice. So, if we were to go in order from the bottom up, we will go: bass, baritone, tenor, and then countertenor. But the way that the countertenor sings, it's actually in their falsetto, and falsetto literally means "false little sound." They actually only use a very small part of the vocal folds. But all male voices have the possibility to sing in falsetto; it's not just for a particular type of voice. If any of you are Bee Gees fans out there, you'll know that that's singing in a kind of falsetto. It's really possible for most male voices to sing in that range, and that range is not as high as a soprano. So, that range, in the equivalent of a female voice, would be similar to a mezzo-soprano. The majority of roles that mezzo-sopranos sing weren't originally written for them in the canon of, sort of, historical, sort of, a good 200 years of serious operatic writing; they were written for the male "castrati," and the castrati were a total phenomenon. In fact, we still don't really know how that voice sounded and, of course – for those of you who don't know – it was an incredibly barbaric ritual: they would take a young pubescent boy who, sort of, showed that they had a gift for singing while they were still singing in their boy soprano voice, and they would literally castrate them. And so these young boys would grow up with still their soprano boy sound, but in the body of an adult male. And, actually, this terrible thing literally went on for centuries, but at the peak of their phenomenon was the 17th and 18th century, when castrati were literally like rock stars; everybody wrote for them, they were the king's pets, they earned a lot of money, they had extraordinary virtuosity. And this might sound as if that's an incredibly long-winded answer to this question but it isn't – it's actually very key to the answer, because once this barbaric ritual was finally and properly outlawed, they had a huge canon of operatic roles that nobody could sing. So, they were left with two choices, either: they create that role for a male voice and probably have it sing it down an octave, which, of course, has lost the whole point of why it was written in that particular way; or have a female sing it. And, so, these women took on what they now call the "pants role" or the "breeches role." So, [when] mezzos and sopranos started to sing these roles, [it] wasn't until the 20th century that operatic roles for the countertenor even really started to happen. Benjamin Britten writing Oberon was probably the most famous for [A] Midsummer Night's Dream. But then, of course, the countertenors could sing a lot of those castrato roles written from 200-300 years previously because there was such an influx of getting back into the, sort of, Baroque world of opera. This all fed into the world of the countertenor becoming, really, a short and certain thing in the canon of operatic roles, and now probably more excitingly so because many more modern operas are being written for this voice type.

Julie Mclsaac 10:11

And along the same line, Liz, we're wondering: why is Rosina in [The] Barber of Seville performed by mezzo-sopranos and coloratura sopranos?

Liz Upchurch 10:22

Well, this role wasn't written for either of those voice types, okay? So, this role was actually written for a contralto. And, if you remember, we said that it's bass, baritone, tenor, countertenor [for the male voice]; for the female voice, it's contralto at the bottom, and then mezzo, and then soprano. So, this is written for the lowest of the female voices, but clearly somebody who had extraordinary agility and virtuosity, which is required for Rosina's singing. The fact is that Rossini was also a bit of a superstar, and his music – his operas – were played everywhere. And, so, in, you know, a little bit like today – I don't think too much has changed – you'd like to see the, sort of, most celebrated singer do their thing, and, so, Rosina is really one of those roles that now you rarely hear sung by the voice that it was originally

written for, but you can hear it sung... I mean, really, Maria Callas to Beverly Sills to Joyce DiDonato to... So, you can have absolute total variety of voices and, because of the nature of the style, you can lift out an aria and actually transpose it. So, when Maria Callas would have done, the famous singing lesson scene, famously this was transposed for her and, of course, she was so famous – of course you would transpose the scene for her; I don't think they do that for everybody. But, also, another factor in there is there are so many different types, and the role of Rosina is supposed to be a young ingenue, and you don't often hear contraltos sing this type of role. So, it does make sense, in some ways, that lighter voices have fit into this role historically, particularly over the last 100 years.

Julie Mclsaac 12:50

Really grateful that Liz spent that time with us. I mean, she's really busy training the Ensemble Studio, and she's such a wealth of knowledge.

Robyn Grant-Moran 12:56

She really just reaffirmed for me that voice types and ranges are really reflective of the time that operas were written in. So, maybe this is a challenge for current composers since we are more fluid right now, and we're getting to be more open to things. Composers, please, write more music that reflects or changing values around gender and identity.

Julie Mclsaac 13:23

The COC actually recently hosted a virtual panel conversation around gender and opera and this topic – about voice types and character tropes – that came up quite often. And for anyone who's curious about that and learning more, then you can go to coc.ca/GenderAndOpera, where there's an archive of that live event.

Robyn Grant-Moran 13:44

We'll loop back to Liz for another question later this episode, but here's one that comes up a lot: Sandy reached out to us on Instagram to ask us to explain, "Why is the Phantom of the Opera considered a musical and not an opera?"

Julie Mclsaac 13:58

A lot of people have strong feelings about this.

Robyn Grant-Moran 14:01

It's amazing that, decades later, these conversations are still being had and these feelings are still so strong.

Julie Mclsaac 14:10

Exactly. And we thought, in answering this question, wouldn't it be great to go right to the source and connect with someone with plenty of Phantom of the Opera expertise? And, so, that's what we did reaching out to Rebecca Caine. Rebecca is a Canadian-British soprano, who you might recall as having sung the role of Christine when Phantom of the Opera first opened here in Toronto. She's also sung with the COC on several productions. Here's what she had to say.

Rebecca Caine 14:36

No, I can't think why you asked me, Sandy on Instagram! Um, well, let's think this through, shall we? So, it's through-sung – most operas are through-sung right? But, no, wait! Let's think about, oh, The Magic Flute, which you could argue is a singspiel, right? But then there's Fidelio, there are lots and lots of operas that have dialogue, so, that doesn't work. Could it be [that] you do six day performances a week? Well, let me see, Gian Carlo Menotti premiered many of his operas on Broadway, The Consul won Best Musical even though it was an opera, so, no, that's not right. It's not a matter of [whether] performance is miked – is it because it miked? No, because, originally, musicals weren't miked. Oh, this was another theory I came up [with]: does it have a character who continues to sing while either being fatally ill or mortally wounded, right? And then I thought, "Wait a minute: Les Mis[erables] had Fantine dying of something – either venereal disease, or... (I should know: I was in it) or consumption – very operatic! And Éponine who, of course, you know, sings a duet after she's been shot," so, that disproves that theory. And then I thought, "Okay, well, let's get serious, let's think about this as "melisma," right? So, melisma is when you sing more than six notes to one syllable, right? So, that's often opera – you often have that – and I thought, "I've got it, I got it!" and I thought, "Riffing: people riff in musicals now." I can't riff; when I riff, it sounds like Baroque ornamentation, which is actually what riffing is: it's ornamentation. So, that doesn't... And then, of course, the real thing is, is I believe musicals are text-lead and that opera's an art form where the sheer vocal quality is all-important, basically. And musical theatre is where the characterful narrative predominates through the text – the words come first. And, so, to give you an example, if you go and see [Der] Rosenkavalier, you just drown in that gorgeous, creamy sound and the presentation of the rose – or the final scene at the end, nobody really cares... Or the final scene in Götterdämmerung for Brünnhilde and nobody really expects to hear the words at the end; they're just drowning in the sound. So, for musicals, it's text-lead. That's my answer.

Robyn Grant-Moran 16:58

Someone else we thought we'd reach out to on this is Jonathan Christopher. Jonathan actually joined us as a panelist on that Gender & Opera event we were talking about earlier. He's a Bermudian-American baritone who's worked in opera and musical theatre. He's also performed in critically acclaimed operas and musicals at Lincoln Center, Signature Theatre, and Brooklyn Playhouse Theatre.

Jonathan Christopher 17:22

It's funny because you'll talk to some opera folk, and they'll say, "Well, obviously, it's a musical; it's not an opera," and then some musical theatre folk are a bit more confused because a show like Phantom requires such a solid vocal technique, and a lot of the characters in the musical itself require operatic training – like [Ubaldo] Piangi, who's a tenor; Carlotta [Giudicelli], who's the big soprano that has to sing a high D and a high E every single night. But I think, from my own humble perspective, it has to do more with the styles and the conventions of the time: the original version of Carmen has musical numbers just like a musical that we know today does, and then there are scenes where there was a dialogue – not even sung-through dialogue. But then when opera companies found out Carmen was quite popular, they hired somebody to create recitative, which – for those who don't know what that is – it's, like, the dialogue within an opera but it's still sung and sometimes there are chords underneath it that are rolling by. But it's not necessarily melodic; it just pushes the story from the one big musical number to the next musical number. And that's, kind of, what Phantom of the Opera is like as well. So,

in a way it's operatic in scope but Andrew Lloyd Webber, the composer, writes for the musical theatre. I also think of the show Porgy and Bess, which was originally performed on Broadway. The Gershwins called it a "folk opera," and eventually, over the years, it got performed in opera companies around the world, but it didn't hit the Metropolitan Opera in New York until the 1980s, and the show was pretty much labeled as musical theatre up until then. And then when it returned to Broadway, the convention of having a show completely sung-through with classically trained voices has fallen out of favour with what we deem as a musical, which is, you know, numbers, scene, spoken scene, musical number. So, they rewrote, with the permission of the Gershwin estate, the show: they changed the keys for a lot of the singers, so they were able to sing them eight shows a week, and they added dialogue as opposed to the sung-through, so it was almost like the opposite of what they did for Carmen, which we consider an opera.

Julie Mclsaac 19:51

Yeah, no, that's a really great distinction! Thanks for pointing that out about the frequency of performances, where someone in a musical theatre context would be singing that show, eight shows a week. And, in an opera context, they might be performing twice a week or three times singing that role, and how that impacts.

Jonathan Christopher 20:06

And the demands are quite different but, at the same time, they are demands. So, Christine in Phantom of the Opera: most Christine's are contracted to perform six shows a week. A lot of massive roles that either are physically demanding or vocally demanding on Broadway and in musical theatre, they have an alternate that performs the two other shows throughout the week. I know in "Hamilton," which is what I was doing here right before the lockdown, our Hamilton was performing seven shows a week and his alternate – or his standby – will perform at least one show a week, because you're on stage the whole time, and those roles are quite operatic in the sense that it's it's a big piece; you're onstage from the beginning to the end and, even though it's rapping and hip-hop, that's almost more demanding on your voice than using your full body and your full sound to project out into the house, to sing 40-45 minutes worth of music, which most operatic roles are.

Robyn Grant-Moran 21:14

I'm pretty excited about this next audio question that comes to us from COC's Ticket Services.

Julie Mclsaac 21:20

And when you think about it, that team is actually the company's frontline when it comes to answering audience questions. So, we thought it'd be really interesting to hear what do they get asked the most?

Nick Davis 21:30

I'm Nick Davis with the Ticket Services team – aka The Box Office. One question we're asked often is whether production is set as traditional, or modern, or some gray area in between? What would you say is the difference in experience between these traditional and modern settings?

Robyn Grant-Moran 21:47

I think this might actually be two separate questions: A) "What's considered traditional and what's considered modern when it comes to a production?" and B) "What, as an audience member, can we expect from seeing either one of these?"

Julie Mclsaac 22:03

Yeah, great questions. And I find myself thinking... well, asking myself, "What do I mean when I say traditional?" When I say traditional, do I mean, "Are they wearing the costumes that someone would have worn around the time that that opera was created?" So, let's say something was written in 1780, then is a traditional production something that looks like what a production would have looked like in 1780? Or, when that person's calling into the Box Office to ask that question, are they hoping to see a production that looks like that beloved production that they first saw when they first went to [The] Marriage of Figaro, for example? Are they hoping to recreate that traditional experience that they had?

Robyn Grant-Moran 22:41

Yeah, those are very different things. And when we're talking about things that are traditional, it's really historically informed: we don't know for sure. So, if we're trying to recreate history, why are we just looking to costumes? Should we be turning the opera house back into a house of ill repute, where people are beer-drinking, and gambling, and eating peanuts?

Julie Mclsaac 23:07

Yeah and, likewise, like, with the Mozart example... so, the operas of that time, they were exploring, like, contemporary foibles and challenging societal structures of the time. So, should we then mount an opera that does that, that challenges our contemporary way of being and of seeing and challenges the societal structures that are in place? Because, in that way, you'd be honoring, sort of, the original impetus of the work? So, would that be traditional or would that be modern?

Robyn Grant-Moran 23:33

To me that says, traditional, but that's probably not what people are asking when they ask about traditional.

Julie Mclsaac 23:42

Yeah, so, I guess the question is, "What is traditional to you?" and then hopefully, the person on the Box Office side can, sort of, share, "Well, here's what the team is doing. Here's what that creative team is doing," and whether we want to label that traditional or modern – I mean, there's just so many ways you can interpret both of those terms.

Robyn Grant-Moran 23:57

Yeah, I always kind of considered maybe this question should be more "minimalist" or "present day costuming" or "avant-garde direction" for those really challenging at times productions.

Julie Mclsaac 24:14

When someone's asking that question of traditional or modern, are they actually wondering, "Is this going to be something that I can just go and listen to and not have to think about very much, or is it going to be something that, sort of, upsets what I've come to know as my beloved Tosca or my beloved

[La] Traviata, and I don't want to be..." They just want to, kind of, go and wrap themselves up in that cozy blanket of the piece that they know and love without having to think about it differently – which is legit! That's fair, that's completely fair!

Robyn Grant-Moran 24:43

Absolutely. I was just going to say or is it one of those productions where you just have to close your eyes and enjoy the music?

Julie Mclsaac 24:49

[And] just listen! Yeah, but I love that question about thinking back to those original audience members who attended that first production or the early run of a production, when it was created in whatever century it was created, and to think about how can I get close to the experience that they would have had when that thing was new, and that thing wasn't known to them yet. And, to me, in that respect, I like it when the design team and the director do something kind of crazy and modern with the production, because then I'm on the edge of my seat not knowing what's going to happen – the way those original audiences would have been. That was a great question for us to think on. Thank you so much for sending that in, Nick. And we hope this was helpful for anyone who has perhaps called in to Ticket Services to ask that kind of question in the past.

Robyn Grant-Moran 25:35

Now, all of this talk about traditional versus modern dovetails really well into our next topic, which actually comes to us from music critic Anne Midgette. We spoke to Anne for part one of our episode on opera and criticism, and she wanted to know about the driving considerations when programming an opera house.

Anne Midgette 25:53

I would love to hear an administrator's view on deciding whether a show should have a more traditional or a more interpretive approach. I am very interested in interpretive director's approaches, and I know a lot of audiences are horrified at excesses that come out of that and I would be curious to know how programmers think about that.

Julie Mclsaac 26:15

Excellent question, Anne. And when it comes to planning out an opera season, who better to offer up those insights than the newest General Director of the Canadian Opera Company, Perryn Leech. Now you may recall, we chatted with Perryn and outgoing COC leader Alexander Neef at the start of 2021, in Episode Six. And Perryn was immediately on board with helping us to answer Anne's question. Here are some of his thoughts.

Perryn Leech 26:38

Things that appeal to me, the things that I like to see myself as an audience member and to program are things which have a strong narrative, or with really well thought through reason for changing the setting, if that's the case, or changing the period sometimes. And I think one of the ways that you do that is when something starts to fall apart completely after First Act, that's when you know that it was a concept that was a good idea but just didn't really take through. Those are the sort of productions which

annoy me as a as a patron, because you think, "Well, okay, it was a good idea for maybe 20 per cent of the show and then it just fell apart and I've forgotten about it." So, what I'm always looking for is that the way of asking me new questions about a piece: if it's a piece I know really well, it's asking me new questions, framing the story in a different way, telling that story in a different way. And I think that if you leave only talking about the shock value or production, then production has failed because, at some point, you've taken people out of that narrative's storytelling and just gotten into the stage of mindset – a mind space, at least – of questioning why you made some decisions.

Julie Mclsaac 27:46

Do you have any recollections or cherished memories of seeing that done very well, where there was a concept that steadily made its way through the entire piece and resonated strongly as a new interpretation of the whole?

Perryn Leech 28:00

Sure. I think that there are many examples of it. I think that there was a production of Jephtha, which was a Handel oratorio, which had a concept put onto it, but the concept was thought all the way through, and characters were added – some singing, some non-singing – that made the story and that concept work, and at no point did you feel that the concept wasn't there, that the narrative wasn't central to the concept. And then there are many more examples where it doesn't work and something has been outdated. I think some of the Peter Sellars updates of the Mozart operas, for instance, – I've only seen them on video – but I think that Don Giovanni in a CEO role, I would say, it didn't completely work but you didn't question it enough, because 95 per cent of it did work, and therefore you're able to just lose yourself in this, "Oh, he's got that power. He's not the Count; he's the CEO of an organization, therefore people have to tolerate the way he treats people, the way he interacts with people, and the rights that he believes he has are all set within the context of a corporate CEO." That made a huge amount of sense to me, as someone, at that point, is relatively young starting and working for the corporate clients.

Julie Mclsaac 29:18

Is there anything that inspires you in particular when it comes to highly interpretive choices of canonical rep?

Perryn Leech 29:25

No, I think each piece is different. I think once you started to say "one size fits all," it has to be, though, driven by stuff that's within the narrative of the libretto and the writings. So, we did a very modern version of the Ring Cycle in Houston, Texas, but it all held together because it was all based in what the original libretto and story was, and nothing was added. And people say, "Well, it was all modernized up and everything," and that's definitely true but the reality of it is that nothing was added that wasn't in the original story. And, actually when you look, Wagner is so specific about how he wanted things doing and setting, and people, sort of, try and rebel against that. But in real terms, the story of The Ring is incredibly clearly laid out, and it is open to interpretation on how you tell that story, but [if] you lose the story, then I think you've lost your audience.

Robyn Grant-Moran 30:31

I mentioned earlier that we received a whole range of submissions when we put the call out for questions for this episode. I think it's fair to say this one is coming from someone with a fair bit of opera expertise. Zane wrote in to ask, "What is the company's official favorite selection from the '24 Italian Art Songs and Arias [of the 17th and 18th Centuries]' book?"

Julie Mclsaac 30:51

Now there's probably way too many people with very divergent thoughts on this answer to get you one solid one, Zane. But we did want to dig into this for you, and so we're going to go back to two of the COC team members that we spoke to earlier. Let's bring back COC Music Director Johannes Debus and Liz Upchurch, Head of the COC Ensemble Studio.

Johannes Debus 31:10

Yes, mine is "Amarilli, mia bella." The simple reason for that is it's probably one of the first songs in Italian that I got to learn or that I encountered when I was a little boy. And it is a beautiful song. There's always this name of "Amarilli" – Amarilli, of course, is also this flower, the amaryllis, and always at the end of the verse, there's this beautiful melisma on this name, and it's, kind of, embellished almost like beautiful flowers – it's a love song, obviously. Later on, I remember I played a concert with a friend of mine who was – or is – a fabulous recorder player, and we played some sets of variations on that song because, at that time, it was was a bit like I would say like Lady Gaga... I don't know... other artists of the genre of that time! It was really the popular repertoire, everyone must have known it and sang it.

Liz Upchurch 32:28

I can tell you that my favourite is "Caro mio ben," which was written by [Giuseppe] Giordani and the poet, I believe, is anonymous. But every voice type has sung that. If you want to see Pavarotti sing it – which I'd probably say has to be one of my absolute favorite renditions of this. You can hear basses sing it, you can hear high soprano sing it, you can hear it with orchestra, you can hear it with guitar, you can hear it with piano, there's even a recording online going back to 1903. I can play you a little bit. Just that tune – it's so simple! But just those three little notes, it's so simple and yet so beautiful. And with an operatic core to the poem, which is, you know, "Dearly beloved, you make my heart languish after you." Does it get any more operatic than that? But it's not actually an operatic song; it was written by an Italian for a concert, I believe, in London. Caro mio ben – enjoy it!

Julie Mclsaac 33:38

Excellent. Well, thank you! And thank you, Zane, for the question. And Happy Birthday, Zane. We're told that today, the premiere of this episode, is your birthday.

Liz Upchurch 33:46

Oh, and happy birthday, yes! I could probably do a version of... [plays "Happy Birthday to You"] Happy birthday, Zane!

Julie Mclsaac 34:19

Now we talk a lot about the COC's mainstage work and the history of the company, but, presently, the company is also heavily involved in schools and communities through musical programs taught by a wonderful staff of COC Teaching Artists, often in partnership with different community leaders. And, as

we're planning this episode, we wanted to hear from students about the things they wonder about and their experiences with opera.

Robyn Grant-Moran 34:41

Here's a really great one from the grade 9 MID class at Haydon Park Secondary School in Toronto. They wanted to know, "How do you come up with a costume for the opera?" Julie, is this maybe one you'd like to put your director/dramaturg hat on for?

Julie Mclsaac 34:58

Yeah, I would love to! So, there's a lot of collaboration involved. So, for example, if I'm directing a work, then I'm going to chat a lot with the costume designer, and I'm going to compile a whole bunch of images – like, maybe create a vision board or something like that, maybe use Pinterest or some other means to do that – so that we can all get on the same page in terms of "What is the world of this show that we're creating?" For example, "Where's it set geographically?" "Where's it set in time?" "What is the era that this piece is set in?" And, in that case, you might do some research around "What did people wear?" And then you want to, sort of, know, "What was commonplace for people to wear at that time?" "Was it a time where women often wore skirts?" or "Are we transitioning into a time where women would wear trousers?" or "What does it mean to wear skirt? What does it mean to wear trousers?" and things like that. So, what are your costume saying in addition to everything else that's going on in your production. And what's really great is that, in terms of collaboration: there's the designer, there's also a team of builders, and people who supervise all the wardrobe stuff. And, if you're interested in knowing some intricacies of that, you could go back to Episode Four, where we spoke with Sandra [Corazza], who's head of wardrobe here at the COC, and she's got lovely insights.

Robyn Grant-Moran 36:04

And I imagined comfort is really important to you as well.

Julie Mclsaac 36:08

Absolutely!

Robyn Grant-Moran 36:09

Like, you have to have comfortable shoes. When famous Swedish soprano Birgit Nilsson was asked how she prepared for the role of Isolde [in Tristan und Isolde], she said, "Comfortable shoes!"

Julie Mclsaac 36:23

So important!

Robyn Grant-Moran 36:25

A funny little anecdote: I wore Russell Braun's kneepads in the Louis Riel production – he was not using them for his role; it was from a past production.

Julie Mclsaac 36:36

Opera companies have their store of costumes and they might reuse pieces, so, you might find yourself wearing a costume piece that another singer wore maybe two years ago or five years ago. And I think

that's lovely because then you find that you're part of this tradition, you feel like you're participating in something that goes beyond the single production that you're in and connects you to all these other artists. The other thing I think about, Robyn, is about, like, "What [does] the singer have to do when they're wearing that costume?" Like, kneepads: usually you need that when you have to be down on your knees or down on the ground and thinking about "What does that mean for their pants that they're wearing? Do they have to be reinforced in the knees?" for example.

Robyn Grant-Moran 37:09

Hmm, yeah, I hadn't even considered that! But, now that you said, it makes perfect sense.

Julie Mclsaac 37:15

And undergarments – like, what someone's wearing under their... – and that might contribute to the silhouette, so, the line of the costume and how that looks on stage. But, also, maybe they have scenes where they need to be intimate with someone else, or where there's nudity or something like that. So, there's a lot of thought that has to go into undergarments and quick changes. So, "How quickly do they have to change between one costume piece and another?" And, actually, there's one more question that we received from Haydon Park's grade 9 MID class, and it's a really excellent one. They wanted to know, "How do opera singers get their voice to travel so far?"

Robyn Grant-Moran 37:47

You know, it's still a big surprise to a lot of people that the sound you hear when you go to an opera doesn't rely on the use of mics or amps. Since we were already speaking with vocal expert Liz Upchurch, we asked if she could break it down for us in 60 seconds or less.

Liz Upchurch 38:05

The operatic voice is somewhere between... it's half athletic and half artistic. But there's a scientific reason why you can hear them: it's not that they're singing louder than the amount of people playing in the orchestra – [you] can have over 100 people in the pit, there's no way that one person can sing louder. This is a very good question: why can we hear them sing over or through this enormous amount of sound? It's because of actually the frequency that the human voice resonates at. And so basically operatic voice is trained to live to the full extent in that frequency – or the "formant" I believe it's called – and this takes a lot of passion and commitment. Yes, a lot of training but, as I said, it's not about singing louder; it's, kind of, learning to make your entire body the resonator for your instrument. I mean, that's a very brief little way of putting it but it's somewhere between science and what the composer writes.

Julie Mclsaac 39:15

It's so interesting, that idea of the human body as a resonator, because when we asked the same question to professional vocalist, Jonathan Christopher, he almost mirrored Liz's response in comparing the human body to an instrument all its own.

Jonathan Christopher 39:30

So, you have your whole body – your body is your instrument when it comes to singing. And when you sing in so many different styles, which is for me, very important – as much as I love opera I love musical theatre, as much as I love musical theatre I love gospel music, as much as I love gospel I love pop

music – and many of my teachers along the way have told me that I should probably focus on just one thing in order to be fully successful in it. But I myself am too passionate about music in general, so, I'm happy that I had training in opera that did prepare me for musical theatre, but then I did learn some different techniques in order for my voice to sustain eight shows a week. So, in opera, you know, our support comes from our abdomen and, depending on the teacher that you study with, it's whether or not you release [your abdomen]. Your abdomen is filled, it's like a big barrel and you kind of... or you have a rubber tube around your stomach and you try to press out to, kind of, get that support and feel like a buoy that's wading in the water. And then you have to use the muscles in your face as, kind of, like a resistance in order to get this big full sound out. And when you're walking into a theatre, you know that your sound has to get from where you are, up to the very last balcony, where the cheap seats are – they're up there, so, you want to sing to them. So, you learn the musculature and, kind of, the anatomy of your body to know what it takes to sing to those people out there. And it's a lot of work, you don't necessarily have to have a big booming voice. It depends on what we call "the resonators," which are in your skull. Like, there are all these different holes and cavities in your head, which make it like a big speaker at a concert – like at a Beyonce concert or something that amplifies her sound so she can get out to the cheap seats. We use our own bodies to do that and, through a lot of studying, you figure that out. Whereas in musical theatre, you still have to support the sound that you're creating, but you also have a microphone to help amplify, especially nowadays. Maybe back in the 1930s and 40s, you hear a singer like Ethel Merman where she had a loud sound because she had to – there weren't microphones at that time! So, you use these different parts of your face to, kind of, [mimics performing on stage by speaking louder] make that sound go from where you are and all the way through the back. But we don't have to play with that these days, and you still have to project, but you also want to make really good friends with the sound engineers, especially when you're on tour with the musical because it's almost that you are at their mercy: when you're doing a musical, they mix your sound, they make sure that the sound is balanced between the band that's playing underneath the stage, the ensemble, the principles, so, everything sounds, like, a beautiful rock concert in a way. That's at least what Hamilton is.

Robyn Grant-Moran 43:04

Thanks again to the grade 9 students at Haydon Park's MID class for these great questions. We hope you've got a better sense of how opera production and performance works. You know, it's interesting that, a lot of the time, people think that if you work in opera, you must know a lot about opera. But that's not always true.

Julie Mclsaac 43:21

Learning is definitely a lifelong journey and, in planning this episode, we got some opera questions from a few COC staff members, including members of our own production team. One question that comes to mind in particular is, "Why does it feel like there's so few English language operas?"

Robyn Grant-Moran 43:38

Since we were already talking to Johannes Debus, we posed this question to him as well. Here's a little bit of that conversation.

Johannes Debus 43:46

In terms of the amount of repertoire that has been produced in English in opera, there's a bit of a gap. I mean, after Henry Purcell, you'll find some things, of course, in the 19th century, late 19th century, [Frederick] Delius and others and, yes, Benjamin Britten. I mean, we did A Midsummer Night's Dream at the COC at least in the last 10-11 years, Peter Grimes, the company has done [The] Rape of Lucretia, [The] Turn of the Screw, and I think those are all... yeah, absolute masterpieces based on great stories, it's always extremely exciting and it's extremely well written. Then there's something like Stravinsky, The Rake's Progress and, of course, now you have a huge amount of repertoire from the U.K. but also from other English spoken countries – North America in particular. I think there's a lot happening and I'm sure that we will see and hear more. Obviously I'm not a native speaker but, from what I understand, it's actually very, very tricky to perform/to sing in English well, and that might also be one aspect why people have the impression and the notion that this repertoire – repertoire in English – is a bit neglected.

Robyn Grant-Moran 45:18

Do you have a favorite English-language opera?

Johannes Debus 45:21

It might be Peter Grimes. I think Peter Grimes is one of those pieces that... it has it all. You know, it has the large scenes, it has also the focus on the individuals and their tragedies, so to speak. The music is of such variety and mastery, the score writing is so powerful. The use of all the forces: chorus, soloists, but then also the orchestra with those interludes – it's really breathtaking! And you go from, like, at the very end, you only hear a foghorn and basically, you know, you go from very, very little to the largest storm scenes. Yeah, so, it's a piece that somehow showcases the possibilities, the range of opera and the immediacy. You know, it can hit you and it hits you then right in your heart.

Julie Mclsaac 46:53

Our next question came to us from theatre critic Karen Fricker. We'll actually be chatting further with Karen on an upcoming episode about the future of arts criticism. But when she found out that we were doing this mailbag episode, she thought it'd be the perfect time to learn the answer to something she's always wondered about.

Robyn Grant-Moran 47:09

I'm curious about what opera singers eat on the day [of a performance] because, you know, you hear a lot about, like, how to run a marathon and the pasta stuff and, I'm just wondering, if you're going to sing a big, big role, what's the philosophy? And is there a philosophy or is it completely dependent on the person? Is it dependent on what register they sing in? Is it dependent upon their physical size? So, that's my question: what do you eat? This is such a great question. And this is so different for everyone. I know I don't like to feel too full, but I don't want to be hungry either.

Julie Mclsaac 47:52

Yeah, I agree: everyone's gonna have their own little tricks of the trade and what makes them feel good and confident going out on stage.

Robyn Grant-Moran 47:58

We decided to widen our nets on this and bring you some answers from a range of performers working across opera and musicals. Our friends at Amplified Opera wanted to weigh in. Here's co-founder Teiya Kasahara.

Teiya Kasahara 48:11

I typically eat something that is quite hearty and nutritious. So, energy that I can pull from for quite a few hours. So, something with complex carbs, a lot of protein, no spice – I don't want any acid reflux – or any kind of acidic things, usually no tomato, anything dairy. It depends, but I think everyone is different. That's what I eat.

Julie Mclsaac 48:36

Here's what Jonathan Christopher had to say when asked about his pre-show eating rituals.

Jonathan Christopher 48:42

It really does depend on the person and it also depends on the idiosyncrasies and the neuroses of a person. I know when I was in my master's degree at least, there were a lot of us that were just, kind of, freaking out about the next steps of what happens after you receive your master's degree, and I worried myself so much I did start to get acid reflux, and there were days when I couldn't sing – I'd go into my voice lesson and it would just be [imitates scratchy throat] or I was doing... I forget which opera I was doing but at the same... like, the muscles in my throat would start spasming, and I was like, "Okay, this isn't great. So, what do I do to make sure that this doesn't happen in a performance?" and most of it does come down to diet but, at the end of the day, too, it, kind of, just comes to where you are physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually as a performer, and you learn that through time. In terms of opera. I don't necessarily want to have a full stomach before I go on stage – or in musical theatre as well. Like, I'll have an energy drink or... not necessarily a cup of coffee but something, kind of, that wakes me up but also gives me enough energy to do a three-hour show. Well, I'm vegan, so I, kind of, eat vegan junk food: I love falafel but I try to have stuff that's not too acidic. But also, the more I worry about it, the more I become neurotic about whether or not the food affects me. And since I don't eat dairy anymore, that doesn't really factor into what I eat. But I know a lot of people that have very strict diets in order for them to make sure that their throats are as prepared, and as clear, and as clean as possible. I was just watching an interview with Leontyne Price earlier today and, if you don't know who Leontyne Price is, she was one of the most prolific voices of the 20th century. As a Black opera singer, she was an inspiration to me and to so many others; the adversity that she went through paved the way so I can be where I am today. She said something about [that] her private life was free from various temptations, whether it was, you know, the night before a show, going out to a party or having a big, big meal that might affect her voice the next day for that concert or for that opera. Our job as artists is to give our best selves to the public in the theatre, so, throughout your years of study and throughout your young career, you figure out what works for you and what doesn't work for you, and if that comes down to someone eating a big piece of lasagna before they go onstage to do La Traviata, then that's what it is, you know. And if it means not necessarily having a meal from noon on until after the show, then that's that person's convention. But it really does depend.

Julie Mclsaac 51:51

Well, thanks for sharing your particular experience on that and also pulling in, sort of, the wisdom of artists who have come before us in previous generations. That's great, too! Thank you.

Robyn Grant-Moran 52:02

There's one final question that came through to us on Twitter and it's from a performer who's no stranger to the COC's mainstage.

Julie Mclsaac 52:10

Audiences might remember soprano Keri Alkema as the Foreign Princess in the COC's *Rusalka* in 2019, or as Giovanna Seymour in COC's 2018 production of *Anna Bolena*. She also co-hosts a weekly YouTube show [Screaming Divas] with soprano Sondra Radvanovsky, and it's a lot of fun, so do check it out! She tweeted, "With the pandemic – or possibly endemic – I wonder what our art form as a whole will look like in 3-5-10 years from now?" So, we thought this might be a nice one to ruminate on as we wrap up. What do you think, Robyn – three years from now?

Robyn Grant-Moran 52:43

Oh, my gosh, even just three years from now: will we have the ability to all sit together and commune in an opera house together? Will we be distanced in that? Will we have intermissions? All of these things are going to really change the landscape the answers to these.

Julie Mclsaac 53:02

Right! Like, will I have people sitting on either side of me, and will we be in there, sort of, in that beautiful, tight compact experience altogether or not? And also thinking ahead, you know, three to five years, you know, we had Cherie [Dimaline] and Ian [Cusson] who shared with us about their collaborations (it's on Episode Five of the podcast) and I'm hoping that, three to five years from now, we're seeing that production come to the stage, and that it's really indicative of this wealth of Canadian storytelling that's beginning to take over our mainstages – not take over our mainstages but really have its place, its rightful place on the main stages of the country.

Robyn Grant-Moran 53:38

And I expect hybridisation is going to become the norm; that live performances will have a lot of digital content for accessibility, whether it's unpacking themes, seeing backstage bonus things, even getting to see performances when you're not able to get to the theatre itself.

Julie Mclsaac 54:03

Yeah, I agree with you that opera isn't just about what happens in the opera house; but opera is this thing that can connect us and that we can all be connected to – regardless of whether or not we're able to gather together in the opera house – but that there's many different pathways in and ways that the art form is evolving and percolating.

Robyn Grant-Moran 54:22

Yeah, I'm really excited to see how the use of technology that we've been incorporating since the pandemic stays and how it grows over the next few years.

Julie Mclsaac 54:39

One it's exciting, too, to think right now, Robyn, we're having these conversations that are a bit removed from mainstage opera activity just because there really isn't any, but to think that this is a place that we could talk about productions if they were happening, and we could chat with people who are working on their productions and, sort of, have a place to add to people's experience or to expand the experience of attending the opera.

Robyn Grant-Moran 55:04

I love the idea of us having episodes that act in support to productions that are happening at the Four Seasons Centre.

Julie Mclsaac 55:15

And I love what you're saying about all those different things that can support that experience, whether that's insight into what's happening backstage, or getting to know one of the performers, or getting to know what's going on in the pit and getting a better sense of connection to those individual musicians who are making the magic happen down there. A lot is possible and we've been forced to explore and to innovate, and, hopefully, we'll bring it along with us when we also bring back that thing that we miss so much.

Robyn Grant-Moran 55:41

One final thought. I mean, the conversations that we're having about identity, and gender and opera, and racial identity. They were conversations that were happening before but not at the decibel level they are right now because of the pandemic. That's really exciting! How is that going to change productions in the future? I expect for the best, much of the time.

Julie Mclsaac 56:07

I remember Rena [Roussin] saying on Episode Seven, she said, "I just want more opera, and more people who feel represented, and feel included, and feel like they can come and enjoy the art form." Speaking of more, that's all the time we have for today. But thank you so much for joining us.

Robyn Grant-Moran 56:28

We also want to extend a special thanks to all of our guests: COC General Director Perryn Leech, COC Music Director Johannes Debus, Head of the COC Ensemble Studio Liz Upchurch, actor and singer Jonathan Christopher, Amplified Opera co-founder Teiya Kasahara, and soprano Rebecca Caine.

Julie Mclsaac 56:49

We loved hearing your questions and we hope that we were able to satisfyingly answer a few of those head-scratchers. But please feel free to keep sharing your questions and feedback at any time. You can tag us on social @CanadianOpera, or email us at audiences@coc.ca. You can also send us a voice memo and there's instructions for how to do that at coc.ca/KeyChange.

Robyn Grant-Moran 57:13

We appreciate all of the feedback we've received so far, and the reviews you've left on Apple Podcasts. And remember, if you're a COC subscriber or member, you have access to exclusive bonus content and extended interviews. Next week: we'll have more from our chat with Rebecca Caine.

Julie Mclsaac 57:30

So, if you're a COC supporter, keep an eye out for a link in your supporter newsletter on Thursdays. Coming up next episode: we're diving into our Spring season with an exploration of opera and contemporary art. Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson will join us in conversation along with Adelina Vlas of the Art Gallery of Ontario, where Ragnar's work is currently on display.

Robyn Grant-Moran 57:51

See you then. Be the first to find out about free events and concerts from the COC by signing up for our monthly eOpera newsletter at coc.ca/eOpera.

Julie Mclsaac 58:11

Thank you to all of our supporters for making Key Change possible. This week we want to especially thank every COC member, subscriber, and donor for coming on this journey with us as we explore new ways to share opera's unique power.

Robyn Grant-Moran 58:25

So, to make sure you don't miss an episode, subscribe to Key Change wherever you get your podcasts.

Julie Mclsaac 58:32

Key Change is produced by the Canadian Opera Company and hosted by Robyn Grant-Moran and Julie Mclsaac.

Robyn Grant-Moran 58:39

To learn more about today's guests and see the show notes, please visit our website at coc.ca/KeyChange.