

More than song and dance

Queen of Puddings Music Theatre trains singers Cirque du Soleil style, including African drumming and bellowing like Swedish cowherds

If you were to poke your nose this week into the Jackman Studio, a large rehearsal room at the Canadian Opera Company, the scene before your eyes would not have much to do with opera as we usually think of it. You might find eight young women ecstatically pounding on African drums and cowbells, dancing like natives of Ghana and belting out African call-and-response tunes. Or the same women, led by Toronto musician Suba Sankaran, might be seated in a circle, performing brain-frying exercises in which they sing in the South Indian Mayamalavagaula raga (melodic mode) while tapping complex rhythms. Or they might be performing subtle exercises on mats, under the tutelage of Toronto's guru of Feldenkrais technique, Marion Harris.

The eight participants are all, in fact, operatically trained singers. Most are still in university. They were selected from 65 applicants across Canada to take part in Contemporary Techniques for Classical Singers -- a three-week program run by Queen of Puddings Music Theatre, under its artistic directors John Hess and Dairine Ni Mheadhra.

The brightest star in Canada's new music firmament, Queen of Puddings is known for its eccentric but winning recipes -- starting with the one that inspired the name of the Toronto-based company. That traditional Irish recipe turns a few simple ingredients into a shamelessly rich dessert. ("Spread warm jam on the top; whisk the egg whites stiffly; fold in the remainder of the sugar and pile on top of the pudding," it reads in part.)

Hess and Ni Mheadhra likewise believe in humble, homegrown ingredients: Though they sometimes include music by international composers, their productions are otherwise 100% Canadian, right down to the designers and directors.

And the results have indeed been rich. Beatrice Chancy, a gut-wrenching opera about black slavery in Canada by composer James Rolfe and poet George Elliott Clarke, restored everyone's faith in the future of opera

in Canada; since its premiere in 1998 it has had productions in Toronto, Halifax and Edmonton, and was broadcast on CBC television. But Hess and Ni Mheadhra soon realized they'd have to plant their own kitchen garden, figuratively speaking.

"Right from when we started Puddings in 1996, we wanted to put singers in a kind of Cirque du Soleil mode," Ni Mheadhra said this week. "It was an aesthetic that called on them to do much more than

stand and sing. We were also doing work that required a different vocal style [than the standard operatic one]. There was a piece by Karin Rehnqvist, for instance, where the women were supposed to sing like Swedish cowherds calling to one another on top of mountains."

The turning point came in 2000, with their show *Sirènes*. "It was our dream," said Ni Mheadhra, "to have six female singers, unaccompanied and unconduted, performing with no pitch source and no time source.

Coming from instrumental backgrounds, John and I assumed that they'd be able to initiate their own ensemble." (Ni Mheadhra began her career, at age 17, as a professional cellist; Hess is a pianist.)

"Instrumentalists are trained to be independent. But singers are trained to be more dependent," Ni Mheadhra said. "So it turned out to be an enormously difficult thing that we had asked them to do."

Ni Mheadhra and Hess also realized that with each show they did, they'd have to retrain a new group of singers in the "Queen of Puddings vocabulary" of movement and vocal production. So they hit on the idea of an intensive summer program. Thanks to three-year funding from the George Cedric Metcalf Charitable Foundation and the Ontario Trillium Foundation, they're currently able to provide full tuition scholarships to all eight participants, and an astounding student-teacher ratio of eight to seven.



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Dance improvisation class at Queen of Puddings: Students include Lauren Phillips in foreground, Mireille Lebel seated, and behind from left to right, Marion Samuel-Stevens, Kelly Backwell and Phoebe MacRae.

"Most advanced opera training programs recognize the need for movement, acting, etc.," Hess said, "but they're not always process-based. Even though they're calling it training, they're product-oriented. What we want is to give [the singers] a set of skills; to empower them, instead of saying, 'Listen to me; I'll tell you what to do.' "

Though each participant is assigned an unaccompanied solo piece to work on during the program, they hardly sang at all the first week. U.S. contemporary music specialist Lucy Shelton -- the only Western-trained singer (and the only non-Canadian) on the faculty -- didn't arrive until the final week. And there's no instruction in vocal technique per se.

"That's a very deliberate choice," said Hess. "We want the singers to feel free to take chances and risks, so we don't want a voice teacher on hand perpetuating old models."

OK, so why African drumming and dancing?

"It gets the rhythm into their bodies," Hess said. "If they saw the polyrhythms they're doing right now in a contemporary music score, they'd freak out!" (Ottawa-based percussionist Cathy Armstrong taught the participants by rote.)

In the final drumming class, Hess and Armstrong smiled as they watched the singers collaborating intensely to create and perform their own pieces, using elements of dance, percussion and song they'd learned over the previous week. "They didn't have a conductor or time source," Hess noted afterward. "They were able to take control, and spontaneously choose a leader. That's exactly what we had wanted in *Sirènes*."

"The whole idea is to try to provide a way of learning without realizing that you're learning," Hess added. "So with the South Indian singing, they're so focused on hearing the raga, and on tapping the tala [i.e., the rhythmic pattern] that they can't think about singing."

The South Indian singing also "shapes and fine tunes" the participants' ears to microtones and other non-Western intonation, Hess noted -- a key skill for contemporary music, most of which conspicuously avoids Western tonality.

In addition to the more exotic ingredients, the course includes a session on deciphering contemporary scores; movement classes with dancer-choreographer Marie-Josée Chartier; acting lessons with director Tom Diamond; and master classes with Shelton. On Friday, the last day of the course, the participants will perform their piece, as well as a monologue, for a small, invitational audience.

Mid-way through the program, the energy level among in the participants was practically crackling -- and it was clear that what they were learning would apply to standard repertoire as well as contemporary.

"Oh my God, this is so much more what I want!" said soprano Alison Smyth, when asked how the program differs from conventional music instruction. "At school, it's about getting everything right; about getting from this note to that note. Here, it's about just letting yourself go, and being uninhibited; about getting back to the message that the composer is saying. I think that the traditional opera and classical world needs to be ripped open like this."

The Feldenkrais sessions, which focus on increasing mobility and flexibility of the ribcage, and freeing the neck and facial muscles, appear to have been a revelation for all the participants. "It opens up [the whole breathing apparatus]," said Vancouver-born Mireille Lebel. "So you can take in more breath, sing higher notes; better arias, and so on. And it just feels so primal and good!"

"There's a lot more acceptance of mistakes here," noted Catherine Carew, a Toronto-based mezzo originally from Fenelon Falls, Ont. "I often feel like I've been saying things that should completely embarrass me here, but it doesn't faze me. I just think: OK, I've just learned something new."

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For information on classes and private sessions, please contact:

Marion Harris

390 Dupont Street, Suite 201

Toronto, Ontario M5R 1V9

Tel: 416-928-3505 Fax: 416-928-3593

www.feldenkraiscentre.com

