



KARSTEN MORAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES
Heather Johnson, left, in a master class with Catherine Malfitano.

Crowd-Sourcing an Opera

The creation of a new opera is a chancy proposition. So the American Lyric Theater has come up with a way to bolster budding librettists and composers: invite a crowd of opinionated New Yorkers to a concert reading of a fledgling work and ask them to criticize it. Bring in a living opera legend and let her have a go at it, too. Whatever is left standing, the reasoning goes, has a fighting chance to make it into production.

CORINNA da FONSECA WOLLHEIM
CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
The American Lyric Theater was founded in 2005 to foster the creation of operas by matching composers to librettists and offer-

ing them training and workshops to help them develop new works. Last year it also commissioned three operas from participants. Those operas are at the center of the InsightALT festival being presented at the JCC in Manhattan.

The festival, where audiences can get a glimpse of the craft that underpins the art of opera, opened on Tuesday with a public master class led by Catherine Malfitano. A venerated soprano, Ms. Malfitano has, over the course of three decades, created roles in nearly a dozen new operas. In recent years she has also built up a portfolio of directing credits.

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The Audience Has a Role, Crowd-Sourcing Operas

From First Arts Page

"The ultimate test of whether a piece is going to last is whether you can make an emotional connection with the audience and make them come back for more," she told the participating singers, urging them to take the creation of new operas seriously. "What we are doing is of the utmost importance for the future of this art form. Because at some point people will get sick of the museum."

With those words in mind, the fine roster of singers performed selections from three operas. "The Long Walk" is an opera about post-traumatic stress disorder in war veterans, with music by Jeremy Howard Beck and a libretto by Stephanie Fleischmann, based on Brian Castner's book of the same title. "La Reina" is a drama about drug wars by the Mexican composer Jorge Sosa, with

The InsightALT Festival continues with a symposium on opera and war on Sunday; a concert reading of "The Long Walk" that night; and a reading of "La Reina" on Monday at the JCC in Manhattan, 334 Amsterdam Avenue, at 76th Street; (646) 505-4444, jccmanhattan.org.

words by Laura Sosa Pedroza, his aunt. "The Turing Project," with music by Justine Chen and a libretto by David Simpatico, dramatizes the life of Alan Turing, the computer pioneer.

In the master class the excellent Canadian baritone Jonathan Estabrooks and the vibrant mezzo Elise Quagliata performed a scene in which Turing, who was gay, turns down a no-nonsense marriage proposal by his friend Joan Clarke, who worked with him on decrypting Enigma Code messages in World War II. It's a moving moment that derives its poignancy from the pragmatic negotiations that mask the passions of the characters. Joan, fully aware of Turing's homosexuality, offers social respectability in return for discretion.

"I love you," Turing sings, even as he rejects her. "You taught me how to knit. I can talk to you straight, like a man. You're my best friend."

Afterward, Ms. Malfitano told Mr. Estabrooks: "The line about the knitting is funny. But you cannot play it for laughs." Of the four statements Turing makes, she suggested, two are more true than the others.

"I love you" and "You're my best friend," Mr. Estabrooks ventured.



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Foreground, from left, Jonathan Estabrooks, Catherine Malfitano and Elise Quagliata at the InsightALT festival. Jody Schum accompanies.

"Yes," Ms. Malfitano said, "so you have to sing them differently."

In the read-through of the complete first act of "The Turing Project" on Thursday evening, those words glowed with intensity when Mr. Estabrooks, a gifted actor, delivered them. There was a ripple of laughter at the reference to knitting, but instead of distracting from the pathos, the humor heightened it. Sitting in the audience, Ms. Malfitano nodded with approval.

After the reading, Lawrence Edelson, the president of the American Lyric Theater, led a discussion with the capacity audience, whom he invited first to give short statements about the work they had just heard. One listener described the score as "a vivid smear of humanity against a mechanical background."

The "Turing" creators, Ms. Chen and Mr. Simpatico, now sitting center stage, had questions for the audience. For

Everyone's a critic, and that's exactly what this festival is looking for.

those who had no previous knowledge of the history, did the scene about breaking the Enigma Code make any sense? Yes, but it could have been more suspenseful, said one listener. Was there enough science in the beach scene? One man said he wanted more. Another added that he loved the bit about pine cones and Fibonacci numbers.

The comments and suggestions began to flow quickly. Was the language sufficiently idiomatic? Were napkins really called serviettes in 1940s England? Is a British trillion the same as an American trillion?

A lively discussion erupted around a vocal tic written into Mr. Estabrooks's part. Was it a stutter? But then shouldn't he catch on a particular consonant? No, it's a wordless "ah-ah-ah" that's more of a place holder, Mr. Simpatico explained. Then perhaps the rhythm needs to be written out differently, an audience member suggested. Or perhaps these matters could be solved by a good stage director?

That, Mr. Edelson said, would be unwise. "When we develop an opera, we want a piece that is strong enough to survive even a bad director."

"All the News
That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

Late Edition

Today, sunny, hot, humid, high 90. Tonight, clear to partly cloudy, warm and humid, low 73. Tomorrow, partly sunny, warm, humid, high 87. Weather map, Page C8.

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