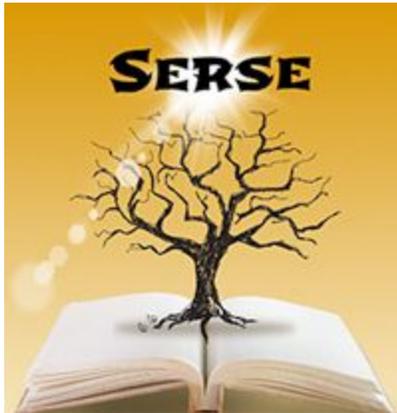


Six opera productions hit the boards this month, four clustering on the weekend of November 4-6

by Daniel Hathaway



Opera fans in Northeast Ohio will enjoy a bumper crop of productions this harvest-time. Six shows, two of them double-bills, will open between November 2 and 11. We'll be running separate previews for Oberlin Opera Theater's Donizetti/Poulenc evenings (November 2, 4, 5, and 6), for CIM Opera's Puccini/Menotti performances (November 9-11) and for Opera Western Reserve's single performance of *Carmen* (November 11).

But let's take a look at the busiest opera weekend of the year. Baldwin Wallace's *Serse*, Kent State Opera's scenes from *The Magic Flute*, and the first pair of a dozen performances of Mascagni's *Zanetto* by Opera Circle Cleveland, plus the remaining Oberlin Opera performances, all fall on the weekend of November 4-6. With some astute planning, you can catch a performance of each of them. Here's a rundown of the BW/COT, Kent State, and Opera Circle productions.



Baldwin Wallace University will team up with **Cleveland Opera Theater** to produce three performances of a new take on George Frideric Handel's *Serse*, two in Kulas Hall at BW on Friday and Saturday, November 4 and 5 at 8:00 pm, and the third at The Arcade in downtown Cleveland on Sunday, November 6 at 8:00 pm. The show is an abbreviated version of Handel's story about the King of Persia (often spelled Xerxes). We caught up with Amsterdam-based director Timothy Nelson (left) between rehearsals in Berea to ask how this production came about.

It all started when Nelson met BW opera director (and Cleveland Opera Theater artistic director) Scott Skiba in grad school. "Scott knows that I enjoy taking opera to a new

place, and it was his idea that I turn *Serse*, a three-hour opera, into a ninety-minute production,” Nelson said.

But Skiba’s choice of opera didn’t meet with instant enthusiasm on Nelson’s part. “I tried to convince Scott to choose any other Handel opera, because *Serse* is just not a natural fit for me. I suggested *Alcina* or *Ariodante*, or *Orlando* — any of those — but he insisted on *Serse*, and said I could have free reign to do whatever I wanted.”

Nelson then had the idea of basing his new production on the poetry of Rumi, the 13th-century Persian poet and polymath. “I’ve always been deeply interested in Rumi and Persian culture, and I knew Scott wanted a shortened version of the opera. As I dug in, I thought, well, Handel took a 17th-century libretto and made it into an 18th-century piece by cutting at least ten characters out of the cast. I thought, why not do the same thing for a 21st-century audience?”

Digging deeper, Nelson discovered some interesting historical context about Handel’s opera. “You have to be a bit of a nerd like me to get the significance of *Serse*. Right before Handel wrote it, *The Beggar’s Opera* was performed in London, which made people aware that opera could be sung in the vernacular and be funny and entertaining, and not be the stodgy, elitist thing that Italian opera had been up to that point. Handel felt the pinch, because he was no longer in vogue. *Serse* was his attempt to write a comedy that would appeal to people by going back to a 17th-century Cavalli libretto and getting rid of many *da capo* arias. It ended up being a very strange piece. Some of the most beautiful arias in *Serse* are only eight bars long and get cut off by recitatives. If people aren’t used to opera with *secco* recitatives, this is a good place to start.”

In fact, there aren’t that many recitatives left in the Baldwin Wallace/Cleveland Opera Theater version. “We’ve turned Elviro, a comic holdover from Venetian operas, into a narrator, and we’ve simplified the story down to the bare minimum. It comes off as a love tale, almost a folk story. Almost 90% of Elviro’s text is taken from the poetry of Rumi, and the rest is newly-composed. There’s a wonderful synergy between Rumi and Handel in terms of what it means to suffer for love — about the importance of going through pain to get to the other side.”

Tim Nelson is delighted with his student performers. “I got lucky. The cast I have is fantastic, and the singers who have the most difficult music, like *Serse*, are up to the challenge. But Handel is quite malicious. He saves maybe the four hardest pieces for the orchestra and singers until the last fifteen minutes. We didn’t cut those, and these singers have turned out to be real troupers.”

Having originally had his doubts about *Serse*, Nelson said that he's completely changed his mind. "I just came from a big Cavalli production in the U.K. with the English Touring Opera, involving a huge set and a big budget. *Serse* was a just a little thing tacked on to the end of the season, but I've really become emotionally connected to it."

Tickets for the performances at Baldwin Wallace are \$10 for adults, \$5 for students (order [online](#)). The Arcade performance offers various price levels and amenities (click [here](#) for tickets and details).



Kent State University Opera's fall scenes will include a special collaboration. We spoke with stage director Marla Berg (left) to find out more about her "Scenes from Mozart's *The Magic Flute*," which will be performed in Murphy Auditorium at the Kent State Museum on Friday, November 4 at 7:30 pm, Saturday, November 5 at 2:00 pm and 7:30 pm, and Sunday, November 6 at 2:00 pm.

"This has turned out to be a very interesting project," Berg told us by telephone from her office at KSU. "Kent Opera always does a scenes program in the fall as part of our syllabus, but this year we were asked by Jean Druessedow, the director of the Kent State Museum, to do scenes from *The Magic Flute* because she has this incredible collection of costumes from productions all over the world. The museum owns costumes and stage designs by famous artists like Marc Chagall and David Hockney. We're doing the scenes program in Murphy Auditorium, right next door to the [exhibition](#) so people can see the scenes and the costumes in the same go."

Just like the process of trimming *Serse* to a reasonable length, distilling Mozart's opera into a few scenes is a tricky business. "I devised a way to link the scenes with narration by WCLV's Bill O'Connell," Berg said. "I wrote a script for him to tie the production together. It's actually turned out to be quite fun. We're doing the highlights — the quintet and most of the finales — and we have a Queen of the Night who's doing a beautiful job. We actually have two tenors as grad students this year, so we've double cast a role so they each get to sing. And we have a new conductor, Katherine Kilburn. Her student will be conducting one of the matinees. It's been a long journey, but it's going to be really beautiful. The stage is a teeny-tiny, postage stamp-sized space, so instead of a set, we'll have projections."

Kent's production will include two professional faculty singers, Melissa Davis and Jay White. "Melissa is doing a beautiful Pamina, and Jay is the musical director of the opera

program. He deals with all the preparation as well as singing the Third Spirit. He's hilarious. I'm afraid he's going to steal the show," Berg said. "Another exciting feature is that Chloe Wingard, the young woman who designs paper wigs and masks for the mannequins in the Museum, has designed our costume pieces. It's quite a collaboration for all of us, and everybody's been really excited about it. We've also written a couple of campaign jibes into the script."



Opera Circle Cleveland will stage two performances of Pietro Mascagni's *Zanetto* at the Shrine Church of St. Stanislaus in Cleveland's Slavic Village on Friday, November 4 at 7:30 pm and Sunday, November 6 at 3:30 pm, before taking the one-act, 50-minute title on tour to ten more Northeast Ohio venues between November 11 and December 16.

"*Zanetto* opens a new chapter in our programming," executive director Dorota Sobieska (left) wrote in an email. "It's a creative initiative to reach wider audiences with carefully designed chamber works of exceptional beauty offered free to the public."

Set in the Tuscan countryside during the Renaissance and originally labelled a *scena lirica* by the composer, *Zanetto*, with its cast of only two singers, is eminently portable. Mezzo-soprano Megan Thompson, director of Great Lakes Light Opera, will sing the trouser role of Zanetto, a young wandering minstrel. Sobieska, who also serves as stage director, will appear as Silvia, the wealthy and comely hostess of a country hotel who is besieged by suitors, but rejects all of them. After Silvia meets Zanetto, the usual operatic complications ensue, but at the end, Zanetto is also sent away unfulfilled.

"In only 50 minutes, Mascagni tells a story of love, hope, suspicion, disappointment, and imperfection through one of the most compelling scores of Romantic music," Sobieska wrote. "It's a gem of the operatic repertoire."

Staged and costumed, *Zanetto* will be sung in Italian with projected English translations and accompanied by a chamber ensemble with music director Jacek Sobieski at the piano. All twelve performances are free, but donations will be gratefully accepted. View the complete schedule [here](#).

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