

Preview

Nightingale Opera Theatre and Hudson Chamber Players plan August production of *Werther* and chamber concerts

by Daniel Hathaway



Many performing organizations lay low in August. Others are just gearing up for late summer seasons. Nightingale Opera Theatre is in the final stages of rehearsals for its production of Massenet's *Werther* at the Solon Center for the Arts on August 2 and 4, and the Hudson Chamber Players have three Sunday afternoon concerts in the works for August 4, 11 and 18 in Hudson and Cleveland. Both organizations are new on the scene in Northeast Ohio, and reflect the entrepreneurial spirit that seems to be bubbling up all over in today's classical music world.

Melissa Davis (left) created Nightingale Opera Theatre just last summer with a production of Kurt Weill's *Street Scene* at the Akron Art Museum. "There're just not a whole lot of opportunities in this area for opera singers, especially sopranos. I wanted to start something and I guess I was just crazy enough to do it!", Davis told us in a phone conversation. She chose *Street Scene* because its large cast allowed more than just a few singers and students to participate. "The Akron Art Museum was a bit too small for the show but we managed to make it work. It was a very intimate experience for the audience."

Davis and her company followed up in March with two one-act shows, also staged at the Akron museum. Lee Hoiby's *The Scarf* and Ricky Ian Gordon's *Orpheus and Eurydice* utilized the same set with some accessorization and were accompanied by pianists Donna Lee and Judith Ryder, with a cameo appearance by clarinetist Daniel Gilbert in the Gordon piece. *Werther* at the Solon Center will allow the company, now a non-profit organization, to expand a bit with costume and set designers now on the roster. But for the moment, Nightingale will stick to piano accompaniment. "I'd rather have a really wonderful pianist than an orchestra that can't play the repertoire that well," said Davis, "and we have one in our music director, John Simmons from CIM."

And why *Werther* for its second summer production? "I've always loved the opera," Davis told us. "The music is absolutely stunning and it's not done that often. Nightingale likes to do out-of-the-way titles. It's hard to find a tenor who can sing constantly — there are eighteen arias, but Tim Culver is perfect for the role and he was available."

In addition to Culver, the cast includes such well-known area singers as Stephanie Foley Davis (Charlotte), Brian Keith Johnson (Albert), Melissa Davis (Sophie), Ryan Fitzgerald (Schmidt), Mark Miller (Johann) & John Pickering (Le Bailli). Stage direction is by Fenlon Lamb, who has also been holding master classes for students in Nightingale's young artists program who are covering roles in the production, which goes up on Friday, August 2 at 7:30 pm with a second performance on Sunday, August 4 at 2:30 pm.

Werther will be set in the 1950s and sung in English without supertitles, which Davis believes is important to attract new audiences to opera. "I have a small role so I've been sitting out in the house listening and making sure you can understand the text."



Though cellist Erica Snowden (left) didn't create the Hudson Chamber Players — that was CIM violist Sergein Yap with a group of colleagues who wanted to fill a summer chamber music gap left by the closing of the Encore School for Strings — she stepped in to run the program after Yap moved out of state. "I was in a quartet with Sergein at CIM and we had a great time doing concerts the last two years," Snowden told us while she was en-route to Buffalo last week. "So they tapped me. We wanted to increase the season and add events in Cleveland while keeping things going in Hudson."

The ensemble has already branched out with concerts at The Happy Dog, Survival Kit and St. Colman's Church in the Gordon Square Arts District and plans three August concerts on Sunday afternoons in Hudson and Cleveland.

On August 4 at 3 pm in the chapel of Western Reserve Academy in Hudson, the ensemble will play Tansmann's *Suite for Bassoon and Piano*, Elgar's *Romance for Bassoon and Piano*, both featuring bassoonist Mark DeMio, Brahms's *Two Songs for Alto, Cello and Piano* with Academy faculty soprano Margaret Karam and & Snowden, and Schumann's Piano Quintet in E flat major with pianist Elizabeth DeMio.

On August 11 at 3 pm, the players will move down the road to Christ Church, Hudson for string quartets by Prokofiev and Ravel and Schubert's cello quintet.

Then on August 18 at 3 pm, the Hudson Chamber Players will hit the Anatolia Café in Cleveland Heights, performing Beethoven's "Ghost" Trio, Brahms's *Quartet in a, op. 51, no. 2*, and end their summer seasons with the Mendelssohn *Octet, op. 20*. All events are free but donations are welcome.

"It's a lot of work," says Erica Snowden, "and planning and organizing are new to me." But the cellist, who also serves as principal in Canton, assistant principal in Erie, and teaches at the University of Akron, is enthusiastic about new possibilities. She's particularly keen on outreach activities. "We've played at the Hudson farmer's market on Saturday mornings and I'm still setting up more appearances like that. I love the idea of a series of smaller performances leading to our Sunday concerts. It makes classical music fun

to see us playing on street corners or at the ice cream shop. That makes it fresh and exciting.”

Published on clevelandclassical.com July 30, 2013