



## Free lunch at opera house

**Midday culture draws big crowds**

**Offerings a blend of music, dance**

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CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

There's a new lunchtime sensation in town, with a lineup at the door and standing-room only. The soul-nourishing menu is entirely calorie-free, and you'll return to your afternoon routine feeling rested and refreshed.

Best of all, it's free.

Unlike many things that sound too good to be true, these daytime events at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays are the real deal. There is music (of all sorts), dance and lectures connected to the work of the Canadian Opera Company and the National Ballet of Canada.

Yesterday's crowd was at capacity, filling the steps, walkways and upper-level chairs of the amphitheatre. They heard a selection of art songs performed by the opera company's resident young talents.

A COC spokesperson said that organizers on Tuesday had to turn away about 100 people. This is unprecedented for a daytime concert series, and a sign that the new opera house is making its presence heard as well as seen.

For many yesterday, it was the first opportunity to hear three male additions to the Ensemble Studio. For all, it was a showcase of excellent homegrown artistry.

The standout pieces were three Elizabethan poems set to music by 75-year-old Toronto composer Derek Holman. He wrote this song cycle, *A Lasting Spring*, two years ago as a memorial to Nicholas Goldschmidt, who spent five decades tirelessly promoting music in Canada. Holman dedicated the composition to Nicholas's widow Sheila, who was also present yesterday.

COC rehearsal coach Liz Upchurch accompanied tenor Lawrence J. Wiliford, who excellently replaced Michael Colvin as Guglielmo on the opening night of the current production of *Così fan tutte*. The execution of Holman's frankly sensual music was fascinating. Upchurch dug into the piano part with panache, while Wiliford's light, controlled singing floated over top.

With Upchurch still at the keyboard, soprano Virginia Hatfield sang Benjamin Britten's *On This Island* cycle, with words from the pen of W.H. Auden, written in 1937.

The audience was then introduced to bass-baritone Andrew Stewart, and baritones Justin Welsh and Jon-Paul Décosse, who tackled Ralph Vaughan Williams's nine gorgeous *Songs of Travel*, with Kathryn Tremills on piano.

Having three very different (and uneven) singers tackle one man's life story was not a great idea, as it destroyed the songs' emotional arc.

Given the intensity of both the training and experience that members of the Ensemble Studio get, it will be interesting how these three artists develop.

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