

A Very Good Year: A Preview of the 2012 COC Ensemble Studio

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Canadian Opera Company Ensemble Studio members (l. to r. Jenna Douglas, Timothy Cheung, Sasha Djihanian, Cameron McPhail, Ambur Braid, Rihab Chaieb, Mireille Asselin, Owen McCausland, Neil Craighead, Claire de Sevigne (Photo: Chris Hutcheson)

Singers are much like fine wine - they require the exquisite endowment of nature, the tender loving care of the cultivator, and the favorable environment for the innate qualities to shine through. In Operaspeak, this translates to the presence of god-given talent, solid training, and the opportunity of being in a nurturing environment that allows each singer to reach his/her full potential. Based on early indication, the 2012 edition of the COC Ensemble Studio is a vintage year. Yesterday I attended the *Meet the Young Artists* noon hour recital at the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre. As usual it was jammed, and this being the first concert of the new season, there was almost a festive atmosphere. Nine singers and two pianists make up this year's Ensemble, and they were all there with the exception of tenor Christopher Enns who was ill. As in previous years, each singer went up to the podium to say a few words to the audience, followed by an aria. The program:

Chacun le sait from *La fille du regiment* - Claire de Sevigne, soprano
 Je suis encore tout etourdie from *Manon* - Sasha Djihanian, soprano
 Di due figli vivea from *Il Trovatore* - Neil Craighead, bass-baritone
 Amor e qual vento from *Orlando* - Mireille Asselin, soprano
 Avant de quitter ces lieux from *Faust* - Cameron McPhail, baritone
 Voi che sapete from *Le nozze di Figaro* - Rihab Chaieb, mezzo-soprano
 Here I Stand from *The Rake's Progress* - Owen McCausland, tenor
 Regarde-les, ces yeux from *Esclarmonde* - Ambur Braid, soprano

Timothy Cheung and Jenna Douglas, piano

Of the eight singers, four are new to the Ensemble Studio, while the other four are very familiar to fans of the COC. The four newcomers are winners from last year's Ensemble Studio Vocal Competition, the first year it was open to singers outside the Ensemble. All eight possess attractive voices with solid technique, ingratiating stage presence, abundant energy and most of all, they all have something to say, to communicate to the audience. Each took full advantage of their single moment in the sun and really "sell" their aria, making a strong impression.

I have noticed that in previous years, some singers were more ready for prime time than others, but with the 2012 class, it's clear that they are all at a very high level and all possess the potential of a solid career in opera.

Quebec soprano Claire de Sevigne opened the proceedings with Marie's Act One aria from *La fille du regiment*, combining sparkling tone with an endearing stage persona. She was followed by another Montreal soprano, Sasha Djihanian, a singer with an excellent track record of competition successes, and it's easy to see why. She possesses a dark-hued timbre, relatively rare in a lyric soprano. Her middle and lower registers are also really beautiful and luscious, which she uses with discerning taste in the *Manon* aria. Neil Craighead mentioned to the audience that this is his fourth year in the Ensemble, a record only equaled by the recently graduated Ileana Montalbetti. Craighead sang Ferrando's aria from *Il Trovatore* with power and rich tone, in fact better than I've ever heard him.

Soprano Mireille Asselin, who impressed audiences as Semele (sharing the role with fellow soprano Ambur Braid) in the special performance last spring, showed off her considerable agility and attractive soft-grained lyric sound in the rarely heard aria from Handel's *Orlando*. She was followed by Manitoba baritone Cameron McPhail in Valentin's aria from *Faust*. This singer has a big, rich, beautiful high baritone, ideal in "Avant de quitter ces lieux."

His top is particularly impressive, and he chose the alternate ending that showed off his high range. I predict a big future for this singer. The other new male voice belongs to New Brunswick tenor Owen McCausland. His is a lyric tenor with spinto aspirations, so one can understand why he's chosen to sing the title role in *La clemenza di Tito* in the upcoming special Ensemble Studio performance, sharing it with fellow tenor Chris Enns. On this occasion, McCausland sang Tom Rakewell's "Here I stand" with impressively ringing tone.

I've noticed that compared to the past, there seems to be fewer and fewer low female voices in the Ensemble. As far as I could remember - and I go back to the 1980's - I don't ever recall any contraltos in the Ensemble. This year, there's just the one low female voice, that of mezzo Rihab Chaieb. Costumed appropriately in a stylish suit, Chaieb sang a lovely Cherubino's Act One aria from *Nozze*, capturing the Page's personality perfectly. The last person to sing was dramatic coloratura Ambur Braid. She previously impressed everyone with her Queen of the Night and the title role of Semele. On this occasion, she tackled the daunting aria from *Esclarmonde*. This Massenet piece is hardly ever done, as not too many people can sing this repertoire! I do recall that it served as a vehicle for Dame Joan Sutherland back in the late 1970's at the Met, and I think that was the last time it was staged in that house. Braid was fabulous in this bravura aria, totally fearless in her use of the high register, nailing every twist and turn with precision and elan. She is unusual among coloratura sopranos in that she possesses a really substantial, dark-hued middle voice, a rare attribute found only in a few singers like Dame Joan and June Anderson. Ambur Braid's vocal fireworks brought the concert to a fitting end. I look forward to hearing these fine singers during the course of this season.



Final Bow (l. to r.) Jenna Douglas, Timothy Cheung, Ambur Braid, Claire de Sevigne, Sasha Djihanian, Neil Craighead, Mireille Asselin, Cameron McPhail, Rihab Chaieb, Owen McCausland (Photo: Chris Hutcheson)