



ENTERTAINMENT



**Sing big
or go home**

Il Trovatore is an epic vocal challenge and Canadian Opera Company knows it

TRISH CRAWFORD
ENTERTAINMENT REPORTER

Opera superstar Enrico Caruso is reported to have said about the opera *Il Trovatore*: "All you need is four of the greatest singers in the world."

That's a pretty tall order — one that makes Canadian baritone Russell Braun wince.

"That comes to haunt you," says Braun, as he prepared for the Sept. 29 opening of the Canadian Opera Company's 2012/13 season. He plays the role of Conte di Luna in *Il Trovatore*, who vies with troubadour Manrico for the sweet Leonora.

This opera "features four lead roles that represent the epitome of 'the Verdi singer,'" says Ali Kashani, the opera company's associate director of development.

"These are roles that require powerful voices that can sing with supreme lyricism, legato and even agility while still (being) capable of tossing off spectacular high notes."

All that must be done without a microphone or other amplification. Many opera newcomers are astonished to discover that singers can fill large halls to the very back rows with just the power of their voices.

That music comes from two small vocal folds (not cords) that flutter faster than the wings of a hummingbird when air passes through.

Singing well is a four-part process with the diaphragm filling with air, which is forced through the vibrating folds and resonates through the nose, mouth and throat before being "articulated" through tongue, lips and cheek, says voice specialist Dr. Brian Hands.

OPERA continued on E6



BRETT GUNDLOCK FOR THE TORONTO STAR
Eliza van den Heever plays Leonora in *Il Trovatore*, which opens the Canadian Opera Company's 2012/13 season.



Work, talent, instinct needed

OPERA from EI

He says breathing well (from the diaphragm) is the essence of singing well. When singers come in complaining of a lump in the throat or a sore neck, Hands says it is almost always caused by putting too much strain on the neck and vocal folds.

"We are athletes of the voice," says Ramon Vargas, who has the role of Manrico. "We all have two legs, but very few can run 100 metres in less than 10 seconds. It takes work, talent and instinct. It's all in our training."

"Our instrument is the hardest to work with," the Mexican-born tenor says of the voice. "First, we always have it with us. We have to build this instrument and then, with years of training, control it."

Acting, interpretation and emotion also play a huge role in a singer's success, says Vargas, adding, "We are not only athletes but artists too." Noting that modern-day singers have much slimmer waistlines than previous generations, Vargas says that comes from the realization that "we sing with muscles, not with fat."

Elza van den Heever burst into tears when her singing teachers told her she was not a mezzo soprano (which sings lower register) but a soprano at the age of 25.

"I thought, 'Are you trying to put me out of work?'" says the 6-foot-tall soprano from South Africa. She wasn't sure if she would be cast in the ingenue and love interest roles common to a soprano's repertoire.

But she took her American teacher's advice in 2005 and weathered "long, sweaty tears in the practice room," striving for the higher notes.

"It took an understanding of technique," says den Heever, who is Leonora in *Il Trovatore*.

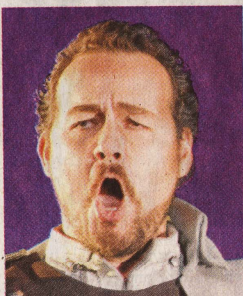
She called vocal folds "two muscles the size of a pinky — you can't feel them, can't see them but they are there in our throats," and says it's a marvel they stand up to six hours of singing each day.

While smoking, spicy foods and alcohol are usually avoided to prevent the vocal cords from becoming irritated, Russian mezzo soprano



BRETT GUNDLOCK FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Ramon Vargas, left, Elza van den Heever and Russell Braun, during a dress rehearsal for the Canadian Opera Company production of *Il Trovatore*.



"It's extremely difficult, there is an extreme range of emotion. I will go onstage and turn his rage into my rage."

RUSSELL BRAUN
ON PLAYING CONTE DI LUNA
IN *IL TROVATORE*

Elena Manistina says they've been unavoidable hazards in her work.

"In Russia, this type of work is near the smoking area," says Manistina, who will perform the role of the gypsy Azucena in the smoke-free Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts. "I am used to sprays and smoke."

She carries a massive bag of medicines, including immune system boosters, and insists on getting

enough sleep to stay healthy. She also says it is important "to have a good mood and outlook so you should eat something yummy, chocolate or muffins."

She describes the mezzo-soprano voice "with good high range as well as good lower range, like an alto, with various colours, giving it a more heroic quality."

Braun's father, Victor Braun, was a baritone, but he says he explored for years whether he had the higher reach of the tenor. As with den Heever, teachers helped him realize where his voice belonged.

"I don't vocalize every day," says Braun. "I find time to rest as well, especially when vocalizing a demanding role."

The Conte di Luna is such a role, says Braun, a character "consumed by jealousy" who plots to "seduce and capture Leonora."

"It's extremely difficult, there is an extreme range of emotion. I will go onstage and turn his rage into my rage."

Braun, 47, avoids alcohol, which is dehydrating, and acidic food or drink. His voice has grown over the years as he's aged and expanded his repertoire.

"It can become really an obsession to think about what those little folds are doing. They are fragile. Singing is deeply connected to your body. It draws the energy from the ground up," says Braun.

"It's mystical."

OPERATIC CHALLENGES

The Canadian Opera Company's Ali Kashani discusses the vocal demands and/or vocal uniqueness of each of the COC's 2012/13 operas.

DIE FLEDERMAUS *Die Fledermaus* has its vocal challenges for the two principal ladies, Rosalinde and Adele: high notes and vocal agility all delivered with beauty of tone. But the added challenge is the stylistic requirements. Strauss's music is distinctly Viennese and the singers must express the proper Viennese inflection in both their singing and in the significant amounts of spoken dialogue.

TRISTAN UND ISOLDE *Tristan und Isolde* features two of the most strenuous roles in all of opera. The title characters must sing above a 100-piece orchestra with vocal power and tonal brilliance. But perhaps the most difficult challenge is the sheer stamina required to sing these roles over a 4.5-hour evening.

LA CLEMENZA DI TITO *La Clemenza di Tito* has many of the hallmarks of Mozartean writing: it requires beauty and evenness of tone across the singer's range as well as the ability to sing with agility. These requirements can reveal the slightest lack of vocal polish. In *Clemenza*, Mozart created one of his most interesting roles, Vitellia. This is a role that often requires the

soprano to sing in the lower part of her voice . . . while still frequently climbing up to big high notes that would tax a mezzo-soprano.

SALOME

In Strauss's own words, the title character of *Salome* requires the voice of a 16-year-old. Singing above a massive orchestra, Salome must have Wagnerian reserves of power while sounding young as a teenager, with a fresh voice and the ability to scale back her power.

LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR

Lucia di Lammermoor is the quintessential bel canto opera. While a beautiful voice is important, the ability to sing beautifully is paramount. The singer must be able to sing both softly and heroically, with great legato and virtuosic agility.

DIALOGUES DES CARMÉLITES

Dialogues des Carmélites features a mostly female cast, requiring all manner of female voices. Blanche is a lyric soprano role, while Madame Lidoine requires a grander voice. Madame de Croissy requires an alto or deep mezzo-soprano, who can bring dramatic poignancy to her two great scenes. The role of Mère Marie requires a big-voiced mezzo-soprano while Sister Constance needs a soubrette, a high-flying soprano that can charm the audience.



SEX, LIES, REVENGE

Opera company takes on epic vocal challenges, E1

TORONTO STAR

WEATHER HIGH 17 C | MOSTLY SUNNY | MAP S12

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