

THE NEXT

50

MICHIGAN
OPERA
THEATRE

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ACT I
OUT AND ABOUT

THE HISTORIC
MICHIGAN BUILDING
THEATRE (DETROIT)

SAT / SEPT 25, 2021 / NOON–MIDNIGHT

BLISS



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Jonas Kaufmann, tenor with Helmut Deutsch, piano

Tuesday, October 12 // 7:30 pm
Hill Auditorium, Ann Arbor

Hailed as “the world’s greatest tenor” by *The Telegraph*, Jonas Kaufmann has been an international star since his sensational Metropolitan Opera debut in 2006, performing over 70 different roles at the world’s leading opera houses. This recital, taking place in only a handful of US cities, features German songs by over a dozen different composers, including Franz Liszt, Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann, Richard Strauss, and Gustav Mahler.

*Please note: proof of vaccination or negative COVID PCR test
plus masks are required for this performance.*

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The Menakka and Essel Bailey Endowment Fund for International Artistic Brilliance
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BE PRESENT

FOR YOUR SAFETY AND COMFORT

For the safety of all, facial coverings are required during *Bliss*, regardless of vaccination status. The safety of guests, artists, and staff is Michigan Opera Theatre's greatest priority for performances and workplace conditions. Special edition masks are available to help you feel even more immersed in the experience.

QUIET NOTICE

You are now a participant in an exhibition.

This is an acoustic experience. Once you enter, please refrain from holding any conversations.

Observe the patrons around you and you may show appreciation to the performers when appropriate.

Art is all around you.

Please be mindful.

Remember to look, not touch.

A MESSAGE FROM WAYNE S. BROWN

MOT PRESIDENT AND CEO

Welcome to *Bliss*, the second production of the Michigan Opera Theatre (MOT) Fall 2021-2022 season, featuring a most unusual performance offering... the final scene from Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* (*The Marriage of Figaro*). MOT Artistic Director Yuval Sharon has once again designed a magical moment for Detroit area audiences with a clear example of a commitment to traditional works with a twist! This final scene, which will continue repeatedly over a twelve-hour period in the historic Michigan Building Theatre, is bound to be one of the most unusual and memorable experiences that MOT audiences have encountered to date. Known for his internationally acknowledged site-specific works, Yuval Sharon has leveraged this historic landmark in Detroit to serve as the setting for this performance. We look forward to hearing your feedback.

We are delighted that *Bliss* has benefitted from a special partnership between MOT and the University Musical Society in Ann Arbor through shared production and marketing teams. MOT is also proud to partner with the Wasserman Projects for its new group exhibition *Ocean Body*, an immersive installation by Helga Davis (NY), Mark DeChiazza (NY), and Shara Nova (MI). MOT seeks alliances to celebrate the link between the visual and the performing arts. Shuttle service between the Michigan Building Theatre, Wasserman Projects and the Opera House Parking Garage will operate between noon and 9 PM.

As we look forward to the second half of the season, audiences can expect a resumption of dance and opera presentations, beginning in January with the Dance Theatre of Harlem in the Detroit Opera House. February brings a return of the 2015 MOT production of *Frida* in Music Hall – in honor of the 50th Anniversary of Michigan Opera Theatre. We then look to the month of April for a new production by Yuval Sharon of Puccini's *La bohème* (revisited) in

tandem with the centennial of the Detroit Opera House. The season will close with *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* by composer Anthony Davis and librettist Thulani Davis. Our MOT production will subsequently take place on the stages of the Metropolitan Opera, Opera Omaha, and the Seattle Opera in future seasons.

Thank you for joining us today. We look forward to learning from you how we can make your opera and dance experiences with MOT increasingly exceptional. Special thanks to our generous sponsors and supporters for helping MOT celebrate 50 years of opera and dance performances for your enjoyment.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Wayne S. Brown". The signature is fluid and cursive.

WAYNE S. BROWN
MOT President and CEO

A MESSAGE FROM YUVAL SHARON

THE GARY L. WASSERMAN ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

“Forgiveness breaks the chain,” according to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. “It introduces into the logic of interpersonal encounter the unpredictability of grace.” Rabbi Sacks discusses this concept in relation to the Jewish day of atonement, Yom Kippur, a holy day that my community celebrated just last week – but he could have just as easily been referring to the sublime final minutes of Mozart’s *Marriage of Figaro*. After a crazy day chasing his maid’s skirt, the Count is caught red-handed, and despite his high status, he publicly implores his wife for forgiveness. She breaks the chain of suffering with sweet words of pardon, and the entire ensemble sings: “Ah, we could all be so happy, if we could just be like this.”

Forgiveness is a quality with little currency in our contemporary culture’s dispensation towards cancellation. We are quick to judge and slow to consider, much less to do the hard work of reconciliation. Mozart depicts human foibles with so much sympathy, knowing that to err is human. But how much better would our world be if we could find the words: “Forgive me,” and the accompanying, “I do.” *Ah, we could all be so happy, if we could just be like this.*

The profundity of Ragnar Kjartansson’s conceit for *Bliss* is to show how very difficult forgiveness is – because this magical moment doesn’t just come and go, as it does in a normal performance of the opera. Instead, the incessant repetitions, the sweat on the brow of the hard-working singers and orchestra members, demonstrate for us what forgiveness really looks like. It is a marathon, not a sprint. Rabbi Sacks was characteristically optimistic when he says that forgiveness breaks the chain; we all know that it sometimes takes enormous effort, and you don’t always get it right on the first try. Missteps will happen again and again (and again) – after all, does anyone leave the opera thinking the Count really learned something? (Is he truly sorry, or

only sorry that he got caught?) *Bliss* might seem like a punishment for the Count, as he is condemned to repeat this moment in a loop of eternal embarrassment. Or, simultaneously, it can be seen as the endless grace of the Countess, who time and time again sings, “I am kinder than you, so I forgive you.” You, as the spectator, can decide for yourself.

I purposefully chose *Bliss* to come right on the heels of Jeanine Tesori and Tazewell Thompson’s *Blue*. That opera ends in a gut-wrenching way, with a Black family staring into the void of pain whose only consolation is a community that knows this story too well. There is no scene in *Blue* where the police officer responsible for killing the son begs for the family’s forgiveness. As we too often see in real life, *Blue* confronts us with the world as we see it now, full of senseless violence, separation, and loss. For 12 hours of *Bliss*, then, we are invited to contemplate a different world. (Nicole Joseph, a member of the *Blue* cast, will play the Countess, granting forgiveness over and over again to her cheating husband – and I like to think she is taking some of the emotions of *Blue* into this performance with her.) *Bliss* offers the flip-side of what opera can offer our torn and bruised society: a vision of beauty and grace that is not an escape but a hard-fought aspiration. Allowing you, as an audience member, to circulate freely and take in the performance from whatever angle you choose, however long you want, reminds you that each of us can participate in making a different reality.

Ah, we could all be so happy, if we could just be like this.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Yuval Sharon".

YUVAL SHARON
The Gary L. Wasserman
Artistic Director

BLISS IS...

Presented by



FORD MOTOR COMPANY FUND

With support from

Community
Foundation
FOR SOUTHEAST MICHIGAN



**KNIGHT
FOUNDATION**

ROCKET
Community Fund

Gary L. Wasserman & Charles H. Kashner

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WASSERMANPROJECTS



BLISS

MUSIC

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

LIBRETTO

Lorenzo Da Ponte

ORIGINAL CONCEPT

Ragnar Kjartansson

WORLD PREMIERE

Performa 11, New York City, 2011

RESTAGED BY

Yuval Sharon

CONDUCTOR

Christopher Rountree

SET DESIGN

Monika Essen

COSTUME AND WIG DESIGN

Suzanne Hanna

LIGHTING DESIGN

Heather DeFauw

STAGE MANAGERS

Nan Luchini, Hailli Ridsdale

PRODUCED IN ASSOCIATION WITH

University Musical Society

CAST

Corey McKern	Count Almaviva
Nicole Joseph	Countess Almaviva
Grace Wipfli	Susanna
Robert Wesley Mason	Figaro
Jennifer Cresswell	Cherubino
Diane Rae Schoff	Marcellina
Tyrese Byrd	Don Basilio
Lucia Helgren	Barbarina
Jacob Surzyn	Antonio
Biba Bell	Lead Actor
Britney Birr	Actor
X. Alexander Durden	Actor
Joseph Galba	Actor

MOT ORCHESTRA

VIOLIN I

Eliot Heaton - Concertmaster
Laura Leigh Roelofs - Assistant
Velda Kelly
Andrew Wu

VIOLIN II

Dan Stachyra
Anna Bittar-Weller
Henrik Karapetyan

VIOLA

Scott Stefanko
James Greer

CELLO

Andrea Yun

BASS

Derek Weller - Principal

FLUTE

Dennis Carter

OBOE

Sally Heffelfinger-Pituch

BASSOON

Francisco Delgado - Principal

HORN

Carrie Banfield-Taplin

BLISS SYNOPSIS AND LIBRETTO

At the end of *Marriage of Figaro*, the Count has been caught trying to cheat on his wife with the servant Susanna (soon to be Figaro's wife). With everyone watching, the Count asks the Countess for her forgiveness, and in a state of grace, she offers it to him.

ITALIAN

IL CONTE

Contessa, perdono!

LA CONTESSA

Più docile io sono,
e dico di sì.

TUTTI

Ah, tutti contenti
saremo così.

ENGLISH

COUNT

My Countess, forgive me.

COUNTESS

I am kinder:
I will say "Yes."

ALL

Then let us all
be happy.

ABOUT RAGNAR KJARTANSSON

Ragnar Kjartansson draws on the entire arc of art in his performative practice. The history of film, music, theatre, visual culture and literature find their way into his video installations, durational performances, drawing and painting. Pretending and staging become key tools in the artist's attempt to convey sincere emotion and offer a genuine experience to the audience.

Kjartansson's work has been exhibited widely. Recent solo exhibitions and performances have been held at the Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, Metropolitan Museum of Art New York, Barbican Art Gallery in London, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., Reykjavik Art Museum, Palais de Tokyo in Paris, and New Museum in New York. In 2011, he was the recipient of Performa's 2011 Malcolm McLaren Award for his performance "Bliss". In 2009, Kjartansson represented Iceland at the Venice Biennale, and in 2013 his work was featured at the Biennale's main exhibition, The Encyclopedic Palace. Kjartansson was born in 1976 in Reykjavik and studied at the Iceland Academy of the Arts and The Royal Academy, Stockholm.



IN CONVERSATION: RAGNAR KJARTANSSON AND YUVAL SHARON

Michigan Opera Theatre's Artistic Director Yuval Sharon and Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson have never met but have talked online numerous times. This time, Yuval is at the Detroit Opera House, and Ragnar is at home in Iceland, where Yuval meets his children. One is three years old and "ridiculously sweet" and another is eleven, an age where you talk about "death and Will Ferrell and stuff like that."

Yuval Sharon: Seeing your children might be a perfect lead-in to talk about Mozart. My favorite Mozart opera is *The Magic Flute*, because I like to think of it as a paean to childhood. This notion of Mozart as the eternal child is something that I think about all the time – not the child in terms of infantilization or belittlement, but because Mozart shows the wisdom in childhood. As we get older, we must struggle to maintain the childlike approach to the world that is captured in so much of Mozart's music. I have to suspect you share that sentiment in some way, in terms of Mozart's child-like joy in life that Mozart really exudes in so many ways.

Ragnar Kjartansson: I always thought about this, in the intense joy of Mozart. I always love to think of Mozart as this kind of this person with his intense joy and intense creativity. And you have to imagine he's in pain constantly, because as an 18th-century person, who drank and ate pastries, his teeth must have been rotting all the time. You're in constant pain, which I find so interesting.

YS: It's hard to even fathom that amount of pain, and then to nevertheless find a way to channel something so different. His music is always smiling, even when it is depicting humanity at its most imperfect.

RK: It reminds me of a documentary I saw a long time ago about Leonard Cohen, where Bono [U2's lead singer] says something

profound. He's talking about the song *Hallelujah* and that Leonard Cohen looks into the abyss with a twinkle in his eye. That's so well said, and I think that is the sort of attitude in lots of Mozart. He's totally aware of the pain and suffering in life. And yet there's like this constant twinkle, you know?

YS: What role does *Marriage of Figaro* play for you as an audience member – your experience of the full opera? And then what led you to think about doing this 12-hour version?

RK: My affection for Mozart started like so many people of my generation: when the *Amadeus* movie came out in 1984. I went to see it seven times in the cinema when I was eight. This movie became the bass drum of my imagination. I really remember thinking, "Okay, this is the most beautiful music in the world." Then I became a grown person, and I just want to see *Marriage of Figaro*. Before I did this piece, I saw it probably three or four times. But you go through the whole opera, and at the end you come to this moment that drives a stake through your heart. Chris McDonald, who I collaborate a lot with as sound designer in my pieces, came up with this brilliant notion while we were working on *Bliss*: what's amazing about this moment is the use of nostalgia. The whole opera is so contemporary – 1780s – and then we suddenly come to this part, which sounds like Monteverdi or something. It sounds sort of ancient. And it's this weird thing about nostalgia; it always makes moments so emotional.

YS: That's beautiful. In the previous iterations of *Bliss*, the first time you did it in New York, and then in L.A. too, the scenography that you created also gives us a sense of nostalgia in the sense that it's kind of a picture-theater, with very two-dimensional sets, classic old opera costumes, things like that.

RK: I just love this idea of theater that says, "OK, this is the play...It happens in the 18th century, put them into 18th-century costumes." There's no twist to it. I always found that kind of a funny idea, you know? Because *Bliss* gave it a total performance art twist, so it was good to have the setting be this traditional idea of how a Mozart opera should look like.

YS: I think that's so wonderful, even though the opera director in me knows it would be impossible to imagine doing *Figaro* so conventionally, visually.

RK: An artist friend of mine [Magnús Sigurðsson] made a picture of himself, naked with a cigar and a finger up his butt, and the picture is called, *The Cliché Is the Ultimate Expression*. I love that sentence.

YS: But as a director, I am very excited about opera as a living and breathing art form. The text and music will always stay the same, but the visual interpretation gets to change generation after generation. Each generation gets to put a new accent on the story each time that we do it. We can't rewrite it, but we can find a way to say these stories are constantly happening again and again, in our everyday lives. The visual is the place where we have a window of openness. But in *Bliss*, the notion that there is a formal "hack" of the work lets some things be perfectly fine as they are: in preparing *La bohème*, as we'll do here at MOT in April, we'll use beautiful 19th-century costumes, but we're going to perform it in reverse order – starting with Act Four, then Act Three, Act Two and ending with Act One. If we play with the form, the visual world can stay the same; but there must be movement and play in some aspect of the presentation.

RK: That's what artists do: we play.

YS: If Mozart was living today, I'm sure he'd be laughing that hysterical laugh from *Amadeus*, over and over again, all 12 hours. And I think that trying to capture that spirit, his anarchic side, doesn't make his music any less beautiful.

RK: The beauty comes from that sense of wildness. That's also what I really like about repeating this part of the opera, because it's the moment the whole revolutionary idea is distilled. It's like a revolution schnapps. You're reminded that the social system in the opera is totally disgusting. But it's also pretty, because of the forgiveness we see. But that can be dark, as if it's suggesting, "We will continue with the status quo. Everything's forgiven. We will be happy." When we're doing it, we are thinking about the 18th century's brutal aristocracy. But also in patriarchal terms: this dude does something wrong, and the lady

forgives him because she's kinder than him. It's this sort of Sisyphus task, which women have to go through again and again in the patriarchy. So there's this total joy of forgiveness in the work on the one hand, but also this really depressing part on the other.

YS: Is it just depressing to feel like the boulder is going to roll down the hill, that the Count is just going to have to ask forgiveness again, without ever learning from this mistake? Or is there hope that any one repetition might be the last?

RK: There is hope. But it does not happen in with one forgiveness. It takes two, three hundred years.

YS: And we're still working at it. When I think about this final scene, I think about in relation to Greek theater: The Countess takes the role that would normally be occupied by a goddess. The humans in classic theater find themselves in such an immovable predicament, and the only one who can change it is a god or goddess – Athena, in her wisdom, who descends from the heavens to intervene. I think what you're saying about the "revolutionary schnapps" at the heart of this moment is that it's *not* a goddess but a human who offers forgiveness. So humans could be their own divine force. You see this idea so often in Mozart, the proximity to divinity that humanity actually possesses – if we can pay attention to it, and if we can cultivate that aspect of ourselves. The Countess can achieve what we would otherwise have to look to the gods to give us.

RK: This is humanism at its core, and that's actually what was starting to happen when this opera is being written. This is about the time of famine in France, which caused unrest and then the revolution; the United States is starting to happen. Here in Iceland at the same time this opera is performed, we have the worst volcanic eruption in our history, which caused 8 million people around the world to die. So it's interesting to think about this period, when modernity is starting.

YS: When I think about this particular piece of yours, I can't think of a better kind of living metaphor for what opera is all about, which is, there is an utter absurdity to it. And yet, you can't think of anything more aspirational and beautiful.

ARTIST PROFILES



YUVAL SHARON (GARY L. WASSERMAN ARTISTIC DIRECTOR)

Yuval Sharon has amassed an unconventional body of work that expands the operatic form. He is founder and Artistic Director of The Industry in Los Angeles and the newly appointed Gary L. Wasserman Artistic Director of Detroit's Michigan Opera Theatre.

With The Industry, Sharon has directed and produced new operas in moving vehicles, operating train stations, Hollywood sound stages, and various "non-spaces" such as warehouses, parking lots, and escalator corridors. From 2016-2019, Sharon was the first Artist-Collaborator at the Los Angeles Philharmonic, creating nine projects that included newly commissioned works, site-specific installations, and performances outside the hall. His residency culminated in a major revival of Meredith Monk's opera ATLAS, making him the first director Monk entrusted with a new production of her work.

The first American ever invited to direct at Bayreuth, Sharon distinguished himself with a boldly progressive Lohengrin in 2018, using subtle dramatic direction to completely overhaul the opera into a critique of entrenched power structures. He is the recipient of the 2014 Götz Friedrich Prize in Germany for his production of John Adams's Doctor Atomic, originally produced at the Staatstheater Karlsruhe and later presented in Seville's Teatro de la Maestranza. He also directed a landmark production of John Cage's *Song Books* at the San

Francisco Symphony and Carnegie Hall with Joan La Barbara, Meredith Monk, and Jessye Norman. His 2016 production of Peter Eötvös's *Three Sisters* at the Wiener Staatsoper led Opernwelt to call him "one of the most interesting arrivals on the musical landscape." His production of *Cunning Little Vixen*, originally produced at the Cleveland Orchestra, was the first fully-staged opera ever presented in Vienna's Musikverein in October 2017.

In 2017, Sharon was honored with a MacArthur Fellowship and a Foundation for Contemporary Art grant for theater.



CHRISTOPHER ROUNTREE (CONDUCTOR)

We see Lady Macbeth in a dozen crooning silhouettes washing blood out of rags over bright porcelain sinks; hear Stravinsky pouring out of an abandoned warehouse; see dozens of watermelons fly off Disney Hall; hear a black and white overture imploring against hatred; parse a chorus singing Haydn's *Creation* backwards; watch a violinist cutting himself out of duct tape with a razor as his amplified violin sits gathering feedback; listen to three minutes of *Le nozze di Figaro* on repeat for twelve hours; celebrate with rituals joyous for the end of the world; witness a long-lost John Adams suite come alive; and hear the sound of rose-petal jam-making as music. Conductor and composer Christopher Rountree stands at the intersection of classical music, new music, performance art and pop.

Highlights of the 2020-21 season include his debut with Long Beach Opera conducting Philip Glass' *Les Enfants Terribles*, and the premiere of a commission for Martha Graham Dance Company. In the 2019-20 season, Rountree began recording a four-volume set of the music of Julius Eastman. In conjunction with this recording project, he toured the country with Wild Up, culminating in an Eastman portrait at the National Gallery. With the Martha Graham Dance Company, he continues a multi-year project resurrecting old works. Additionally, Rountree collaborated with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra and Four Larks, filmmaker Bill Morrison and composer Alex Somers at the ACE Hotel, and inaugurates an ambient series at Descanso Gardens with co-artistic director Anna Bulbrook. Rountree is currently working on two operas about love and technology with librettists Royce Vavrek and Roxie Perkins.

Rountree's inimitable style has led to collaborations with: Björk, John Adams, Yoko Ono, David Lang, Scott Walker, La Monte Young, Esa-Pekka Salonen, Mica Levi, Alison Knowles, Yuval Sharon, Sigourney Weaver, Tyshawn Sorey, Ragnar Kjartansson, Ashley Fure, Julia Holter, Claire Chase, Missy Mazzoli, Ryoji Ikeda, Du Yun, Thaddeus Strassberger, Ellen Reid, Ted Hearne, James Darrah, and many of the planet's greatest orchestras and ensembles including the San Francisco, Chicago, National, Houston, and Cincinnati Symphonies; the Los Angeles Philharmonic; International Contemporary Ensemble; Roomful of Teeth; Opéra national de Paris; the Los Angeles, Washington National, and Atlanta Operas; and the Martha Graham Dance Company. He has presented compositions and concerts at Walt Disney Concert Hall, Palais Garnier, Mile High Stadium, the Coliseum, Kennedy Center, Philadelphia Museum of Art, ACE Hotel, National Sawdust, MCA Denver, The Hammer, The

Getty, a basketball court in Santa Cruz, and at Lincoln Center on the New York Philharmonic's Biennale.

Rountree is the artistic director and conductor of Wild Up, the ensemble he founded in 2010, and artistic director of an interdisciplinary ambient series in an oak grove in L.A. called SILENCE. Rountree is a seventh-generation Californian descended from the first sheriffs of Santa Cruz County, he lives in the Silver Lake neighborhood of Los Angeles.



COREY MCKERN (COUNT ALMAVIVA)

Award-winning baritone Corey McKern continuously earns critical acclaim and accolades in every appearance he makes. Of his performance as Figaro in *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, critics hailed: "Corey McKern... has all the goods to rise to star stature – timing, stamina, vocal heft and an easy-going stage presence – especially telling in Figaro's signature aria, 'Largo al factotum della citta.'"

Recent engagements include Older Thompson in *Glory Denied* with Opera Birmingham, Sharpless in *Madama Butterfly* with Inland North West Opera, the title role in *Don Giovanni*, Escamillo in *Carmen*, and Captain Corcoran in *H.M.S. Pinafore* with Pensacola Opera, performances as a soloist in *Carmina Burana* with Missoula Symphony, Handel's *Messiah* with the Alabama Symphony, Mahler's *Songs of a Wayfarer* for Pensacola Symphony, and Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* with the Tallahassee Symphony. He also returned to the Florentine Opera for a concert of "Opera's Greatest Hits," performed in Nashville Opera's Opera Jukebox Virtual Concert, in Asheville Symphony's Virtual Gala, and Mobile Opera's Winter Gala Concert.

Mr. McKern is a grant recipient from the Sullivan Foundation, as well as the first-place winner of Opera Birmingham, Shreveport Opera, and Mobile Opera competitions. He holds a Master of Music degree from Indiana University, and a Bachelor of Music Education Degree from Mississippi State University. He is also a graduate of the Seattle Opera Young Artist Program.



**NICOLE JOSEPH
(COUNTESS ALMAVIVA)**

Described as an artist with a “sweeping range of emotions” and a “honeyed, effortless voice,” Detroit-area soprano Nicole Joseph has delighted audiences in a wide range of performances across the country. She received critical acclaim for many recent opera performances, including Blanche (*Dialogue of the Carmelites*) and Magda Sorel (*The Consul*), with Detroit’s Opera MODO, the latter of which earned her recognition with a nomination for the 2019 Wilde Award for Best Opera Performance. In 2020, Ms. Joseph was seen in Michigan Opera Theatre’s last pre-pandemic production as Nella in *Gianni Schicchi*, following her debut in 2018 as Hattie in Daniel Sonenberg’s *The Summer King*.

As a choral singer and soloist in many highly acclaimed ensembles, Nicole performs frequently with the Sphinx Organization’s Exigence Vocal Ensemble, and Conspirare, with whom she received Grammy recognition as a featured soloist on their 2015 award-winning recording, *The Sacred Spirit of Russia*. Nicole also had the honor of performing for the nationally televised Aretha Franklin Tribute Concert held at Aretha Franklin Park in Detroit. She is currently the Interim Director of Music at Kirk in the Hills Presbyterian Church in Bloomfield Hills.



**GRACE WIPFLI
(SUSANNA)**

Grace Wipfli, from Toledo, OH, has proven to be an impressive, charming and promising young soprano. Most recently, she was awarded an Encouragement Award from the Midwest Region of the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions. Performance highlights include: Sa femme in Milhaud’s *Le Pauvre Matelot*, Donna Anna in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, The Governess in Britten’s *The Turn of the Screw*, Ann Truelove in Stravinsky’s *The Rake’s Progress*, and The Beggar Woman in *Sweeney Todd*. Ms. Wipfli made her Carnegie Hall debut as the Soprano Soloist in Ralph Vaughan Williams’ “Dona Nobis Pacem,” in March of 2020, days before the world shut down. While attending the 2021 Sewanee Summer Music Festival, Ms. Wipfli was chosen as a winner of the Jacqueline Avert Concerto Competition. She is currently in her second season as Toledo Opera’s Soprano Resident Artist and will make her Toledo Opera debut as Inez in *Il Trovatore*. Ms. Wipfli currently studies with Laura Brooks Rice. *Bliss* marks Grace’s Michigan Opera Theatre debut.



**ROBERT WESLEY MASON
(FIGARO)**

Hailed as a “gifted and fiercely committed baritone whose voice is spacious and reverberant” (Opera News), Robert Wesley Mason has established himself as one of today’s most versatile performers, employing “his mighty baritone to stunning effect, using interpretive phrasing and nuanced delivery” (Albany Times Union).

Wes has performed more than 50 operatic roles, among them the formidable title roles of Thomas’s *Hamlet* (Fort Worth Opera) and Rossini’s *Guillaume Tell* (Southern Illinois Music Festival), as well as

Marcello/*La bohème* (Hawaii Opera Theater, Fort Worth Opera, Norwalk Symphony), Ping/*Turandot* (Nashville Opera), Zurga/*The Pearl Fishers* (Opera Delaware, Baltimore Concert Opera), Belcore/*L'elisir d'amore* (Gulfshore Opera), Escamillo in both *Carmen* (Fargo-Moorhead Opera) and *La tragédie de Carmen* (Syracuse Opera), and Masetto/*Don Giovanni* (Opera Philadelphia).

Among his many leading contemporary-opera roles are Charlie/*Three Decembers* (Fargo-Moorhead Opera, Nashville Opera), Jan Nyman/*Breaking the Waves* (West Edge Opera), Hannah Before/*As One* (Lyric Opera of Kansas City, Eugene Opera, Pensacola Opera) Stanley Kowalski/*A Streetcar Named Desire* (Kentucky Opera), Father Flynn/*Doubt* (Union Avenue Opera), John Sorel/*The Consul* (Opera Saratoga), Jonathan/*Siren Song* (Hawaii Opera Theatre) and Dax and Larry/*Three Way* (world premiere, Nashville Opera/American Opera Project).

He has also appeared in concert and supporting roles with the Dallas Opera, the Glimmerglass Festival, Michigan Opera Theatre, Virginia Opera, and Opera Hong Kong to name a few. Mason made his Off-Broadway debut in 2020 as Wotan/Gunther/Hagen in On Site Opera's production of *Das Barbecü*. Prominent among his other musical theater credits are Billy Bigelow/*Carousel* (Union Avenue Opera, Utah Festival Opera and Musical Theater) and Curly/*Oklahoma!* (Maryland Live Arts). He is featured on the world-premiere recordings of Robert Paterson's *Three Way* (Naxos label) and Jorge Martín's *Before Night Falls* (Albany Records label). Wes has received awards from the Sullivan Foundation, The Loren L. Zachary Foundation, and the Metropolitan Opera National Council.



JENNIFER CRESSWELL (CHERUBINO)

Soprano Jennifer Cresswell was last seen at Michigan Opera Theatre as the Cropper Woman in *The Grapes of Wrath*. While she has enjoyed success in many traditional roles, including Santuzza in *Cavalleria rusticana*, Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni*, and Liù in *Turandot*, her true operatic passion lies in American Opera, as demonstrated in performances such as Magda Sorel in *The Consul*, Anna Murrant in *Street Scene*, Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, The Mother in *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, Charlotte in *Before Breakfast*, Hannah After in *As One*, and her most recent adventure, Olivia in *INTERSTATE*, a new chamber opera with music by Kamala Sankaram, for which Jennifer also served as co-librettist with Kathleen Kelly (premiering digitally through Minnesota Opera in October 2021).

Cresswell is also an accomplished recitalist and concert performer, including performances as soprano soloist for Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*, Bach's *Mass in B Minor*, Poulenc's *Gloria*, Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, and David Lang's *Simple Song #3*. In recent seasons, she has performed in concert at the Toledo Museum of Art, Kerrytown Concert House, in virtual distribution through the Ann Arbor Arts Alliance, and in concert with acclaimed tenor George Shirley, featuring the music of George Gershwin and Kurt Weill.



DIANE RAE SCHOFF (MARCELLINA)

Diane Rae Schoff, mezzo-soprano, is a regular character on stage with regional companies throughout Michigan and around the country. This Season Ms. Schoff returns to Michigan Opera Theatre for their 21-22 season in *Bliss* at the historic Michigan Theatre Building and reprises her role in *Frida* in February 2022. In 2020, Ms. Schoff was honored to join Michigan Opera Theatre in their production of *Gianni Schicci* as Zita. Over the past six seasons at MOT, Ms. Schoff has performed many roles including, the 2nd maid in *Elektra*, Natalia Trotsky in *Frida*, The 2nd Lady in *Die Zauberflote* and Aunt Cecilia in *Little Women*.

Recent performances around the area included joining Opera Grand Rapids as Katisha in their production of *The Mikado* and Toledo Opera as the 3rd Lady in *The Magic Flute* and the Old Baroness in *Vanessa*. Ms. Schoff received high praise for her company and role debut with Opera Carolina as Marcellina in their 2017 production of *Le Nozze di Figaro*. Opera News said, "It would be hard to imagine a better portrayal of Marcellina, both physically and vocally than that of Diane Schoff." Opera Carolina has hosted Ms. Schoff on many occasions delighting audiences with her "look that could drop a horse at 50 feet" (Toledo Blade) as The Duchess of Crackenthorpe in *La Fille du Regiment* and as Mme Larina in *Eugene Onegin*. Ms. Schoff can often be heard and seen with MOT's outreach concert series, Opera in the Parks. An avid performer of concert, oratorio, and classical works with orchestra, she has sung many of the alto solos in The Bach Cantatas over the years and debuted with Orchestra Sono as the alto soloist in Haydn's Lord Nelson mass and the



TYRESE BYRD (DON BASILIO)

Tyrese Byrd, tenor, is a native of Greenville, SC and a graduate of the South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities. He completed his undergraduate studies at Furman University, where he studied with Dr. Grant Knox. Tyrese was selected to participate in Furman's Music in Italy program, where he studied at the Accademia dell'Arte in Arezzo, Italy. There, he studied with acclaimed soprano and baroque specialist, Jill Feldman.

Tyrese is currently pursuing a Master of Music degree at the University of Michigan while studying with Dr. Louise Toppin.

Tyrese has competed for several years in the NATS Student Auditions where he has won state and regional awards, as well as recognition as a three-time national finalist, including third place in the Hall Johnson Spirituals Category in 2020.

Recent roles include Miles (cover) in *Proving Up* by Missy Mazzoli, Herr Vogelsang in *Der Schauspieldirektor*, Le Prince Charmant in *Cendrillon*, Arpad in *She Loves Me*, and the title role in Mozart's *Bastien und Bastienne*. Tyrese will join Madison Opera this season as a studio artist and perform the roles of Normanno/Edgardo (cover) in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Georg (cover) in *She Loves Me*, and Mercury/Orpheus (cover) in *Orpheus in the Underworld*.

As a frequent soloist with SC Bach (South Carolina's Bach Society), Tyrese has appeared in Bach's *Magnificat*, *Christmas Oratorio*, and several sacred and secular cantatas. His other concert repertoire includes Mozart's *Requiem*, *Coronation Mass in C*, Handel's *Messiah*, and Mendelssohn's *Elijah*. Tyrese has also attended SongFest at the Colburn School in Los Angeles as a Colburn Foundation Fellow, working with many acclaimed coaches, composers, and teachers.



**LUCIA HELGREN
(BARBARINA)**

Lucia Helgren recently graduated with her Masters in Vocal Performance from the University of Michigan under Dr. Louise Toppin. She was last seen on the Michigan Opera Theatre stage in the summer production of *Cavalleria rusticana: In Concert*. Her other recent credits include Cunegonde in Syracuse Opera's production of *Candide*, Musetta in University of Michigan's *La Bohème*, and Frasquita in *Carmen* with the Buffalo Philharmonic. Upcoming, she will appear with the Buffalo Philharmonic, once again under the baton of JoAnn Falletta, as the Queen of the Night in Mozart's, *The Magic Flute*.



**JACOB SURZYN
(ANTONIO)**

Born and raised in Michigan, Jacob has worked with companies such as Plymouth's Main Street Opera Theatre, Ann Arbor's Arbor Opera Theatre, and Detroit's Opera MODO. With these companies he has performed as Marquis de la Force in *Dialogues des Carmélites*, Doctor Gregg in *Gallantry*, Jupiter in *Orphée aux enfers*, Crespel in *Les contes d'Hoffmann*, Dandini in *La Cenerentola*, Papageno in *Die Zauberflöte*, King Melchior in *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, and Pirate King in *Pirates of Penzance*. A pioneer of virtual opera, Jake covered

the role of Guglielmo in Opera NexGen's inaugural performance of *Così fan tutte*. This past summer Jake was a resident artist with Opera North performing the role of Marcello in *La bohème*, and in March of 2020 he made his debut with First Coast Opera where he sang the role of The Pilot in Portman's *The Little Prince*. Jake has been a Young and Apprentice Artist with Charlottesville Opera where he covered the roles of Marcello, Lancelot, and Escamillo.

Jacob is a graduate of the University of Michigan where he performed the roles of Schaunard in *La bohème*, Melisso in *Alcina*, and Cacambo/Don Issachar in *Candide*. He returned to the University of Michigan in 2020 as a guest performer to portray Johannes "Pa" Zegner in Mazzoli's *Proving Up*.

An avid performer of oratorio, Jacob has sung as the soloist in concerts ranging from the Baroque to the Contemporary. Such works include J.S. Bach's *St. John Passion*, Haydn's *The Creation*, Vaughan Williams' *Dona nobis pacem*, and Lang's *The Little Match Girl Passion*.

This spring Jacob will cover the role of Jupiter in Madison Opera's production of *Orpheus in the Underworld*.



**BIBA BELL
(LEAD ACTOR)**

Biba Bell (b. 1976, Sebastopol) is a dancer, choreographer, and writer based in Detroit. Her choreographic work, often set in unconventional venues, focuses on domesticity, labor, embodied memory, and architecture. Her work has been presented at the Kitchen, Danspace Project, Movement Research, Centre Pompidou Paris, The Garage for Contemporary Culture Moscow, Jack Hanley Gallery NYC, Pace Wildenstein, Human Resources LA, Museum of Contemporary

Art Detroit, Detroit Institute of Arts, Insel Hombroich, Artissima Turino, among other. She was a Kresge Arts in Detroit Live Arts Fellow and a DAAD guest professor of Experimental Performance in Germany. She is currently an Assistant Professor in Dance at Wayne State University. Bell performed as a founding member of the collective MGM Grand (Modern Garage Movement, 2005-2011) and with NYC-based choreographers Maria Hassabi and Walter Dundervill amongst others. She has collaborated with visual artists Davide Balula, Nick Cave, Alexander Buzzalini, Nicola Kuperus, Cuppetelli and Mendoza, and Frauke Dannert and musicians Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe, Sowande Keita, Matthew Daher, ADULT., Underspreche, and Scott Zacharias. Of her dancing the *New York Times* writes "It's invigorating to watch someone who borders on wild." Bell earned her Ph.D. in Performance Studies from New York University.



**BRITNEY BIRR
(ACTOR)**

Britney Birr, a Detroit Metropolitan area native, began her movement training at the age of 3. As a graduate with Bachelor of Fine Arts at Wayne State University (Dance Honors and recipient of the Linda Simmons Excellence in Dance Award), and creative professional in Detroit, she was able to participate in works by Doug Varone, Trey McIntyre, Faye Driscoll, Ron DeJesus, Stefanie Batten Bland, Nicholas Leichter, and Laurie Eisenhower. Additional training and experience include B12 Dance Festival in Berlin, Dance Italia, Movement Invention Project, Gallim, The Cambrians, and Complexions Contemporary Ballet summer intensives.

Britney is a sought after collaborator and performer for projects led by Detroit artists such

as Biba Bell, Brandon Koepsell, Alex Quetell, BodyLanguageLa.B, and Bailey Allshouse of BALLSHOUSE + projects. Britney worked with Artlab J dance company and its Artistic Director Joori Jung from 2015-2017; and was a company member of BAIRA led by Bryan and Shaina Baira as well as a company member of Take Root, a based in Rochester, Michigan for the 2019-2020 Season. Britney continues with Artlab J for their 2021-2022 season while pursuing performance, teaching, choreography, and collaboration opportunities as a freelance artist.



**X. ALEXANDER DURDEN
(ACTOR)**

X. Alexander Durden is excited to return to Michigan Opera Theatre after debuting with the company in *Twilight: Gods*. Favorite roles include Belmonte in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (Capitol City Opera), Somebody in *Everybody* (Hilberry Theatre), Jones Morgan in *Buffalo Soldier* (Virginia Repertory Theatre), Spoony in the East Coast premiere of *All American Boys* (Off the Page Theatre), and Il Cuoco in *Madama Butterfly* (The Atlanta Opera Company). X. Alexander is a writer, actor and classical vocalist with collegiate and graduate training from Morehouse College and The Boston Conservatory, respectively. Currently, he is a Master of Fine Arts in Acting candidate at Wayne State University.



**JOSEPH GALBA
(ACTOR)**

Joseph Galba is a performer with dance, vocal, and theatrical training who graduated with his BFA in dance from Wayne State University in Detroit, MI. The first time he heard the *I Love Lucy* theme song at the age of 2 was an Earth-shattering moment; this birthed his intense desire to sing, dance, and entertain. He has

performed in works choreographed by Biba Bell, Jenn Freeman, Shannon Mather, Meg Paul, Anna Sperber, and Christian Vincent. Furthermore, he has worked with American Ballet Theatre and Michigan Opera Theatre, and has performed nationally across the United States in venues such as Walt Disney World, the Detroit Opera House, and Avalon Hollywood. In Los Angeles, Joseph signed with the Movement Talent Agency while working and training with high-profile artists such as Jojo Gomez, Guy Tang, Marty Kudelka, and Kevin Maher. His artistic style is marked with an experimental spirit, fusing contemporary, modern, and commercial styles of dance. He enjoys exploring modes of discomfort and vulnerability in his work. In his off time, he enjoys learning complex languages, traveling, and meeting people from all walks of life.



**MONIKA ESSEN
(SET DESIGN)**

Monika Essen is an award winning, nationally recognized artist and designer. The recipient of the prestigious Lawrence DeVine Award for Outstanding Contribution to Theatre, she studied Interior Architecture and Environmental Design at Parsons School of Design NYC and received her MFA in Scenography from the renowned Hilberry Repertory Co. Ms. Essen has designed over 250 productions in theatre, opera and film, and is currently the Resident Designer at the Michigan Opera Theatre where she has just recently designed their highly acclaimed productions of “Frida,” and, of course, “Bliss.” She has also designed for the Atlanta Opera, Florida Grand Opera and Cincinnati Opera, working with such notable directors as Tazewell Thompson, John Pascoe, Kenny Leon, Mario Corradi, and now Yuval Sharon. Some local favorite productions include “Murder Ballad”

and “American Hero” at Detroit Public Theatre and “The Foursome,” “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance” and “The Impossibility of Now” at Tipping Point Theatre. Additionally, she creates art, furniture, museum exhibits, interiors and full sensory, multi-media environments for residential and commercial clients, including the Detroit Zoo. All her design work can be viewed at www.studioepoque.com. Ms. Essen is a member of The United Scenic Organization 829.



**SUZANNE HANNA
(COSTUME AND WIG DESIGN)**

Suzanne M. Hanna is a native Detroiter. She has designed costumes for Michigan Opera Theatre, Motor City Lyric Opera, Oakland University, Wayne State University, The Jewish Ensemble Theatre and The Performance Network among others. She is proud to be the Costume Director for Michigan Opera Theatre for the last 22 years.

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In remembrance of our founder and long-term general director,
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This fund enables Michigan Opera Theatre to produce compelling opera,
present innovative dance, and engage with thousands of students and members
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The Michigan Opera Theatre Board of Directors began the first phase of fundraising for Detroit Opera House capital improvements in January 2020. This multi-phase capital campaign grew from recommendations identified in the facilities master plan completed by Albert Kahn Associates, Inc. Scheduled facility improvements and upgrades will shape the patron experience at the Opera House for years to come.

We look forward to sharing full details about the capital campaign in the coming months. Until then, we extend heartfelt thanks to the following donors who made contributions that enabled capital improvements to begin.

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The Italian word *avanti* means "ahead," or "forward." The Avanti Society at Michigan Opera Theatre represents a designated group of Michigan Opera Theatre patrons who have made plans to include the organization in their estates — whether by will, trust, insurance, or life income arrangement. Membership in The Avanti Society is open to all.

Michigan Opera Theatre is grateful for the generosity and foresight of those listed below, who have chosen to declare their intentions and join the Avanti Society.

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