

MSU Opera: Director is a ‘force of nature’

Ken Glickman, For the Lansing State Journal 7:24 p.m. EST November 17, 2014



(Photo: Rod Sanford/Lansing State Journal)

“Opera at MSU has come a very long way,” says Dean James Forger of the College of Music.

One only has to remember students performing a few selected scenes of opera many years ago in the old Music Auditorium at Michigan State University. A few single board sets were on stage, but soon after the singers began their arias, several of the sets suddenly fell over onto the students, shocking the audience and the performers.

Forger soon began recruiting a director of opera studies. Buck Ross, who knew East Lansing because of his work with the Mid-Michigan Opera Company, told Forger, “You have to look at Melanie Helton, she’s a force of nature.” At the time, Ross was director of the opera program at the University of Houston and Helton has

getting her Masters in vocal performance there.

Now, Helton, fourteen years later, is preparing her students for a four-show run of Mozart’s “Cosi fan tutte.” Last year the three shows they planned were sold out and they had 200 people at the dress rehearsal. This year they are taking the plunge for a full, four show run.

Forger remembers, “Melanie came back for her masters after having a distinguished career in opera and Broadway. She was not a kid.”

Looking back on her fourteen years at MSU, Helton says, “It seems like 20 years, and it also seems like 2.”

The enthusiastic teacher speaks about her love of her students, of opera and of MSU. “I’ve never had children, but I think of myself as a very maternal person. So my students are my children. I love their intelligence and their eagerness to perform. I’m very invested in them.”

Although her opera program has been improving year by year with larger and larger audiences attending the productions, last year was a seminal year.

In 2013 the newly renovated Fairchild Theater opened, showing off an intimate space with an orchestra pit for a full ensemble and acoustics that favor young voices. “Its paradise,” swoons Helton. “The acoustics have changed our lives.”

Last year the opera company performed full productions of Puccini’s “La Boheme” and Mozart’s “Magic Flute” (which won national awards) at Fairchild. The near-perfect acoustics allowed the singers to go un-amplified even with a 60 instrumentalists in the pit.

Helton, 58, comes from Cincinnati where her entire family went to concerts and was immersed in the arts. Her mother was an organist and her father a true opera buff although he worked at Proctor and Gamble.

For her undergraduate degree, Helton went west a couple of hours, and received a vocal music degree from Indiana University. Armed with her diploma she joined the thousands of other unemployed singers in New York City, house sitting and working in a temp secretarial job and began auditioning like mad.

“I sang dinner theater, I did everything I could. I have a big personality, and soon people started to notice me. I was fearless.

“My first big break was a role in “Kiss Me Kate” at Wolf Trap in Washington.”

After “Kiss Me Kate” Helton became a busy performer: working with Leonard Bernstein in his opera “A Quiet Place,” appearing on Broadway in a revival of “The Most Happy Fella,” landing roles with the New York City Opera, Seattle Opera, San Francisco Opera, and two years with the Santa Fe Opera.

“When I went to Houston for my masters, I didn’t want to be a singer; I wanted to be an opera director.”

Since coming to MSU, Helton, along with the other voice faculty, has driven the program to a quick success. Forger says, “The voice faculty here is one of the most collaborative faculty groups I’ve ever seen. They are all working together to make opera a success.”

When Helton first came, they had to hire a professional tenor to carry the load as the lead in “La Boheme.” Now the bench is so strong that she has double casts for all of the operas.

Her innovative directing has given the operas a fresh and exciting approach. Helton says, "As a child, I took ballet from the age of 4 and I try to give my operas a choreographed look. On Broadway musicals I used to tap dance, too.

"But I'm always looking to see how I can tell the story better."

She also found that building a dynamic opera program is more than teaching students and directing productions. Helton has been busy recruiting new students and raising money.

Forger says that she fully embraces the fundraising challenges. "We must have a \$350,000 endowment to fund one graduate student. It's an expensive proposition."

Helton is particularly proud of a grant she won from the Worthington Family Foundation, providing \$22,000 per year for costumes, wigs, sets and guest conductors.

"She's devoted to the art form, her students and her colleagues. She comes to MSU after a full and engaging life in the theater. And now she wants to impart her knowledge of the triumphs and pitfalls of a professional musical life to her students," Forger says.

IF YOU GO

"Cosi fan tutte" by Mozart

- **When:** 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday at Fairchild Auditorium, MSU
- **Tickets:** \$20, \$18 for seniors, \$5 for students at College of Music box office, (517) 353-5340, online at music.msu.edu or at the door.

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