



ENCOURAGING OTHERS

*MARIA NOCKIN talks to
Stephen Costello and Ailyn Perez,
the young couple singing Gounod's 'Romeo and Juliet'
this month at San Diego Opera*

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On a beautiful sunny day punctuated by a few clouds blowing in from the nearby Pacific Ocean, I came to San Diego Opera's eighteenth floor harbour-view office to interview the young couple that will be singing *Romeo and Juliet* for the company this month. Over the past year, Stephen Costello and Ailyn Perez have become two of the most popular young singers appearing at major opera houses around the world. Stephen arrived first, so I started by asking him about his background.

Stephen Costello: I grew up in Philadelphia and became interested in music through the public school system. Now, it's hard to find a music program in a public school because of cutbacks, but there are still a few music classes in that city.

I played trumpet all through grade school. After that, I joined the chorus and became involved in singing. At one point I realized that solo singing was something I wanted to do seriously. If I had not begun with trumpet I might never have gotten involved with music.

Just then our Juliet arrived.



Stephen Costello and Ailyn Perez. Photos © 2008 Ellen Appel (Costello) and 2007 Dario Acosta (Perez)

Ailyn Perez: Hi, I'm Ailyn. (She pronounces it Eileen). My family is mostly from the Chicago area, but I also have relatives in Jalisco near Guadalajara, Mexico. I attended Elk Grove High School in Illinois followed by the University of Indiana at Bloomington. It is not an easy school, which is why many people say you should only go there for graduate work. It has one of the best music programs in the nation. It's very thorough and demands a great deal from the student.

The library is a dream come true and it is online, but when you are there you can listen to its extensive archive of recordings. You could never assemble a collection like theirs on your own. When you go to The Met you can see the names and pictures of artists who sang particular roles in the past. When you go to the Indiana University Library, you can hear their performances!

SC: After high school, I went to the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. It gives degrees in various different arts and you can study anything from painting to basket weaving there. After I finished my bachelor's degree, I attended the Academy of Vocal Arts, which is where Ailyn and I met. AVA is completely tuition free. It's not easy to get in and you work very hard once you are there, but it certainly is well worth it. It's excellent preparation for an opera career.

Maria Nockin: Did you do any young artist programs?

AP: I did the Merola Program at San Francisco Opera and I was a resident artist at the Wolf Trap Opera Company in Vienna, Virginia. Before that, I had to go home and work each summer. Because I had no time off, I was late in starting young artists programs. You can begin to do them as early as the first year of college. A YAP is a wonderful way

to spend a summer, especially if you can get a major role in a show. You learn volumes from one show. Those programs can be very important in the development of a young singer.

SC: I did not do any programs like that, but I did some in vocal competitions. We both won prizes from the Licia Albanese-Puccini Foundation and the George London Competition! We made good contacts from those contests, too. Last year I won the Richard Tucker Competition, which helped me a great deal. With that organization, I sang a concert with Anna Netrebko, Samuel Ramey and the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra at Avery Fisher Hall. That helped to put my name in front of many important people.

MN: What can you tell us about the San Diego Opera production of Gounod's *Romeo and Juliet*?

SC: It is a gorgeous traditional Shakespearian production with terrific sets and costumes. It's always nice to do something in the style and period for which it was written. Every once in a while you get a great production that is a concept, but the composer's intentions are of primary importance. Some concepts really do work, however.

AP: Everyone in the cast seems to have a great deal of love for both the story and the score.

SC: The music is so great that it brings out the best in all of us.

AP: It's a classic story. We have a wonderful stage director, an excellent fight director and a terrific choreographer. That's everything a singer could want! When you see *Romeo and Juliet* as a play, the dramatic moments fly by very fast, but the opera emphasizes and prolongs them. The music brings the characters' emotions to the forefront and makes them more passionate.

MN: How will you handle the Wedding Night Scene?

SC: After killing Juliet's cousin, Tybalt, he is afraid to face her.

AP: He's probably bloody and he has to be out of breath from running. Juliet tells him that she forgives him and that she knows Tybalt wanted him dead.

SC: He's fifteen years old and she's fourteen. It's their first night together and they are probably quite inexperienced. It may be the first time he has seen a naked woman. These are young people exploring each other for the first time. They are not very sexual beings so I think that aspect of the scene should be played down.

AP: Our director, Cynthia Stokes, wants it to look like we are in bed, but the time we are together for the duet is quite short. Besides, our period costumes would not be easy to take off.

MN: Was the Costello-Perez wedding a major event?

AP: Yes, it sure was. It was a beautiful wedding, but we didn't have much time for a honeymoon.



Stephen Costello and Ailyn Perez

SC: Shortly after we got married I went to sing in Berlin for two weeks, but we followed it by singing Verdi's *La traviata* together in Miami. It works out pretty well. We are always able to figure out something so that we are not away from each other for long periods of time. If I have a week free, I'll go where she is and if she's free she comes to me. We've managed to work together for several productions, as well.

AP: This summer we will sing Puccini's *La bohème* together in Cincinnati, but sometimes we do have to appear in different places.

SC: I sang Cassio in the 2008 performances of Verdi's *Otello* at the Salzburg Festival. It was transmitted to movie theatres around the world and is now available on Blu-Ray and DVD. The *Otello* is Aleksanders Antonenko, the Desdemona, Marina Poplavskaya and the director is Stephen Langridge. Riccardo Muti conducts the Vienna Philharmonic. For me, it was a truly memorable experience both dramatically and musically. Next year I sing Nemorino in sixteen performances of Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore* at the Glyndebourne Festival!

MN: Do you sing any recitals?

SC: We do some. The most important one I've sung so far was in London for the distinguished Rosenblatt Series. Next year I sing my first American recital in Kansas City. It's at Jewell College where Juan Diego Florez made his US recital début.

MN: What are some of your goals as opera singers?

AP: We would like to help build a larger audience for opera. A great deal depends on parents and other adults cultivating the love of music in children. How can you expect to fill the theatres of the future if you don't start children off with music lessons and music appreciation? It is up to parents, teachers and churches to see that children are exposed to all kinds of music. We have many wonderful American artists and American operas that they need to learn about.

SC: I don't understand why music is so often the first thing cut by schools that have financial problems. Music involves history, math, literature, etc, and it teaches discipline. If there were more that we as singers could do to keep music in the schools, I would love to do it. When Ricardo Muti was the head of the Philadelphia Orchestra, he used to go to the school board meetings so that he could emphasize the importance of music in school.

AP: When we sing we often meet youngsters, some as young as fourteen, who aspire to a singing career. We try to help by showing them some possible paths to achieving their goals and referring them to good people. You cannot always accomplish what you want to do in a day or even a year, but you can influence people by doing your art at the highest possible level. Down the road, it encourages others to do more for classical music.

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Charles Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* was first performed in Paris in 1867, and also received London and New York performances during the same year. The French libretto, by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, follows the story of Shakespeare's tragedy. From the first night, the opera was immediately popular and successful, and it received nearly four hundred performances during its first twenty years.

San Diego Opera will perform the opera on Saturday 13, Tuesday 16, Friday 19 and Sunday 21 March 2010. The company's 2010 season finishes with Verdi's *La traviata* (17, 20, 23 and 25 April). Further information from www.sdopera.com or +1 619 533 7000.

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