

# Making operas at Curtis

Mikael Eliassen, Opera Theatre director

BY DICK SAUNDERS

“The best way to learn is to do,” says Mikael Eliassen, head of vocal studies at the Curtis Institute. He’s living proof.

“When I took over the department in 1988, I’d never run anything in my life,” says Eliassen, who was then a free-lance voice coach and accompanist living in New York and working part-time at Curtis.

“I came in 1986, doing a day or two a week, when the department was in a low position of accomplishment. People knew what Curtis was, but not that there was an opera department. Gary Graffman [the concert pianist who was president of Curtis] was new at running the school when he asked me to take over the program.

“I was going very much on instinct, trying to identify talented young singers, giving them a framework based on performance, setting an aesthetic for

the productions we were doing, hiring stage directors and scenic designers.” When Eliassen started, “there were maybe 40 people coming to audition. I did a lot of recruiting to get gifted young singers to come to Curtis. Now the numbers have risen astronomically. We get 400 or 500 [auditioners each year]. We’ve become an opera center.

“The reputation of the department is based on the performing aspect. It really is the best way to learn. On a stage, with an orchestra, a set designed for you, costumes designed for you.”

A graduate of the Curtis opera program will have performed in “14 or 15 operas. That’s not true of other places,” says Eliassen, who is artistic director of the Curtis Opera Theatre as well as head-of-department chair in vocal studies. “We have students coming from high school, 18 years old, for four or five years of



PHOTO BY PETE CHECCHIA

*Last season’s performance of Don Giovanni*

undergraduate studies. The opera department is a graduate school — two years with an optional third — where they can get a master’s degree or be in a professional-studies program” designed for them by Eliassen. Students who audition for the opera department may have done their undergraduate study at Curtis or at other schools.

At a Curtis opera performance, the cast list doesn’t distinguish undergraduates from grad students. “We have 27,” Eliassen says. “Eight or nine undergraduates, the rest in the opera department. The older ones sing with the younger ones. Cross-pollination!”

“When they’re coming in at 18, you don’t know what’s going to happen. At 18, Juan Diego Florez had no high notes and no coloratura. He sang South American songs with a guitar,” says Eliassen of the high-flying bel canto tenor who is Curtis’ most illustrious recent gift to the great opera houses of the world. “With tenors, you never know. Sometimes, it’s very clear [where a voice belongs]. Sometimes people change voice type. That’s what schools are for. With the older ones — coming to audition at 22 for the graduate program — the voices are much more set.”

Eliassen heads a faculty of 18. “Voice teachers deal with the technical skills of singing,” he says. “I teach two classes — performance seminars; kind of a master class. And I see the singers individually.”

How did a non-singer like Eliassen become an expert on voices? “I studied singing,” he says with a grin. “But nature didn’t give me a voice. My older sister was a singer, so I grew up around voices, working with singers, learning how to listen.” And seeing the world.

He was born in Copenhagen in 1944, grew up in London, and first came to the United States at 16 as an exchange student: “Grosse Pointe, Michigan. Writing music and playing the piano.” His parents emigrated to Canada, so he studied in Montreal. Then came five years of study in Vienna. He didn’t settle permanently in Philadelphia until 12 years ago. And he still gets around. When we met for an interview, he had just returned from one of his two yearly visits to Copenhagen, working with young singers.

“Here’s an interesting thing about singers,” he says. “They don’t hear themselves. Or what they hear isn’t what the audience hears. So the vocal coach becomes the ears of the singer.

“Some schools have programs for accompanying



PHOTO BY DARIO ACOSTA PHOTOGRAPHY

*Mikael Eliassen*

and coaching, but it’s something you can’t actually teach. Of course you must know languages, styles, periods of music. But what voices can sing what repertoire? What kind of language do you use when you talk to singers? You learn by doing. It’s like being a football coach. It’s one’s job to inspire — to expose young singers to new repertoire. I envy them that they’re learning this and exploring for the first time music I have been doing for years.”

For the past two seasons, Curtis Opera Theatre has been involved in a cooperative venture with the Opera Company of Philadelphia and the Kimmel Center. Last year, in Kimmel’s Perelman Theater, they did *Ainadamar*, a contemporary opera by Argentinian composer Osvaldo Golijov. This year, it was Alban Berg’s *Wozzeck*. Next year, it will be Samuel Barber’s *Antony and Cleopatra*.

“It’s been very useful to everybody,” says Eliassen, who handles the casting and producing. “For OCP, it’s repertoire that they wouldn’t do on their own. I try to choose operas with important scores for the

orchestra to play,” since the orchestra is made up of Curtis students.

In addition to *Antony and Cleopatra*, Curtis Opera will be doing Stravinsky’s *Rake’s Progress*, Bellini’s *La Sonnambula*, and Rossini’s *Barber of Seville* in the 2009-2010 season. “I don’t announce until quite late what we’re going to do,” Eliassen says. “It’s all about serving the singers.” He won’t program an opera unless he’s sure he has the right performers.

Last season, he did *Don Giovanni* because he had two potential Dons to alternate in the title role: “We did Menotti’s *The Medium* because we had a mezzo who needed to do it. We had a guy who’s go-

ing to sing *Pelleas* one day. So we did *Impressions of Pelleas*, Peter Brook’s two-piano reconfiguration of Debussy’s opera. As for Rossini’s *Il Viaggio a Reims*, Eliassen says it’s lots of fun and “it has lots of roles. The whole department is in it.”

Like other arts institutions, Curtis has been hit hard by the recession. Instead of five operas, there’ll be four next season.

“This is not an easy time,” Eliassen says. “I sit with my budget and ask, ‘How can we make a year happen with what we have?’ You have to be clear on what the mission is. The mission here is putting on operas. Performing!”



PHOTO BY DAVID SWANSON

*The Marriage of Figaro, presented last season*

## Curtis Opera Theatre Season-2009-10

*The Rake’s Progress* by Stravinsky (staged)

November 19, 20 & 21 at 7:30 pm; November 22 at 2:30 pm Prince Music Theater

*La Sonnambula* by Bellini (concert)

February 18, 19 & 20 at 7:30 pm; February 21 at 2:30 pm Prince Music Theater

*Antony and Cleopatra* by Barber (staged)

March 17 at 7:30 pm; March 19 at 8:00 pm; March 21 at 2:30 pm Perelman Theater, Kimmel Center

*Il barbiere di Siviglia* by Rossini (staged)

May 6, 7 & 8 at 7:30 pm; May 9 at 2:30 pm Prince Music Theater