

# CANADIANS INVADE WASHINGTON

## 18TH CENTURY FRENCH OPERA AT OPERA LAFAYETTE



Group Photo: Jason Starr (film director), Nicole Chaney (stage manager), Lisa Mion (Production Manager), Emilie Martel (assistant director), Keven Geddes (Jaquino), Pascale Beaudin (Marcelline), Alexandre Sylvestre (Dom Fernand), Kimy Mc Laren (Leonore/Fidelio), Jean-Michel Richer (Florestan), Tomislav Lavoie (Rocco), Oriol Tomas (stage director), Dominique Côté (Pizarré), Ryan Brown (conductor), Marie-Eve Scafone, rehearsal pianist photo by pierre-efienne bergeron.

by WAH KEUNG CHAN

Where in North America can you see 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century French comic opera featuring an all French-Canadian cast? The unlikely answer is Washington, DC. The city's company Opera Lafayette (OL) has been performing obscure French Baroque opera for 17 years. This is all due to its founder, conductor Ryan Brown, a humble violinist trained at Oberlin and Juilliard with Dorothy DeLay, who has gradually built a company worthy of envy. On February 19, Opera Lafayette will revive Pierre Gaveaux's *Lenore ou l'amour conjugal* (1798), a work which inspired Beethoven to write *Fidelio*. It's part of a Brown's plan to present both works side-by-side for the company's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2019.

Back in 1994, Brown started the company out of the basement of his Capital-Hill home, calling it Les Violons de Lafayette after the Marquis de Lafayette (a French aristocrat who fought with the winning side in the American Revolutionary War). He was intrigued by French Baroque music. "At Juilliard, harpsichordist Albert Fuller introduced me to Rameau, and I found his music new and fascinating," says Brown. Enticed by epic stories from history, myth and literature, Brown began to present French Baroque opera in concert in 1998 starting with Charpentier's *Actéon*. By 2001, he changed the company's name to Opera Lafayette. In 2005, it released the first of ten recordings on Naxos, Gluck's *Orphée et Eurydice*, heeding advice from New York Baroque Dance Company founder Catherine Turocy to help build a fan base. By 2012, OL began producing fully-staged productions, and it hasn't looked back.

Not only does French opera have a dance sequence, but French comic opera is infused with plenty of spoken dialogue. From the start, Brown tapped into Canadian imports for French-speaking casting. "Nathalie Paulin and

Marianne Fiset have appeared in our productions and recordings," says Brown following a run-through of Gaveaux's *Lenore* at a rehearsal space in Montreal's Centre Pierre-Péladeau. Indeed, for *Lenore*, Brown has assembled an all-Canadian cast, consisting of Kimy McLaren as Léonore (flown in from her home base in California), Jean-Michel Richer as Florestan, Tomislav Lavoie as Rocco, Pascale Beaudin as Marcelline, Dominique Côté as Pizarro, Kevin Geddes as Jaquino, and Alexandre Sylvestre as Dom Fernand. Additionally, the artistic direction has strong Canadian roots with stage director Oriol Tomas, set and costume designer Laurence Mongeau, and lighting designer Julie Basse.

It's the first time Brown has held his music and staging rehearsals outside of Washington. "Most of the cast is from Montreal and they all are friends," says Brown who flew into Montreal on January 3, along with his brilliant production manager Lisa Mion, to begin rehearsals the following day. "It also made perfect economic sense. Instead of bringing 10 people to Washington and housing them, it was easier to bring two people to Montreal." It seems somewhat surprising that OL hasn't tried this before, but the company's baby steps approach has definitely paid off.

One of OL's specialties is finding connections between well-known and forgotten works. In 2008, it presented an evening of antecedents to Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, exploring the sources that inspired Mozart and Da Ponte. In 2012, it produced Paisiello's *Barber of Seville* and in 2014, it offered the second part of its ambitious *Così fan tutte* project, which paired Mozart's opera with François-André Danican Philidor's *Les femmes vengées*, which Brown presented as a sequel to *Così*, set 10 years later, with all the couples more or less happily married.

OL has also been expanding its reach. The 2012 production of Pierre-Alexandre Monsigny's *Le roi et le fermier* – OL's first

completely staged production – was performed at Paris's Royal Opera of Versailles using recently discovered backdrops from a 1780 staging of the opera. Since 2011, OL presents a second performance of its annual productions (now increased to three a year) in New York and its board of 22 now includes 6 members from New York. When suggested adding a third performance in Montreal, Brown is cautiously open, asking for venue recommendations.

Pierre Gaveaux was an 18<sup>th</sup> century French tenor who created the role of Jason in Cherubini's *Médée*. At the age of 31, he published the first of his 35 operas. *Leonore ou l'amour conjugal* based on the libretto by Jean-Nicolas Bouilly premiered on 1798 was very popular in its day. "Unfortunately, it's been overshadowed by Beethoven's version," says Brown, who has the knack for finding obscure gems. The story of a woman (Leonore) who impersonates a boy in order to find her husband (Florestan) who has been locked up in prison still resonates with audiences today due to its revolutionary overtones.



Brown is not making claims that Gaveaux's work is a masterpiece. As the January 18 run-through proceeds, it's clear why *Lenore* was popular at the time. There is comedy at the beginning as Marcelline, the jailor Rocco's daughter, has become smitten

with Leonore disguised as Fidelio, dismissing the advances of Jaquino. The story takes a dark turn when the scene changes to the dungeon where Florestan is held and tortured. The music is delightful and dramatic, but missing a memorable hit aria. The all-Canadian ensemble cast a wonderful spell, with the dramatic highlight the Leonore-Florestan duet as they are finally reunited, sung wonderfully by Kimy McLaren and Jean-Michel Richer.

Brown is happy with the results (only a few staging notes need to be given to the cast), and returns to Washington the next day. "I like the idea of letting the music percolate for the next three weeks before we meet again in Washington with the orchestra." The production will be video recorded for a DVD release, another step forward for the company. **LSM**

Pierre Gaveaux's *Lenore ou l'amour conjugal*, Opera Lafayette, Sunday, February 19, 3 PM, Washington, DC, Thursday, February 23, 7:30 PM, New York, NY. [www.operalafayette.org](http://www.operalafayette.org)