SPOTLIGHT ON OPERA

Opera alumna's success rooted in mentorship

Simone Osborne’s (DMPS’09) star continues to rise. The soprano recently reunited with Professor Nancy Hermiston who directed Vancouver Opera’s Rigoletto. It was their first time working together since she graduated in 2009.
From Abu Dhabi to Vancouver: UBC alumnus builds international teaching career

Chris Ward (MMus’13) teaches one of two band programs in the United Arab Emirates. Despite the distance, he continually returns to his old stomping grounds at UBC. Ward, who holds a master’s degree in saxophone, recently participated in the 2015 UBC Summer Music Institute and helped Robert Taylor, director of bands, organize the third annual Wind Conducting Symposium.

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“Robert Taylor: Chris was a graduate student here when we started the symposium in 2012, so he has been involved in the project since the beginning. The way it works is that we provide an ensemble, mostly of UBC students and alumni. Participants conduct the ensemble from the podium and they receive feedback live and on video. It’s a very intense environment, and Chris has been critical in his role to create a comfortable space for teachers to take risks and grow during the workshop.

“Chris Ward: The sense of community this year was incredible. People said they felt so supported and felt comfortable to try new things. You can see that people were getting way out of the comfort zone and experimenting with new ways of moving and communicating.”

Spotlight on Opera

Opera alumna’s success rooted in mentorship

“My UBC opera family... is just as influential to this day. Everything they told me is true, and everything they prepared me for has happened.”

“It’s pretty surreal for me,” says Osborne, 29, who first learned Gilda’s aria in Hermiston’s studio during her student days. “The truth is, about half of the roles that I’ve done professionally, I already did at UBC. I’m a singer because of UBC and I’m a singer because of Nancy.”

For Hermiston, who founded the UBC Opera Ensemble in 1995, working professionally with a former student marks a major accomplishment.

“It’s especially wonderful for me to be working with Simone on a role like this. It’s one of the great soprano roles of the repertoire,” says Hermiston, chair of the voice and opera divisions. “I have known her since she was 15 years old and it has just been so great to see this wonderful development.”

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What has it been like working at the American Community School of Abu Dhabi?

CW: From the classroom perspective, it’s similar to my first job as a music teacher in the state of Washington, except I’m not doing marching band or pep band. But one of the big differences is the opportunity to travel to really exotic locations all around the world, whether on holiday or for class trips. Service is a very big part of the school, so in my first year, I went on a service trip to Borneo and this last year during spring break, I went with students to Jordan for Habitat for Humanity. There are also conferences all around the Middle East, in Singapore, India, and other locations far from home. This upcoming year I have back-to-back trips, one to the Netherlands for an international jazz band and vocal jazz ensemble festival and the other to Qatar for an arts trip with my middle school band students.

What do you gain from these travel opportunities that are directly related to your job?

CW: Travel for personal and professional reasons has been a big part of my growth as an educator. Many music teachers can feel isolated because they are the only instrumental music specialist at their school. In Washington State, I took personal days to watch other band directors in the state teach so I could learn new rehearsal strategies. In Abu Dhabi, there’s no other band program in the city. The only other one is in Dubai, and those are the only two in the UAE. I have to fly somewhere else to speak with someone in person and share ideas about music and teaching. So getting the chance to go to Singapore or London for AMIS honor band festivals (Association for Music in International Schools) or to New Delhi to spend a week watching a friend teach and connect with these other international music teachers is amazing. The international teaching experience is the perfect marriage of personal and professional goals. In my first year, I went to Vienna and saw the Vienna Philharmonic perform. It was unbelievable. When I was teaching in the states, you would never think to do something like that, to fly to another country during one of your breaks. But that’s the mindset for most of the teachers in the international scene. Here’s a three-day weekend, let’s go to New Delhi!

RT: If you’re teaching in North America, you have a lot of opportunities for professional development. Our symposium is one. But when you’re farther away, it’s a lot of effort to get to a professional conference. That’s one of the reasons it was really great that Chris brought me out to the UAE. I was able to spend a full week at each school working with the students and observing all of the classes, giving feedback to the teachers about the structure of their programs, doing several lessons, and maybe helping to send the program into some new directions or finding ways to support those teachers. Chris also set up evening sessions, and we had music teachers come from all over UAE for the professional development opportunity.

It was a very exciting trip for me. One of the most exciting things was to watch Chris in action and see how he was integrating—very thoughtfully—so many of the ideas we had explored during his UBC studies in his curriculum and classroom. It’s inspiring to see generations of students teaching their students!

Read more about Chris Ward online at music.ubc.ca/highnotes

OUR FACULTY

Mastering Rzewski’s De Profundis

Pianists do not often play and speak at the same time—let alone whistle, sing, play a Harpo horn, and use their body and the piano as percussion instruments. Terence Dawson decided to take on the challenge and perform Frederic Rzewski’s De Profundis as a career milestone marker.

Rzewski’s De Profundis has been described as a melodramatic oratorio, in which the pianist recites text consisting of portions of Oscar Wilde’s letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, which was written during the author’s imprisonment in Reading Gaol “I feel overwhelming empathy when I try to simply get my head around the idea that this creative artist was denied books, denied writing material, placed in solitary confinement and sentenced to hard labour for two years,” says Dawson, chair of the keyboard division. “That in and of itself would bring an ordinary man to their knees.”

Eight sections of rhythmically notated recitation are preceded by eight preludes, with the pianist directed to perform simultaneously as speaker, singer, whistler and percussionist. At approximately 30 minutes in length, this performance is no small feat.

“It took patience. And it took a lot of experimenta-
tion to figure out what I needed to do to absorb the physicality of playing as well as the emotional

CHRIS WARD

TERENCE DAWSON
demands of the piece,” says Dawson, who read Wilde’s work (De Profundis) in its entirety, as well as biographies and critical works in order to explore more fully what the prolific author went through during those desolate years in prison.

After six weeks of practicing up to seven hours a day, Dawson felt comfortable with the idea of scheduling a date for his first performance of De Profundis.

“I don’t think I’ve ever put as many hours into a piece to just to figure out how to actually physically play it. You would think that after 50 years, you would know how to practice,” says Dawson. “Learning De Profundis was a different experience because of the writing itself. Rzewski demands it all; variety and drama magnified by the intensity generated by Wilde’s words. The fusion of the music and speech takes the pianist and audience to a new plane.”

Mastering Rzewski’s De Profundis

Dawson first performed De Profundis at UBC in March 2015 after returning from a year-long sabbatical. Now he is taking this work on tour, with invitations from universities and colleges from coast to coast including Mount Allison University, and closer to home at Douglas College, Capilano University, and the Universities of Victoria, Calgary and Lethbridge. An encore performance at UBC on October 29th was preceded by a panel discussion with faculty colleagues focusing on the words of Wilde, the music of Rzewski and the fusion of the two.

“I’ve also found that despite spending countless hours immersed in De Profundis, it still feels fresh every time I play it because the words are so heartfelt,” says Dawson, who was inspired to tackle the work after hearing a performance by New York-based pianist Lisa Moore in 2000. “I think of it as a piece that demonstrates the resilience and the power of the human spirit.”

By studying language and music, you can actually learn about the brain in sophisticated ways. It has potential applications in the medical sciences, for example, to help stroke patients recover their gait.

How did you get into this field? Why rhythms?
When I was doing my PhD, I was really interested in 20th century composers, especially Elliott Carter who spent a great deal of time developing the rhythmic aspect of his work and aimed to express his vision of life by manipulating rhythms in some interesting ways. In many of Carter’s compositions, each portion of the ensemble represents a character and he defines those characters in very specific terms musically. One of those ways is by giving each character different rhythmic gestures—played together. And that really spoke to me–this idea that you could have all these different speeds at the same time. Earlier when I was playing piano, I always liked music that was more rhythmic. I liked the passionate style of the Russians and I also played some South American music that had more syncopated rhythms.

What are you hoping to discover through polyrhythms?
You find polyrhythm in many different cultures and I think studying how these rhythmic patterns are perceived and how they come to take different meanings in different cultures is a way to appreciate diversity.

I’m very interested in cross-cultural studies as a way to understand human creativity more deeply but also to appreciate the diversity that different musical cultures have to offer.

Read more about Ève Poudrier online at music.ubc.ca/highnotes

THE UBC SCHOOL OF MUSIC WELCOMES ASSISTANT PROFESSOR ÈVE POUDRIER.

Ève Poudrier is particularly interested in rhythms and their potential impact on cross-cultural understanding and medical sciences among possible applications. By building a database of 800 excerpts of pieces from 1900-1950, she hopes that analyzing the structure of complex rhythms and how people perceive them will help uncover how cognitive mechanisms interact with musical practice and the communication of specific affects. High Notes caught up with Poudrier to learn about her work and what inspired her to move across the continent.

What excites you about your field of research?
I am interested in uncovering the psychological mechanics of perceiving rhythm.

With the development of brain sciences, neuroscientists are very interested in taking music as a topic of study for learning about the brain. Music and language are two human inventions that all humans share and are that very complex.

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