

World-class opera stars to join Allentown Symphony Orchestra to open classical music series

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As I was growing up, opera was a type of music that I didn't think appealed to me, but I really didn't know much about it. I had heard all the jokes about opera music and the loud wobbly voices and crazy plots, and so I decided I didn't like opera music.

When I was young, I also didn't like vegetables, tomatoes, mushrooms, or avocados, until later in my teens when I actually tried them. Then I realized they were really quite good. I've enjoyed vegetables, tomatoes, mushrooms, and avocados, especially guacamole, ever since.

Some of the most beautiful and moving music in the world comes from operas. Songs about love, loneliness, rejection, joy, intrigue ... you name it, you can probably find an aria about it in opera. Opera was the musical theater of its day, and the songs were the pop music of the time.

In fact, if you go to Italy, opera is still the popular music of the people and everyone can sing along to the most famous melodies. And whether you realize it or not, opera melodies have permeated our culture in the United States in commercials, TV shows, movies, and stage performances. You have probably listened to and enjoyed many more opera pieces than you even realize.

Opera is one of the fastest-growing art forms in the United States because it involves superstar singers, chorus members, acting, dancing, sets, costumes, lighting, and, of course, an orchestra. The Metropolitan Opera telecasts in theaters have brought this larger-than-life art form to cities around the world, and now anyone can afford to see a production of these great masterpieces of music. (The Met: Live in HD will feature 10 live transmissions, beginning Oct. 15 with Bellini's "Norma" in Miller Symphony Hall, Allentown.)

Exceptional opera soloists can move an audience to tears. They need almost athletic-type abilities because it takes a tremendous voice to project to the 5,000 seats in the Metropolitan Opera House and also require excellent acting ability and versatility of character. The best singers will keep you right on the edge of your seat during the entire performance.

In 2008, we featured with the Allentown Symphony a young soprano, Angela Meade, who after I worked with her, I knew she was the best soprano I had ever heard. Therefore, I was not surprised at her brilliant rising career as she quickly became a regular at the Metropolitan Opera and also at major opera houses throughout the world. She is indeed one of the finest sopranos living and singing today.

So, I was thrilled when she accepted our invitation to return to the Lehigh Valley to perform with John Mathew Myers, a rising star tenor, and the Allentown Symphony Orchestra, for "Opera Arias," 7:30 p.m. Oct. 7 and 3 p.m. Oct. 8, at Miller Symphony Hall.

For your listening pleasure, we put together an exciting program with selections from Verdi's "La Traviata" and "La Forza Del Destino." We will also perform music from Wagner's "Tannhäuser," and Tchaikovsky's opera's "Eugene Onegin." John and Angela will sing the love duet, "O Soave Fanciulla" from Puccini's "La Boheme," as well as the dramatic duet from Tchaikovsky's lesser-known but very exciting opera, "Iolanta."

In planning the program, I felt I had to include the aria, "Casta Diva," from "Norma" by Bellini. This is one of the roles that Angela Meade is famous for. She has often sung the lead role in this opera at the Met in New York and she sings it exquisitely. A better interpretation and performance is hard to find.

Hailed by Opera News as "the most talked about soprano of her generation," Angela Meade was the winner of the Metropolitan Opera's 2012 Beverly Sills Artist Award and the 2011 Richard Tucker Award.

Tenor John Matthew Meyers was declared as an "artist to watch" by Opera News, and he has rapidly established himself as a rising star with an exceptional voice. He has performed at the Santa Fe Opera, and LA Opera, and recently made his Los Angeles Philharmonic debut as Mao in John Adams's "Nixon in China," conducted by the composer. His performance of Mao was hailed by the Los Angeles Times as "brightly lighted to match his declaiming voice."

Included in the opening night concert program will be the Allentown Symphony Chorus, comprised of exceptional vocal musicians from throughout the region. They will be singing audience favorites like "Va Pensiero - Chorus of Hebrew Slaves" from "Nabucco" by Verdi, and the grand "Triumphal March" from Verdi's opera "Aida."

Usually, you would have to drive to Philadelphia, or New York, or fly to Italy to go to the La Scala Opera House to hear opera singers of this caliber. But we made it easy for you. All you have to do is drive to center city Allentown to Miller Symphony Hall to enjoy an incredible night or afternoon of beautiful music sung by some of the best singers in the world.

"Meet the Artist" with Allentown Symphony Conductor Diane Wittry, soprano Angela Meade, and tenor John Matthew Meyers, noon Oct. 6, Miller Symphony Hall, Allentown. The talk is free and open to the public.

Diane Wittry is Music Director and Conductor of the Allentown Symphony Orchestra, Artistic Director of the Ridgewood Symphony, N.J., and author, "Beyond the Baton" and "Baton Basics" (both, Oxford University Press).

Tickets: Miller Symphony Hall Box Office, 23 N. Sixth St., Allentown; allentownsymphony.org; 610-432-6715. Free student tickets, underwritten by a grant from the Century Fund, are available for Allentown Symphony Orchestra concerts.