Classical Notes: Musical programs 'cautiously' eye summer

Joseph Dalton
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You’ll understand, I’m sure, why I’m not writing my usual year-end overview looking back on superlative operas and concerts from the last 12 months. I attended seven local concerts before the curtain came down on all live performances in mid-March. Over the long months since then, music organizations have strived to fill the void with online presentations, whether live or prerecorded or taken from the archives of past seasons. Those are admirable efforts but a poor substitute for the magic of being in the same space with great musicians and fellow listeners.

Amid my quiet despair at the months still ahead with no live music, one particular press release came as a welcome surprise. The Berkshire Opera Festival has taken a leap in announcing a new and expanded season in July and August.

PS21 Chatham may not be on the radar for most classical music goers but two years ago it built an impressive open air theater and the new executive director, Elena Siyanko, comes from the classical music world.
Since launching in 2016, this plucky little troupe has been producing one opera every summer, usually at the beautiful Colonial Theatre in Pittsfield. This year they’ve got Verdi’s grand comedy “Fallstaff” going up at the more intimate Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center in Great Barrington for three performances in August. The season begins in July with two performances at the Daniel Arts Center of Tom Cipullo’s “Glory Denied,” a highly praised two-act opera from 2007 about an American POW from the Vietnam War.

The BOF announcement says that company leaders Brian Garman and Jonathon Loy are looking ahead with “cautious optimism” and promises that guidelines on safety protocols will be strictly followed. Though tickets are supposed to go on sale early in the New Year, the issue of allowable capacity at these indoor venues may cause complications.

No one can say what safety mandates will be necessary come summer. As 2020 has shown us, dramatic changes can come with short notice. I don’t expect things to be back to normal by summer, but constraints can often lead to new discoveries.

With fresh optimism, I reached out to leaders of other summer festivals that year after year bring to our region a wealth of talent and beauty. My question was open ended: “What do you foresee for next year?” I think my motivation in asking was clear enough and didn’t think it professional to give an honest plea: “We’re all desperate. Please give us something to look forward to.”
Apparently, I’m not the only one asking. Francesca Zambello, artistic and general director of the Glimmerglass Festival, said in her November fundraising letter that she was getting questions all the time about the 2021 program. While decisions will
be prudent and designed for safety, she continued, the season will be “an adventure” and make new use of the company’s 26 acres of outdoor space. “You will just find yourself taking in more fresh air while enjoying performances.”

In a subsequent interview, Zambello said that she hoped a season could be announced by late January or early February. Also, negotiations are underway with the orchestra, virtual auditions have been held for a new batch of young artists, and if a substantive season does come together, it will include last year’s resident artists: soprano Isabel Leonard, bass baritone Eric Owens and tenor William Burden.

Lawrence Edelson of Opera Saratoga seems to be thinking along the same lines, although rather than lush acres in the country, he’s got the historic cityscape of Saratoga Springs and its surrounding environs to work with. In a statement that included understandable caveats about safety for audiences and artists, Edelson said: “We are planning an exciting series of live performances that will showcase the company in exciting locations that allow us to take advantage of the historic and natural beauty of the region.”

It’s worth noting that he says “performances” rather than “operas.” The company is in the midst of producing a series of free monthly song recitals livestreamed from Caffe Lena. If the troupe can pull off an outdoor staged opera, it would be a welcome followup to Edelson’s first summer in 2015, which included a gorgeous production of Purcell’s “Dido and Aeneas” performed at twilight on the grounds of the National Museum of Dance. By the way, Opera Saratoga celebrates its 60th anniversary in 2021.
Inquiries to SPAC and Tanglewood were met with polite but vague statements.

SPAC’s Elizabeth Sobol said the venue was in ongoing discussions with its resident
companies, New York City Ballet, Philadelphia Orchestra and Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, all of which are committed to a summer presence. “Whatever door to presenting our resident companies is open to us next summer, we want to be primed and ready to walk through it,” said Sobol.

Bernadette Horgan of the Boston Symphony Orchestra had little to offer regarding what might be ahead at Tanglewood. Her statement said that the orchestra’s vast administrative team is considering a number of models and that the stakeholders – artists, students, faculty, technicians, local businesses – are numerous.

To local audiences, the mix of small and large venues gives variety and texture to a
To local audiences, the mix of small and large venues gives variety and texture to a musical season. But Tanglewood is the preeminent summer music festival in the U.S., so what happens there will be a bellwether for the condition of the industry.

The web page for the Tanglewood Music Center states: “Due to the Covid pandemic, all fellows accepted in 2020 have had their attendance deferred to 2021.” Likewise, at the Seagle Music Colony in Schroon Lake, last year’s young artists are reupped for next summer. Whether sessions begin at either venue is still uncertain.

When Covid forced the cancellation of the Seagle’s run of operas and musicals, artistic director Darren Woods stated his intention to reschedule the same repertoire to 2021. That may not take place but he’s rather certain that something will happen: “We are lucky that our residential campus model for staff and artists allows for some flexibility in our program that will hopefully allow us to gather artists to create this summer.”

“Flexibility” seems to be the byword of this era, not just in our daily lives but also in arts management. “Reimagined” is another word that’s getting a workout these days. It’s used to
describe every rejiggered semblance of a concert or opera season.

During the time I’ve been reporting this story, two more season announcements arrived, both from what might be called “boutique festivals.” Tannery Pond Concerts, which presents recitals in a Shaker barn in New Lebanon, has rescheduled all six programs originally slated for last season to run from May 29 thru Sept. 18. Artistic director Christian Steiner is “cautiously optimistic.”

PS21 Chatham may not be on the radar for most classical music lovers, as its offerings over the last decade or so have been mostly dance and film. But two years ago it built an impressive open air theater and the new executive director, Elena Siyanko, comes from the classical music world. A recent newsletter lists a variety of enterprises on the way including a Modern Opera Festival, which Siyanko told me will consist of three one-acts: Douglas Cuomo’s “Savage Winter,” Kate Soper’s “Ipsa Dixit” and Daniel Schlosberg’s “The Extinctionist.”

As the region’s music community steps into 2021, I see abundant evidence of caution and safety but also optimism and desire.

Joseph Dalton is a freelance writer based in Troy.

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A Times Union contributor since 2002, Dalton has received writing awards from ASCAP and the New York State Associated Press. After starting his career at CBS Records, he ran the CRI label for 10 years and produced 300 CDs of American music. His third book "Washington’s Golden Age" was released in 2018. You can reach him at JosephDalton@earthlink.net.

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