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A Chance for Young Artists to Shine on the Opera Stage

By **Rebecca Schmid**

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When Hans Werner Henze’s “Phaedra” takes the stage at the Royal Opera House next month, the entire cast will consist of performers at the start of their careers. The production is a fitting platform for the Jette Parker Young Artists Program, which nurtures but also challenges talent from around the world.

The current troupe includes not just 10 singers from eight countries but also four budding conductors and a stage director. As part of the Royal Opera House’s mission to promote diversity, the program last season branched out to coach three singers from “socially underprivileged” backgrounds through the initiative “Link Artists” and offer workshops for female conductors. The next installment, dedicated to ballet music, takes place May 18-19.

But the main objective of the program, founded in 2001, is to place young artists in the workings of a leading musical institution, providing them with the tools to hone their craft over a two-year period in which they work as salaried employees but also have coaches for language, movement and more at their disposal. At the end of each season, having played small roles and learned others as understudies, the singers appear in their own show of scenes and excerpts on the main stage (this year’s summer performance, on July 21, includes Mozart, Verdi and more).

“Every facility of the company is made available” to the young artists, said the Royal Opera’s music director, Antonio Pappano, through a spokeswoman, “so that their talents are nurtured at a crucial time in their development, before they are out in the world facing the music business alone.”

Henze’s “Phaedra,” which will be performed at the newly refurbished Linbury Theater, was selected to include the American countertenor Patrick Terry — a voice type the program has on its roster for the first time — but also to push the whole ensemble in new directions. The “concert opera” for five singers and 23-member orchestra, which had its premiere at Berlin’s Staatsoper Unter den Linden in 2007, demands performances of both technical extremes and philosophical depth.



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“More and more is expected of young artists today,” said the program’s artistic director, David Gowland, in a phone interview, citing the growing importance of contemporary music. “You have to do everything to survive and have a career.”

He hopes to help singers stand out in today’s highly competitive market. With “Phaedra,” the Chinese mezzo-soprano Hongni Wu takes on her first German stage role and first contemporary opera. In preparation for the title character, the 23-year-old received four months of language coaching.

“Singing it in German with full attention to text can be tiring for a nonnative speaker,” she said by phone. She added that the character is more complicated dramatically than other parts she has tackled: “It is not easy given my age and life experience, but I’m really looking forward.”

Henze’s last stage work is as much a story of unrequited love and vengeance as it is of life and death. The composer interrupted work midway in 2005 after falling almost fatally ill, only to write a second act that unexpectedly introduces a tango and other playful elements to the brooding score.

Drawing largely upon Jean Racine’s 17th-century adaptation of the Greek myth, the poetic libretto by Christian Lehnert tells of Phaedra’s attempt to seduce her stepson, Hippolyt, and her subsequent suicide. She leaves behind a note accusing Hippolyt of rape, prompting King Theseus to have him dragged along the rocks. But with the goddess Artemis on his side, he is transformed into king of the forest.

The Israeli director Noa Naamat, 28, will reinforce the presence of the Minotaur, who has in fact already been killed by Theseus when the story begins and sings only in the final scene. The mythical figure represents for Ms. Naamat “a wild, destructive creature that lives in the minds of the other characters and prevents them from finding their way out” of the labyrinth in which the opera opens, she said, also in a phone interview.



For the Israeli director Noa Naamat, 28, the Jette Parker Program offers a rare opportunity to showcase her abilities. Johan Persson

The Minotaur will emerge as a force of evil, for example handing Phaedra the knife when she tries to slit her wrists in the first act (she will ultimately be found hanging from a rope). By the second act, as the text and music become more direct, Ms. Naamat said that “the characters become more animallike in their behavior.”

In addition to consulting with contemporary music experts on the Royal Opera’s staff, she contacted Mr. Lehnert, whose insight only strengthened her conviction about the significance of the Minotaur. In keeping with her vision, sets by the Greek performance designer Takis will create a “cold, industrial, abandoned aesthetic,” she said.

For Ms. Naamat, the Jette Parker Program offers a rare opportunity to showcase her abilities. She recalled the excitement of seeing her ideas come to life on the main stage during last year’s summer performance. Just as crucial is the opportunity to work alongside leading talent as a member of the directorial staff.

“There is nothing like being in a rehearsal room with Maestro Pappano,” she said, citing not just his knowledge but his “love and passion” for the art form.

Singers who have coached the young artists include the baritone Alessandro Corbelli, who appears in a new production of Verdi’s “La Forza del Destino” through April 22; the bass-baritone Gerald Finley; and the soprano Renée Fleming.

“If you want to have the experience of working with your idol,” said Ms. Wu, “it might be possible.”

Correction: April 12, 2019

An earlier version of this article misstated the date of a summer performance by young artists. It is July 21, not 15.

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