

Kurt Weill Newsletter

VOLUME 40

NUMBER 2

FALL 2022



...we think the Lotte Lenya Competition is one of the most important in the industry.

...one of the best competitions there is, and I hope all singing actors get the opportunity...

The Lotte Lenya Competition had a huge impact on my career and on my own choices as an artist...

Every winner or finalist with whom I've worked recently has been exceptional.

FEATURES

LENYA@25: Lenya Competition Celebrates Anniversary

Cross-Casting in Vienna

Stephen Hinton on Richard Taruskin

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Cover: Lenya Competition prizewinners, clockwise from lower left: Lauren Michelle, Jeremy Weiss, Laura Corina Sanders, Nkrumah Gatling, Marie Oppert, Andrew Polec, Jim Schubin, John Brancy, Ronald Wilbur. (Photos: Kurt Weill Foundation)

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A variety of opinions are expressed in the *Newsletter*; they do not necessarily represent the publisher's official viewpoint. Letters to the editor are welcome.

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In Memoriam: Paul Epstein

The trustees and staff of the Foundation continue to grieve the passing of Paul Epstein, who served on our Board of Trustees from 1996 to 2010. As an experienced attorney and highly-regarded veteran of the non-profit arts world, Paul offered a great deal to the Board's deliberations. Fellow trustee Joanne Hubbard Cossa relates: "Paul befriended me when he helped me negotiate a contract for the Chamber Music Society with the short-lived CBS cable in 1980. When I decided I should move to something more diverse and community-minded, it was Paul who suggested that Symphony Space would be a good fit. Later, he brought up my name when there was a vacancy on the Foundation's board. He was complicated, but so generous and smart. He certainly was a blessing to me."

EDITOR'S NOTE

In autumn, a young performer's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of ... the Lenya Competition! How fortunate that next year will mark its 25th anniversary, a perfect occasion to consider its role in molding new generations of musical theater performers. Next year's finals will be held 29–30 April in Rochester amid a whirlwind of festivities; save the date!

We also feature an interview with the director and star of a new production of *Die Dreigroschenoper* at the Vienna Volksoper, review two new Weill recordings, and offer memorials to pathbreaking musicologist Richard Taruskin and to Milton Coleman, for many years Lenya's accountant, then Treasurer of the Foundation for many more.

Shortly before we went to press, we learned of the passing of two more Weill advocates: composer Ned Rorem; and critic, translator, and *Dramaturg* Michael Feingold. Rorem was an early exponent of *Der Jasager*, while Feingold's English translations of the works of Weill, Brecht, and Hauptmann remain standard and widely performed.

Finally, sad news of another kind: Our designer, Veronica Chaffin, recently left the Foundation. This is the last *Newsletter* to benefit from her expert eye.

Dave Stein

Letters to the Editor

We present responses from three eminent commentators on musical theater to Kim H. Kowalke's "Sondheim and Weill ... and (Foolish) Me" published in the Spring 2022 Newsletter:

To the Editor:

I enjoyed Kim Kowalke's article on Sondheim and Weill in the *Newsletter*, and here's another Weill/Sondheim connection: I read and enjoyed the Weill *Newsletter* regularly, and I wondered why a dead composer had a newsletter but a living composer/lyricist, Stephen Sondheim, did not. So it was the *Kurt Weill Newsletter* that inspired me to found *The Sondheim Review* in 1994.

**Paul Salsini
Milwaukee**

Note: Salsini's memoir of his tenure as editor of *The Sondheim Review, Sondheim & Me: Revealing a Musical Genius*, has just been published by Bancroft Press.

To the Editor:

I found Kim Kowalke's remarks on Sondheim's equivocal published comments about Weill very candid and balanced. Sondheim made many oddly critical and iconoclastic observations about other great lyricists in his book *Finishing the Hat*, particularly Noel Coward and Lorenz Hart. Perhaps their eminence struck a competitive nerve? And could something about Weill have threatened Sondheim's sense of his own position in the pantheon? Possibly he was aware that he was not the complete composer that Weill was and was defensive about being compared with him.

For all his gifts, Sondheim could not orchestrate, or choral arrange, or compose continuity underscoring unassisted. Those tasks devolved upon Irwin Kostal, Sid Ramin, Don Walker, Hal Hastings, Betty Walberg, Danny Troob, Wally Harper, Jonathan Tunick, Michael Starobin, and others. (Even Meredith Willson, who also wrote his own lyrics, could orchestrate proficiently, having composed symphonies.) Kurt Weill through-composed and orchestrated his Broadway scores without help. Yet Sondheim is credited as a "composer" on a par with Weill.

**Mark N. Grant
New York City**

To the Editor:

Thanks to Kim Kowalke for a terrific piece in the *Newsletter*, which I found, as expected, more than illuminating. It makes me wish I had got round to quizzing Sondheim more about Weill during a daylong session with him back in 1993. (Typically, I took no notes.)

I can still see him coming down the stairs in jeans, telling me: "I sit on the couch (where, not knowing the rules, I'd seated myself); you sit on the chair, THERE!" And then throwing himself full length on the couch, putting his hands behind his head, fixing me with his gaze, and declaring, "I understand you're coming from the Kurt Weill Foundation. What do you do? Are you attached to a university, or what?"

By now, I was convinced the interview was going nowhere, so I threw caution to the wind and said, "Well, you've just mentioned one of the names I was told to steer clear of, so I may as well tell you that I'm a professor of drama in Australia, and my main area of research is the work of Bertolt Brecht." At which, he held his arms out in front of his face, formed them into a cross as if to ward off the Devil, and declared, "Aaaargh! Let me tell you about Lenny's and my work on *The Exception and the Rule!*" And he was off! No end of stories, including one about how Arthur Laurents had been to Berlin, seen some Berliner Ensemble productions (this was around 1965), and called Sondheim as soon as he got back to say he'd seen a show which he should definitely look at writing a score for. I impressed him mightily by guessing which one: Brecht's *Arturo Ui*.

Hours later, he took me upstairs to the music room and invited me to grab any scores or CD's I didn't have. I said if I'd known in advance, I'd have brought a wheelbarrow, but I could take only a few with me back to Australia. As we came back downstairs, I asked if he would sign the score of *Into the Woods*. He said, "Happy to." My restraint overwhelmed, I gushed, "As soon as I get back to Adelaide this goes right on my library shelf next to my signed LP and concert program from Benjamin Britten!" Then he grabbed my arm—I can still feel it—stared at me and said, "What? You MET Benjamin Britten? What was he like?" I had to summarize my two chats with Britten, and I threw in a deft(?) pen portrait of the composer, which I am presumptuous enough to hope surfaced among Sondheim's papers after his death.

**Michael Morley
Flinders University**

The Lenya Competition@25

In 2023, a flagship program of the Kurt Weill Foundation observes a milestone anniversary. We have assembled a varied group who have reaped the benefits of the Lenya Competition—those who have made it happen, those who have won prizes, those who have worked with prizewinners—to chronicle its history, celebrate its achievements, and assess its impact.

Competition Founder Kim H. Kowalke takes stock ...

The twentieth-fifth anniversary of the Lotte Lenya Competition coincides with the 125th birthday of its namesake. That isn't coincidental, as I conceived the competition in 1998 to honor the centenary of her birth—part of a four-day “Relocating Weill” celebration of his European manuscript scores arriving at Sibley Music Library in Rochester. I thought that it might be a fitting one-off tribute, because Lenya's career encompassed not only her landmark performances and recordings of Kurt Weill's music, but also opera/opera in Europe and American musical theater, notably *Cabaret*. From the outset, the Competition tried to nurture the sort of performer who could cross boundaries and “do it all” by performing idiomatically a wide range of music theater.

Remarkably, over twenty-five years, the range of repertoire requirements has changed only minimally, still encompassing four selections bridging opera and musical theater, including at least one work by Weill. After 2010, contestants had to perform a selection from both pre- and post-1968 musicals, while the necessity of singing at least one non-English selection was dropped in 2012, as contestants no longer were required to include two contrasting works by Weill. The diversity of required repertoire and an emphasis on excellence of both singing and acting has also continued to dictate the composition of the jury for the finals: a conductor/coach, a producer/director, and a versatile performer who epitomizes the values of the Competition.

Although only a local event in 1998, limited to Eastman students, the initial jury included legendary soprano Teresa Stratas, Maestro Julius Rudel, and Mark Cuddy, the artistic director of Rochester's LORT company. A top prize of just \$1,000 was won by the 19-year-old baritone Brian Mulligan. Stratas prophesied that he would have a career—which has proven to be quite an understatement! Gradually eligibility expanded both in terms of age (19–32) and geography: first to the tri-state area, then the U.S., and in 2004, globally, without geographic restrictions. As the number of entrants increased, preliminary regional auditions were soon implemented and then replaced in 2011 by mandatory video submissions of full programs prior to a semifinal round of live auditions in New York City. Applicant numbers peaked in 2021, following on the heels of COVID, with 500 contestants from 39 states and 29 countries submitting videos.

Prior to the 2011 Competition, contestants received judges' feedback if they were moving on to the next round. In the final round, sometimes judges would give notes or actually coach some contestants between their performances of full programs in the afternoon and the evening concert, where they were asked to sing just one or two selections. I recall, in 2005, that Hal Prince quietly advised Erik Liberman that “less is more” for “Try Me,” which Erik had hyper-staged. The director reminded Erik that he'd directed the original production of *She Loves Me*, and that “Try Me” had been lit by only a pin-spot on the actor's face. “So all that crap you're doing won't be seen,” Hal said with a wry smile. Erik's transformation was instantaneous and remarkable, prompting Prince to proclaim “That's it, he can do it.” After the evening performance the panel awarded Liberman second prize, and two years later Hal cast him in the Broadway production of *LoveMusik*. Unfortunately, not every finalist could assimilate such high-pressure, compressed advice. We committed to finding a way to include such a valuable learning opportunity with our remarkable judges, who were also capable of compelling coaching. So in 2011 we finally decided to level the playing field by building into the semifinal round fifteen-minute coaching sessions by the adjudicator/coach immediately after each contestant's audition. It required two days instead of one, but its success in raising the level of performances in the final round and its popularity with the contestants soon made one-on-one coaching with a seasoned professional one of the signature features of the Competition.

The expansive list of eminent judges comprises a veritable “who's who” of musical theater and opera, with Stratas and Ted Chapin (president of the Rodgers & Hammerstein Organization and Tony Award official) each serving ten times. Other luminous figures to sit in the per-

PHOTO: KURT WEILL FOUNDATION



Kim Kowalke welcomes prizewinners following the 2022 finals. From left: Ruth Acheampong, Amanda Sheriff, Kowalke, Katrina Galka, Jeremy Weiss, Ronald Wilbur



Andy Einhorn coaches Trevor Martin at the 2019 semifinals

former's seat on the jury have included such opera and Broadway stars as Patricia Racette, Victoria Clark, Rebecca Luker, Lisa Vroman, Shuler Hensley, Mary Beth Peil, Phillip Boykin; in the director's chair: Harold Prince, Jack Viertel, Anne Bogart, James Robinson, Robin Guarino, André Bishop; and conductor/coaches: Jeanine Tesori, Andy Einhorn, James Holmes, John Mauceri, Ted Sperling, William Bolcom, Rob Berman—to name just a few.

As the Competition expanded, prizes for semifinalists, finalists, and winners also gradually increased. By 2003 the top prize had increased to \$7,500, then to \$10,000 five years later, to \$15,000 the next year, \$20,000 in 2017, and this year, to celebrate LLC@25, \$25,000. Discretionary awards named in honor of Weill's musical assistant on Broadway, Lys Symonette, were introduced in 1999 to recognize outstanding vocal talent or a superlative performance of a single number. Emerging Talent Awards for promising performers at an early stage of development were introduced in 2010. In 2015, to reward the presentation of an outstanding program, the Carolyn Weber discretionary award was established upon her retirement, honoring her sixteen years as consummate administrator of the Competition and astute mentor to hundreds of contestants. At the conclusion of this year's Competition, almost \$1.5 million will have been awarded cumulatively to more than 700 contestants, a total that doesn't include travel stipends, development grants, Lenya Songbook honoraria, or Young Artist sponsorships. (See Brady Sansone's article, which follows.) Unlike many others, the Lenya Competition has never required an entrance fee; accompanists for both semifinalists and finalists are provided without charge.

In retrospect, not in my most fanciful dreams could I have imagined such a trajectory. That the Competition has evolved into one of the most prestigious and high-stakes international contests for singing actors, of course, owes a good deal to broader paradigm shifts and esthetic reassessments that were but glimmers on the horizon a quarter century ago. At the time, recording companies were luring opera singers to "elevate" Broadway musicals with their pearly tones and incomprehensible "singerese" (think of *West Side Story* with Kiri Te Kanawa as Maria and

José Carreras as Tony), while television and movie personalities were routinely faking their way vocally in starring roles on Broadway. Not everything has changed, but now major orchestras routinely present concert versions of musicals, and opera companies frequently include the classics of the American musical theater in their seasons. And the "cross-over" phenomenon has morphed into what was almost unimaginable in 1998, with the likes of Broadway star Kelli O'Hara appearing as Despina in *Così fan tutte* at the Met during the same season as diva Renée Fleming garnered a Tony nomination as Nettie in *Carousel* at the Imperial. Even the training being offered the next generation of singers is starting to catch up with these shifts.

Previous Competition prizewinners are now singing in the world's leading opera houses and theaters, on Broadway, in the West End, and on national and international tours. They include Grammy and Drama Desk award winners, Tony and Olivier nominees, a Cardiff Singer of the World winner and a top-five finalist, and a West End Newcomer of the Year. Sometimes Lenya winners pursued exclusively operatic careers; others discovered their niche solely in musical theater. But that has usually been by choice, not because of limitation of ability or opportunity. And more and more the boundaries between categories of both repertoire and performer have been blurred, if not erased, in new pieces for the music theater, in the manner of Weill's own hybrid works in the quarter century between 1925 and 1950—on both sides of the Atlantic. From the perspective that informed my motivations in founding the Lenya Competition a quarter century ago, that's more than sufficient validation for the endeavor. After all, the final sentence in the Foundation's mission statement reads, "Building upon the legacies of both Weill and Lenya, it nurtures talent, particularly in the creation, performance, and study of musical theater."

Competition Administrator Brady Sansone explains how the Foundation provides ongoing support ...

The Foundation has attempted to expand its impact beyond the Lenya Competition's monetary prizes and envision ways to work with or create opportunities for its alumni after they compete. The first formal program along these lines was the Professional Development Grant, launched in 2012, in which the Foundation accepted proposals from prizewinners for support of specific initiatives that would advance their careers. Over the next six years, the Foundation provided \$115,000 to thirty prizewinners by funding audition circuit travel, immersive language lessons, rigorous dance training regimens, and many other successful projects.

In 2014, the Foundation established a relationship with the Glimmerglass Festival to underwrite the costs of one or more "Kurt Weill/Lotie Lenya Young Artists," selected from performers who have reached the Competition finals. Fresh off his 2014 First Prize performance, Ben Edquist went on to play Jigger in *Carousel* as the first of half a dozen Weill/Lenya Young Artists at Glimmerglass. When Brian Mulligan, the top prizewinner at the very first Competition, took the lead role in *The Crucible* there in 2016, the initiative was expanded to encompass support for a Principal Artist as well. Justin Hopkins, who brought the house

down with his rendition of “Ol’ Man River” in the 2012 finals, had a similar effect on audiences in Cooperstown during his turn as Joe in *Show Boat* as the 2019 Weill/Lenya Artist. Such placements have since expanded to settings that further reflect the stylistic spectrum celebrated by the Lenya Competition, from Santa Fe Opera’s Apprentice Artist program to lead roles at The Old Globe and Oper Graz. To date the Foundation has distributed \$170,000 to support the engagement of Lenya prizewinners.

The Foundation reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic by attempting to aid both creators of new musical theater and Competition prizewinners with a single project. The goal was achieved with the Lenya Competition Songbook: the Foundation showcased new theater songs by producing audio recordings performed by a prizewinner, and offered a prize for the outstanding performance of a “Songbook” number in later Competitions. Recordings of all 27 selections from two Songbooks have appeared. Honoraria for recording the material were much appreciated by writers and performers, but that was secondary to the opportunity to collaborate during such a challenging time.

Foundation staff and Board members have also advocated for Lenya alumni since the earliest days of the competition. We recommend them enthusiastically for appropriate gigs; connect them with coaches, agents, and collaborators; and prioritize funding of projects which engage prizewinners through our grant program (so long as the casting decisions are sound!). The Competition’s diverse repertoire requirements will continue to produce a roster of singing actors who can individually or collectively “do it all,” and we want to make sure that members of what we affectionately refer to as the “Lenya Family” will find continuing success afterwards and have opportunities to demonstrate the fullest range of their capabilities.



Brady Sansone (second from left) with conductor Adam Turner (Julius Rudel/Kurt Weill Conducting Fellow, 2016–17) and cast members Margaret Gawrysiak (Second Prize, 2010), and Zachary James (Third Prize, 2009) after Virginia Opera’s production of *Street Scene* in 2018

PHOTO: KURT WEILL FOUNDATION

Arts professionals comment on the pleasure of working with prizewinners ...

Producer/Director Francesca Zambello:

As a director and arts leader of an institution, I want to say how grateful I am to the Foundation for the Lenya Competition. On looking over the list of recipients, I am astounded by the sheer number of prizewinners whom I have been so fortunate either to work with or to engage for certain roles. To maintain the standards and ideals of Lotte Lenya inspires me, and hopefully



PHOTO: STEPHEN VOSS

does the same for those who take on her mantle! Discovering that kind of consummate performer is something we all aim for, but when it actually happens, we know we are blessed to be in the company of someone so gifted. The Competition’s keen selection process has certainly yielded performers who represent those high ideals. I personally want to thank the Lenya Competition for recognizing those special and unique artists rather than people with only beautiful voices who often seem generic in the end.

One way the Competition acknowledges successful finalists is the Lys Symonette Award. Lys left an incredible mark on me when I was a young director. She had a direct link with Weill and Lenya. She told me wonderful stories, but also said much about their artistic beliefs and pursuits. I was so inspired by her and remain grateful that the Competition gives an award in her honor. That kind of dedication as an artist—and, in her case, as a coach, helping people interpret roles—is an incredibly unique gift.

Company Director Mark Pearson:

At College Light Opera Company, we strive to help young performers be as versatile, and by extension marketable, as possible. Few competitions align so closely with that goal as the Lenya Competition. Placing special emphasis on interpretation and storytelling helps performers of music theater to hone their most fundamental skills; the Competition forces them to pivot quickly and comfortably between both musical and dramatic styles.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF CLOC

CLOC has been fortunate to have many Lotte Lenya emerging artists participate in our program. Our repertoire covers a wide range of styles from operatic to contemporary rock and pop, and the Lenya performers consistently excel at reinventing themselves week after week. In addition, many of our alumni have done quite well in past Competitions, from finalists to top prizewinners. The process has always proven hugely beneficial, the true prize being the invaluable feedback and coaching they receive along with useful professional connections and visibility.



PHOTO: SOUNDTRACKFEST.COM

Conductor Keith Lockhart:

I have worked with many Lotte Lenya Competition laureates over the years, both with the Boston Pops and with other orchestras around the country, in repertoire ranging from oratorio to Broadway.

Some were just beginning their careers: Rebecca Jo Loeb first sang Carrie Pipperidge in *Carousel* with the Boston Pops when she was a Tanglewood Music Center vocal fellow, before she won First Prize in 2008. Justin Hopkins (Second Prize, 2012) had just won his award when he first joined the Pops, singing Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on Christmas Carols* with us, both in Boston and on tour across the country. I later convinced Justin to take on the demanding baritone role in Britten's *War Requiem* and joined him onstage with the Philadelphia Orchestra in the first performances of the bass-baritone version of Copland's *Old American Songs*.

Some had gone on to other points in their careers by the time we met artistically. Nicole Cabell (Lys Symonette Award, 2002) has joined me at my summer festival, the Brevard Music Center in western North Carolina, to sing an absolutely gorgeous Strauss *Four Last Songs*, and an equally beautiful Barber *Knoxville, Summer of 1915* in London with the BBC. Theresa Winner Blume (1998) is a respected teacher and performer in the greater Boston area, who first joined the Pops to sing Cunégonde in our 2018 Leonard Bernstein Centennial festivities. There have been others, but I hesitate to list them all for fear of leaving someone out!

These Competition laureates all have very different voices and musical sensibilities. What they share is brilliant musical intelligence, versatility that allows them to lend their vocal talents to all sorts of repertoire, and an impressive ability to communicate. They are all powerful, extraordinary performers.

Broadway Vocal Coach Mike Ruckles:

Over the years, it's been my privilege to prepare many students to sing in "the Lenya" (as it is affectionately known), several of whom have taken top prizes. The discipline, repertoire exploration, preparation, and vocal cross-training required to excel in the Competition produces extraordinary and versatile performers who can move between styles and genres with ease. That's the most enviable prize to be won at the Lenya.



PHOTO: MIKERUCKLES.COM

Festival Director Darren K. Woods:

At Seagle Festival, where singers are trained in both opera and musical theater, we think the Lenya Competition is one of the most important in the industry. Having hired two First Prize winners (Amanda Sheriff, 2022; Matt Grills, 2012), a Second Prize winner (Maren Weinberger, 2013), a Third Prize winner (Trevor Martin, 2019), and a Special Award winner (Michael Hewitt, 2017), as well as several finalists and semifinalists, we've learned to use the Lenya Competition as a barometer to make sure that what we are teaching our singers is what the industry requires. There is no better gauge in the competition world than the Lenya.

It was so wonderful to be in the audience for the 2022 finals in New York. Watching the finalists do their programs helped those in our organization learn how to better coach the artists that we encourage to enter the competition. It was also wonderful to see and hear about the care and devotion the Kurt Weill Foundation staff shows for these artists. They truly help them through those crucial next steps, and isn't that what we are all trying to do?—prepare the next generation of great artists who, like Lotte Lenya, can "do it all!"



PHOTO: ELLEN APPEL



PHOTO: STEPHANIE BERGER

Music Director Rob Berman:

In my fourteen years as music director of Encores!, about fifteen Lenya winners have appeared in productions, sometimes as featured ensemble members, sometimes in principal roles. When I look over the list, I can say that these are many of my very favorite singers, not just for their beautiful voices but for their high level of musicianship. These are the folks who give a music director a great sense of relief because they are so reliable: great readers, fast learners, and expressive singers. On top of that, they have proven themselves incredibly versatile, with great respect for the material and an understanding of the different styles of singing required for different eras of musical theater. Singers like Amy Justman, Lauren Worsham, Arlo Hill, and many others I could name—these have been my "go-to" names for many projects over the years. They are all intelligent, musical, and outstanding colleagues, willing to take on any assignment for the love of singing great music.



PHOTO: KAREN ALMOND

Conductor Lidiya Yankovskaya:

Every Lenya Competition winner or finalist with whom I've worked recently has been exceptional. The award has consistently identified performers who not only are superb in their artistry and skill, but also offer a unique voice and perspective. More than ever, we need support for performers who are committed to moving opera forward—performers who approach the art holistically and not only sing well, but also embody the art form as a reflection of our world. Congratulations on identifying and supporting such phenomenal artists.

Director/Conductor Ted Sperling:

When judging the competition with Teresa Stratas and Ted Chapin many years ago, I was pleasantly surprised that we shared the same priorities when it came to the auditions: great singing coupled with **powerful acting**. It's that dynamism that makes me want to work with these performers.



PHOTO: CHARLES GHESSLER

Recently I worked with three Competition alumni on MasterVoices' presentation of *Carmen* at Lincoln Center: Ginger Costa-Jackson, John Brancy, and Nicole Fernandez-Coffaro. All three arrived at the first day of rehearsal meticulously prepared, with Sheldon Harnick's English translation memorized and internalized. The entire rehearsal process was a joy, with lots of back-and-forth between the cast and our director, Sammi Cannold, and the performances were knockouts. I know I'll continue to work with singers from the Competition many more times in the future! The Lenya Competition is a wonderful institution, and I'm very grateful that it exists and flourishes.

Six-time finals judge James Holmes looks back, and ahead ...

Famously, Weill described his wife as "a terrible housewife but a very good actress," grateful that Lenya's lack of musical training did not inhibit her ability ("like Caruso," as he put it) to enthrall an audience with what she had to say. The Competition that bears her name requires partici-



PHOTO: KWFOBG

pants to encompass repertoire from both the European tradition and the more diverse, complex world of today. It asks the singer who acts to be ever more conscious of words and the dramatic impulse behind them; it demands that the actor who sings look for the widest range of vocal color and inflection, with a total grasp of what those notes on the page really mean. Musicianship and vocal quality play a crucial part, for sure—but to handle such a wide variety of styles with true success, you need above all to be a storyteller. With the future of opera very much a live issue in the U.K. right now, a recent article in the London *Times* made the same point: "Opera is the embodiment of an essential human instinct: telling stories through music." Just so: and not only opera, but lyric theater of every kind, in every venue, via every sort of music from baroque to rap. And—both in itself and in its aims—it seems to me that the Lotte Lenya Competition embodies that essential human instinct, too.

The first two decades of the new millennium seem to have confirmed trends that were underway in the 1980s, when I con-

ducted the first London performances of Sondheim's *Pacific Overtures* for English National Opera. Genuine interest in the "Golden Age" Broadway repertoire of Weill and Lenya's time thankfully persists; yet the large forces it often requires (especially in the orchestra pit) has led it to look for venues where the considerable expense is already somewhat defrayed—in particular, the subsidized opera house.

Were Weill and Lenya still around, I suspect they would approve of the barriers coming down between the worlds of opera and musical theater; "serious" and "light" were not terms they embraced. And while acknowledging that today's public is more important than posterity, they would also want to encourage creators or performers seeking to tell stories through music in new and original ways. With their lifelong concern for the arts, especially in stressful, straitened times—and as Weill in particular took an interest in educating and encouraging the young—I hope and believe they would be glad that the Lenya Competition (together with its recently established Songbook initiative) continues to reaffirm its principles for new generations.

When I think of storytellers in music, I quickly arrive at Josephine Barstow, whom I first encountered in the 1970s, near the beginning of a long career that has spanned the entire gamut of lyric theatre styles. This summer, we worked together again on Sondheim's *A Little Night Music* where—fifty years on and an octave or so lower than her normal range—she triumphantly caught Madame Armfeldt in a beam of vocal and dramatic artistry that remains undimmed. While by definition, the Lenya Competition must always be about the emerging generation, somehow it also takes in a uniquely experienced and acclaimed octogenarian from Sheffield, who to this day can bring a character, a song, a narrative to life with unique skill. Or more accurately, it's about her potential successors; now, with things being as they are, they need encouragement as never before.

Past prizewinners recount their experiences before, during, and after the Competition ...

Megan Marino, Third Prize, 2012:

I had one of those “lightbulb” moments working with Vicki Clark in the 2012 semifinals on “A Quiet Thing” from Kander & Ebb’s *Flora the Red Menace*. I’d been pretty heavily steeped in the American Young Artist program circuit and experienced my share of ups and downs, tons of rejections, Lord knows how many times I’d almost quit. She took no prisoners working with me. She somehow knew I was creating a distance between myself and the song, and she just looked deep in my eyes and told me not to give a hard sell, just tell me your story ... I started to sing the first sentence, and I was cool. Second sentence: just broke down in tears! Thought for sure I’d bombed the audition right there. When I gathered the courage to look her in the eye again she was smiling and said something to the effect of “We got you there.” It changed the way I did my thing forever. Life and music and art aren’t meant to be perfect, they’re meant to be REAL. I can’t thank her enough for challenging me to truly “go there.”



PHOTO: ERIN BAIANO



PHOTO: JOAN MARCUS

Lauren Worsham, Second Prize, 2009:

The Lenya Competition had a huge impact on my career and on my own choices as an artist. Since participating, I have been lucky enough to perform with multiple prestigious New York institutions including Carnegie Hall, the Philharmonic, MasterVoices, and even on Broadway (where I earned a Tony nomination originating the role of Phoebe in *A Gentleman’s Guide to Love and Murder*). I’ve continued to explore new music and opera and to expand my own personal musical interests with my indie-pop band Sky-Pony. The Competition taught me that I didn’t have to choose one style of performance—a lesson that has stuck with me and proven true! In putting together my program and listening to the judge’s critique, I also learned crucial lessons about how to put together a solo show, which is an integral part of being a working musical-theater singer.

Through the Competition, I also met other artists and several judges with whom I have forged long-lasting relationships. Shortly after my trip to the finals, judge Rob Berman cast me in the Encores! production of *Where’s Charley*; that role led to further work opportunities.

Alen Hodzovic, First Prize, 2009:

I was one of the few Competition participants who was not a classically trained opera singer. Also, coming from Berlin, I was one of the first non-U.S. citizens in the finals.

I consider myself an actor first and a singer second. My way into a song is never primarily through vocal or musical technique but through character and dramatic circumstances. Once I find a personal understanding of what the song and the person who sings it is all about, the voice will follow. If I don’t, it won’t.

That the judges, including Teresa Stratas, found any value at all in my approach to the Weill material was not only a wonderful confirmation but also a nudge in the right direction that helped me learn more about how I operate as an “actor who sings.” Back in Europe, I keep encouraging all kinds of performers to apply for the Competition. The process of preparing and participating is itself a great experience and lesson. And you never know what might come of it.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF ALEN HODZOVIC

Marie Oppert, Trustees’ Award, 2020:

The Lotte Lenya Competition was probably one of my most enriching learning experiences. I can even say that it changed my life in a way.

First of all, the Competition allowed me to really get to know Kurt Weill’s repertoire. I often use his works for auditions and sing his songs in concerts. The main element that attracted me in Weill’s compositions, as in the Competition, is acting through the songs. Building a diverse program and receiving advice from specialists helped me grow in that multidisciplinary direction. Being coached by extraordinary artists such as Ted Sperling, Rebecca Luker, Shuler Hensley, and Teresa Stratas, as well as receiving advice from the staff of the Kurt Weill Foundation, was a highlight for me. I also stayed in contact with other contestants.

After I won a Special Award in 2017, I was asked to audition for the lead role in the *Phantom of the Opera* on Broadway. This year I joined the prestigious company of the Comédie-Française by auditioning for the role of Polly in *The Threepenny Opera*, and I’m beyond thrilled to be able to play this dream role!



PHOTO: KURT WEILL FOUNDATION

Brian Vu, First Prize, 2016:

The Lotte Lenya Competition is one of the best competitions there is, and I hope all singing actors get the opportunity not only to compete but to advance and share their art with the panel and world! I came across it by way of Matt Grills's perfect First Prize-winning set on YouTube back in 2012. As a fellow musical theater fan that loved the singing-actor programming requirements, I didn't hesitate to take my shot. I auditioned several times and worked my way up to First Prize. One of the biggest things the Lotte Lenya Competition taught me was that I could trust my musical instinct 100 per cent. And that I didn't need to pander to anyone other than my own musical journey and satisfaction. Because the more authentic you are, on stage and screen, the better audiences will connect with you. I'm so grateful to the Competition for teaching me that.



PHOTO: LAUREN HURT

Beyond the Competition, the Foundation was instrumental in helping this opera singer with two left feet work on dance preparation for a tour of *West Side Story* as Riff, doing the original Jerome Robbins choreography.

Katrina Galka, Second Prize, 2022:

After my first year in the finals (Lys Symonette Award, 2021), I knew I wanted to compete again. I started to study past winners in-depth. What was it that made them great singing storytellers? This led to a process of play and experimentation as I prepared a new program. That program not only allowed me to win Second Prize the following year, but it also taught me about how I connect to myself and my emotions, and how I live in my body, as well as how to effectively prepare a character and a story. I will take those lessons with me for the rest of my career. Now I prepare for auditions differently; I work on pieces as if I were prepping them for the Competition.



PHOTO: KARLI CADEL

I've continued to build my opera career in Europe, making debuts this season with Staatsoper Hamburg and the Bayerische Staatsoper. And I've also booked more crossover work, performing in musicals with opera companies: Anne Eggerman (*A Little Night Music*), Julie Jordan (*Carousel*), and Cunégonde (*Candide*).



PHOTO: TERRY GILLIAM

Victoria Okafor, Second Prize, 2022:

Ms. Okafor graciously agreed to contribute a recent Instagram post, made just after she signed with UIA Talent Agency, as her statement about the Competition:

Well, the cat's out of the bag! I'm not gonna lie y'all, @lottelenyacompetition changed my life. it was there that my love for musical theater was reignited and it was there that my semifinalist coach told me to go for it and pursue it. So here I am, represented by an amazing team of people that believe in me and my art. I'm blessed and thankful for the opportunity to do what I love. And now I get to explore all the things!!

Massive thank you to @analisaleaming for everything and to @lottelenyacompetition for being the door in which all this came to be. I love this community so much and I'm so excited for what's in store.

1 day ago



analisaleaming I can't wait to follow along your journey! 🌟🌟🌟



Ten-time finals judge Ted Chapin honors a guiding light ...

When Kim Kowalke first asked me to judge the Lotte Lenya Competition finals, my instant "yes" sprang from the knowledge that I would be sitting in a room with Teresa Stratas. As her longtime admirer, from all her operatic roles right up to her remarkable turn as the lead in the Broadway musical *Rags*, I sensed it would be an experience, and maybe fun, to sit with her if not as an equal, at least as a partner. Clearly, I thought, the knowledge she acquired over the years in her career would make for interesting observations as the contestants came out on stage and ran through their well-rehearsed and cultivated performance of four contrasting numbers.

It was indeed fun sitting by her in the middle of Kilbourn Hall at the Eastman School, and then it became extraordinary as we judges gathered to share our feelings and thoughts. That is always a very revealing moment, and can be a little scary when divergent opinions are voiced. (On rare occasions, I have sensed a judge's agenda creeping into the deliberations, the worst situation in any competition.) Our task was to listen carefully to each of the fifteen-minute presentations and judge honestly what we saw and heard. Stratas was kind, understanding, emotional when something really moved her, and quietly fierce when something felt phony. One year at the post-finals reception she sat one con-



PHOTO: KURT WEILL FOUNDATION

testant down, leaned forward, and said, “You should be ashamed of yourself.” As soon as I heard that, I made my way over to the bar, wondering what would come of that awkward moment. The next year I found out: that young man came back and took First Prize. What Stratas felt, and had no hesitation in saying, was that he was not connecting with any of the material he had presented. It was as if he was a singing machine, going through the motions, bringing none of his own personal depths to the performance. It was bold, risky, and Lord knows unconventional for her to say that. But she knew what she was doing, and it turned out to be extraordinarily helpful to an emerging talent who hadn’t realized how important it was to dig inside.

I have been asked to come back many times over the 25 years, and each time has been slightly different. Stratas was there often, making her brilliant observations. When asked to judge not long ago, I realized it would mean I would have been on the

panel more times than Stratas had. That didn’t feel right, and I wrote her saying I hoped that wouldn’t happen. [It hasn’t; Stratas and Chapin share the record at ten final rounds each—ed.] I’m still glad I went with that initial desire to sit next to one of the great artists of our time as we three judges figured out how to bestow the awards.

I should point out there is always that moment in any competition when the judges realize some people are not going to win. It’s a tough moment. Getting to the finals at all shows remarkable effort, linking talent with hard work, and those who walk away without an award can’t help but feel bad. One of the good points of the Lenya Competition, as the story above shows, is that contestants can come back and try again if they don’t win this time. That is perhaps one of the best long-term features of the Competition, of which everyone at the Kurt Weill Foundation, and all the judges through the years, can be justly proud.

Former Foundation Director Carolyn Weber recalls the beginnings...

PHOTO: WEILL-LENYA RESEARCH CENTER



November 1998: One of my first duties as a Foundation employee was traveling to Rochester for the concert given by the winners of the inaugural Competition. I was intrigued immediately; the Competition seemed like a great idea. And it was right up my alley because of my background as a performer and an artist manager. I saw right away that the mission of the Competition—seeking skilled singer/actors who could

do all kinds of musical theater—was unique. It was all laid out on the first page of the very first finals program. Many participants were used to standard vocal competitions, and it was really hard for them to get the idea that they had to act every one of their songs. A lot of contestants didn’t, or couldn’t, understand. Yet a few of those I remember the most fondly competed early on; there were a couple of unique artists. Over time, the general talent level has risen, partly because of the ways expectations for performers have evolved since 1998. At the very least, the Competition helped put those ideas in the air.

In the early years, we had to do a lot of work to promote the Competition; we wanted more and better people to participate. I remember making many phone calls to music and theater schools and young artist programs. We also gradually expanded eligibility; that first year it was Eastman students only, then students from New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. In 2001, we held regional auditions in Cincinnati, Los Angeles, New York City, and Rochester.

Many features of the Competition had not developed at that time. The whole idea of the Competition as more than a one-day event, or that so many contestants participate more than once, that there’s a lot of interaction with the judges and Foundation staff, that they have a chance to develop in their careers as they participate—none of that was apparent at first. Yet there was *always* an idea, which grew as time went on, that if a prizewinner was really talented, that person would be mentioned to producers

who needed young artists (James Conlon and Ted Sperling come to mind), and certainly we tried to encourage hiring. Some of those who recruited prizewinners had been judges and seen the talent for themselves, like Harold Prince.

We always tried to give our best advice after the semifinals: “Is there other repertoire that might show you better?”—that kind of thing. Some contestants were very open to that, and they absorbed their experiences in the earlier rounds and really grew. (Some were not, and there were a couple of letdowns.) I still remember how hard it was to predict who was going to improve between the semifinals and the finals. I always loved seeing someone do a really outstanding performance and thinking, “I talked to him or her about some of those things, and it did make it better!” That is *very* different from other competitions.



PHOTO: CORY WEAVER

A final word from the top prizewinner of the first Competition, Brian Mulligan ...

When a vocal competition at Eastman was announced in 1998, I was so excited. I was not very familiar with Weill’s music, but I wasn’t about to let that stop me! I went to the Sibley Music Library and listened to every Weill work I could. There was no recording of the *Four Walt Whitman Songs*, but I found the score of “Come Up from the Fields, Father,” and I think my performance of that number was probably how I won. I learned something that has guided me consistently throughout my career: it is my responsibility to find the music which best showcases my talent. I can even be actively involved in the creation of music that is written specifically for me. This makes me think of the symbiotic relationship between Weill and Lenya. Also, how a phenomenal artist like Teresa Stratas discovered that Weill’s music was a perfect showcase for her singular artistry. I look to these women, idols of mine, and I think ... I just might be doing it right!

Cross-Casting in Vienna

27 November 2022: A new production of *Die Dreigroschenoper* opened at the Vienna Volksoper, with a twist. Singer and actor Sona MacDonald, whose Weill/Lenya résumé was already long and impressive, plays Macheath, the first time a woman has taken the role in a major production. The Volksoper states that this will be the first of a series called “Manifesto,” described as follows: “young as well as experienced theatre-makers are invited to think aloud about the how and why of making music theatre. Each artistic team will leave behind a new production and a manifesto at the end, which we will build on in the future.” MacDonald and director Maurice Lenhard sat down with the *Newsletter* during rehearsals to discuss the implications of the startling casting for gender politics and, more generally, how we understand and interpret this monument of twentieth-century musical theater.

KWN: The primary news-making aspect of this production is the fact that Sona will be playing Macheath. What was the inspiration for casting Macheath with a woman actor and Jenny with a man?

ML: So many things we’re used to seeing—the esthetic of the twenties, the gangsters, the moon over Soho—sometimes keep us from *hearing* the text, especially what’s between the lines. One big idea that emerged from our reading of the *Dreigroschenoper* was that Mackie is not just a person; he’s a system, he’s a universe. When he’s played by a man, we see a very familiar structure. How would we see the same situations and action if it’s a woman in that place? We found very quickly that the piece only works in terms of two genders—female and male—because that imbalance of power underlies everything. Even though Polly and Macheath have more stage time together, we decided the core couple is Jenny and Mack due to the past they share. If both are played by female singers, that imbalance is not preserved. So we decided to flip Jenny around, too.

KWN: There are four major women characters in this play—Jenny, Mrs. Peachum, Polly, and Lucy. What happens to the relationships with the other three women when Macheath is played by a woman?

SM: We don’t even ask that question any more. We’re concentrating on “How are we manipulating, or using, each other?” The key to this casting is to express what men, and women, say and do to exert power.

ML: I would add the relationship between Tiger Brown and Mack, two men with a lot of affection for each other. Mack’s relationship to Lucy and Polly is not primarily about gender, much more

“What can I get out of this?” *Everybody* is selfish. The way that Brecht and Weill describe this society is exaggerated, but if we’re honest, it’s not that far off. We can identify; we think it’s funny. The audience sympathizes with heartlessness.

SM: Of course I will be as charming as I can be, showing the audience the kind of manipulation I’ve experienced from men. We’re showing how the emotion plays into exploitation.

KWN: How will the casting change the accustomed gender politics of the *Dreigroschenoper*? Are you just turning things on their head, or trying to introduce a new perspective?

SM: Definitely a new perspective. We’re not trying to be completely original; women actors have played men often in the German theater, though we think this is the first time for Macheath.

ML: We’re trying to go back to the main idea more than move away from it. Sona plays Mack straight, with all his masculinity, but we don’t give her a mustache, and we don’t give the actor playing Jenny a blond wig. That would make it persiflage, and it’s not.

KWN: Sona, what sort of costumes will you be wearing? Standard female dress or male dress, or not quite either one?

SM: I feel empowered when I put the costume on; it gives me weight, masculinity. It’s a heavy white winter vest.

ML: It looks almost like armor. Plus white pants and boots that could be men’s or women’s, and the classic white gloves. Sona’s the only one wearing only white. Part of our concept is to play the show in a world that is very cold, so everybody is trying to keep warm. The prostitutes show their bodies because they’re getting paid to, but Macheath, the richest character, can afford the warmest clothes.

KWN: Have you found that the casting creates unforeseen complications?

ML: Initially we had to deal with questions about how to address Sona, but we got used to saying “Macheath, Sona, she,” and it didn’t matter any more. Another example: when Jenny sings that she was pregnant. How could we make that believable? Look, I love opera, and it’s my business. Show me one opera that is totally realistic. We just accept stories like

PHOTO: BARBARA PALFFY/VOLKSOPER WIEN



Macheath (Sona MacDonald) prods Münz-Matthias (Jakob Semotan) as Polly (Johanna Arrouas) and other gang members look on

Turandot. Why is it a big problem? Why search for realism in a genre where people constantly sing to each other?

KWN: How do you see the choices you're making about staging affecting the humor and satire of the play? Will the audience laugh as much?

ML: I hope so, yes. I'm not planning on *not* making anyone laugh. Some of Brecht's lines are so funny, and at the same time cruel. But still funny! This is the balance one has to find. We're not neglecting the humor, or the satirical heart. It's just shifting here and there.

SM: Oh, some of Mack's comic lines are divine! I've heard them so many times—and now I get to say them.

KWN: What about social criticism? Who are the criminals here, the nice bourgeoisie or the scruffy beggars? How do the casting and other moves affect that angle?

ML: That is the main question one has to face looking at this piece, and it's important to say, "We don't have all the answers." First, we did not want to tell a story about marginalized groups that we don't know anything about, like homeless people, because that is not what this piece is about. Of course we were thinking about who the criminals are. We could portray Peachum and Mack as Elon Musk or some other mogul. But that is also a world we know nothing about. We came back to the idea that this is a piece about the bourgeois audience seeing this piece. Neither the actors nor the audience is starving or on the verge of living on the streets. And this feeling of comfort can make us accept a lot of things. For me that is a core part of this story. But we're trying to show—in all the beauty, all the entertainment, and all the juiciness of the *Dreigroschenoper*—how things can be terribly wrong. We have to find the parts of the story that give us a reason to do this piece now.

KWN: Are there any other things that you're doing in this production that are out of the ordinary, not part of what you might call "traditional" ways of approaching the *Dreigroschenoper*?

ML: Definitely, things will be different here and there, but my idea of directing is not to turn everything upside down. Anything we do, we do out of conviction. We love the work. But first of all, doing it in an opera house is out of the ordinary. At least in German-speaking countries, it's normally done in a theater. Here, we have an orchestra that knows how to play together. We have a conductor who did *Aida* last month. We have singers that do opera as well as musicals. We have actors. That opens up so many possibilities musically that I do not see in spoken theaters.

SM: We have amazing singers here! And I think it's great that we can blend different styles together. It might also be shocking to some people: "Why is she singing that way?" But that blending is something that Weill made possible.

KWN: Are you still planning to have a child sing the "Moritat" at the beginning?

ML: Yes. We wanted one singer who is not yet in the adult world—

SM: —who cannot be manipulated.

ML: A person who is able to ask questions, even though they're never really asked. For example, when Polly sings "Seeräuber-Jenny." We'll have the kid standing next to her, just listening to what the adults are doing, and learning. We're also having fun



Jenny (Oliver Liebl) and Macheath (Sona MacDonald)

PHOTO: BARBARA PALFVÖLK-SOPER WIEN

with an angelic voice singing "Und der Haifisch, der hat Zähne." And we're actually dividing the number, so we begin the second act with "Und Schmul Meier"—and the child has learned something. It's a point of reference.

KWN: Sona, you have a very long history with the *Dreigroschenoper*. What's it like to sing Macheath's songs?

SM: Oh, just delightful. I have all these different interpretations in my head. I can hear Max Raabe, and several actors I know who have done it. I even auditioned on Broadway with Sting in 1989! Over the years you hear all these different styles. Teresa Stratas still is one of my greatest inspirations as a Weill interpreter.

KWN: Maurice, were you always thinking of asking Sona to play Macheath when you got the idea of casting the character as a woman?

ML: Well, no. The idea came first. Then I kind of stumbled over Sona while looking for possibilities. I saw a video on YouTube and was immediately captivated. I had a feeling she would understand. Then we met, and it was clear that it couldn't be anybody else.

SM: This is something I would not have dreamed of. To have someone come to me out of the blue with an *idea* that is out of the blue. The best part was that someone believed in me in this *different* context, you know?

KWN: What do you expect to be the biggest surprise from this production?

ML: I definitely hope audiences will leave the theater surprised at something they had not seen in the *Dreigroschenoper* before. Just as I always thought I knew the piece, but when I really read it, I realized I did not know it. I knew some essentials, I knew the songs, but I didn't know the in-betweens so well.

SM: I hope they just let us in. I hope their hearts are open and not even too surprised.

KWN: The goal is to give the audience a new way to think about both the *Dreigroschenoper* and the larger world?

ML: Change the picture to deepen the experience, that's how I would put it.