



## Complete Preparation with dell'Arte Opera Ensemble

by Melissa Ramb

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*Read about a small but fast-growing program in New York City that offers singers the chance to prepare and perform complete opera roles in a supportive and friendly environment.*

What singer would not like to add a new role to their résumé, have the opportunity to learn it with the help of a talented coach, and then rehearse and perform it with excellent colleagues in an experimental, friendly, and singer-nurturing environment? Such opportunities are certainly rare, but this sort of experience is the foundation of a small but thriving company in the heart of America's opera capital, New York City, and an experience for which I was eager to audition.

Founded in 2000, the dell'Arte Opera Ensemble's mission is to provide "emerging artists with valuable opportunities to hone their craft, make connections with leading industry professionals, and develop their knowledge of, and capacity to learn, the operatic repertoire." Under the leadership of Maestro Christopher Fecteau, singers get the opportunity to experience a program that allows them to learn a new role from inception to performance, with all the detail, musicality, and expectations

of a big house and at no cost to the singer. If this sounds too good to be true, experiencing the vision and passion of Maestro Fecteau and the outstanding artists and collaborators who are drawn to dell'Arte will convince you. From singers with international careers, to emerging artists, to those who have just completed their undergraduate degrees, dell'Arte specializes in drawing the best out of singers and providing momentum towards their professional goals. In the words of principal guest conductor Steven Jarvi, "This is the little opera company that could."

Each summer, dell'Arte produces five full-length operas, with piano accompaniment in a semi-staged format and free to the community. Repertoire for the 2008 season included *La traviata*, *Carmen*, *Così fan tutte*, *Roméo et Juliette*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The program announces projected summer repertoire each December, holds auditions in the winter, and then makes

final repertoire decisions.

The audition process is standard. What is unusual is the atmosphere in the audition space: professional, but with a distinct feeling that the adjudicators are genuinely interested in each artist. I heard many singers commenting on the detailed conversations with adjudicators in their auditions and on the interest those adjudicators expressed in the singers' careers and goals. Except for covers, each singer dell'Arte casts is learning his or her role for the first time. As a result, the adjudicators are listening for potential and for where a voice may be headed, rather than for what the singer has already tried and found successful. The result is a feeling of possibility and enthusiasm that I found to be simultaneously calming and inspiring.

Once dell'Arte issues participation agreements in the spring, it becomes the individual singer's responsibility to schedule an allotted number of free individual coachings. This is the beginning

of the rich collaborative learning process that is unique to dell'Arte. Students in Maestro Fecteau's studio get "a lot of attention to detail, commitment, quality," said tenor Alexander Caraballo, "and there is no 'hand-holding.' You must work on a very high level, and you are a much better performer as a result."

Indeed, dell'Arte is geared towards the self-motivated singer. The coaching process is extremely detailed and individualistic. The more prepared the singer, the more he or she is able to reap the benefits of the atmosphere of collaboration, creativity, and musicality.

The process rewards each singer who is prepared to work with the skills necessary for success. During my own time with dell'Arte, I experienced numerous revelatory moments when the page came alive through a new musical and dramatic understanding.

The best part of the dell'Arte process

is the immense faith that Maestro Fecteau has in singers. I often felt that he believed in me and my potential more than I did, so I felt enormous freedom to experiment

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and to risk failure in the pursuit of a new truth or understanding.

The dell'Arte program is not limited to denizens of New York City and its

surrounding areas. Granted, being local makes scheduling coachings and participating in small ensemble rehearsals infinitely easier, but for non-locals dell'Arte gives every consideration to facilitating the complete preparation process.

Soprano Abla Lynn Hamza, who sang Violetta in 2008's *La traviata* and Susanna in 2007's *Le nozze di Figaro*, is a perfect example. Based in Philadelphia, Hamza was able to coordinate schedules for both of these leading roles. Hamza also sang Bianca in *La rondine* and covered Fiordiligi in 2008 at Sarasota Opera, which invited her back to cover the role of Adina in *L'elisir d'amore*.

"My coachings were detailed from beginning to end and I felt fully supported in my roles by Maestro Fecteau, conductors, the creative staff, and the cast," she said of her dell'Arte experience. "My biggest takeaways from my experience are confidence that I am fully prepared to

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Left: Conductor Christopher Fecteau and keyboardist Lynda Saponara (front right) work with Tony Bellomy and Catherine Heraty  
 Right: *La traviata* cast, July 20, 2008 Armenian Evangelical Church, NYC.



sing these roles with orchestra and . . . a more detailed, comprehensive approach towards learning new roles.”

I am another example of a non-local singer who was able to reap the full benefits of the dell’Arte experience. Cast in a small comprimario role, I was entitled to three hour-long coachings to prepare for the role of Annina in *La traviata*. (In comparison, principals receive up to six 90-minute coachings.) The program does not provide food or housing, but I was able, through the generosity of friends, to stay for free and make the most of my time in the city.

The time I spent with dell’Arte was extremely valuable, both musically and personally. I was able to work through the many layers of my role, including diction, musical analysis, and dramatic interpretation, as well as find the time, energy, courage, and patience that good role preparation requires.

The conducting and directing talent at dell’Arte is of an extremely high quality. The 2008 program included guest conductors Daniel Kleinknecht of Cedar Rapids Opera Theatre and Steven Jarvi, assistant conductor of Kansas City Symphony, as well as stage director Nate Merchant, highly acclaimed Shakespearean director Kate Powers, and dell’Arte’s Karen Rich. Rich not only directed *Carmen* but also serves as the company’s grant writer and played a major role in facilitating the creative process of all five productions.

These artists transformed each singer’s role preparation into a cohesive operatic whole, and did it in a short amount of rehearsal time.

I know that I am not alone in feeling that it was a privilege to sing under Maestro Kleinknecht, whose mastery of the score brought the best out of each singer.

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He lavished his attention to detail and commitment to excellence, combined with his gracious spirit and care for singers, on everyone, from the ensemble to the principals.

Singer enthusiasm also abounded for dell’Arte’s principal guest conductor, Steven Jarvi, and for his commitment to fresh interpretation and helping singers’ craft their individual interpretation of

a role. When asked about his dell’Arte experience, Jarvi says, “My experience has been extremely positive. There is an atmosphere of collaboration and creativity in these rehearsals. Perhaps some of it is due to the fact that it is a basically low-pressure situation, but I find that people bring their best attitudes, best voice, and best musical ideas to most of these rehearsals—and I am glad to receive that enthusiasm and send it back tenfold. . . . Nothing feels better than setting a high standard and reaching it, especially when it is in a very short rehearsal period. In short, it is a focus on quality over quantity and a true commitment to the well-being of its singers and artists that is distinctly dell’Arte.”

Participants in the 2008 summer program have responded enthusiastically to their dell’Arte experience. Soprano Erika Rauer, who sang the role of Fiordiligi and has since made her German debut as Salome at Oper Bremen, comments that she was drawn to the program “because of the opportunity to learn and try out new repertoire. Christopher Fecteau and Steven Jarvi were both highly recommended to me, so I trusted that the musical integrity would be high.”

Jo Ellen Miller, whose upcoming engagements include Giannetta in *L’elisir d’amore* at Sarasota Opera and Charles Wuorinen’s “A Winter’s Tale” at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., sang Juliette. “I felt my work was valued

and appreciated," said Miller. "I got a lot of personal attention and was given exactly the amount of one-on-one preparation that I needed. I felt that I learned a great deal from my colleagues and there were many opportunities for collaboration."

Positive experiences were not limited to those in leading roles. Recent NYU graduate Nicole Zuraitis performed in the ensemble in two productions and was eager for the opportunity to learn new repertoire.

"The casts were small enough that even the ensemble felt like an important part of the show," she said. "I appreciated that there was limited rehearsal time, and therefore preparation was essential to both your personal success and the success of the show. I was floored by the talent that I was fortunate enough to be singing and performing with. The casts and creative team were supportive and all shared an equal love of and devotion to the art form.

"I have a deep appreciation for dell'

Arte because they gave a person with no professional experience, fresh out of college, the chance to perform and learn from incredibly talented persons of various ages and places in their careers."

The future looks bright for dell'Arte Opera Ensemble. In addition to the summer program, plans include a new Black Box Series that will present "lesser known operatic masterpieces in intimate spaces, fully-staged and elegantly costumed, with minimal sets to focus attention on the music, text, and emotional content of the work, and on the performers themselves."

Future plans for the summer program include an orchestra and increasing the musical staff.

In the past eight years, dell'Arte has set a very high standard for role preparation so that singers can have real-world experiences while serving the operatic art form. With this strong foundation and the enormous talent drawn to the company,

it is exciting to think of the singers who will continue to benefit from this unique program. *Bravi tutti*, dell'Arte, and best wishes for your continued success and growth.

*Lauded for her clear tone, agile voice, and engaging stage presence, soprano Melissa Ramb has performed in opera, oratorio, concert, and musical theatre throughout the United States and abroad. Favorite roles include Gretel (Hansel and Gretel), Pamina (The Magic Flute), Lucy (The Telephone), Genevieve (Suor Angelica), Annina (La traviata) and concert work including Bach's St. Matthew Passion, Gounod's Gallia, Samuel Barber's "Knoxville, Summer of 1915," and Mozart's "Exsultate, Jubilate." She has toured in five productions with the Orlando Opera and currently resides in that fair city with her husband, daughter, and golden retriever.*



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