



FRIENDS OF OPERA

UNIVERSITY OF
NEBRASKA-LINCOLN

Support~Inspire~Applaud

VOLUME 13, NUMBER 2

FEBRUARY 2015

Bolcom's *A Wedding*: A Celebration of Opposites

If the thoughts in your head were to burst into song, what music would pour forth – a jazzy lick, a gospel melody or perhaps a country waltz? That was the question composer William Bolcom sought to answer for each of the characters in his comic opera *A Wedding*. Just as a marriage celebration brings together two different families, so Bolcom brings together a variety of musical styles through rich, vibrant characters.

Based on the 1978 Robert Altman film of the same name, *A Wedding* presents the blue-blooded Sloan family and the newly rich Brenner family (somewhat reminiscent of *The Beverly Hillbillies*). Comedy ensues as Dino, from the Sloan side, marries Muffin, the daughter of Tulip and Snooks Brenner.

The young couple is wed in a church in the high-brow neighborhood of Lake Forest, Illinois. After the official ceremony, the parties move to the Sloan family mansion for the wedding reception. In an upstairs bedroom, we are introduced to Nettie Sloan, the family matriarch. Here too we meet other members of the Sloan family, including Nettie's three daughters Antonia, Victoria (the mother of the groom) and Diana. We also meet Antonia's husband Jules and Victoria's husband, the Italian-born Luigi. The butler Randolph, enters the bedroom to announce that, of the 200-guests invited to the wedding, all

have declined to attend. This revelation is the first of many moments designed to pique suspicion and curiosity.

A short time later, in the ballroom, the Brenner family of Louisville, Kentucky makes a rousing entrance. Snooks and his wife Tulip are introduced as the FOB and MOB – the father and mother of the bride respectively. Snooks, a newly rich tycoon in the trucking business, declines a drink of alcohol with an enthusiastic declamation of sobriety and pious living. Jules Goddard, uncle of the groom is immediately smitten by Tulip Brenner, mother of the bride. As the reception continues, so uncovered are the many eccentricities and vices of both the Sloans and the Brennens: anger, addiction, lust, gluttony, pride, and religiosity.

During his recent residency at UNL's Glenn Korff School of Music as the Ariel Bybee Visiting Professor of Opera, Mr. Bolcom said of his compositions, "I want to see what happens when you collide things." This desire was manifested in the musical styles and thematic content of *A Wedding*. Mr. Bolcom emphasized the dark topics by colliding them with their opposite, the humor in the situations. In fact, *A Wedding* could be considered a celebration of opposites – city folks vs. country folks, old money vs. new money, humor vs. drama, and life vs. death – and how one accentuates the other.

continued on page 4

A Wedding

By William Bolcom
Director: William Shomos
Conductor: Tyler White

Friday, February 27 7:30 p.m.
Sunday, March 1 3:30 p.m.
Kimball Recital Hall

Opera Preview talks by William Shomos begin 45 minutes before curtain in the lower lobby of Kimball Recital Hall.

Adults \$20
Students/Seniors \$10

For advance ticket sales, contact the Lied Center Box Office: 402-472-4747

A reception for Friends of Opera members and their guests will be held following the Friday, February 27th performance, in the lower lobby of Kimball Recital Hall. Cast members will attend.

This Issue

A Wedding Cover
President's Corner pg. 2
Wesleyan Presents
One-Act Operas pg. 2
A Visit from The Composer pg. 3
Scholarship Winners. pg. 3

www.friendsofopera.org

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

Dear Friends,

I am writing this column (about two weeks before you will read it) at the end of one of the most exciting weeks ever at UNL's Glenn Korff School of Music. The opportunity to have the iconic American composer William Bolcom in residence at UNL has had a profound impact on our students. Think of rehearsing *The Marriage of Figaro* with Mozart sitting ten feet from you, or doing *La Boheme* while Puccini offers thoughtful comments! None of this could have happened without the inspiration of former faculty member Ariel Bybee, who helped found Friends of Opera, and now lives in Utah. The Ariel Bybee Endowed Fund is a part of her living legacy to UNL, thanks in part to the generosity of Jim and Rhonda Seacrest and many of you. Our wonderful opera students have had a once-in-a-lifetime experience!

Elsewhere in this Newsletter you will find more information about Mr. Bolcom and about UNL Opera's production of his opera *A Wedding*. Please consider this your personal *Wedding* invitation. I can assure you that you will laugh, sigh and cry – and that's just in the first ten minutes! **I hope to see you at Kimball Recital Hall and, Friday evening, at the Friends of Opera reception following the show.**

Colluratura **Jeni Houser**, a 2011 UNL Master's Degree recipient, has recently proved that there is more than one way to get onto the mainstage of a major opera house. While in Madison, Wisconsin rehearsing for the role of Johanna in Madison Opera's production of *Sweeney Todd*, Houser

received an urgent Friday evening phone call: Chicago Lyric Opera was calling to see if she could stand-in the next day in an afternoon children's opera production to sing one, two or three famous arias for an ailing soprano. Jeni agreed, and Lyric Opera arranged for her to be excused from her Madison rehearsals the next day.

On Saturday morning, Jeni went by car to Chicago, not knowing for certain if she would be needed at Lyric. When she arrived, she got the royal treatment: private piano rehearsal with the conductor, make-up, hair styling, and a brief vocalization on the stage to test the acoustics and her "carry." The final decision was that Jeni would sing Olympia's "Doll Aria" from Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffman* from downstage left, while the ill soprano acted the part from center stage, as there was no time to teach Jeni the staging or fit her for a costume. So, within hours of her arrival, Jeni sang the "Doll Aria" at Chicago Lyric, which included a number of high G's at the end. Afterward, she was roundly congratulated, and also told there had not been many notes that high performed on the Lyric stage. Congratulations, Jeni!

Sincerely,



Don Burt
President

NEBRASKA WESLEYAN OPERA THEATER presents two comic one-act operas, *La Canterina* by Haydn and *Mavra* by Stravinsky, Friday, April 17 at 7:30 p.m. and Sunday, April 19 at 3:00 p.m. in O'Donnell Auditorium, 50th & Huntington Streets. Adults: \$10; students/seniors: \$5.

Visit us at www.friendsofopera.org or contact us at info@friendsofopera.org

FRIENDS OF OPERA BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Don Burt, *President* Michael Tully, *Vice President* Karen R. Lusk, *Secretary* Mike Fardella, *Treasurer*
Judy Amber, Talea Bloch, Kate Butler, IV Dickson, Marsha Dunn, Kim Einspahr, Kathy Friedman,
Ginny Parker, Laurel Shoemaker, Bill Shomos, Dee Tenney, Carol Walker, Diana Warner,
Connie Pejsar (University of Nebraska Foundation), John W. Richmond (Director, Glenn Korff School of Music)

Friends of Opera is a tax-exempt, nonprofit corporation supporting opera at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Bolcom Visits UNL As First Bybee Professor

American composer William Bolcom was welcomed to UNL's Glenn Korff School of Music January 26-30 as the first Ariel Bybee Endowed Visiting Professor of Opera. His residency coincided with the school's preparation of Bolcom's opera *A Wedding*.

Born in 1938 in Seattle, Washington, Bolcom began playing the piano and composing at a very young age. He entered the University of Washington to study composition when he was just eleven years old. Bolcom went on to study with Darius Milhaud while earning his Master of Arts degree from Mills College. He also attended Stanford University and later worked with Olivier Messiaen and Milhaud at the Paris Conservatoire.

During his 35-year tenure on the University of Michigan faculty, he continued to compose and in 1988, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in Music for his work *12 New Etudes for Piano*. Bolcom earned four Grammy Awards for his setting of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience* in 2005. In 2006, Bolcom received the National Medal of Arts, the highest award given to artists by the United States government. Though first reluctant to compose an opera, Bolcom eventually collaborated with librettist Arnold Weinstein, his longtime lyricist and friend, when he was commissioned by Lyric Opera of Chicago to compose, three operas: *McTeague* (1991-92), *A View from the Bridge* (1998-99) and *A Wedding* (2002-2004).

UNL's Opera Director Dr. William Shomos chose to produce Mr. Bolcom's *A Wedding* for several reasons including "the generous distribution of principal roles, the limited choral demands, and the availability of reduced orchestration." Dr. Shomos, committed to the promotion

of contemporary American works, then asked William Bolcom to accept the Ariel Bybee Endowed Visiting Professorship. Mr. Bolcom spent his residency at UNL attending opera rehearsals, coaching cast members, leading question and answer discussions, and appearing on NET Radio.

Bolcom coached all of the performers individually in their roles, and he attended and actively participated in all opera rehearsals during the week. Bolcom's commitment to character delineation and their "edginess" was evident during his interactions with the student-performers. Senior Angela Gilbert, who plays the role of Tulip Brenner, said that Mr. Bolcom, "helped me [to] feel solid in my character and reminded me that an aria is not always meant to be sung in perfect rhythm. He allowed me to take liberties that helped me [to] express the things I couldn't before." Joshua Zink, a third-year doctoral student, who will be singing the role of Tulip's husband, received both public and private coaching sessions during which Bolcom discussed his expectation that the often jagged musical lines should closely resemble speech-patterns. Zink said that Bolcom "was very enthusiastic that I was getting his idea by stretching rhythms, sliding on some notes, and making it more speech-like." Zink went on to say that working with Bolcom was an "invaluable experience."

Dr. Shomos affirmed the value of the visiting professorship by saying that, "Bolcom's enthusiasm, his straight shooting, no nonsense way of getting down to work, his sense of humor, and his seemingly boundless energy and generosity were an amazing inspiration for all of us."

Thanks to second-year Doctoral student Katie Pacza, who prepared this article.

Friends of Opera Scholars: Different Roots, Similar Goals

This year's Friends of Opera Scholarship winners come from different states, but embrace a common goal of sharing their love and appreciation of music with others. Each Spring, Friends of Opera sponsors a vocal competition among high school seniors, selected by the voice faculty, who have been admitted for study in the UNL Glenn Korff School of Music the following Fall. Three \$1,000 scholarships are awarded by an independent panel of judges. Let's meet our 2014 winners:

Brittany Bell graduated from Boyd High School in McKinney, Texas, where she participated in a variety of music programs, including school and state-wide choirs and the Texas Youth Orchestra. Brittany also served as President of the Texas Future Music Educators Club. Her decision to attend UNL was influenced by both the quality of the voice faculty and the availability of financial aid. She enjoys the abundant performance opportunities at UNL, and already feels very involved. Brittany hopes eventually to earn a Master's Degree and to teach elementary or high school music.

continued on page 4



2014 Friends of Opera Scholarship winners (from left) Brittany Bell, Michael Clinch and Emily Freeman



NONPROFIT ORG.
US POSTAGE
PAID
PERMIT NO. 256
LINCOLN NE

1900 U.S. BANK BUILDING
233 SOUTH 13TH STREET
LINCOLN, NE 68508-2095

Friends Membership Dues Reminder

Have you renewed your Friends of Opera membership for the 2014-2015 season?

If you have not contributed since June 30, 2014, please send your donation to:

Carol Walker
Membership Chair
2028 "D" Street
Lincoln, NE 68502

***The Friends of Opera Board
of Directors thanks you for
your support!***

FRIENDS OF OPERA SCHOLARS *continued from page 3*

Michael Clinch is a graduate of Lincoln Southwest High School, where he participated in a wide spectrum of music activities, both vocal and instrumental. As a Lincolnite, Michael always had UNL high on his list of college choices. He liked the feel of the campus, and his visits to the School of Music confirmed the talent level of the students and faculty and the welcoming environment. Michael is already singing in Rocktavo, UNL's male a cappella group. He hopes to earn a degree in music education and eventually be a high school choral director.

Emily Freeman comes to UNL from Northwest High School, Olathe, Kansas. Emily participated in the choir program, performed roles in school

musicals, and competed in state-wide solo and ensemble festivals. Emily chose UNL because of the welcoming attitude of the voice faculty and her belief that she would be encouraged to become both a better musician and a better person. As an out-of-state student, financial aid played a large role in her selection of UNL. She is pursuing a degree in music education and hopes eventually to teach high school choir.

The three winners agree that their biggest adjustment to college life involves heavier workloads and the absolute need to manage and budget their time. To quote Michael Clinch, "I don't have any room for wasted time." Congratulations to these three outstanding students.

A WEDDING *continued from page 1*

A Wedding is the third opera commissioned of William Bolcom by Lyric Opera of Chicago. It premiered at Lyric Opera in 2004 and has since been performed by Indiana University's Jacob's School of Music, the University of Houston's Moores School of Music, and the Oberlin Conservatory of Music.

UNL's production of *A Wedding* features a large ensemble cast of undergraduate and graduate students as well as guest artist Dr. Robert McNichols, whose appearance is made possible by a grant from Friends of Opera. Dr. McNichols, of Kansas City, Missouri, will be singing the role of Randolph, the Caribbean butler of the Sloan mansion. Dr. McNichols, a bass-baritone, earned his Bachelor of Music and Master of Music from the University of Missouri-Kansas City Conservatory and his Doctorate of Musical Arts from the University of Kansas.