

# The Making of an

# Opera

Alex Maldonado, B.M.,  
baritone, with Ioanna  
Tsakalacos, '14, M.M.,  
soprano, in Mozart's  
*The Impresario*

## Opera Workshop Opens Unexpected Doors for Students

By Karen Geisel  
Photography by Paul Gargiulo

**W**ith less than 24 hours before the first curtain call, tensions run high in the West Side Theater as 18 students and two harried faculty members work to perfect their performance. This semester, students will not perform a traditional opera, but rather, a rare production of song cycles executed in German. Months of painstaking rehearsals have led to this moment but there is no time to bask in their accomplishments as Music Director David Mayfield's illness-induced raspy voice rings out, "You sang it wrong." Unshaken by the criticism and without missing a beat the performer sings back, "I know that," in operatic fashion.

### THE SHOW MUST GO ON, AND IT DOES.

Time is running short in the final dress rehearsal yet the students remain calm and attentive as Opera Director Kimun Kim cuts the final scene short, "Stop! I want to change this." This level of focus is an impressive feat in any classroom, particularly so in the performing arts where creativity reigns supreme.

Behind the scenes but at the center of the chaos is Donna Connolly, Coordinator of Vocal Studies in the Caroline L. Guarini Department of Music, Dance and Theatre, and fondly referred to as "Momma Bear" by her students. Connolly's vision has dramatically transformed the program over the past 13 years, with the changes driven primarily by her recruitment of an eclectic group of teachers and voice coaches, passionate about exposing a new generation of young adults to the Opera.





Stage and Production Manager Attira "Atti" Lelahuta in lighting booth for Schumann's *Frauenliebe und Leben* & *Dichterliebe* in the West Side Theatre, April 19-21, 2016

Each year, approximately 80 to 90 percent of students participating in the Opera Workshop are commuters and many come from low-income families. It's not unusual for the average NJCU student to carry the burden of two part-time jobs, an 18-credit workload and a 45-minute commute to-and-from campus each day. If that thought triggers a tension headache, consider the added five to ten hours per week that NJCU Opera Workshop students dedicate to their craft. Daunting, yes, but the 18 students in the program make the choice to persevere each day, acquiring the skills necessary to not only be vocally and physically expressive on stage, but to do so in a foreign language.

#### BREAKING BARRIERS

"We audition every student. So many of them come in with no idea of how to audition and without any understanding of what opera really is, simply because they've never been exposed to it," said David Mayfield.

Universally viewed as a "social elitist" art form, Mayfield and the rest of the Opera Workshop team are determined to break the art's restrictive socioeconomic barriers.

"For the more experienced students, this class hones skills which

they already developed through performance and study; for the newer students, just blending individual skills together, simultaneously and in concert with each other, is worthy of an entire course," Mayfield expressed with pride. "Other goals we strive to instill are learning to maintain a schedule, preparing individually and with a group while moving at divergent speeds in non-traditional ways, garnering foreign language skills through song, and cultivation of professionalism and respect for fellow performers."

Mayfield boasts an impressive resume. An opera singer himself, Mayfield jokes about the decade he spent in Dallas, Texas working towards a Master's Degree in Music, "I went to sing and not to get a degree. I ended up with a degree and not singing!" In the late 90s he returned to New York City to pursue opera auditions but instead began working as a voice coach at the prestigious Manhattan School of Music. Mayfield's passion for teaching was unveiled when one of his students won the Metropolitan Opera's national audition, for which only five students are selected nationally. It wasn't until 2005 when the relatively new NJCU Coordinator of Vocal Studies, Dr. Connolly, sat in on one of Mayfield's

coaching sessions that he was quickly enticed to join her program. "The rest is history," Mayfield says modestly.

#### MOVING FOR MUSIC

Charged with managing one of the largest and most popular programs at NJCU, the Music, Dance and Theatre faculty often begin their day at 8 a.m., frequently working until midnight, for months on end. The Opera Workshop team mirrors this dedication as they prepare for each semester's curtain call. The impressive combination of experienced production and performance faculty cultivated by Donna Connolly, another former opera singer, rivals the talent employed by every collegiate music program in the state.

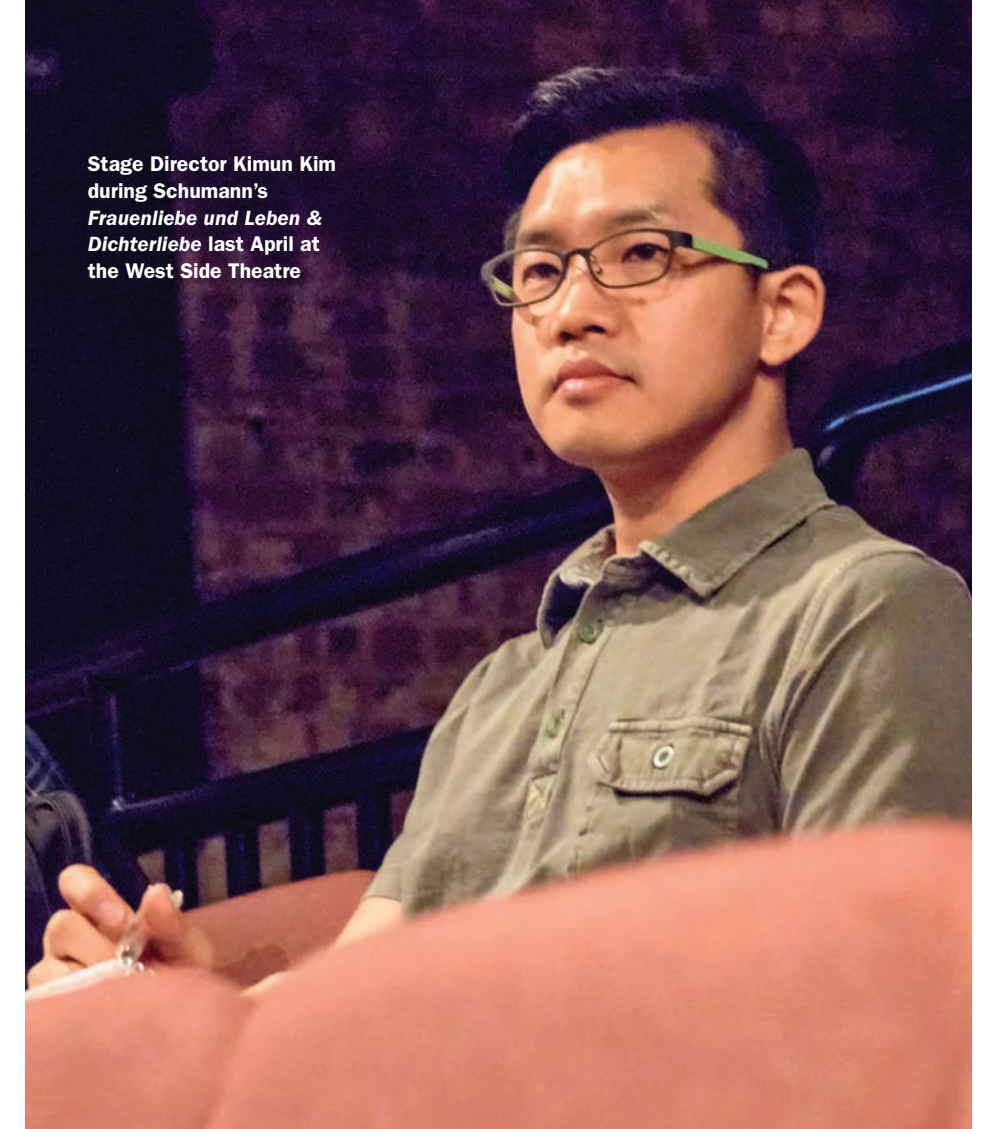
In 2001, Connolly dreaded her daily life, living in an Ohio cornfield while teaching Music at the University of Cincinnati. "We had knots in our stomach when we left the Northeast and couldn't wait to get back," Connolly recounts her family's sentiment. Desperate for change, Connolly applied twice to NJCU's Music, Dance and Theatre Department. "When I finally got hired at NJCU, I fell in love with the campus and its quaintness. You get to know people. It's a family. Growing the voice area became my main goal



LeAndre Scott, baritone in Menotti's *The Old Maid and the Thief*



Jessica Tomasella, '11, M.M., soprano, and Eden Rahming, '12, M.T., contralto from Menotti's *The Old Maid and the Thief*



Stage Director Kimun Kim during Schumann's *Frauenliebe und Leben* & *Dichterliebe* last April at the West Side Theatre

and I can happily say we now have so many talented students with beautiful voices."

Connolly prides herself on staying deeply involved in her student's lives, sometimes going as far as encouraging severely overstressed students to "take a break." "Some of these kids are literally trying to manage a 20-hour work-week, school, homework and the Workshop. My heart bleeds for them, they need a break sometimes," she added.

#### TRADITION MEETS TRENDS

This semester's production, performed almost entirely in German, was titled *Frauenlieben Und Leben*, translated to mean "a woman's love and life," and *Dichterliebe*, a man's painful view of unrequited love. Seeking to challenge students and broaden their musical exposure, Connolly compiled a collection of art songs by Robert Schuman and

poetry by Chamisso along with various other poets, developing song cycles. Song cycles are typically performed while standing, statue like, alongside a piano accompaniment; incorporating song cycles with full-stage production as Connolly has is very rare.

Drawing inspiration from popular, non-traditional live performances sweeping the nation such as Broadway's *Hamilton*, Connolly bookends the production with lively American production scenes from composers Leonard Bernstein and John Corigliano. The show culminates with an all-cast performance of "On My Way," from the Broadway hit *Porgy & Bess*.

"The audience needs to feel emotion and therefore the language doesn't matter," stated Kimun Kim, the Workshop's new 33-year-old director, "I'm trying to teach these kids that Opera is not performed with voice alone. They need to know how

to move on stage and be expressive...how to tell a story.”

Kim dons a bright green Polo t-shirt, jeans and sneakers, appearing to blend in with his students. Originally hailing from South Korea, Kim studied music and voice intensively beginning at age 12. While in high school he attended his first Opera, *La Traviata*, and fell in love with the performance art, its beautiful lighting and elaborate costumes. “I never looked back,” he reminisced, “That was the moment I decided to be an opera director.”

At 25 years old, Kim embarked on his journey to the United States without a word of English in his repertoire. For months, Kim dedicated himself to learning the English language in hopes of applying to NJCU and developing his love of opera. Following his acceptance to the University, Connolly handpicked Kim to become an assistant teacher in her Opera Workshop while he pursued his undergraduate degree in Music. Like Mayfield, Kim earned his master’s in Music while living in Texas, studying at UT Austin. He worked successfully on several productions before his path again crossed with Connolly who persuaded him to return to his true home, NJCU. Since September 2015, Kim has purposefully incorporated innovative set designs, transforming the Workshop’s live performances.

“There is no paper program given at our performance. Instead, it is projected into the play. My goal is to have the audience feel the subtext of the performance through visuals, like projectors. I’m working with a video designer to cast 3-D images behind the performers that will provoke subliminal feelings of happiness or sadness,” Kim said, “Meanwhile, we are using less complex mapping and figuring out how to be more dynamic on a smaller scale.”

The minimalist set props for this almost two-hour performance underscores the success of Kim’s method, consisting of only a chair and bench, a blanket and eight apples throughout various scenes. The 42-foot projection screen remains in place through the performance, illuminating a variety of scenes, from budding spring flowers to ominous gravestones, to set the tone for an emotional piece.

#### ACCEPTING THE CHALLENGE

“Opera singing for a vocalist is like competing in the Olympics for athletes,” suggests 33-year-old Israel Hernandez, NJCU Music major and former pre-college Julliard student. A rarity in the Opera Workshop, Hernandez is one of the few performers with prior opera experience but his path to NJCU was no more traditional than those of his classmates.



The cast of Mozart's *The Impresario* takes a bow. (From left) baritone Alex Maldonado, B.M., tenor Will Flaim '16 B.M., soprano Ioanna Tsakalakos, '14, M.M., and soprano Pamela Dempsey

**COMING FALL 2016:**  
*Die Fledermaus* by Johann Strauss  
G. Schirmer Edition  
Directed by Kimun Kim. Conductor and music director, Robert Prowse.  
Location: West Side Theatre  
Dates & Times:  
Thursday, November 17, 7:30 p.m.  
Friday, November 18, 7:30 p.m.  
Saturday, November 19, 7:30 p.m.  
Sunday, November 20, 3:00 p.m.

**Ticket Price:**  
\$15.00 General Public  
\$5.00 Students, Children & Seniors

**For more information, call:**  
201-200-3151

Hernandez was attending Manhattan School of Music when he realized that the angst he was feeling wasn't homesickness; it was regret. Longing for the one-on-one coaching he received while attending Newark High School, Hernandez transferred to NJCU where his high school music coach was now employed.

“I realized that you can't go to a school because of a name, it's the teachers that matter. Let's face it, our egos can get the best of us,” Hernandez said, “I believe in my path. Everything happens for a reason. I needed to grow emotionally and the faculty at NJCU has helped me with that.”

Standing quietly, Sarah Blood's most distinguishing feature is her vibrant red hair but the moment she begins to sing, her beautiful, resonating voice captures the attention of the entire theater. Receiving her undergraduate degree at Kean University, Blood now pursues her master's at NJCU. While NJCU was not part of Blood's original plan, the advice of a trusted voice coach drew her to the school.

“I'd been studying music for a long time and was considering getting my master's when my private voice teacher recommended NJCU,” Blood said. “She told me that the program was small but there was a teacher there that could do wonderful things with my voice. One-on-one attention is important for mentoring and the absolute best thing you can do for yourself.”

Blood recalls feeling immediately comfortable on the small NJCU campus and within the tightknit Opera Workshop family. Born and raised in Winfield Park, NJ, population: 1,500, Blood loved the small town feel of the University but quickly realized that the demands of the Workshop were far more intensive than she previously imagined.

“The Opera Workshop is difficult for so many reasons. A lot of separate parts need to come together to make something seem attractive to an audience. You need to convey emotion while speaking a foreign language to your audience, do your research on the person who wrote the poetry or composer, memorize lines and execute perfect staging. Then add more emotion! Not to mention all the rehearsals, it all takes a heck of a lot of time,” she added.

#### THE FINAL BOW

Exhaustion is setting in as the clock strikes 10:00 p.m. The time has come to practice the ‘final bow,’ and the expression on each student's face proves that even this small detail is more complex than they previously thought.

“Let's do that last scene all over again,” directs Kim. The stage clears before the scene begins again, from the top. Practice makes perfect, and this team will settle for nothing less. [NJCU](#)