

LEISURE & ARTS



These Opera Singers Are a Lounge Act

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New York -- It was Italian night last Wednesday at the Parkside Lounge, a bar on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. This had nothing to do with any ramp-up in requests to pour the Chianti, Peroni or even Asti Spumante, and everything to do with the music pouring out from the back room -- now Verdi, now Boito, now Rossini -- all sung by members of the year-and-a-half-old classical-music collective Opera on Tap. The evening's nine performers, all in their 20s and early 30s, had to wrap it up by 10 sharp, because that's when a rock band was taking over the tiny red-curtained stage; meanwhile, they kept their few dozen listeners engaged and kept the beer and bravos flowing.

"To love and the hell it puts us through," called out emcee Anne Ricci, the insouciant founding diva of Opera on Tap, as she donned her horned Valkyrie helmet and raised her glass in a toast to a pair of classic Neapolitan songs of amore -- "Non Ti Scordare di me" and "O Sole Mio" --

performed with all due lather by baritone Ko Kaiden.

"We like shtick a little more than we should at Opera on Tap," confessed Ms. Ricci, inviting the audience to sing along to a lusty preintermission round of "Coro di Zingari" -- perhaps you know it as the Anvil Chorus -- from "Il Trovatore." "We have postcards for sale and T-shirts," continued the 30-year-old lyric soprano. "You want to see our T-shirts? They come in chocolate brown -- and chocolate brown." OK, maybe not so many colors, but plenty of coloratura.

Opera on Tap grew out of a conversation between Ms. Ricci and Donald O'Finn, the manager of Freddy's, a bar in Brooklyn. "I was there to hear one of my country-singer students perform," said Ms. Ricci, whose day jobs include teaching voice and clerking in a Brooklyn cheese store. "I'd reached the point where I was fed up. I'd been spending the majority of my time as a performer just auditioning."

Mr. O'Finn, whose bar is known for wacky events like spelling bees and "Cringe Night" (customers reciting homemade poetry from their high-school days), thought opera would work well in the 40-seat back room. The ceiling was tin; the acoustics were good. Bring on "Boheme."

"I've always been a fan of arias," he said. "And this has been a huge success for us," so much so that Ms. Ricci and her cohorts now have a regular gig at Freddy's (the second Thursday of the month) as well as at the Parkside Lounge (the first Wednesday of the month). "It's generally standing room only," added Mr. O'Finn. "It's wonderful to have opera be readily accessible and not be this long-winded thing."

While this is "Rigoletto" and "Rosenkavalier" without remuneration, it's also an opportunity to perform without pressure. "I've recovered a real sense of enjoyment that I'd lost doing tons and tons of auditions and getting nowhere," said Ms. Ricci. "I also wasn't happy with the way I was performing. I'd become very self-conscious, and Opera on Tap has allowed me to relax and loosen up and sing more from the heart."

"A lot of the appeal is that the performers play up a lot of aspects of opera you don't get in more formal situations. It's kind of campy," said Adam Wasserman, the online editor of Opera News, who attended a recent Opera on Tap show at the Parkside Lounge. "It was nice to go with some of my co-workers and be in a relaxed environment and have a beer and hear music sung by people our age, music we love. The performers' enthusiasm counted for a lot," he added diplomatically. "You're there for reasons other than the aesthetic experience you expect at the Met. It's like an indie-music concert."

Partly because it simplifies the process of assembling a program, partly because it makes a nice little publicity hook, Opera on Tap tends toward themed performances. A recent Christmas show, for example, featured snippets from Handel's "Messiah," the Bach Christmas Oratorio and a wintry moment from Act III of "La Boheme." A "back to school" night in September featured participants in pigtails and focused on new beginnings, thoughts and emotions, with music that included Cherubino's love song from "The Marriage of Figaro" and the first love duet from "Otello." And "The Menstrual Woman of Opera"? Well, that dealt with grouchy sopranos and the benighted tenors and baritones who love them.

Coming up: a couple of so-called sobriety nights in honor of the new year. These will get a bead on moments of self-realization in opera. "We're going to include things from Mozart and Verdi requiems," said Ms. Ricci, who with co-founder and co-managing diva Carla Roberts holds auditions for new members three or four times a year. "When we first started it was on a referral basis, and we found we were getting a full range of skills. Some people weren't quite up to scratch." While she estimates that 70% of the Opera on Tap performers get some paid singing work, "it's not enough to cover their bills. I definitely fall into that category."

The second of three children, Ms. Ricci grew up in suburban Detroit, where her father was a newspaper columnist and opera lover. "I was exposed to the music from an early age," she said. Her first passion was "Carmen." Her first performance, according to family lore, took place in the bathroom, where she lined up small Playskool plastic figures on the toilet seat, amphitheater-style, and sang to them. Ms. Ricci performed in high-school musicals, but after a voice teacher introduced her to classical repertoire, "I just felt that my voice went there naturally."

Even so, success in her chosen field has been elusive.

"I definitely wanted to be singing at the Metropolitan Opera and have an illustrious performing career," said Ms. Ricci, who got her vocal training at Indiana University and the Manhattan School of Music. "I did the Met competition twice," she continued, referring to the vaunted talent search for promising young singers, "and I didn't get very far, but that's all right."

She doesn't put it this way, but Opera on Tap has been one of those when-a-door-gets-slammed-a-window-pops-open situations. "It's been a journey of self-discovery. I'm really loving running a business. Who knew?"

An immediate goal for the group, aside from scoring a bit more rehearsal

time, is to expose new audiences to opera and change their perception of it as the last refuge of the stuffy. "Our broadest mission," said Ms. Ricci, "is to become a national organization with chapters. We're also kind of interested in pairing with big opera companies as a form of outreach for them. We want to be something that provides a service to the greater opera world."

That mission may already be accomplished. "I'm not an opera buff, but this is opera for the people," said Elaine Matthews, a research scientist, who came to last week's show at the Parkside Lounge with two young friends who were visiting from Austria. "It's very compelling. These performers could make everyone love the opera."

"I've been to Lincoln Center," she said dismissively, then added con brio, "I want to come back here and see these people."