



Opera NEO's production of *The Fairy Queen*, 2016

photo by Gary Payne



Samina Aslam and Blair Remmers as the cover role and Renaud in Opera NEO's production of *Armide*, 2017



photo by Gary Payne

# NEW OPPORTUNITIES:

## Opera NEO

BY CAROL ANDERSON

Read about a new training program in beautiful California led by seasoned stage director and conductor Peter Kozma, whose vision has taken the program from opera scenes with piano to three full operas with orchestra in just five short years.

**N**estled in the hills overlooking the Mission Valley area of San Diego lies a jewel of an amphitheater, typically used as an event space for weddings and parties. But for a few nights each summer, these hills ring with the sound of operatic voices as Opera NEO takes residence in this unique location. A relatively new addition to summer training programs, Opera NEO was founded in 2012 as a three-

week festival and quickly expanded to its current length of five weeks. Founder and Artistic Director Peter Kozma, a stage director and conductor, relocated to San Diego after many years working in academic and professional opera environments and, in his own words, “ran out of excuses” to delay his dream of creating a smaller, masterclass-based training program where artistic individuality could thrive.

To assemble his ideal faculty, Kozma brought together friends and colleagues from his professional network who shared his vision of eliminating competition and providing a place for singers to “get the most out of their talents.” A brainstorming session led to the naming of the new company. Since their intent was to operate less conventionally, the term “new edge opera” was considered. Though the



Photo by Gary Payne

Jon Jurgens (front left), Aaron Keeney (front right), and Dale DeWood (back left) as Ferrando, Guglielmo, and Alfonso in Opera NEO's production of *Così fan tutte*, 2017

sound of that phrase did not resonate, the useful acronym NEO did.

Not only is NEO an abbreviation for a term that encapsulates the company's mission, but *neo* in Latin means "new." The first festival in 2012 attracted 18 singers who performed opera scenes with piano accompaniment. Initial feedback from those early participants was that they appreciated having the "freedom to try out things and make mistakes." They were able to learn about themselves and their artistry in a nurturing environment, without the constant pressure to prove themselves.

Opera NEO currently offers two levels of training experiences: apprentice and studio. The apprentice program emphasizes the rehearsal and performance aspects of training, with all apprentices having mainstage role assignments. Most of these singers have previous mainstage experience performing with orchestra or other Young Artist Programs and academic experiences on their résumés.

The studio artists have a more varied range of talent and experience, but many of them have not yet performed with orchestra or learned a complete role. The studio program focuses on training with voice lessons, coachings, movement sessions, masterclasses, and seminars scheduled each week. Baritone Evan Cooper (Studio 2017) believes that having two weekly voice lessons meant he was

better able to assimilate the concepts presented by his teacher Braeden Harris. Tenor Blair Remmers (Studio 2016, Apprentice 2017) emphasizes that "quality time is spent in crafting and perfecting résumé materials, auditions, and first impressions—everything that is needed to land a job." Studio artists also perform in the cabaret, a program of staged scenes from opera, operetta, and musical theatre with piano accompaniment. Beginning in 2014, opportunities were added for apprentice coaches, stage directors, and conductors.

A major factor in the festival's initial and continued success is its partnership with Palisades Presbyterian Church, which has provided facilities for the workshop from its inception. When Opera NEO expanded its season to include fully staged productions with orchestra, several options were tried before the company settled in 2015

into its current mainstage primary venue, an outdoor amphitheater located behind the church parking lot.

The church congregation also was the initial source for home-stay hosts for Opera NEO participants. As the program has grown, the host pool has expanded to a broader cross-section of neighbors who are seeking a way to become involved. The hosts love developing a "backstage connection" with the program, and friendships grow between hosts and singers that last beyond the summer. Since host family situations are now spread out around the area, office staff have developed an elaborate system of carpools to ensure everyone can travel to and from Opera NEO events in a timely fashion.

Mainstage productions are chosen after the auditions are complete, in keeping with Opera NEO's commitment to individuality. Rather



since 1978

FRANZ-SCHUBERT-INSTITUT  
Baden bei Wien, Austria

*Poetry and  
Performance of  
the German Lied*

# MASTER COURSE

for Singers and Pianists

**June 30 to August 8, 2018**

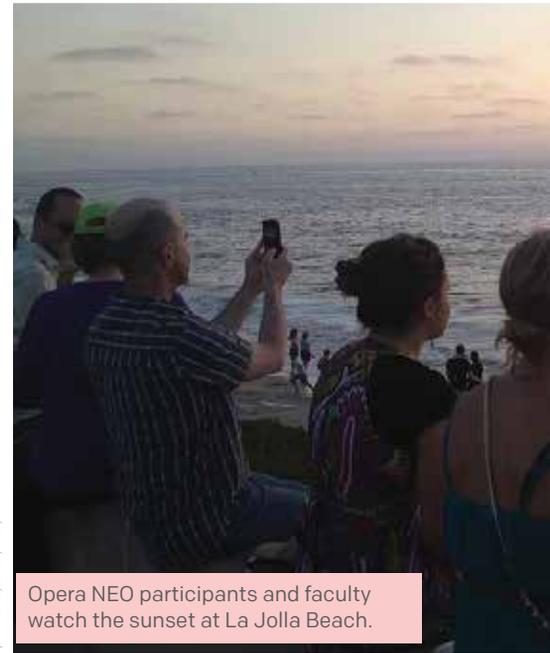
Elly Ameling · Ido Ariel · Helmut Deutsch  
Julius Drake · Robert Holl · Wolfram Rieger  
Andreas Schmidt · Birgid Steinberger  
Roger Vignoles

office@schubert-institut.at  
[www.schubert-institut.at](http://www.schubert-institut.at)



Ensemble members (L to R) Patrick Smith, Véronique Filloux, Harrison Heard, and Alba Franco-Cancel in Opera NEO's production of *Armide*, 2017

photo by Gary Payne



Opera NEO participants and faculty watch the sunset at La Jolla Beach.

than choose singers to fit a previously drawn plan, Opera NEO staff is able to tailor mainstage offerings to suit the singers they would like to bring to San Diego. Kozma says that there is a basic pattern that they follow

in programming, to serve both the needs of young artists and their ever-growing and loyal audience base. Roughly speaking, each season includes something from the core operatic repertoire, an opera that is

less often performed in the U.S., and an opera from the earliest years of opera history. For the 2017 season, the three productions were Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, Gluck's *Armide*, and Cavalli's *Il Giasone*. Two of the productions

 **JENSEN  
FOUNDATION  
VOCAL COMPETITION**

May 21 - 26, 2018 in New York City  
\$15,000 1st Prize

**Application Deadline March 18, 2018**  
**JensenFoundation.org**



were presented in the Palisades Amphitheater, while the Cavalli opera was staged in the sanctuary of Palisades Presbyterian Church.

Period performance techniques are emphasized in preparing the early

works, and classes in performance practice are offered to all program participants. Authentic instruments tuned at Baroque pitch are used in the orchestra, and an expert in period performance is engaged to conduct those operas and guide the production stylistically. While emphasizing authentic style, productions typically explore nontraditional settings, incorporating many modern references. The 2014 production of Handel's *Agrippina* was set in a 21<sup>st</sup>-century political arena and featured many references to the current era of cable news reporting.

"The productions are freewheeling and inventive—and almost shockingly relevant to today's audiences," says soprano Sara Womble (Apprentice 2016), who performed in Opera NEO's production of *Don Giovanni*.

Performing in an outdoor amphitheater presents obvious

challenges, necessitating elaborate plans for routing power to the venue, bringing in stage lighting equipment, and amplifying both the orchestra and stage performers. Outdoor performance also creates opportunities for a unique audience experience—for instance, food trucks are available at the venue before the performance and during intermission.

Opera NEO alumni speak glowingly of their experiences, from the application and audition process throughout their summer in San Diego. Word of mouth has been a powerful recruiting tool, as is the information published on online audition manager websites. Cooper is a relative newcomer to the opera world, and he discovered the program through mezzo-soprano Stephanie Doche (Studio 2016, 2017), his university classmate.

2018  
COA Summer Arts and Education  
Institute Festival



*Carmen, La Traviata, Tales of Hoffman,  
Impressario & Trouble in Tahiti*  
Fully Staged with Orchestra

- Concerts
- Opera Scenes
- Competition
- Masterclasses

**June 24 - August 8**  
Audition Submissions now Welcome

*For Information Contact:*  
**Edna Garabedian, 559-225-6737**  
CEO Artistic General Director  
[edna.garabedian@comcast.net](mailto:edna.garabedian@comcast.net)

**COA** [www.CaliforniaOpera.org](http://www.CaliforniaOpera.org)

*Apply Now*  
**Lyra New York**  
**2018 Summer Program**

**GIULIO CESARE**  
by Handel

*Study, Preparation, Performance*  
**July 23 - July 28, 2018**  
**New York City**  
at the National Opera Center




[www.lyranewyork.com](http://www.lyranewyork.com)  
[lyranewyork@gmail.com](mailto:lyranewyork@gmail.com)  
*Lyra New York is a member of Opera America*



Opera NEO young artists participate in a movement class.

The program offers options for live auditions (13 cities this season), as well as recorded submissions. Having these choices is a boon to busy singers who may have neither the time nor financial resources to travel to a distant audition site, and the audition committee gives equal attention to those applicants who choose the recorded option. Remmers took advantage of the online audition both times he applied and was grateful for that flexibility.

Opera NEO's commitment to individuality is apparent in the audition requirements for singers listed on its website. There are neither language nor repertoire requirements for screening purposes, just the guideline to offer selections "that best showcase different sides of your personality and voice." For live auditions, singers are asked to present a Mozart aria, a selection in English, and a recitative excerpt. Applicants are asked to dress casually rather than in "audition attire," to be comfortable, and to "be themselves." Doche describes her audition as "incredibly relaxed and personable," having included a brief conversation in addition to her repertoire presentation.

Womble echoes these sentiments, pointing out that her audition lasted longer than is typical. "I remember being so energized as I was walking out of the audition because I felt I'd been able to use the experience successfully as a vehicle for expressing something about myself as an artist." She also loved having the option to wear relaxed clothing and flats rather than uncomfortable heels!

Opera NEO's two levels have different financial structures. At the apprentice level, no tuition is charged and participants receive a modest stipend, \$800 for the upcoming season. Studio-level participants pay a tuition fee (\$3,600 for next summer), but opportunities exist for financial aid and payment plans. Budgeting for a pay-to-sing opportunity is challenging for many singers, and Opera NEO staff work to make their program as financially feasible as possible. Thanks to the availability of local host families, the company is able to place all participants in free home-stays, which Cooper cites as "just one example of them going the extra mile to make sure each dollar we spent was not wasted."

Several Opera NEO alumni shared the most valuable lessons each of them took away from their time in the program. Remmers realized the "importance of being human in the business" and appreciated the lasting personal relationships he developed so quickly at this company.

Womble emphasized similar lessons she learned about "being nothing more and absolutely nothing less than your truest self: onstage, in the rehearsal process, and in the solitude of the practice room." She credits much of her post-Opera NEO success to her commitment to embracing her uniqueness as an artist. Womble also discovered that the rehearsal space can be a "playground" for the artist, and she treasures the time spent experimenting and collaborating with her colleagues.

Doche is equally grateful for the encouragement she received to discover her individuality as a performer and person. Having thoroughly explored those things that make her a unique artist in her time at Opera NEO, she has been able to offer them "unapologetically" to the operatic community in her auditions and performances. Cooper believes that what sets Opera NEO apart from other training programs is its commitment to "growing and developing young singers, rather than [only] giving them a role to perform and put on their résumé."

While Opera NEO's rehearsal and training schedule is intense, each of the alumni interviewed was able to find time to connect with their colleagues socially and explore the beauty of the San Diego area. Proximity to the gorgeous beaches of San Diego was a wonderful advantage of the program's location, described by Doche as a "reward for the energy and focus put into rehearsals and lessons." Remmers remembers heading toward the shore one evening with a group of singers and staying into the "wee

“For live auditions, singers are asked to present a Mozart aria, a selection in English, and a recitative excerpt. Applicants are asked to dress casually rather than in ‘audition attire,’ to be comfortable, and to ‘be themselves.’”

hours of the morning,” an evening of friendship he’ll never forget.

One participant recalled a ride to lunch with two friends in a pickup truck; after encountering several colleagues walking along the road, they ended up with a truck bed fully loaded with singers! Those relationships and memories will have lasting importance in the lives of these artists. And as often happens in concentrated and intense programs, lifelong friendships are developed

not only between participants but also between artists and faculty.

As it continues to refine and expand its curriculum, Opera NEO brings a unique perspective to the array of young artist training opportunities available for singers and other aspiring opera production personnel. Opera NEO’s mission statement emphasizes individuality, personality, and creativity as well as artistic responsibility. Alumni agree that the program was tailored to

their individual needs and helped unlock their artistic potential. The future looks bright for this company as both a member of the vibrant Southern California arts community and a resource for the next wave of opera professionals.

*Pianist and coach Carol Anderson has been principal coach of the Utah Opera since 2003 and just completed her 16th summer on the music staff of the Santa Fe Opera. She is the longtime accompanist for the Utah District Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions and has played for the Southeast Regional level in Atlanta since 2014. When not engaged in rehearsals, she makes time in her schedule for shopping, hiking, downhill skiing, and Game of Thrones.*



## Mikael Eliassen Voice Program



**SUNDAY, JUNE 17 TO SATURDAY, JUNE 30, 2018**

Discover what it means to be an opera singer and work with faculty from the renowned vocal studies department at the Curtis Institute of Music.

**APPLY TODAY**  
[WWW.CURTIS.EDU/ELIASEN](http://WWW.CURTIS.EDU/ELIASEN)



**CURTIS**  
INSTITUTE OF MUSIC



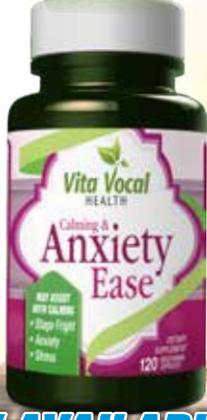
**Vita Vocal**  
HEALTH

**Protect & Enhance Your Voice**



**THROAT & VOICE ENHANCER**

**Stage Fright Anxiety Ease**



**Calming & Anxiety Ease**

**Boost Your Immune Health**



**SUPER DEFENSE COLD OR COUGH**

**NOW AVAILABLE AT**  
 YOUR LOCAL PHARMACY & HEALTH FOOD STORES







For Wholesale & More Info  
**718-514-0773**

Visit us online for more products and information:  
[www.vitavocalhealth.com](http://www.vitavocalhealth.com)

Also available at 