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LA Opera's Young Artist Program Generates Opera World Buzz

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LOS ANGELES -- They slide, run and leap, morphing into anxious cops and wily robbers.

It's a grown-up version of the classic playground game that forces the up-and-coming opera stars to think on their feet and react quickly to fellow performers.

The eight singers and one pianist are at the LA Opera for a new program that immerses budding artists in vocal, acting and dancing lessons until they're ready to appear on stage as professionals.

The competition to join this elite group is fierce: Only about 2 percent of the more than 450 who applied this year were admitted. Their presence has generated a bit of a buzz within the tight-knit opera world for the Los Angeles company, as they offer a new place to showcase the next big star.

"The people in that room, you won't be able to afford in three years. They're amazing, amazing talents," Brandon McDonald, a professional dancer with the Mark Morris Dance Group, said after teaching the crew a dance class.

Other major U.S. opera companies have had young artist programs for decades. The San Francisco Opera's dates to the mid-1950s, while the Chicago Lyric Opera started one in 1974.

Placido Domingo, the celebrated tenor who is also the LA Opera's general director, launched the Los Angeles program in 2006 to help artists through the difficult early stages of their careers. Many struggle because they need to enroll in pricey lessons to prepare for professional life while at the same time pay off their school loans. Some are also trying to raise families.

The LA Opera insulates them from some of those pressures by paying them a stipend to cover living expenses. The company would not divulge how much is paid to the students, who are also supplied with a steady stream of lessons and given chances to work with the masters of their craft.

Domingo said he wants to help the artists overcome early obstacles they may face.

"I remember the challenges of providing for my own young family while paying for voice lessons during my early career," said Domingo, 67. "It is very important to provide young artists with personal guidance during the critical stage between the end of their formal training and the onset of a steady professional career."

In return, the LA Opera hopes the artists will return to perform major roles later in their careers.

Karen Vuong, a 23-year-old soprano, already has at least one job lined up after she becomes one of the first to graduate from the program in May. The Kentucky Opera in Louisville has tapped her for a supporting role in their November production of Jules Massenet's tragic romance, "Werther." She'll play Sophie, the younger sister of the main female character.

During a recent acting class, teacher Michael Goldstrom had Vuong practice singing Ann Truelove in a scene from Stravinsky's "Rake's Progress." He told Vuong to pace the room in rhythm with the brooding, solemn music. He asked her to describe to him the bleak scene where Ann stood alone in front of her house, at night, after discovering her lover had left her.

Vuong's voice soared. Her eyes welled, and tears trickled down her face.

"That was the first time I ever cried in the piece," Vuong said. "I was like, oh, that was interesting. And I tried to explore it and use that."

Goldstrom said he pushes singers to connect with the rhythm and the words of the music and use their imaginations to interpret their characters.

"It is exhilarating to see these people transform," Goldstrom said.

Vuong said the young artists program has helped her develop a step-by-step process to learning roles. And it's helped her cultivate more mundane skills such as time management.

"It forces you to reach another level with yourself," Vuong said.

The artists have been drawing attention from other U.S. opera companies.

Karen Ashley, director of the young artist program, said visiting officials have asked to hear them when they stop by the LA Opera. Many are interested in "who are the next people who are going to become the stars of tomorrow," Ashley said.

Janice Mancini Del Sesto, the Boston Lyric Opera's general director, said she watches young artist programs closely to spot singers who could perform at her company.

"Some of these artists, we've talked about, heard about," Del Sesto said of those currently at the LA Opera. "In some cases, we are, in planning seasons out, looking at what their schedules are like."

Goldstrom, a longtime New Yorker, said the program shows that Los Angeles is developing high art.

"The center of the opera world I think is probably considered to be New York," Goldstrom said. "The power of this program is that ... it's shifting attention onto Los Angeles."

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