

Papa's Got a Brand New Belt

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by Ryan Tracy

Vagabond Opera sings outside the box

IT ISN'T UNCOMMON to be let down by something that comes along calling itself "opera," only to find out that it either has nothing at all to do with opera, or that it's basically a musical. (For the layman, musical theater would generally fall under the "theater" industry, while opera is classical music's territory; there are some exceptions, but generally, that's how it plays out). No doubt, opera's marginal status in popular culture has let much of this lame, ironic or even erroneous labeling go on unchecked.

But the Portland, Ore.-based Vagabond Opera, arriving next week to the Zipper Factory in a hail of sepia and song, actually lives up to its name.

Founded six years ago by frontman Eric Stern, Vagabond Opera has been bringing a richly diverse, if distinctly zany, mix of operatic cabaret to musical venues of all kinds both in and outside the United States, straddling genres and doing some serious singing while they're at it. The six-piece ensemble (which includes violin, musical saw, accordion, sax, cello, bass and percussion and several vocals) presents songs in 12 languages, and in musical traditions ranging from opera and cabaret, to klezmer and Balkan wedding music, wearing costumes, donning foreign accents and trying to evoke, as they call it, an "old world mood." And while its musical sources come from diverse areas, and the vocal stylings are not always of a strictly classical nature, the rigorous and virtuosic hallmark of formal vocal training is never too far away. Stern, 37, who is trained in the Bel Canto style of operatic singing (as is Vagabond soprano Ursula Knudson), says he got the idea for Vagabond Opera while he was "entrenched" in the opera world, and longing for a less restricted way to practice his love of singing.



"I found myself to be a cog in the machine," he says, referring to how the opera industry is mainly a repertory system, where singers cycle through the same roles in opera houses around the world, in essence, getting plugged-in to whatever arsenal of standard roles the singer has under his belt. "In some ways you have to be a cog. But for me, it was limiting."

And while the opera world today seems to be changing, there are still few opportunities for singers to create new roles, or to present operatic singing in contexts outside the concert hall or opera house.

"I didn't feel that [what I did] was reaching my peers." This is a truth among young conservatory-trained musicians who are confronted with the reality that most of their friends outside of classical music will never find their way into a concert hall. For classical singers, this prospect is even grimmer than it is for instrumentalists.

When scream-singing, speak-singing and non-singing rule the direction of popular music—not to mention the amount of digital-faking going on with recording technology able to make someone sound like the good singer they are not at the click of a button—it's hard for the values of classical singing to find a foothold.

In fact, many trained singers who can't find work in opera, turn to singing for church choirs, a steady gig but one that comes with obvious drawbacks.

There just aren't a lot of places where the operatic voice fits in. Even worse, many singers, after training classically, simply give up singing altogether, whether for being unwilling to risk their life pursuing a career in opera, or, as Stern points out, because classical training can often (even blatantly) discourage aspiring students, making them afraid to use their voices outside the context of the repertoire.

"You can get paranoid" about how you sound, Stern acknowledges, "and you end up not singing at all. It seems wrong and sad." But Stern has found an exuberant and satisfying place where operatic vocal technique and popular idioms intersect,

allowing his group to perform along side more indie-oriented bands (it will be joined on Tuesday by Boston-based Walter Sikert and the Army of Broken Toys, and New York songstress Adrienne Anemone) while also exposing unlikely audiences to the visceral pleasures of a Bel Canto voice.

For Vagabond Opera, casual atmospheres and classical voices are not mutually exclusive.

> The Vagabond Opera

Jan. 13, The Zipper Factory, 336 W. 37th St. (betw. 8th & 9th Aves.), 212-695-4600; 7, \$15.

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