

Arthur Kaptainis: Young conductor Jordan de Souza is going places fast

"That's an opportunity I thought I might have in 10 years," conductor says of his new position at Komische Oper Berlin

ARTHUR KAPTAINIS, SPECIAL TO THE MONTREAL GAZETTE Updated: November 3, 2016



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Isn't it always the way.

"What came out in the press was not a reflection of what actually happened," Jordan de Souza said backstage at Place des Arts between rehearsals for the coming Opéra de Montréal production of Don Giovanni.

The Toronto native was talking about a dustup in Berlin three weeks ago at the Komische Oper, the third-largest (but still well-established) opera house in the German capital.

Did the people in the front office really feel so strongly about the nomination of a certain Antonello Manacorda as Generalmusikdirektor? This is debatable. But the fact remains that the members of the orchestra voted overwhelmingly against the appointment, an exercise in democracy that will make de Souza the de facto chief conductor in September 2017.

"You don't have the same administrative responsibility as the Generalmusikdirektor but you have the musical responsibility," de Souza said by way of explaining his only-slightly-less-august title, which is Kapellmeister. "And you have six or seven productions to conduct."

This might be a good time to rub your eyes and look again at the name. Yes, we are talking about the same Jordan de Souza who until 18 months ago was leading the much-admired choir of the Church of St. Andrew and St. Paul through anthems on Sunday mornings.

Operatic talent

He is not the only former Montreal resident in the production. Baritone Gordon Bintner, taking the title role in the Odm Don Giovanni, is also an alumnus of the choir. A classmate of de Souza at the Schulich School of Music, Bintner will soon take a roster job in Frankfurt.

Emily Dorn, another McGill grad and A&P alumna, sings for Christian Thielemann at the Dresden Semperoper. Layla Claire, the Donna Elvira, went to the Université de Montréal. She has already performed the role at the Salzburg Festival.

"What does that tell you?" de Souza asks, referring to the church in particular and Montreal in general as a breeding ground for operatic talent.

All of these trajectories are remarkable, but the rocket-like ascent of de Souza, 28, is close to dumbfounding. First it should be understood that Sunday services did not consume all his waking hours when he arrived at the Church of St. Andrew and St. Paul with the interesting distinction on his resumé of having become (at 19) the youngest player to be granted a fellowship from the Royal Canadian College of Organists.

The conducting position at A & P would evolve to include opportunities to lead Bach's St. John and St. Matthew Passions and Mass in B Minor – towering masterpieces that left de Souza with a sense of how a genius integrates the music with the text.

"I study Don Giovanni exactly the way I study the St. Mathew Passion," he says. "Which means I start with the dramaturgy, the text.

"It's like a Bible study. It's doesn't matter whether you are religious. You have to understand what is beneath those words. Then you see, in the music, the choices the composer makes."

Deep into Bach

While digging deep into Bach in Montreal, de Souza was working on orchestral repertoire at McGill with Alexis Hauser and improving his opera smarts in Toronto as an assistant to Canadian Opera Company music director Johannes Debus and resident conductor of the indie company Tapestry.

Hard work for the COC (including two performances of The Marriage of Figaro) led Debus to take the eager beaver to the Bregenz Festival in western Austria. All went well. Having led Mozart's early Bastien und Bastienne, de Souza is looking forward to 13 Carmens in Bregenz next summer with the Vienna Symphony in the pit.

Yet it is the Kapellmeister gig – a promotion from his current post as Studienleiter (head of music staff) – that has made de Souza and his wife, soprano Jana Miller (who is expecting a girl on Dec. 25), more than short-term residents overseas. Their flat in the Charlottenburg neighbourhood is a 25-minute bike ride through the Tiergarten and Brandenburg Gate to the conductor's place of employment.

Berlin, in de Souza's view, is the musical crossroads of Europe. It is home to countless musicians of stature. Goodness, you can run into the baritone Christian Gerhaher at the local café. "Just a normal afternoon," he says.

The value of the experience he will gain at the Komische Oper is hard to overstate. How can you beat 100 performances over two years? While improving your German in daily brainstorming sessions.

Next October, De Souza will be in the pit for a new production by the KO Intendant, the Australian director Barrie Kosky. Since the company's schedule has not been announced, he declines to specify the opera. Don't worry. The international press will be there.

"That's an opportunity I thought I might have in 10 years," de Souza comments.

It adds to his satisfaction that his three maestro mentors in Canada – Hauser, Raffi Armenian and Timothy Vernon – all trained as opera conductors in the European system, albeit in Vienna rather than Berlin.

"They tell the same stories, so I know they're true," de Souza quips.

Edgy productions

If there is a downside to the Berlin situation it might be the Komische Oper's reputation as a world leader in "edgy" (i.e. bizarre and/or obscene) productions in which dislocations of time and place are only the beginning. Even in the 20th century the KO was better known for its staging than its singing.

There are bad directors out there, de Souza concedes, but also good ones who take liberties based on what they hear in the score. Stefan Herheim, he says, a Norwegian based in Germany, is one of the good ones.

"To me Regietheater works brilliantly when you have a director with a sense of musicality, finding clues in the music," de Souza says, using the portmanteau word denoting that sort of thing.

So far the Odm has been relatively uninfected by the Regietheater fad, but the Don Giovanni that opens on Nov. 12 and runs through Nov. 19 is set not in Spain in the 16th century but a more generalized Europe in the 1940s or 1950s. Donna Elvira is pregnant (as, indeed, is Layla Claire).

Without getting into the particulars of this staging overseen by the American director David Lefkovich, de Souza affirms Mozart's peculiar genius in creating a tragicomic hybrid that would engage the Viennese public without alienating those expecting a high-spirited night along the lines of The Marriage of Figaro.

"It was never done better since Shakespeare than in Don Giovanni," de Souza says of the blend. Making recitative move in a meaningful way is one of many priorities. Take note that the so-called "Vienna version" will be used. The Don goes straight to perdition without a moralizing ensemble at the end.

As much as de Souza loves his new life in Europe, he has not forgotten his native land. Yannick Nézet-Séguin and Jacques Lacombe have proven that success is sustainable on both sides of the Atlantic.

"I love the COC, I love working here in Montreal," de Souza says. "We can make art here at the same level as in Europe. That's not the question. It's a matter of training.

"We love Canada so much. We have so much family here and this is where we feel at home. But there is something I need to do before I am really ready to be what Canada needs me to be."

ATA GLANCE

Don Giovanni plays on Nov. 12, 15, 17 and 19 at Salle Wilfrid Pelletier of Place des Arts. Starting time is 7:30. Go to www.operademontreal.com.

Le Sac à Dos, a Montreal social agency, is collaborating with the Opéra de Montréal to bring opera to the homeless. Street Opera will create a meeting ground for artists and citizens in workshops that will result in the presentation of a new work (libretto by poet José Acquelein and music by Eric Champagne) in the Cinquième Salle of Place des Arts on May 15, 2017.

Soprano Marie-Josée Lord will take part in this event, as will members of the Atelier lyrique program. But so will the participants from the street. They might be supernumeraries, choristers or even soloists. Jab Productions is producing a film documentary on the project.

Martine Beaulne directs the new work and Danièle Lévesque designs the sets. Dina Gilbert conducts the **Ensemble Arkea**.

"Community commitment is part of our mission in that it allows us to build closer relationships with groups that don't necessarily have access to our art form," says Pierre Vachon, Odm director of communications, outreach and education. "We firmly believe that art offers hope."

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