

# Midsummer Opera revives Flotow's tuneful, forgotten 'Martha'



JIM DAVIS/GLOBE STAFF

James O'Leary is directing "Martha," with (top, from left) Stephanie Kacyonis, Jason Budd, Joanna Mongiardo, and Eric Barry.

By Harlow Robinson | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JULY 25, 2015

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More than 50 years have passed since Friedrich von Flotow's tuneful, rustically comic opera "Martha" last showed up in these parts. In fact, "Martha," first produced in Vienna in 1847, has been hard to find on any American operatic stage in recent decades. A popular staple of the repertoire in Europe and the United States in the 19th century, "Martha" fell out of fashion in the 20th. But two arias remained concert favorites with singers of all stripes, classical and popular, and were recorded by such artists as Enrico Caruso and Connee Boswell — whose swing version of "Ach so fromm" ("Ah, so pure"), sung to her poodle, is worth [a look on YouTube](#).

Now, Boston's enterprising Boston Midsummer Opera, celebrating its 10th birthday, has come to the rescue of "Martha." The company's new production, sung in English, features soprano Joanna Mongiardo in the title role, mezzo Stephanie Kacoyanis as Nancy, tenor Eric Barry as Lionel, baritone Jason Budd as Plunkett, and David Cushing as the foppish Sir Tristan. BMO's longtime music director Susan Davenney Wyner will conduct, and newcomer James O'Leary makes his company debut as stage director.

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The action takes place in England around the year 1710. Lady Harriet is bored with her life at court. She and her maid Nancy throw off their fancy clothes and run to the country fair, where they get hired as farmhands "Martha" and "Julia." Romantic entanglements ensue. Eventually the ladies' true identities are revealed — and the hero, Lionel, turns out to be a banished nobleman, an appropriate match for his true love Martha/Harriet.

O'Leary sat down recently to share his thoughts about "Martha." A writer, musicologist, lecturer, pianist, and part-time director, O'Leary teaches at Oberlin College.

**Q.** Why is "Martha" not performed more often? Why did it fall out of the repertoire?

**A.** One thing that struck us immediately about this score is how eclectic it is. Flotow originally called "Martha" a "romantic comic opera." But if we think of German Romantic opera during the 1840s, we think of serious works like Weber's "Der Freischütz." And if we think of comic opera in this period, we think of the "buffa" style. But here we have elements of the grand French style — remember, Flotow studied in France — as well as the folk elements that we hear in Martha's aria "Letzte Rose," an adaption of the famous Irish melody "The Last Rose of Summer." The zaniness and frenzy, the renunciation of reason, also show the influence of Flotow's friend Jacques Offenbach. The opera travels between comedy and romantic opera. So it doesn't fit into a neat category, which is partly why it has been misunderstood.

**Q.** How do you come to do this piece for BMO?

**A.** It was through set designer Stephen Dobay. We met as students at Williams College, and did some work together there. Then we did a production together here in Boston for OperaHub, in 2009, of Ravel's "L'Heure Espagnole." So Stephen put my name forward to the company's manager, Ellen Golde. Later I met Susan Davenny Wyner when she was in Youngstown, Ohio, for a performance. I drove over from Oberlin, and we talked about our ideas for the opera. We are very compatible, since we both have music and stage backgrounds. She has a real way of opening up a score, a real singers' conductor. In the pit she is so alive, she can keep everyone on their toes through sheer personality.

**Q.** How do you see the story of the opera?

**A.** It is a Cinderella story in reverse. Instead of getting the prince and moving to the castle, Martha gets a prince and moves to a farm shack. There is a goofiness about it. But I think that goofiness would have fallen upon very sympathetic ears in that first wave of Romanticism. The idea of Harriet becoming Martha and taking up the country life would have resonated well with audiences. Today it has echoes of the 1960s back-to-the-earth movement, and continues to strike chords with people.

**Q.** Are you updating the setting from the original?

**A.** No, we are doing the piece in the same period in which it was originally set. The piece was never meant to be aggressively political or ideological. We didn't want this to be "agit-prop." The challenge is to bring out all the different musical languages, without having it sound like some sort of pastiche or smorgasbord. We have also tried to show the transition in Harriet's character, through costumes and lighting. The plot interest lies in its embrace of folk values. Martha rejects the idea of returning to court life as Lady Harriet, instead choosing to remain in the country with Lionel.

**Q.** How have the rehearsals been going?

**A.** We have been rehearsing for about three weeks now. Summer theater is not for the faint-of-heart. The cast came in very well prepared, with a lot of ideas; they are easygoing but frenetic. It's not "hurry up and wait," it's "hurry up and hurry up."

**Q.** What do you want the audience to take away from this production?

A. I would like them to take a journey with Harriet/Martha. To think about their daily work lives, when they are trying to be entirely rational. Coming to the summer theater is an act of “letting go” in itself. We all have a tendency to work too hard and too long, so I want them to think about what can be learned from letting go like Martha does. Especially after a winter like the one you had here in Boston.

**FRIEDRICH VON FLOTOW: “Martha”**

Presented by

Boston Midsummer Opera

At: Tsai Performance Center, Boston University, Wednesday, Friday

at 7:30 p.m.,

Aug. 2 at 3 p.m.

Tickets \$40-\$60.

800-838-3006, [www.bostonmidsummeropera.org](http://www.bostonmidsummeropera.org)

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