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University of Colorado's New Opera Workshop to feature bass-baritone Ashraf Sewailam

Wes Blomster Camera Classical Music Writer
Posted: 06/15/2011 01:00:00 AM MDT

If you go

What: NOW 2011 -- University of Colorado New Opera Workshop

What: Recital by Ashraf Sewailam

When: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday

Where: ATLAS Black Box Theater

What: Workshop stagings of "Pride and Prejudice" and "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead."

When: 7:30 p.m. June 22, 23 and 24 and 2p.m. June 25.

Where: ATLAS Black Box Theater

Info and box office: 303-492-8008 or cupresents.org

NOW -- it's an acronym of such intensity that you want to write it with an exclamation mark or two: NOW!

That's because it's exactly what the letters say it is: New Opera Workshop, the University of Colorado summer program that has composers making changes in scores right up to the opening-night curtain.

"NOW gives singers the chance to work with composers on works in progress," says voice professor Patrick Mason, who -- along with CU Opera director Leigh Holman -- introduced the program in 2010. "And opera buffs can watch a new score advance toward performance."



Bass-baritone Ashraf Sewailam.

At a "talk-back" session following each performance audience members can question composers and gain insights into how an opera grows.

"These sessions were so popular last summer that we almost had to ask the audience to leave," Mason says.

In residence in 2011 are composers Kirke Mechem and Herschel Garfein. On stage in the ATLAS Black Box Theater are acts from Mechem's "Pride and Prejudice" and from Garfein's "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern."

Ten CU students are cast in the performances that will be fully costumed with professional sets. A pianist takes on the orchestral score.

Neither work has been heard before.

"You're guaranteed to leave the performances knowing you had a hand in the creative process," Mason says.

A special feature of the program is the cameo appearance of veteran CU mezzo Julie Simson in "Pride and Prejudice" as Aunt Catherine, the aunt who must approve the marriage of the young lovers in Jane Austen's famous story.

"Julie is perfect for the part and she was eager to be involved in the program," Holman says. "We're delighted to have her on board."

The kick-off event of NOW's second season is the Thursday recital by bass-baritone Ashraf Sewailam, former CU student now appearing in major roles in opera houses around the world.

"We looked for an alumnus for this concert," Holman says. "We wanted to show off one of our own, and Ashraf was the first person to come to mind."

"He's very generous and he's great publicity. He talks about CU wherever he sings."

On Sewailam's the program are -- among other works -- Brahms' Four Serious Songs and arias by Stephen Sondheim.

Sewailam's signature roles include Sarastro in Mozart's "Magic Flute" and Mustafa in Rossini's "Italian Girl," both of which he sang in student days at CU, along with Leporello in Mozart's "Don Giovanni" and Alidoro in Rossini's "Cenerentola."

CU's Robert Spillman will accompany the Egyptian-born singer.

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Holman finds the ATLAS Black Box an ideal site for the recital.

"It seats only 100," she says. "It's very intimate and personal; it creates a salon atmosphere."

"Opera is extremely alive today -- especially in the United States," Mason says. "Composers can't stay away from it. They all want to write an opera."

And for them, too, NOW is a valuable experience.

"Without NOW they would have to wait for a commission to see anew work on stage," Mason says. Through NOW, he says, a composer confronts every aspect of opera.

"Composers are genuinely interested in NOW -- and not just as a forum for their own work," Holman says. "They're very generous people."

Leigh Holman and Patrick Mason serve as NOW co-directors. Holman is stage director for "Pride and Prejudice"; Garfein directs his own "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern."

Mason is music director for both stagings. Costumes are by Tom Robbins, lighting, by Ron Mueller and projections by Andrew Morzroth. NOW managing director is Heather Beasley.

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Mr. Sewailam was awesome in his recital last night! But the story says he's singing Thursday (and this story was posted Wednesday)... the recital was Tuesday night. The box on the left seems to have it right...

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