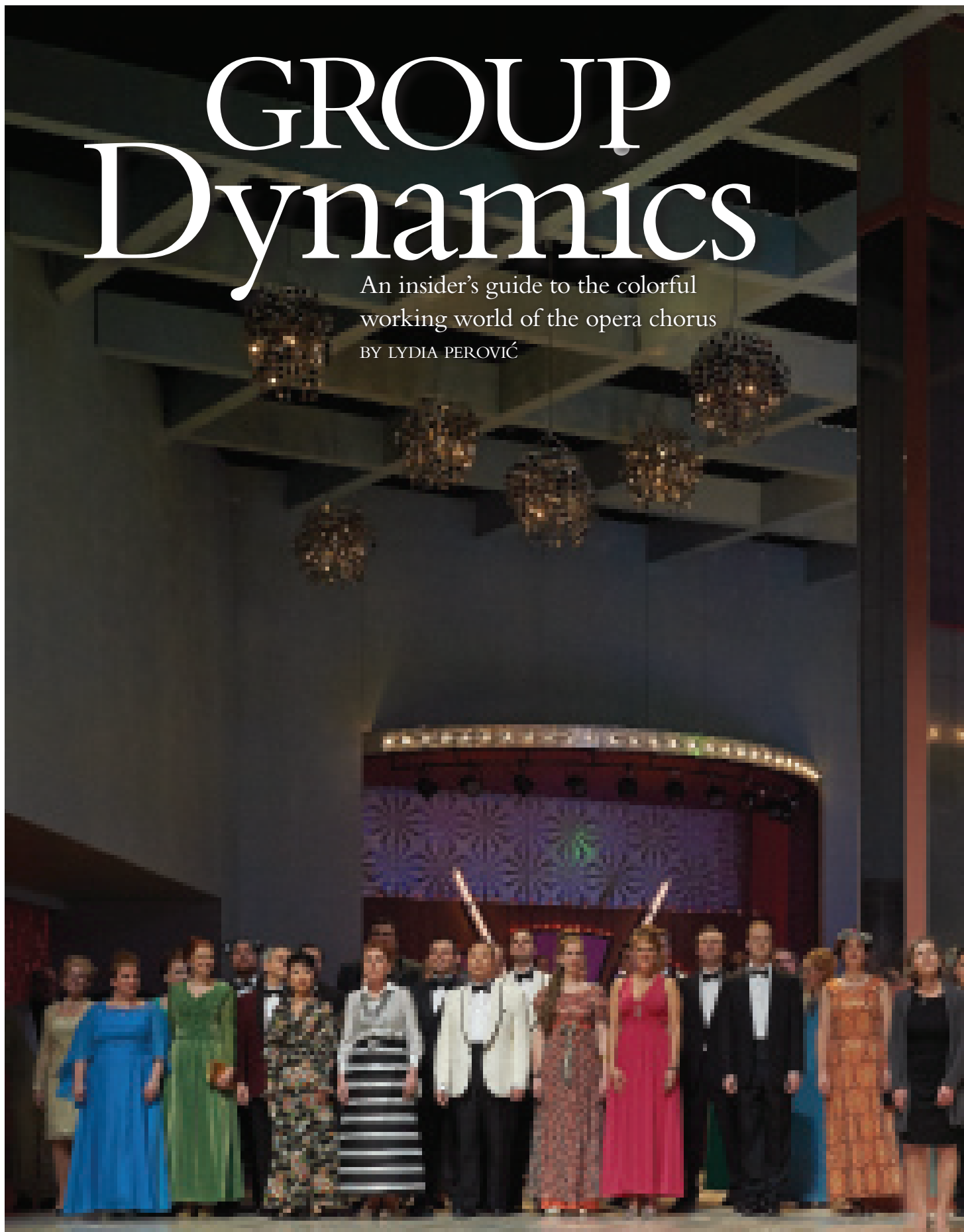


# GROUP Dynamics

An insider's guide to the colorful  
working world of the opera chorus

BY LYDIA PEROVIĆ







Soprano Ingrid Martin: "I work until 5 in an office for an insurance company. It takes a bit of time to change gears."

PHOTOS: (PREVIOUS PAGE AND THIS PAGE) MICHAEL COOPER; (PREVIOUS PAGE) FROM THE 2014 COC STAGING OF *UN BALLO IN MASCHERA*; (THIS PAGE) DIE FLEHMANN

Ask a chorister what kind of unique pleasures singing in a chorus brings, and they will not prevaricate. "I have never been part of a group that can create that kind of sound," says soprano Ingrid Martin of her first rehearsal with the Canadian Opera Company Chorus. "I sat there thinking: 'Oh, my God.'" For mezzo Karen Olinyk, "It's the power, the energy—it's making a sound louder than any sound I can make on my own. Even when you're whispering together, there's something powerful—you do feel that mob mentality in *Peter Grimes*." For baritone Michael Sproule, "There is nothing like being in concertante—in Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra* there are fantastic scenes when everybody's on stage and the soprano is on top and you're like the carpet underneath everything." In addition, says mezzo Lilian Kilianski, "There's the joy within a section, and I really experienced that in Handel's *Semele*. We sing together as a line and we know when each other breathe. You can even sense if someone is stronger on a certain note than you are and vice versa." All the choristers mention a camaraderie rarely found elsewhere. The COC Chorus and Sandra Horst, its Chorus Master



Chorus Master Sandra Horst

of 17 years, seem to win kudos in every production no matter the general tenor of the review. The chorus consists of trained singers and musicians whose lives, ages and careers are otherwise very diverse. Bass Kenneth Baker is in his 33rd season, while mezzo Erica Iris Huang's first contract was the 2010 production of *Aida*. Some, such as soprano Alexandra Lennox-Pomeroy, teach voice privately, or teach an instrument and maintain a freelance instrumental career, such as baritone—and violinist—Sproule, a former member of the COC Orchestra and a current regular with Esprit Orchestra. Other choristers, such as Martin and Olinyk, have full-time jobs in other fields, in their cases in insurance and arts administration respectively. Then there are the teachers: Kilianski teaches Grade 6 and tenor James Leatch history, in addition to coaching rugby and hockey.

Each year, the chorus is assembled anew after mandatory auditions. "Usually, I decide on a core group of people who will be continuous through the whole season," says Horst. "Then, depending on how many people are required in each show, I add or subtract from that." Horst is an energetic, multi-talented

musician—accompanist, répétiteur, conductor, Director of Music Studies in the Opera Division of the University of Toronto's Faculty of Music—who took over the COC Chorus from Donald Palumbo, now Chorus Master of the Metropolitan Opera.

*Opera Canada* spoke with Horst and the singers in February, during the COC's run of *Un ballo in maschera* and *Così fan tutte*. Singing Verdi and Mozart on alternate days is par for the course for chorus singers: they often sing what for soloists would be the repertoire of disparate voice types. "It's fun—I would never have sung Verdi if I wasn't in the chorus," says Lennox-Pomeroy, who describes herself as a light soprano. "When I sing Verdi, I have to 'darken up' my voice so I don't sound bright and stick out. Other singers will have a harder time singing lighter stuff. But we all know how to fit the sound—and Sandra is good at that. She knows exactly how each of us sings, and sometimes adjusts things by saying, 'Sopranos, cover here' or 'Don't use so much diction' and so on."

Still, programming affects the composition of the chorus since chorus size varies from opera to opera. Occasionally, there is directorial input. "Atom Egoyan's *Così* was built on the concept of the school for lovers, so he wanted people that looked the age of the principal soloists," says Horst. "That informed who I chose for that chorus, but that's really unusual. Most of the time you want to have a cross section of the ages, so that they represent a population. Usually, the director takes what I've chosen." Horst finds out about seasons two years in advance, but the singers audition in the winter before the beginning of a new season so they know which shows they will be considered for and whether a female and male chorus will be required to the same degree (there is no female chorus in next season's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, for example).

**T**he singers get the music eight weeks before the start of the rehearsals, and they all have developed their own ways of preparing. Some start by listening. Lennox-Pomeroy downloads audio of chorus parts: "I put them on my phone and listen during the hour-long drive from my home in Orangeville. Then I'll look at my score. I try to get my words memorized as much as I can." Sproule takes a similar tack: "First of all, I listen to it. I listen to a lot on YouTube or recordings, then plunk through my part on the piano, then speak through the words in rhythm, something Sandra does in the rehearsals as well." Kilianski is also an aural learner: "I listen to the chorus parts—I live with the chorus and listen, and then I start singing and planning. I know of the six *Hercules* choruses [Handel's piece is one of the COC's

Spring 2014 presentations] which ones are going to be most challenging so I spend a little more time with them."

Martin and Leatch prefer taking the score to the piano right away. "I'll be taking the choral score into the practise room, and plunking out the notes and reading through the words and trying to get a handle on it before we get into the rehearsals," says the soprano. Similarly, the tenor starts by "teaching it to myself at the piano... They give us the chorus score with some leads-ins, and with the Internet you can find all kinds of things. But I don't listen to recordings; usually, I can't hear the tenor line. It's like a mush of sound—with the orchestra and the soloists, I can't even tell where the tenors are. I'm better learning my part on my own." There are also singers who, like Olinyk, begin from the text: "I read through the libretto. I like to get the overview, just text on the page. I go through the translation—and word by word. What am I singing and why am I singing it? You also look at how the text scans with the rhythm, with the notes. It's



**Soprano Alexandra Lennox-Pomeroy: "Where you are on stage triggers the memory of where you are in the score."**

very tempting to dive into the music right away, but I really try not to, especially with something new. You really want to get the word laydown in the right kind of way. Then I go to the piano and try to figure out notes. There are times when I listen to recordings—I try not to for as long as I can—just to hear the orchestration." Baker starts from text, too: "I will look at the history of the piece, at the composer, read the libretto, get a translation of the libretto. If it's something I'm not familiar with, I'll get a recording. I don't want to learn it from that, but it's nice to get a full sense of the thing. Then you're down to the slogg—learning the notes and memorizing."

Most singers do not memorize their music before the first rehearsal since they may end up splitting into the neighbouring voice part if the chorus master decides to adjust the coloring at certain junctures. "Once we start, Sandra has a fabulous technique of structuring the rehearsal to help you memorize," says Baker, who

concedes that memorizing is never the easiest task. For Lennox-Pomeroy, stage rehearsals can also serve as an aid: “Where you are on stage triggers the memory of where you are in the score.”

The chorus will typically have six three-hour rehearsals with Horst before they start working with the director and the conductor—but the number of pre-staging rehearsals will depend on how chorus-heavy the opera is. During this period, Horst is not in contact with the conductor, so she prepares the group for a variety of scenarios and for different tempi. They often start by just speaking the words in the rhythm. “You can notice a lot when the entire chorus is speaking the text in a sort of sung way together,” says Sproule. “Do you have the right rhythm? Is the pronunciation there?” Although they learn the music by sections, Horst mixes the sections up. “That’s how we’re going to be on stage,” says Olinyk. “First of all, you have to be very strong in yourself in your part. You also have to be aware of everybody else and to make a good cohesive sound. Still later, the director usually wants you to be an

to focus everyone’s energy, it brings it all together.” Horst watches each live performance from the back of Ring 3, her favourite spot in the Four Seasons Centre. “I like the sound there best. I can see exactly what’s going on and I can see the conductor. I am backstage only if the chorus is, too, and I need to conduct them.”

Being nimble and open to all kinds of staging requirements is part of a chorister’s job. In some productions, they will be directed tightly and precisely, but then asked to create their own individual characters in others. One director may put them in the dark orchestra pit (as Robert Carsen did in Gluck’s *Iphigénie en Tauride*) while another positions them backstage and mikes them (as Daniele Finzi Pasca did in Saariaho’s *L’amour de loin*). Or consider Robert Lepage’s Stravinsky production of *The Nightingale and Other Fables*, cited by many choristers as one of their favourite recent productions, in which their tasks might have included handling puppets while wading through a tank of water, or Carsen’s Gluck *Orfeo ed Euridice*, in which choristers found themselves



Mezzo Karen Olinyk: “You have to plan your meals, your shopping, your laundry. You have to sleep. You really have to be disciplined.”



Auditions take place in the winter before the beginning of each season

individual in the picture. The demands of the job are multifaceted.” Fellow mezzo Huang agrees: “I try to sit next to a different person each time, and not always a mezzo. I usually favour tenors. It’s the real test of whether I have the stamina to sing against their line.”

**E**ven after the chorus starts working with the conductor, Horst remains the conduit of communications. “The conductor will give me notes, the chorus doesn’t really work with the conductor directly.” As rehearsals proceed, the conversations between chorus master and conductor continue. “Part of my job is to make sure the chorus does exactly what the conductor wants it to,” says Horst, whose music direction continues well after opening night. “This is one of the few choruses where they have actual notes before every show. The Met chorus does not, nor does Chicago’s, but here it’s built into the chorus contract that there’s 15 minutes of notes with me before every performance. Which is great, as so many things can be improved on in that time. It helps

in body bags writhing across rugged terrain amid balls of fire. “You have to make sure you do justice to the director’s vision,” says Huang. Or, in the words of Kilianski, “Buy into it. Put your soul into it. It almost always works. And that’s when you have fun.”

Several choristers note that modern directors tend to be capable communicators. “Recently, we’ve had a lot of good directors who are easy to work with. I can’t remember the last time we had a grumpy director,” says Sproule. Among his stand-outs, he cites Tim Albery’s Prokofiev *War and Peace*, Lepage’s *Nightingale* (“We stood on stage and had the puppets under the cloaks. At the Brooklyn Academy of Music, where we toured, the audience felt physically close due to the architecture of the hall, and there was an audible gasp when we revealed those puppets”) and Paul Curran’s Shostakovich *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (“It was the first season in the opera house and it was thrilling. Such fun to act, and you always knew what to do on stage. You just went for it.”)

PHOTO: 2013 LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR/MIHAEL COOPER

In addition to singing and acting, choristers are also expected to be good fixers and improvisers. If something goes awry on stage, or if a different principal comes in on short notice and needs some guidance, choristers are there to lend a hand. Says Lennox-Pomeroy: “If something’s missing on stage, or is left behind on stage, if something falls or breaks, occasionally doors don’t open...we take care of it. And if a cast member is switched on short notice due to illness, we are always aware of the new member. They sometimes ask us discreetly, ‘Should I be here?’ while on stage, and we try to help. You have to do it in character, and so that nobody notices.”

While dressers help them into costumes and wigs, chorus members typically apply their own make-up. “We have make-up charts and suggestions pasted on our dressing room walls,” says Lennox-Pomeroy. And with all the wigs you end up wearing, “you get to see yourself in every hair colour. And know what *not* to do next time you go to the salon.”

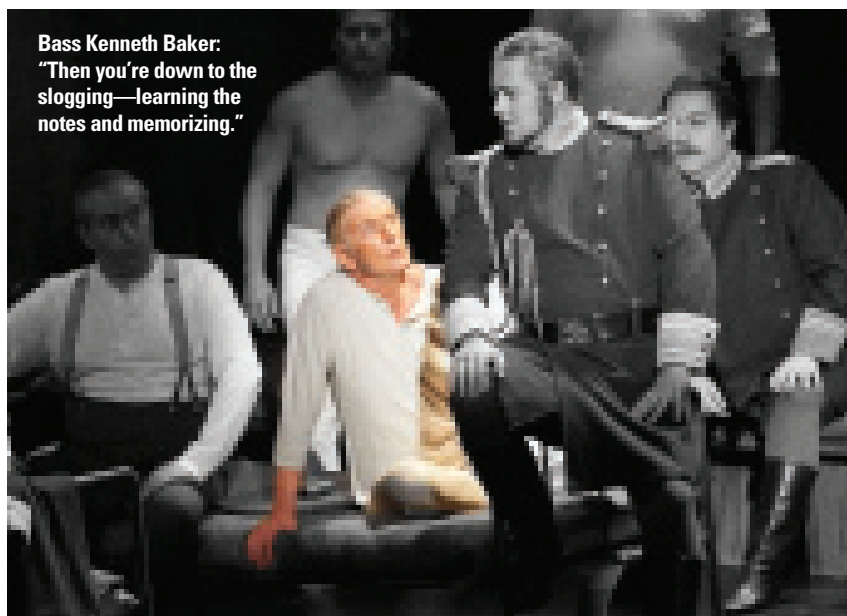
school, “it’s nice that we share this job at night”. Being part of the chorus means you are not the one in charge of everybody else—a big change from his day job as a teacher. “I get tired, but it’s good tired. It’s great to have this creative outlet.”

Those who have children heap praise on their partners. “I usually need the transition time between school and here, and I lie down for 30 minutes while something’s cooking,” Kilianski says of her typical day. “The kids are grown now, but I used to eat with them. Then my husband would come in the door and he’d start childcare and I would leave. Very often, I’d play my music on the way down. So my husband is the unknown hero here. He’s only been able to come to the operas in the past five years because the kids have grown. He works full-time, too.”

Young mezzo Huang, who is working to build up a solo career, describes each new contract as a gift. Her first contract, which included just that 2010 *Aida*, allowed her the time and



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**Bass Kenneth Baker:** “Then you’re down to the sloggng—learning the notes and memorizing.”

PHOTO: (LEFT) 2013 PETER GRIMES/MICHAEL COOPER, (RIGHT) 2012 IL TROVATORE/MICHAEL COOPER

**W**hether they are building a musical career or entering its final act, whether they have full-time jobs in unrelated professions or are busy freelance instrumentalists, whether they teach voice privately or history in school, all of the choristers consider their chorus work as an essential component of their professional lives. Full-timers in other jobs have developed strategies to cope. “You have to plan your meals, your shopping, your laundry, you have to sleep,” Olynyk explains laughing. “You really have to be disciplined.” Martin echoes the sentiment: “It gets to the point where the less time I have on my hands, the more I get done because I have to be twice as disciplined. I work until 5 in an office for an insurance company, and that’s such a different job. It takes a bit of time to change gears. So I welcome the opportunity to walk from Bloor and Yonge down to the theatre—that’s my time to get rid of the 9-to-5 and start preparing.” Leatch’s wife is also in the chorus, and although during the day she works in another

financial support to prepare for the Eckhardt-Gramatté Competition (she won). Since then, her contract has grown to the full season. “It’s such a driving force in my career as a young artist. If I didn’t have the chorus engagement, I don’t know if I’d be singing today. Financially, it’s very difficult for young singers to maintain the lessons, the auditions and the coaching. Chorus has enabled me to keep that up.” Scarborough-born and raised, the mezzo also helps her mother run their joint voice and piano studio out of the family home. “Every time I get a contract, I call my parents and take them out for a very nice dinner. You never know what will happen because your previous contracts don’t guarantee anything. I always work to my audition date as if it will be my lifeline for next year. When I found out I was in for the entire season, I thought it was a mistake at first. I had to reread the letter.” Her parents didn’t miss a beat. “They immediately asked if that meant I would take them out to dinner seven times. We’ll have to see about that.” 