

OPERA NEWS

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Mozart & Friends

NEW YORK CITY
little OPERA theatre of ny
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Tenor Rufus Müller, in performance with violinist Manami Mizumoto, pianist Catherine Miller and cellist Sydney ZumMallen in little OPERA theatre of ny's *Mozart & Friends*.

ON JULY 9, the little OPERA theatre of ny, a.k.a. LOTNY, offered *Mozart & Friends*, an hour-long program livestreamed from St. John's in the Village. Produced by Musae, a company specializing in interactive performances, the concert was (and still is) available for viewing in high definition or

immersive virtual reality. (For a higher ticket price, LOTNY provides VR glasses for those who don't own them.) With a little more advance notice, I would have opted for VR, since it does bring one a step closer to the actual experience, but the concert was perfectly lovely in two dimensions.

Artistic director Philip Shneidman built the program around three arias from Mozart's *Il Re Pastore* (The Shepherd King), which LOTNY had been scheduled to premiere this spring in a newly commissioned translation by Mark Herman and Ronnie Apter. First up was Heather Johnson, singing Tamiri's aria "My soul has now forgotten" with authoritative presence and a mezzo-soprano of heft and point. Kameron Ghanavati followed with an aria sung by Tamiri's lover Agenore, "Oh stars of love, answer," displaying a forward, ringing tenor with burnished warmth and just a hint of muscle. He also offered a persuasively romantic rendition of Belmonte's "O wie ängstlich" from *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*. In both, Ghanavati struck a balance between dramatic connection and the restraint that plays best on camera. Rufus Müller delivered Alessandro's "When storm clouds shroud the heavens," mustering a comparatively more heroic sound, although he was sometimes overmatched by the coloratura passages. His cushioned tenor was better suited to his first aria, the placid "Waft her, angels, through the skies" from Handel's *Jephtha*. The program also featured fine playing from violinist Manami Mizumoto, harpsichordist Elliot Figg, and cellist Sydney ZumMallen. They opened the program with the elegantly soothing Premier Concert in C Minor by Rameau, and Mizumoto and Figg also offered a virtuosic movement from Sonata No. 3 in B-flat Major by Joseph Boulogne, Chevalier de Saint Georges, a Black composer and champion fencer famous in eighteenth-century Europe.

Was it perfect? No. There was the now to-be-expected technical glitch in the beginning, Shneidman held up placards that were unreadable because of the glare from the lights rather than announcing the pieces, pianist Catherine Miller was completely hidden for Mozart's Rondeau from Piano Sonata No. 3 in B-flat Major, and everyone's high notes peaked the meter—but LOTNY gets a ton of credit for regrouping in the face of disaster. Putting together even a relatively short program in the current circumstances requires a disproportionate amount of effort. Johnson closed the program with Handel's "Ombra mai fu." She brought a sense of peace and gravitas to the famous aria, suggesting protection, comfort, and a respite from the worries of the world. The restful, hopeful mood she created lingered after the performers came up one by one for a bow, taking off their masks—a reminder of our current misfortunes, even if with their lovely music-making the performers temporarily made us forget. —*Joanne Sydney Lessner*