

Ohio Light Opera's production of *Iolanthe*, 2018



# A Summer in Ohio

## Celebrating 40 Seasons of the Ohio Light Opera

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

A Midwest company credits much of its success to a strong collaboration among the participating artists and directors, a high production value, and a supportive community while striving to bridge the gap between traditional operetta and musical theatre.

“Life begins at 40.” This phrase was popularized in the 1930s when Walter B. Pitkin used it as the title of his best-selling book. It resonated so much with the American public that the phrase was later used as the title of a movie starring Will Rogers and a song written by John Lennon.

The Ohio Light Opera company (OLO), however, is proof that a tremendous amount can be accomplished in the *first* 40 years of life as well. This past summer marked the completion of OLO’s 40th season, and in those 40 years it has tallied more than 280 productions of 141 titles by 57 different composers. What began solely as a Gilbert & Sullivan company nestled on the campus of the College of Wooster in the city of Wooster, 60 miles south of Cleveland, has now earned the moniker of

“America’s premier lyric theater festival.”

### The Company

Many elements make OLO unique. First, the company is committed to performing operetta and Golden Age musical theatre. Second, it performs all shows in English. Third, it produces seven different shows each summer over an 11-week span. Fourth, and perhaps most important, it uses an “all hands on deck” approach for each production. As Executive Director Laura Neill describes, “Our company is a resident company, and those who are a part of it may come to do principal roles—but they are also ensemble members, with all cast members doing five or six shows.”

OLO employs a two-tiered artist program involving young artists (YA) and resident professional artists (RPA),

all of whom are provided fellowships/salaries and housing.

Singers in the Young Artist Program perform in six out of seven shows, form the corps of the ensemble, and sing supporting roles as assigned. Consisting of undergraduate and graduate students as well as emerging professional artists, they receive instruction and coaching in the essential components of operetta and musical theatre as they are mentored by—and perform alongside—more experienced professionals. According to OLO Associate Artistic Director Julie Wright-Costa, “For the growing performer there is no substitute for the benefit of direct access to supervised instruction and participation in live performances.”

Resident professional artists perform leading and/or supporting roles in five of the seven shows each

season. The expectation that they also participate as part of the ensemble is what Wright-Costa calls an *esprit de corps*, upon which the company was founded.

### Young Artists

Tenor Garrett Medlock had such a positive experience as an OLO young artist in 2017 that he came back for a second season in 2018. As a YA, he performed in the ensemble in six shows, sang supporting roles in three of those shows, and understudied one major role.

As expected, the pace of the program required some adjustment on his part since he had never been asked to learn and perform so many different shows in such a short period of time. "For me, the greatest challenge is balancing the almost constant rehearsals with practicing and keeping up with my technique," he says. Even so, he feels strongly that being able to navigate the two summers at OLO brought his performing to a higher level. "It has honed my abilities to prioritize and work efficiently when preparing, commit music and movement to memory quickly, and focus intensely on the task at hand," he says, "all of which have been tremendous assets to my performing outside of OLO."

Besides the professional growth he experienced, Medlock points to the community he discovered as "the greatest joy" of his time at OLO. "Performing and rehearsing so much over the summer," he says, "the cast bonds in a way unlike any other company I have ever been a part of." He notes the quality, dedication, and positivity he saw in each of the performers, conductors, directors, designers, orchestra members, and crew as well as the "ever-supportive patrons" who "light up" his summer.

Even though he was a young artist, Medlock felt welcomed and valued as a professional. "At the end of the day," he says, "we recognize that we are all going through the same season together and no one person is working any harder than the next."

Soprano Hilary Koolhoven's first OLO summer as a young artist also prompted a return for a second season and then a third. Having notched performances in 18 different OLO shows, she echoes Medlock's appreciation of the supportive community aspect established by the company and the patrons who come back summer after summer.

She credits OLO with allowing her to feel much more comfortable onstage, due in part to the sheer number of times she had to cross the footlights. "When you do between 40 and 60 performances a summer," she says, "walking onstage in front of an audience became as natural as walking down the street."

Of course, she believes the pace of mounting and executing so many shows is formidable. But she also finds comfort in the community of performers that surrounds her. "I'm not going to lie," she says, "it is exhausting. But everyone is exhausted, so we're all just tired together."

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Still, Koolhoven can easily recognize the benefit of such a demanding schedule, saying she felt that each season provided an entire year's worth of performing experience in just 11 weeks. "By the end of each summer, I left having grown significantly as a singer, actor, and dancer," she says. "There was always a new skill to learn."

### Resident Professional Artists

Mezzo-soprano Gretchen Windt spent her first summer at OLO as a YA, but has since returned for four more seasons as an RPA, performing in 26 productions during that time. Part of what keeps her coming back is the opportunity to present shows that she may not get to perform with any other company. She notes performances of obscure works by well known composers like George Gershwin, Jerome Kern, and Emmerich Kálmán, saying, "I love that I get to help unearth these gems and bring them back to life."

She fully embraces the challenge of the schedule, believing that the experience helps singers understand that they are capable of more than they may have previously thought. "When the job involves memorizing lyrics, dialogue, blocking, and choreography for five or six productions over 11 weeks, you do it," Windt says. "You do it because you have to do it. The

applications of this work ethic and attitude once the season ends are almost limitless, but particularly as a singer, I feel entirely capable of negotiating simultaneous projects."

As an assistant professor of voice at the University of North Alabama, Windt has the flexibility to perform during OLO's summer season, allowing her to continue honing the technique she teaches in her voice studio. "Sustainability is a big component of my pedagogy," she says, "and negotiating the vocal demands of five to six productions—ranging from musical theatre to operetta—gives me the opportunity to embody sustainable singing. This informs not only my own technique but also the technique that I teach!"

Windt also highlights the close-knit ties she forms each year with the company members, crew, staff, and even the audience, which she describes as "passionate and knowledgeable" and "a fiercely devoted and supportive group."

### Light, Not "Lite"

Patrons should not expect to see the Ohio Light Opera programming Verdi or Wagner anytime soon, since every summer demonstrates that there is also a dedicated audience for operetta and light opera.

As Wright-Costa explains, musically speaking, "... operetta is

neither 'light' nor trivial." She freely admits that, as with any genre, there are works of brilliance, works that are purely entertaining, and works that "should enjoy a little nap."

Still, she warns singers not to assume that the comedic and sometimes silly story lines mean that the productions are less demanding than grand opera. "Just listen to Lehár's *Das Land des Lächelns* or *Giuditta*," she says. "Think of Bernstein's *Candide*. Even works by composers such as Leo Fall, Sigmund Romberg, Emmerich Kálmán, and Arthur Sullivan [among others] demand superior vocal technique, superb musicianship, and sophisticated acting chops. Add choreography into the mix, and one can see that it requires tremendous ability from the performer."

### Auditions and Casting

For the last 10 years, Wright-Costa has overseen casting for the company. Her 30-year association with OLO, which began when she was a young artist herself, has given her unique insight as to the skills needed to be successful in Wooster.

When hearing auditions, she looks for "all the usual suspects" of a performance package, meaning a healthy, musical, expressive singing voice; engaging performance skills; and a friendly, professional attitude.

She stresses the last element as crucial to the lengthy residency that OLO requires. “That’s a long-term commitment,” she notes, “so a professional and collaborative personality is a must!”

Although dancing is not part of every OLO show, it helps if artists have some previous dance or movement training. Previous experience in operetta, however, is not expected. “It is a joy to introduce young performers to the joys and challenges of this repertoire and to see their appreciation for it grow throughout the summer,” Wright-Costa shares.

Applicants frequently come with a strong background in either opera or musical theatre. Others move easily between the two. Regardless, Wright-Costa believes those in both groups come away from OLO with improved skills. “I like to think that classical

singers come away with a greater sense of confidence in their diversity [as performers] and that musical theatre singers come away with a greater confidence in their vocal abilities,” she says.

Similarly, Neill believes the ability to bring together singers from both worlds, due to the demands of the repertoire, is a large part of what makes OLO unique. “We are not the only company producing these works, although there are some shows that no one else is doing,” Neill says, “but we are the only company (or one of the very few) treating them with the original work in mind and giving the respect due to each work.” She credits this vision to founding Artistic Director James Stuart—a vision that continues to be carried out today. “It’s important to [current] Artistic Director Steven Daigle that the works chosen fit into our mission,

the abilities of our ensemble, and the active pursuit of preserving this genre,” she says.

Despite having a clearly defined niche, Neill understands that OLO cannot simply rely on its past reputation as it looks to the future. “Successful companies like ours need to continue working at keeping the production quality high,” she says. “We should not feel the need to drastically change our mission or focus, yet we are still adapting and listening to our audiences.”

### Educational Mission

Keeping their audience in mind has also led the OLO directors to emphasize a commitment to education. “As a part of the College of Wooster, we have the ultimate ‘arts partner’ in our vision and mission,” Neill says. “No other company has this kind of support.”



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# “By the end of each summer, I left having grown significantly as a singer, actor, and dancer . . .”

This emphasis led to the inclusion of an annual “symposium week,” where renowned scholars and experts in operetta and opera come to Wooster from all over the world. The week includes lectures featuring the season’s works and composers as well as concerts that feature the YAs and RPAs.

Wright-Costa has seen the energy and excitement that symposium week generates. “Patrons have been delighted and devoted with the inclusion of this operetta week,” she says. “We all get to mingle together and discuss, in detail, this genre that we love. As an educator, it’s essential that I stay in touch with the aspect that we all continue to learn. We all

learn from one another in so many ways.”

### All Aboard!

Besides Wright-Costa, Neill, and Daigle, the current team of leaders also includes Music Director J. Lynn Thompson and Associate Music Director Steven Byess. Together, they model the same spirit of collaboration expected from the cast.

In recent years, as OLO has placed more emphasis on production values, the creative circle has expanded to include professionals in scenic design, sound design, lighting, and costuming. Today, more than 100 people work together each season to make Ohio Light Opera what it is.

If life really does begin after 40, then OLO’s past success seems to indicate that it is poised for an even brighter future. Sticking to many of the company’s founding principles, everyone involved seems to understand that it is the community-minded approach that has perhaps been the most crucial element that has ensured their longevity thus far. As Neill says, “The ‘ensemble’ continues to be where our focus is.”

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