



Mockingbird
(Mimus polyglottos)

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Introducing OperaSLO's New Artistic Director

by Kathryn Bumpass

The Board of Directors of OperaSLO has appointed Brian Asher Alhadeff as its new artistic director. Brian has a doctorate in Musical Arts from UCLA and is a nationally and internationally recognized opera, ballet, and symphonic conductor. He replaces former artistic director Robert Ashens, who successfully completed a three-year contract and continues his career as Artistic Director of West Coast Opera, productions with Anchorage Opera, and numerous concerts across the nation and Europe.

Robert introduced Brian to OperaSLO as Associate Conductor during the 2010 production of *La Boheme* and again during the recent spring production of *The Barber of Seville*. Brian is committed to expanding OperaSLO's standard of excellence and fine reputation among top vocalists. Off stage Brian is particularly effective in community outreach and has exciting plans for OperaSLO in public education. He believes "the future of all classical music lies in our ability to embrace children – they are the audience of the future."

In addition to an active performing career as a conductor, Brian has given guest lectures and served on the faculty of several colleges and universities, both nationally and abroad. He brings an exciting new flare of energy to OperaSLO.

An energetic man who seems always to be in motion, he found time to speak with me for this column. I began by asking him what sparked his interest in OperaSLO. He immediately cited the rich artistic life in San Luis Obispo county.

Brian: Opera SLO is located in an extremely arts-friendly environment. It supports a fine symphony orchestra, an excellent musical theater organization, a ballet company and the amazing Festival Mozaic.

Kathryn: This fall OperaSLO will present Gilbert & Sullivan's *Yeomen of the Guard*, as a joint production with Sierra Madre Playhouse in the Pasadena area. You will conduct both companies. How this collaboration will work?

Brian: Following the Pasadena performances, the Sierra Madre Playhouse will pack up its sets, costumes, props and cast, and migrate north to San Luis Obispo." Here they will join forces with the OperaSLO chorus and production team.

As this production originated for a small theater, in the true *commedia dell'arte* touring tradition, I will accompany all performances from the piano, using my newly edited version of score. [Chorus master Rouvaishyana will begin casting and rehearsals for the chorus in September.]

Kathryn: Besides your work on productions of OperaSLO, what activities do you expect to engage in?

Brian: I am most concerned with identifying new audiences. I would like to engage in several aspects of the SLO community. I have a strong interest in community service, classical music education for children, adult opera education, and generating new audiences for opera. I hope there is opportunity for me to visit schools . . . and share what opera is all about, why it's so important, and how wonderful it is that opera is so easily accessible at a high level through OperaSLO.

Kathryn: You have extensive experience working in opera productions. What are some of the most important things you've learned, and how have they contributed to your current work?

Brian: Opera is a large team process. There are many parts that must come together. I am lucky to have a thorough background in virtually every aspect of the production process. I cut my teeth in the industry setting up music stand lights on my knees in orchestra pits, assisting general managers and conductors, serving as chorus master, assistant conductor, guest conductor, music director and eventually artistic director, contracting artists and instrumentalists, even creating and running super titles! These earlier experiences gave me a rich practical background for what is most characteristic of this business – working with people.

Kathryn: You're also a scholar. What are your research interests in opera?

Brian: On one end I have a strong emotional investment in teaching with technology. It's an expensive pursuit, but

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Brian Asher Alhadeff

it's important to reach our audiences, and more importantly our potential audiences, on *their* ground. That means communication with projected high definition video and digital audio, strong yet accessible internet resources, and clever methods for integrating smart phones. I am about presenting information through a big multimedia show.

Apart from technology I love to research and implement various types of opera and performance practice techniques. For example, my doctoral dissertation at UCLA was about how to interpret and improvise Baroque and Classical recitative from the keyboard. Do you recall that occasional tinkling sound of a harpsichord heard so often between the singing parts of some operas just about everything by Mozart or Rossini? Well, that is a pianist improvising on [harpsichord] similar to the way a jazz pianist does in a busy weekend piano bar. This art of "realizing" opera recitative . . . an almost 500 year old tradition passed on verbally and aurally from one musician to the other.

Kathryn: You've taught classes in opera at various colleges and universities. How do you see your role as a music educator? What works most successfully in teaching opera to beginners?

Brian: The role of every classical performer from last chair in the violin section to artistic director begins as a music educator, more so now than at any time in history. When I teach about music one of my goals is to inspire the learner to carry on the information. We must teach and teach how to teach. We must focus on how the aural tradition of classical music is carried on.

Opera is actually an extremely popular form of entertainment that is strongly woven into the pop culture of our society. Reference to opera is widespread, and now it's even being broadcast live [the Met live in HD performances] right next to *Transformers II*, *Harry Potter*, and *X-Men!*

With that kind of exposure alone, we are in a unique time for a special kind of public resurgence. That being said, my primary focus on teaching opera begins by reminding [audiences how much] they already know about opera. For example, titles like "Nessun dorma," "Largo al factotum", "Che gelida manina" . . . are secret titles behind which are [some of] the most famous melodies in history! Helping people connect the dots between what they already know very well, and that relationship to opera, (or what they are unfamiliar with) is a key tool for building bridges.

Kathryn: How can you help OperaSLO expand its audience base?

Brian: OperaSLO already has a fine reputation in the community, and its audience has grown steadily over the last 25 years. We also need to identify who is NOT [yet] coming to opera. That's how we "new audiences" and that is how true audience growth takes place. I am eager to present *Operanutz!* to the SLO community. It is a 10-week course I developed in 2009 that surveys all of the professional operas that take place in California from San Diego Opera to San Francisco.

Operanutz! is an expanded [demonstration] of my unique presentation style. Participants meet once a week for a 3-hour multimedia, digitally projected, deep journey inside opera. Each week we dissect an opera that is about to happen somewhere in California. I present historical videos, documentaries, and audio about famous singers, composers, historical surroundings, plots, character relationships, and I bring in special guest artists for both performance and discussion.



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