

biggest success was *Camille*. He was so funny and dramatic and incredibly faithful to the Dumas play. At the same time, he paid tribute in his performing style to Garbo's films, to Tallulah Bankhead, to great stage actresses; his own style, on top of it, was hilarious but compelling. He could get you to laugh and cry almost simultaneously.

strange to me, because it's a very funny scene about somebody who wastes away; it has a very real double edge even now.

Do you feel like your show has something for everyone?

It is completely accessible for everyone. The show is hosted and narrated by a guy playing a retired diva — very specifically parodying *The Lives of Lincoln* Center fundraisers you

during the course of the evening. The audience can see them develop through the way they play their opera and their rivalry. It's inherent in opera, but in the regular opera, you're just not suppose to play it.

Where do you see yourself going? Do you think you'll be doing this forever?

I'm thinking that I'd personally like to segue into directing straight opera and bringing some life to that. I've also begun to write, and I have a weekly public radio spot in New York; I make a guest appearance as Vera during a classical music program every Sunday and advance opinions about anything.

The singing is also limited by time. My voice is not as capable of what it used to be in terms of pure height and flexibility; it's richer and darker. All the things that happen to a regular soprano when they reach 50 are happening to me.

I don't see myself out there when I no longer have something to offer in terms of operatic singing. It's a transitional time for me. If the company continues to get more work, I would like to continue with it and teach younger singers, direct more. If the company winds down, I also see myself directing. I also have a career as a teacher and a coach; I enjoy that very much.

If you were to do straight opera what would be your number one choice?

To direct? Hmm. For me, the more dramatic the opera, the more I feel I would like to direct it. What I would love to direct is one of the roles that I've done a lot, for instance, *Tosca*, *Traviata*, or *Girl of the Golden West*.

I wish Puccini had written at least five more operas where the baritone chases the soprano around the room; then I'd have a lot more scenes to do. ▼

This was a time before the now ubiquitous and extremely meaningless standing ovation that greets any performance penned by Andrew Lloyd Weber.

This became my goal. I decided that I would try to work up my falsetto — which my voice teachers had told me was an incredibly dangerous thing to do. I was going to try to do this last act of *La Traviata*, the death scene, with another fellow who was a fan of my cabaret work. We decided to form this little company to do late night performances for cult audiences in New York City.

We were reviewed in the New York Times rather favorably. Suddenly, people were coming down from the Met with paper bags over their head. It became a secret cult thing. The people who weren't secretive about it were the opera queens, who came quite gleefully. They were our first and most beloved and loyal audience, until a great number of them died. So *La Traviata* for me has a real connection to our beginning and also to our lost audience. It's

get on PBS with Beverly Sills sitting in the corner doing tedious and endless narration, dropping names, telling funny anecdotes about herself. Our Sylvia Bills is that prototype taken to a more comic level. In fact, Sills came to see Bills in Lincoln Center and loved her.

That hook of the narration is like being spoon-fed what you should look for before you see it. It makes the scene completely accessible. There are certainly going to be opera people who will get stuff in the text and puns on the libretto that the basic audience won't get, but there is roaring from the entire audience all night on various levels for various things. Some of it is vocal comedy, some physical, some slapstick; a lot of it is Sylvia's narration.

It's not just having people come out and sing in falsetto; the personalities of the singers are put before you and available

Good Thing the Neighbors Didn't Play Bagpipes

It started with a ukulele.

No, really. Singer/songwriter Cheryl Wheeler actually began her career when she was a little girl and found a discarded ukulele amongst a neighbor's garbage.

Since then she has written songs for and recorded with the likes of Jonathan Edwards, Mary-Chapin Carpenter, Vince Gill, Alison Krauss, and Dan Seals.

While many find it hard to pigeon-hole Wheeler's music into one definite category, most agree that her songwriting is brilliant. Whether you're questioning your sanity, wondering about gun control, mourning a troubled relationship, or cruising down memory lane, Cheryl Wheeler knows the feeling and knows how to express it.

Sponsored by the Peace and Justice Center, Wheeler will be in concert at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Burlington on Friday, April 30 at 8:00 pm. Tickets are available through the Peace and Justice Center, the Flynn Theatre Box Office, Pure Pop Records, Middlebury Natural Foods Co-op, and Vermont Trading Company in Montpelier. ▼



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Friday, April 9 at 8 pm

Ballet Tockadero meets the Marx Brothers in this all-male opera spoof in drag! In falsetto and falsies—and magnificent voices—the madcap divas of La Gran Scena perform scenes from opera's "greatest hits," including Act II of Puccini's *Tosca*, plus *Aida*, *Carmen*, *La Boheme*, *Die Walküre*, and more. You don't need to be an opera lover to enjoy the visual and vocal slapstick of these consummate—and classically trained—clowns.



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