

Entertainment

Littler: Musicians come to the less mobile

Long-term care residents get live culture the only way they can.



Peter McGillivray and pianist Anne Larlee at Castlview Wychwood Towers.

By: **William Littler** Music Columnist, Published on Sat Jun 23 2012

Audiences take many forms, depending on the nature of the music being performed. But it is not often that singers from the Canadian Opera Company perform for an audience mostly in wheelchairs.

And yet, that is what soprano Ileana Montalbetti and baritone Peter McGillivray did recently, accompanied by pianist Anne Larlee, when the Canadian Opera Company paid a return visit to Castlview Wychwood Towers, one of Toronto's leading long-term care facilities, under the auspices of a remarkable institution known as the Health Arts Society of Ontario.

Founded in Vancouver in 2006 by retired businessman David Lemon and now active in seven centres across the country, the Health Arts Society is a registered charity devoted to bringing professionally performed classical music to people confined in long-term care facilities.

"The idea was a simple one waiting to happen," Lemon explained following the recent Toronto concert. "People don't stop loving well-performed music when they become old or infirm. We are simply bringing to them the music they can no longer go out and find for themselves."

The key to Lemon's approach is the professional level of performance. Although it isn't a large one, the artists receive a fee appropriate to a professional 45-minute concert engagement. The cost to participating facilities is kept minimal and the non-monetary reward to the artists is incalculable.

"I've been doing these concerts across the country," McGillivray acknowledged, "and the audiences are the most appreciative you could possibly have. There's almost always a former musician who comes up afterward to say he hadn't expected this level of performance."

Indeed, when the Canadian Opera Company paid its first visit to Castlerview Wychwood Towers, it brought along a condensed version of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, with most of the major arias included. A proudly framed program for that event now graces the entrance corridor to the Christie Street structure's performance space.

As it happens, *The Magic Flute* was also the name of a popular classical record shop in Vancouver once owned and run as a hobby by Lemon, whose daytime occupation for 34 years was in marine insurance.

A native Londoner, whose childhood memories include hearing, at the age of 11, Otto Klemperer conduct the Philharmonia Orchestra, he grew up to become one of Vancouver's most avid arts patrons, personally commissioning (and at the composer's suggestion, writing the libretto for) an oratorio by the leading British composer Peter Maxwell Davies and a cello concerto for Shauna Rolston by Alberta composer Heather Schmidt. Portions of his collection of prints and drawings occupy walls in leading museums in Ottawa, Victoria and Edmonton.

His Health Arts Society works with local presenters such as the Toronto Symphony Orchestra and Canadian Opera Company to find appropriate artists for the concerts, with ensembles such as the Gryphon Trio and soloists such as pianists Robert Silverman and Bramwell Tovey taking part.

Although a management group supervises the various series, each of seven individual societies across the country operates independently, drawing on its knowledge of local needs and artists. Lemon points out that such is their enthusiasm for the project that many of the artists who signed on in the first seasons are still participating.

The recent Toronto concert represented a Health Arts Society debut for Canadian Opera Ensemble member Ileana Montalbetti, who complemented McGillivray's rendition of songs by Vaughan Williams and Schubert with songs by Berlioz. Together they also sang excerpts from Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, with their accompanist adding a set of Mozart piano variations on the tune popularly known as "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star."

"It was a great experience," the soprano reflected." Judging by the applause, the audience seemed to agree.

David Lemon's "simple idea" has clearly taken off. From the presentation of 280 concerts in its first year, the Health Arts Society's list mushroomed to 650 in the second. For 2012 the number is 1,600 and the goal is to present 5,000 concerts annually by 2015.

"I consider the project to be barely started," Lemon argues. And he may be right. The Bank of Montreal recently awarded the society a \$250,000 grant to expand its activities and the list of long-term care facilities interested in taking part continues to grow.