

# Marshall Pynkoski & Jeannette Zingg

From a European perspective, pioneering in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries characteristically took the form of setting sail in the wake of Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama. Had they been alive at the time, Marshall Pynkoski and Jeannette Zingg might well have signed on as crew. But before adding the swelling strains of Korngold to this quasi-Warner Brothers scenario, a sense of reality forces us to admit that Pynkoski and Zingg have actually been pioneers in reverse, taking us not forward in time but back to those very centuries, a time during which some of the new worlds worth exploring were operatic.

Prior to their arrival as active players on the Canadian operatic stage in the mid-1980s, the 17<sup>th</sup> century barely existed there. The Canadian Opera Company produced its first Monteverdi, *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, as recently as 1990, its first Cavalli, *La Calisto*, six years later. The 18<sup>th</sup> century was almost exclusively represented by Mozart. Even Handel did not appear under the auspices of Canada's largest opera company until 1999, in the shape of *Xerxes*. Moreover, few of the productions that did appear would have been recognizable to their first audiences. We were accustomed to visiting the past very much through the eyes and ears of the present, the occasional tinkling of an amplified harpsichord buried deep in the pit offering an intermittent reminder of what might have been.

Those experiences of two decades and more ago seem awfully distant now, the harpsichord often keeping company with gut-strung strings in today's productions of 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century operas and the singers on stage looking much more like their counterparts in the period engravings bequeathed to posterity. Much of the responsibility for this change, elsewhere as well as in Canada, can be traced to the work of two tall dancers who fell in love not only with each other, but also with an ideal of opera production at considerable

odds with the radical reinterpretations current on the stages of Western Europe.

Had they been less tall—Pynkoski towers five inches above the six foot mark—a more conventional career in classical ballet might have tempted them. As it was, their heights led to their being partnered as students at the Canadian College of Dance and to their discovery of a mutual interest in art, literature and history. They did pursue further studies in ballet—Pynkoski with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet and Zingg with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens—and they did dance together again as employees of the COC.

But when they asked their operatic colleagues about the masterworks of the likes of Rameau, Charpentier and Lully, they were surprised to be told that these once celebrated works were no longer stage-worthy. Having heard and greatly enjoyed some of the music from these operas in concerts by Toronto's Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra—their first date took the dancing duo to one of them—they did not find this response wholly convincing.

And so, curiosity whetted, they did some research at the Library for the Performing Arts

at Lincoln Center in New York, decided that France had to be their destination for 1983 and took advantage of contacts in the leading cabarets of Paris to audition for a year-long contract with the long-legged chorus line of the *Moulin Rouge*.

With two elevated *Moulin Rouge* salaries coming in, they could live on one and bankroll the other as a future production fund, simultaneously devoting their daylight hours to research at the Bibliothèque Nationale and the archives of the Paris Opéra. Working with a harpsichordist, Zingg learned how to co-ordinate period dance notation with the relevant musical scores, and working with Australian theatre scholar Dene Barnett, Pynkoski learned how to draw dramatic expression from the stylized acting vocabulary of the Baroque theatre.



A year later, back in Toronto, they began finding like-minded colleagues with whom to share ideas, and at the Royal Ontario Museum they found a stage on which to test them. As Pynkoski recalls: "There was a curator who wanted something to happen in the empty galleries. She would announce over the public-address system that there would be a performance in half an hour and people would come. We did four performances every Sunday. We were never paid, but in October 1986, the ROM sent us to the Art Gallery of Ontario to perform as part of a major exhibition. We staged about half of Monteverdi's *Orfeo* in the Walker Court. It was our first professional engagement." Whether one dates their company's beginning to that staging of the first two acts of *Orfeo* or to the double bill at the Royal Ontario Museum the previous November, pairing Handel's *The Choice of Hercules* with the Mozart ballet, *Les petits nœuds*, something new had clearly arrived on the Canadian scene, against all economic odds.

Living with relatives or in basement digs, Pynkoski and Zingg poured virtually all their assets into what came to be known as Opera Atelier, and as production followed production, simulating luxury on the proverbial shoestring became part of their improbable achievement.

To veteran observers of Baroque opera and dance, there have tended to be two dominant approaches, the one followed by mainstream companies, concentrating heavily on production values, the other emanating from the groves of academe, preoccupied with the replication of correct detail and often crippled by inadequate funding. Opera Atelier has brought the two approaches together. While specialists can still find things to criticize in their productions—Pynkoski and Zingg insist they are creative artists, not scholars—the public has been won over in venues from Stuttgart to Singapore. Building a creative team from developing talents has been central to their operational strategy, with Dora Rust-D'Eye their signature costumer, Gerard Gauci their frequent set designer, Kevin Fraser their chief lighting man and the Toronto Consort's David Fallis their resident music director.

It used to be said, particularly of their early productions, that the two tall dancers saw better than they heard, sometimes casting singers who looked their parts without ideally embodying them in their throats. At the same time, they have helped develop an entire generation of mostly Canadian singers who both look and sound comfortable performing opera in period style.

They admit now to having been detail-obsessed at first, sometimes missing dramatic truths by working within narrow param-

eters to create an identifiable style. "Everyone begins by being obsessed with style," Pynkoski smilingly admits, confessing that his own "epiphany" came during rehearsals for Charpentier's *Médée* in 2002, when, in a moment of emotional extremity, his French haute-contre star instinctively grabbed his hair with his hands. "It was emotionally so right," Pynkoski adds, "but you can't grab your hair this way if you're wearing a wig. So all the wigs went out and the makeup had to change."

This led in turn to a reconsideration of acting style. Pynkoski the director began stripping away detail to make it more naturalistic and his choreographic colleague followed suit. "Our actors are too big to be put in a box any more," he says. "And Zingg concurs: "Women were already beginning to get up on point before the [French] revolution," she explains. "We had to hammer our dancers' pointe shoes so they were so soft they could barely do it, but we wanted them to look convincing."

Allowing naturalism to soften the strict parameters of style has given recent Opera Atelier productions a less mannered look, easily observed by comparing last season's staging of Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* at Toronto's Elgin Theatre with its 1997 production at the Royal Alexandra. And if scholarly eyebrows rise, Pynkoski and Zingg respond by insisting that theirs is not "a museum company." Historical research guides their work, it doesn't confine it.

That work is now part of the international scene. Beginning with Charpentier's *Actéon* and Rameau's *Zaïs* in New York in 1987, the Opera Ateliers have spread the gospel of Baroque and Classical opera in Germany, Holland, Japan and Korea. In Amsterdam, they teamed up with Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, the Dutch National Ballet and the Academy of Ancient Music under

Christopher Hogwood for a televised Handelian production, *The Sorceress*. With Houston Grand Opera, they mounted a series of Purcell and Monteverdi works. And in the Royal Theatre at Versailles, cradle of the French Baroque, they mounted a *Dido and Aeneas* that later toured England, Italy and Switzerland.

In Canada, they have brought names such as Gagliano, Landi and Rousseau into the operatic repertoire. And through stylized productions of *Die Zauberflöte*, *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*, they have given familiar 18<sup>th</sup>-century repertoire a freshly older look and sound. Above all, perhaps, they have shown us how much life resides in a past once considered dead. "I take it for granted that if these pieces were extraordinary successes in their day and we aren't getting it," Pynkoski contends, "the problem is mine." Fortunately for today's audiences, as he and Zingg continue to demonstrate, so is the solution. ■■■

