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## Creativity Behind the Scenes: Preserving the Culture of Artistry

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I recently attended two performances with the Martina Arroyo Foundation's Prelude to Performance Series at the Danny Kaye Playhouse at Hunter College. Both Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffman* and Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'Amor* were simply but effectively produced -- but beautifully and engagingly staged. These young singers looked the part and acted with rare conviction from emerging artists. It's immediately clear that the success of the format and accessibility of the program was due entirely to the outstanding mentoring opportunities found within the program. One forgets (and completely forgives) the comparisons possible to larger productions like those at the Metropolitan Opera, mounted with huge budgets and experiences international stars -- because of the truth in the performances of these exceptionally trained young singers.

Ms. Arroyo was a racial pioneer in the field of opera, and was a leading soprano with the Metropolitan Opera for a generation, appearing at the Paris Opera, London's Covent Garden, Milan's La Scala, the Vienna State Opera and the Buenos Aires Teatro Colón among many other major venues. Born in Harlem, Ms. Arroyo has since "dedicated her experience and expertise to the young emerging opera singers who aspire to follow in her footsteps." Under her foundation, Ms. Arroyo was able to create her Prelude to Performance program in 2005, crafted to address the skills that opera singers need to know to have a successful career.

The Prelude to Performance program is six weeks of classes, music coachings, stagings and masterclasses which result in the performance of fully staged operas with orchestra in original language. Sessions include Role Class (character development, historical perspective, understanding of text) taught by Ms. Arroyo, Libretto Class (which treats the libretto of the operas like a play, and, depending on the language, includes sessions with foreign language professors), stage craft, movement and combat, sessions with costume designers and makeup artists, as well as Master Classes with leading singers from the Met (live streamed for accessibility on the web for the first time this year.) The program for students 20-35, has been tuition-free since 2011, with a goal of providing stipends for singers in the near future. As a result of deciding to make acceptance into the program based on the voice alone as opposed to financial means, the quality and ethnic diversity of the students shot through the roof. (Fundors interested in breaking barriers: Pay attention to this model!) This is partly funded by their annual Gala (their tenth anniversary event will be on November 4).



Ms. Arroyo working young singers in her Role Class.

The culmination of this program is what I saw over a weekend, two exceptional productions which featured the most committed and polished young talent rising to the challenge of timeless repertory with confidence and sincerity. This is not only the future of opera, but a strong way to build younger audiences; the second night I brought a few friends -- all under 40 -- who said that it was a wonderful (non-intimidating) opera experience, with tickets in their price range. They said it felt fresh -- like bread out of the oven.

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