

TRAINING



Christopher Ainslie and Rebecca Ryan in Independent Opera's *Orlando* at Lilian Baylis Theatre, Sadler's Wells, London

Striking out on their own

Breaking in to the world of opera can be a tricky feat. However, thanks to Independent Opera, graduates now have a chance to win bursaries to help them on their way, writes **Susan Elkin**

"When I finished my postgraduate studies at the Royal College of Music last year, I was lucky enough to get some quite prestigious work offers," says counter tenor Christopher Ainslie, who won this year's Michael Oliver prize in the Handel Singing Competition. "But there simply weren't enough gigs to pay the bills and the stress of the financial worry was beginning to tell on my voice."

Ainslie's problem is a common one for recent graduate opera singers. And it's made worse because the jobs are routinely offered two or three years in advance, so there is a big cash-free interval.

He has now been saved by a year's Sponsored Artist's Fellowship from Independent Opera. It provides £16,000 towards living costs spread over two years. "I am immensely grateful," Ainslie says. "It means I can go on training through lessons with top teachers and I have time

to make the right career choices."

Independent Opera at Sadler's Wells, now launched for five years with £500,000 private funding, is a pretty unusual training initiative. It is funding five other postgraduate voice fellowships along with one each for an artistic director, designer and conductor.

It is also supporting six final-year students at four London music colleges, and one each at RSMD and Royal Northern College of Music with vocal scholarships. These students, selected by their colleges and all studying opera, get an Independent award of £5,000 if they're in London, and £4,000 if they are in Glasgow or Manchester.

Colin Lawson, director of the Royal College of Music, sums up the significance of these awards: "The Independent Opera Vocal Scholarship at the RCM will provide wonderful new opportunities for access

to professional training of the highest quality."

Independent Opera's newest award is in partnership with Wigmore Hall. Singer Matthew Rose is the first recipient of the £20,000 Wigmore Hall/Independent Opera award spread over two years. There is also a choreographer's fellowship.

Independent Opera is funded by American banker and philanthropist William Bollinger and his wife Judy. He has also sponsored the substantial refurbishment of the Lilian Baylis Theatre at Sadler's Wells with an Independent Opera donation of £300,000. In its emergent stages Independent Opera has been linked with Sadler's Wells for several years.

"Independent Opera grew from my family's meeting with South African-born pianist Alessandro Talevi, who came to our house to play accompaniments for our son Douglas, who plays violin," says Bollinger, who soon discovered Talevi's charismatic music directing talents and began to finance his work with singers and performers as a way of giving opportunity to new talent.

Last year, Independent Opera at Sadler's Wells – as it is known – mounted an acclaimed production of Handel's *Orlando*. Next month it produces a double bill of Elizabeth Maconchy's cameo operas *The Sofa* and *The Departure*. Madeleine Boyd, who holds Independent Opera's first Designer's Fellowship, has designed the productions. This will be the company's third season.

These shows work well in the intimacy of the Lilian Baylis, which has no fly tower

and no orchestra pit. "The Maconchy pieces are scored for a 14-piece orchestra, so we use the Bronte Quartet with the Aurora Ensemble with a few augments conducted by Dominic Wheeler," says Talevi, adding that Independent Opera's casting tries to strike a balance between the experienced and less experienced performers.

And now Independent Opera has also put itself firmly on the map by launching itself as a training support organisation, with its scholarship and fellowship programme guaranteed five years' funding by Bollinger, who also has philanthropic interests at Wigmore Hall, Donmar Warehouse, Victoria & Albert Museum and the Vatican Museums.

"I knew we had to do something when soprano Rebecca Ryan sang so magnificently in our *Orlando* last year; that world-renowned singer Anne Evans, who came to one of the performances, offered to teach her," says Bollinger. "But Rebecca couldn't afford to take up the offer." Like Ainslie, Ryan now has a fellowship with which to pay for lessons.

Bollinger is particularly pleased that the company is mounting a concert version of *Orlando* in summer 2008. It has also been invited to revive its production of *Orlando* at a festival in Prague in 2009 to mark the 250th anniversary of Handel's death – one of only two opera companies invited to participate.

"We want to be a platform for new talent and to support all aspects of opera production," says Bollinger.

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