

The show goes on: Despite obstacles, Thirteen Strings closes 40th season with Haydn opera



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Sometimes it can seem as if everything is conspiring against a project's success.

You could say that is the case for the Thirteen Strings production of the Haydn opera *L'isola disabitata* (The Desert Island).

For Kevin Mallon, the artistic director of Thirteen Strings, the project began two years ago when he was the interim Artistic Director at Opera Lyra.

At that time, Opera Lyra had a young artists program which would involve a program for the young singers who were affiliated with the company, eventually leading to a small production.

Mallon, in an interview, said he suggested putting the production together with his orchestra and it was agreed as a nice way to help Thirteen Strings celebrate its 40th anniversary season.

Once Opera Lyra was disbanded, Mallon said, Thirteen Strings was left with a season that had been planned, brochures printed and tickets sold and a sense that the show must go on.

But to achieve that, Mallon had to move quickly.

"I reached out to the Canada Council and Ontario Arts Council and both gave us a modest amount. Former Opera Lyra board members and supporters also contributed," he said in an e-mail interview.

The result is a staging on Friday (May 27) at 8 p.m. at Dominion Chalmers United Church. It will close the 40th season. Originally scheduled for three shows, there will now be only one. Those with tickets for May 28 and 29 can go on Friday night.

As Mallon explained, *The Desert Island*, itself, had a bit of a bumpy beginning.

"Haydn composed more than two dozen works for the stage," Mallon said. "Arguably the most impressive year of opera activity was 1779, the year Haydn oversaw the premieres of three of his operas, including *L'isola disabitata*. It premiered on Dec. 6, the name day of Prince Nikolaus of Esterházy, the composer's patron.

"On Nov. 18 of that year, a fire broke out in the ballroom at the family palace. The damage was devastating. The musical instruments were lost to the flames," Mallon wrote.

The fire did destroy many of Haydn's manuscripts, Mallon said, but not *The Desert Island*, which was in another part of the palace and not touched by fire.

"It feels," Mallon said, "like both for Haydn and for Thirteen Strings, putting this opera on took huge determination."

Mallon said *The Desert Island* is not performed often, in fact, he said he can't think of a recent production in Canada.

Part of the joy of this staging, Mallon said, is the fact that he loves working with young artists.

"And for this we have four great young singers and a young director. I always felt this was the way forward for Opera Lyra, but there really wasn't time to develop their young artist program."

Haydn's original setting was on a desert island where two sisters have taken refuge. The Thirteen Strings performance is set in a church where the sisters have sought sanctuary. The world outside the doors is post apocalyptic with few survivors. In this performance the orchestra is on stage.

The work is important, Mallon believes.

"Musically, it is interesting and important because there is accompanied recitative throughout — i.e. none with just the harpsichord. But on a less technical note, the work is full of beautifully crafted music, arias as beautiful as those crafted by Mozart and a simple story, which is depicted with charm."

Starring in the performance are:

- Valérie Bélanger, soprano
- Maude Brunet, mezzo-soprano
- Stephan Bell, tenor
- Bradley Christensen, baritone
- Alaina Viau, stage director

