

# Haydn opera a rare treat for Ottawa ears

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## L'Isola disabitata At Dominion Chalmers Reviewed Friday night

Haydn is known as the father of the symphony and the string quartet, but the 15 operas he wrote are orphans. Although they made for pleasant courtly entertainment back in the day, Haydn's theatrical works are seldom performed anymore. A shame, since they contain such enchanting music.



Opera Lyra was due to present a run of Haydn's *L'Isola disabitata* (The Deserted Island) as part of its 2015-16 season. When the opera company closed shop last fall, Thirteen Strings announced it would honour the commitment in part and give one performance of the opera in a semi-staged version. Friday night's concert at Dominion Chalmers United Church featured the chamber orchestra supplemented by players from the NAC Orchestra, along with a quartet of vocal soloists.

The libretto is your typical lightweight Esterhazy Palace fare, involving two sisters, their respective loves, romantic misunderstandings, pirates, and the desert island of the title. The mediocre plots of these operas probably contributed to their fall from fashion. Too bad Haydn didn't have a dramatic genius like Da Ponte at his side.

The young quartet of vocalists brought spirit and charm to their roles. As the optimistic younger sister Sylvia, soprano Valérie Bélanger is a star soubrette in the making, with a clear, sunny tone and lively stage presence. She has ringing top notes, but her lower register needs more development. Mezzo Maude Brunet was the glum older sister Costanza. Her voice has an alluring black-coffee colour, but she lacks expressive commitment. Everything is delivered at the same

intensity, and it's difficult sometimes to tell whether she is singing about death or love.

Tenor Stephan Bell was Costanza's long-lost husband Gernando. He has an attractive, light lyric tenor, but it's not an agile voice, and he struggled even with Haydn's relatively simple ornamentation. As the sidekick Enrico, baritone Bradley Christensen displayed the most well-rounded instrument; a little erratic in the high notes but otherwise focused, rich, and sympathetically communicative.

Director Alaina Viau gave the piece a Mad Max post-apocalyptic feel, with lots of leather vests, leggings, raggedy laundry and random tarps. Gernando and Enrico enter Rambo-style, waving pistols around and looking ready to kick some pirate butt. Given the age of the cast and the confines of the space, it worked well enough, although the rustling plastic sheets created irritating background noise.

It's hard to have all the parts of an opera moving smoothly when the singers mostly have their backs to the conductor, but Kevin Mallon kept a pretty tight ship. There were lovely solos in the finale from chambermaster Manuela Milani, cellist Julian Armour, flautist Camille Churchfield and bassoonist Ben Glossop.