

A&E

The 'high wire' of high notes

Tenor Anthony Kearns embraces the challenge of 'Lucia Di Lammermoor'
BY NANCY STETSON



ANTHONY KEARNS IS A CHARMER.

He could not only coax the paint off the wall but melt it back into liquid.

There's the musical lilt of his Irish accent.

And then there's his singing.

At not yet 40, he possesses a rich, full tenor.

"Voices like his don't come along very often," says Steffanie Pearce, general/ artistic director of Opera Naples. "It's a voice-of-the-century voice."

Mr. Kearns is perhaps best known as one of the founding members of The Irish Tenors.

But on Jan. 15 and 16, he makes his official U.S. full-scale opera debut with Opera Naples, performing as Edgardo Di Ravenswood in "Lucia Di Lammermoor."

The role in the tragic romance is a demanding one for a tenor. Many shy away from it, because it requires that the singer stay "in a high spot all the time. It's relentless," Mr. Kearns says. "Where the music sits for the tenor is quite difficult. And one has to be able

to sit up there with some ease. If not, it can knock you off your plate, as they say.

“It’s high-wire act,” he adds. “You’re up and at it from the word go. There’s no moment where you can just stroll your way through... In some operas you have sections where you’re not sitting in the stratosphere and you can hold back, or have respites.”

But not with “Lucia Di Lammermoor.”

“You have to be firing on all cylinders,” to sing the tenor part, Mr. Kearns says. “That’s the bottom line. It’s a tough sing.”

He performed in “Carmen” in Ireland this past July and describes it as “a walk in the park” compared to “Lucia Di Lammermoor.”

“If I can get through this opera, I can get through any of them.”



Anthony Kearns

KIRSTEN CALLAGHAN / COURTESY PHOTO

Opera all the way

Gaetano Donizetti’s opera tells the tale of star-crossed lovers from two fighting clans in Scotland.

Edgardo and Lucia are lovers.

“They’re meeting secretly, behind everyone’s back,” Mr. Kearns says. “But the story doesn’t work out the way he’d like it. She’s forced to marry another... She goes a bit crazy, in true opera form.”

Last season, Mr. Kearns sang the part of Romeo in Opera Naples’ semi-staged production of “Romeo and Juliet – Then and Now,” which also contained selections from “West Side Story.”

(Ms. Pearce explains about a semistaged production: “There are costumes and

movement, but minimal furniture on stage. You perform the highlights. It's like a Reader's Digest condensed version of the opera.")

But this production of "Lucia Di Lammermoor" is a grand opera, what many think of when they think of opera: a fullout, no-holds-barred, dramatic spectacle, complete with a chorus of about 30 and an orchestra with an equal number of musicians.

Singing opposite Mr. Kearns in the role as Lucia is coloratura soprano Audrey Elizabeth Luna, who made her Metropolitan Opera debut last year as Queen of the Night in Mozart's "The Magic Flute." Baritone Christopher Holloway, who has previously performed with Opera Naples in "La Traviata" and "La Boheme," plays Lucia's brother. Robert Swedberg, former general director of Orlando Opera, is stage director, and Metropolitan Opera Conductor Franz Vote conducts the orchestra.

Setting the stage

The performances are the company's first grand opera of the 2010-2011 season. Opening night is black-tie optional and includes a champagne reception and a fundraising auction. Tickets are \$145.

For the second year, Opera Naples is staging its grand production at Miromar Design Center in Estero.

"It's an unusual center (for an opera)," Mr. Kearns says. "It's a lovely venue. It's like a cruise ship, with the balconies, and we're using all of that open space."

Smaller companies that don't have the funding bigger opera companies enjoy often are forced be creative in the space in which they perform, he says, adding he has performed opera outdoors, in courtyards of castles and "in all sorts of locations."

Ms. Pearce elaborates about the grand opera at the design center: "We have a set especially designed for circumstances where there isn't a curtain. It's beautiful... with fjord rock formations 17 feet tall that move around into different positions, to create outdoor and indoor scenes."

'Fire in the belly'

Although he wanted to sing professionally as a young man Mr. Kearns, a native of Ireland, studied catering and hotel management. He sang at weddings and at local events and kept entering contests.

What kept him going?

"It's a case of you have to want to do it," he says. "You have to have the fire in the belly, the hunger for it."

If he didn't sing, he'd be like a fish out of water.

"You need air, you need oxygen," he says. "I need to sing."

And it's not for the notoriety, he insists. "I could care less for applause, adulation and praise. It does nothing for me. I could perform for one person or a thousand. If I'm singing well and am happy doing it, then that's all the adulation or praise I need."

In 1993, he entered a contest called "Ireland's Search for a Tenor." It was a play on the word "tenner," which is what Ireland's new 10-pound note was called. He sang "Danny Boy" on the phone and qualified to become a contestant, and then had to hitchhike to Dublin to participate in the finals.

He felt intimidated when he heard the other contestants warming up, singing scales. A self-described "country bumpkin," Mr. Kearns had had no professional vocal training. He sang "The Impossible Dream" from "Don Quixote" and, as an encore, "Danny Boy." "I was looking for an opportunity to be introduced to singing teachers, to just get my name out there," he says.

He won the contest.

"I was as green as grass, as they say. I went for it, and they thought I was the best. They must have liked the raw talent. They must have thought I had potential."

On the panel was Veronica Dunne, a renowned voice teacher at the Leinster School of Music, who has performed with Joan Sutherland. She instantly recognized Mr. Kearns' talent. He went on to study with her for three years.

"I was introduced to classical music and opera," he says. "Before, my idea of classical music was Broadway and musicals. It wasn't my cup of tea, as they say." The more he learned about opera, however, the more he realized he should be doing it.

"I had a voice and I wanted to use it to the best of my ability. Singing, realizing I was a tenor, and singing the repertoire... it's like the hands and the glove."

Opera was the pop music of its day, he says.

"Whether it's in duets, quartets or sextets, when you hear the singers working together and how the music is written for them, it's quite phenomenal. You can have six voices all doing their own thing on the stage all at once, and you can hear it. It's exciting. It's beautifully written music... unparalleled, compared to the music of today. This music has come through the centuries. It's quite amazing."

Opera as acting

In 1998, Mr. Kearns became a founding member of The Irish Tenors. In addition to their native Ireland, they've toured the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Their 10 CDs have sold millions of copies.

Mr. Kearns continues to sing with the trio and also gives solo concerts, but he wants to

do more opera. "I enjoy it more so than anything else," he says. "It's acting through music on stage."

As a soloist, he mixes it up, giving his audience Irish songs, popular opera, ballads and tunes from Broadway musicals. "I create a concert with an ebb and flow, moments of fun, nostalgia, despair, more fun. A roller coaster of emotions."

It's what pays the bills.

It's also what got him acknowledged as Ireland's Finest (Living) Tenor at the Dublin National Concert Hall's Silver Jubilee in 2006.

"(But) the opera for me is my pleasure and fun," he says. "It gives me a chance to work on my voice and develop the opera craft."

He sings opera because it is his passion.

"I can assure you, and people can tell you, it's not for the money they go into opera," he says. "For opera, you eat, drink and sleep this music and the score for months in advance. Then you're dragged over the coals, pulled asunder, pushed from pillar to post by the director and conductor.

"What's it all for? In the end, to do a good job and sing this music that's been sung for hundreds of years, to put your stamp on it.

"At the end of the day, when we pass on in life, people will look on and say, 'Soand so did a great job.' To be remembered for something worthwhile... it's having a legacy."

A tenor is a tenor

Though a founding member of The Irish Tenors, he seems not keen on being called one. "To stamp someone with the label, 'Irish tenor' ...why aren't Italians called Italian tenors? A tenor is a tenor.

"I'm a lyric tenor," he says. "People have invented a new (term), 'Irish tenor.' Automatically, if people see a concert advertised and it says 'Irish tenor,' they think it's going to be all Irish music. Yes, I'm a tenor, I'm Irish, but I can deliver the goods, not just Irish music.

"I want people to know the other side of me: He can sing 'Tura Lura' or 'Danny Boy' 'til the cows come home. But when he stands up, he can hold his own with the best of them."

In the know

“Lucia Di Lammermoor” by Opera

Naples;

When: 7:30 p.m. Sat., Jan 15, and 4:30 p.m. Sun., Jan 16 && Where: Miromar Design Center, 10800

Corkscrew Road, Estero && Cost: \$145 for Saturday evening, includes champagne reception and fundraising auction; \$25-\$95 for Sunday afternoon. && Info: 514-7464 or www.operanaples.org

More opera to come

Here’s what Opera Naples is planning for the remainder of the season: “Carmen” – Feb. 18 and 20 at Gulf Coast High School

Bizet’s opéra comique features some of opera’s most famous melodies as it weaves the tale of Carmen, a beautiful Gypsy with a free spirit and a fiery temper. Mezzo-soprano Audrey Babcock stars in the title role. && “Requiem Mass” – March 31 and April 2 at Moorings Presbyterian Church

Opera Naples’ grandest scale production to date will feature more than 150 performers, including the Metropolitan Opera’s leading mezzo-soprano, Laura Vlasak Nolen, Canadian Opera tenor Kurt Lehmann and Opera Naples’ own soprano, Steffanie Pearce. The cast will perform under the baton of William Noll.

For more information, call (800) 771-1041 or visit www.operanaples.com.

To schedule a media interview with Mr. Kearns, contact Kirsten Fedewa (on behalf of Anthony Kearns) at 202.365.6936 or kirsten@fedewaconsulting.com