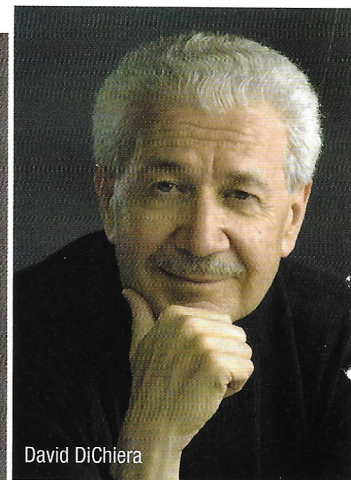
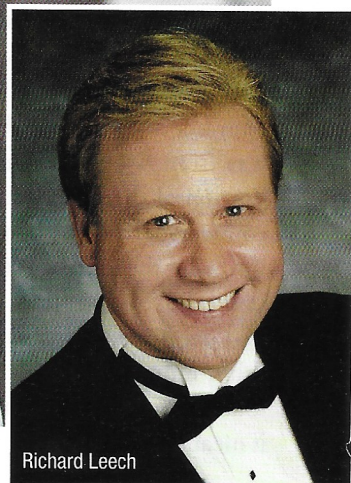




photo by John Grigaitis



David DiChiera



Richard Leech

In Michigan, Richard Leech Helps Train Young Professionals

BY GREG WAXBERG

Michigan Opera Theatre is expanding its Young Artist Program and legendary tenor Richard Leech joins David DiChiera to lead the way.

Previously, it was four to six weeks. Now, it is nine months.

“It” refers to the amount of time that young artists can spend in training at Michigan Opera Theatre (MOT). Thanks to new funding, including a grant from the William Davidson Foundation, and the hiring of renowned tenor Richard Leech, MOT offers Michigan Opera Theatre Studio, which recently completed its first season.

MOT Studio was conceived of by MOT Founder and Artistic Director David DiChiera, who has supported apprentice artists since the company's inception in 1971. While MOT still offers apprentice contracts for local

singers, MOT Studio is an expanded, dedicated program for professional singers from around the country. “I thought it would be good to have people here for nine months, to have more comprehensive time with them,” DiChiera says.

Why did he choose Richard Leech to run MOT Studio? “He has had an incredible career and has been very committed to working with young singers,” DiChiera says. “People are excited to work with him. He has demonstrated a real interest in helping young singers get opportunities to advance their careers.” Leech's position, director of resident artist programs,

actually encompasses a trio of programs that involve resident artists—MOT Studio, Education and Community Programs (in-school touring, summer programs, and public concerts), and Opera Clubs (one-hour performances in local communities).

For Leech, who was teaching privately and is on the voice faculty of the Opera Institute at Rutgers University, the timing of MOT's search was fortuitous. “I happened to be looking for this type of opportunity,” he relates. “Although teaching in a university setting is extremely satisfying, I lived my life in opera houses. So, as satisfying as university teaching is, it's not the same as

being in the energy of an opera house.”

But fear not, Rutgers students, Leech will continue to be an adjunct professor. “It’s doable,” Leech says. “I can still serve my students in the opera institute one day each week. Both companies, Rutgers and MOT, are supportive of what I want to do, and it means a lot to me to have that kind of support.”

Leech was also attracted to the position because he immediately felt at home with MOT and its people, processes, and theater, which he describes as a “*stunning* post-turn-of-the-20th-century opera house—one of the most glorious opera houses I’ve ever seen. It is an environment that is primed for people to succeed in—large enough for opera at a high artistic level.”

By creating MOT Studio, DiChiera seeks to find “talent that would benefit from comprehensive coaching and performance opportunities to get to the next level of their careers. We want to

give young singers as much support, training, and coaching [as possible].” Aligned with that ideology, Leech’s priorities are to identify areas in which singers can improve and to create an environment in which the artists feel safe, nurtured, and comfortable enough to take chances and fail—all as they look to succeed. He also gives Studio Artists access to professionals from the University of Michigan and MOT who can offer a range of perspectives on the business of singing.

If it seems like DiChiera and Leech describe the program in general terms, they do so on purpose. “It’s hard to define,” Leech says. “There’s no ‘cookie cutter’ for making a Young Artist Program because there’s no ‘cookie cutter’ for developing each individual artist. Everyone is unique.”

Appropriately, MOT Studio’s audition process in Detroit and New York, during which DiChiera and Leech listen to 100-

plus applicants to ultimately select about five singers, also has fairly vague criteria. “Some companies are specific with their requirements,” Leech says. “From my perspective, everyone’s path is different, so I don’t want to impose criteria that might eliminate the perfect singer for the program.”

The most suitable applicant likely has a master’s degree and some professional or Young Artist Program experience and has performed several roles. “I don’t expect a full lyric singer to sing something Baroque simply because I want to hear every style,” Leech continues. “That’s very academic, and this is not an academic business. They should bring what they believe they sing well, with a bit of variety in style and language.”

The handful of singers who are chosen to be MOT Studio Artists benefit from what DiChiera says is “pretty much unlimited” exposure to

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(L to R): Michigan Opera Theatre Studio Artists: coach/accompanist Gordon Schermer, mezzo-soprano Raehann Bryce-Davis, tenor Joseph Michael Brent, soprano Angela Theis, bass Brent Michael Smith, and baritone Jeff Byrnes



photo by Mitty Carter

pianists, coaches, singers, conductors, and stage directors who visit MOT throughout the season (Martin Katz, Kathleen Kelly, and Stephen Lord, to name just three); participation in concerts and community performances, such as the Opera Clubs; the possibility of singing or covering a role in MOT's four mainstage productions; and, perhaps most notably, a fully staged production designed specifically for *them*.

"Each year, I will try to find an opera that will best suit these young artists," DiChiera says. For 2015–16, he chose *The Tender Land* because of its roles for soprano, mezzo, tenor, baritone, and bass-baritone. DiChiera and Leech selected *Little Women* for 2016–17. "It can be a case of 'the cart before the horse' if we must pick a production before we have singers," Leech explains, "but we still make the choice with the casting of the Studio Artists as our focus." Studio Artists perform in venues throughout the state.

When it comes to working with each singer, Leech emphasizes always singing with meaning, a tenant of his lifelong mentors Peyton Hibbitt and the late Carmen Savoca, co-founders of Tri-Cities Opera. "When the homework falls into place, you 'touch' your audience with your meaning, instead of 'impressing' them with your voice. That is why we sing."

He also focuses on diction, interpretation, and musicality. "With regard to interpretation, often the largest challenge for a singer is to leave the 'student' behind and become the 'artist.' We spend so much time getting everything 'right' as we

learn the countless areas of this craft in college, but the artists must now take all of that, apply their own decisions, and make the piece their own. We still want it 'right,' but we want so much more—artistry."

Studio Artists also receive language study. "This year," Leech says, "we did a concentrated series of German language classes followed up with individual instruction, as well as Italian as time permitted. We have plans to continue this, as well as provide Czech and Russian diction with [University of Michigan] Professor Timothy Cheek and other language support based on individual needs and desires."

Leech meets with each Studio Artist several times each week, if not daily. On a weekly basis, each artist has coaching and workshop sessions with him and at least one session with a staff coach/accompanist, in addition to regular coaching sessions and classes with principal guest coaches Kathleen Kelly and Martin Katz. Masterclasses are also on the schedule, presented in 2015–16 by Martina Arroyo, Carol Vaness, Bernard Uzan, Dean Anthony, and other guests. DiChiera works with Studio Artists from a birds-eye view, making sure that all elements for MOT Studio are in place and mentoring the artists by offering feedback and discussing future plans.

One singer he has mentored, soprano Angela Theis, sang supporting roles as a MOT Apprentice prior to joining MOT Studio for 2015–16. She earned a master of music in vocal performance at New England Conservatory of Music, completed a fellowship at the Universität Mozarteum in

Angela Theis as Laurie in Michigan Opera
Theatre's production of *The Tender Land*, 2016

Salzburg, was a resident artist with Utah Opera and Syracuse Opera, and has sung leading roles with regional companies.

Besides having further opportunities to work with DiChiera, Theis was eager to be involved in MOT's mainstage productions and MOT Studio's opera. "The MOT Studio program helped me go outside of my comfort zone and take risks as a principal artist," she says. Theis advises future MOT Studio Artists to "have goals that are individual to *you* . . . but be flexible and surrender to change when needed."

Tenor Joseph Michael Brent, another Studio Artist in 2015–16, was initially interested in the program because of Richard Leech and the prospect of a nine-month paid contract with health insurance. With a master's degree and doctor of musical arts from the University of Georgia, and having sung leading roles for UGA's opera productions for four years and leading roles with other programs, Brent loved the performance opportunities, masterclasses, coaching, language training, audition techniques, and career guidance offered by MOT Studio. He also liked the separation of MOT Studio from educational outreach, for which MOT has a separate group of "touring ensemble" artists. "Most educational outreach, in my observation and understanding, primarily involves traveling to local cities and performing one-act operas or heavily-cut English translations of traditional operas. As MOT Studio Artists, we are assigned to mainstage roles and treated like mainstage artists."


Reflecting on his improvements, Brent highlights the individual and small group lessons in German, since he lacked formal education in German grammar and conversation, and the production of *The Tender Land*—the only American opera in which he has performed, and his first time working with conductor Suzanne Mallare Acton and stage director Kristine McIntyre. "Performing in this opera exposed me to new repertoire and demanded that my acting craft be as polished as my singing craft," he says. Brent also praises the flexibility, encouragement, and support for Studio Artists to compete, audition, and accept other performing opportunities while still fulfilling MOT Studio's contractual obligations.



photo by John Griggaitis

His advice for future MOT Studio Artists: "Use every resource offered by the company to your advantage, be self-sufficient because the program is not school, and understand that the program is intended to polish burgeoning opera talent primarily through mainstage performance. The singer with a lot of stage experience, a strong technique, savvy business sense, and personal integrity would benefit most."

Greg Waxberg's bio can be found on p. 31. ©



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