



Anne-Carolyn Bird with Robert Cinnante, director of Virginia Opera's Education & Outreach, at opening night of the 2016 season

## TWO SIDES to Anne-Carolyn Bird's Story

BY GREG WAXBERG

One year ago this month, *CS*'s cover story featured Anne-Carolyn Bird and her husband, Matthew Burns, two singers on the road with their young family. This year, we catch up again with Bird to find out how her family's changing needs led to an unexpected but perfect career change.

**T**iming worked well for soprano Anne-Carolyn Bird and for Virginia Opera. Their paths had crossed before, and each was seeking something that the other was able to provide.

Until 2016, Virginia Opera had an artistic coordinator and an executive assistant. Even though one of those people had somewhat of an artistic background,

President and CEO Russell Allen and Principal Conductor and Artistic Advisor Adam Turner decided that they needed someone with an even deeper artistic background, particularly an expertise in opera production, to combine the responsibilities of both positions. "It's nice to have somebody who, for example, is aware of operatic characters," Allen explains, "who can proofread artist bios and spot any errors in opera titles . . . there's a myriad list of 'little things' that would be second nature to somebody who has the artistic background that we were seeking."

So, the company reorganized the two jobs into one, that of executive/artistic coordinator.

Meanwhile, Bird was at a crossroads in her life. She and her husband, bass-baritone Matthew Burns, were constantly traveling with their two children and ultimately realized that the family needed stability. "Our six-year-old son wanted to be in a house," Bird relates. "He was on the road with us, but wanted to come home to 'his' room. When he expressed that, it became obvious that we needed to slow down."

Though not necessarily a voice teacher—she considers herself more of a mentor who loves working with younger singers—Bird applied for teaching positions at colleges and universities because she believed that she needed to "cast a wide net." Then she read an advertisement for the new executive/artistic coordinator position at Virginia Opera, where she and her husband had performed five times between them.

Requirements included a general knowledge of the opera industry, computer skills such as Microsoft Word and Microsoft Excel, the ability to interact with donors and board members, organizational skills, and the handling of basic financial matters such as payroll and ordering music.

Administration had not crossed her mind up to that point, but "I read it and thought, 'Let me put together a résumé.' Knowing the company made it *much* easier to consider taking a job like that because I knew a little bit about the company, and we know the city." What was Bird able to put on her résumé?

It turns out that she held secretarial jobs in college *and* worked in as many areas of the performing arts center at the University of Georgia as she could, whether that meant selling tickets and subscriptions for the box office or working in stage management or house management. "I wanted to know as much as possible about how the art form works," Bird recalls. "I always had an interest in the 'big picture' of opera, and any necessary training was provided on the job. They knew they were hiring a sophomore who had never done these things."

This background makes it easier to appreciate why, aside from the stability aspect, she applied to Virginia

Opera. "All of it appealed to the parts of me that weren't really tapped into as a performer. I love the business/organizational side. I *love* making a spreadsheet. I love making lists and getting things accomplished. What appealed to me most was the opportunity to dive head-first into another side of the business and to learn it from the inside out. This was what I wanted to do, what I wanted to spend the next many years learning about."

As executive/artistic coordinator, Bird has three primary areas of responsibility. First, she serves as an artistic coordinator for the Artistic Department, which essentially means that she is the liaison between that department and the cast and chorus, including working with stage management on schedules and contracting supers and chorus members. She is also a liaison with the Virginia Opera Herndon Foundation Emerging Artists Program. Second, Bird provides support for Allen and Turner, such as by keeping track of their schedules, acting as a sounding board for ideas and artistic decisions, and ordering orchestra parts.

Third, she is general assistant to the boards of Virginia Opera—a big responsibility. The company has three separate markets (Norfolk, Richmond, and Fairfax) with distinct audience bases, distinct marketing needs, and distinct fundraising needs, so there are three separate boards of governors. With that in mind, Bird is a liaison between Allen and all of those board members, necessitating her attendance at many board meetings.

Then there are special projects. "We occasionally do non-mainstage events that are still community events," Allen says, citing as an example last season's "La Bohème Unplugged," which offered attendees "everything they need to know about the opera in one hour." These performances by emerging artists are held in various locations so that the company can reach broader audiences. "There will be future projects like that, which Anne-Carolyn can help coordinate and get up and running. The Production Department is involved, too, but she can make sure the artistic needs are met."

Interestingly, while Bird is overseeing artistic and executive issues, she acknowledges that she's not sure where the executive side of her personality comes from—possibly from her parents. "My father was an officer in the Air Force, and my mother is well put-together," Bird says. "Neither of them was in business, but I had great models for leadership. I feel confident interacting with board members, but I had a *very* steep learning curve in the financial area—I knew nothing about it. I've sat in on financial meetings and learned to make sense of reports and the artistic budget. I've made plenty of mistakes, but my colleagues are helping me learn the ropes."

And therein lies the key that makes this whole arrangement work. Allen and Turner were not concerned

Columbus State University

# Schwob School of Music

Voice Studies

## Alumni

**Maureen McKay, soprano**

Metropolitan Opera, Komische Oper Berlin

**Michael Sumuel, baritone**

Finalist, 2012 Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions; San Francisco Opera; Houston Grand Opera; Glyndebourne Festival (England)

**Paula Sides, soprano**

English Opera Company

**Gwendolyn Reid, mezzo soprano**

Universität der Künste, Berlin, Germany

**Kimberli Render, soprano**

First Place Winner, Denver Lyric Opera Guild Competition

## Faculty

**Earl Coleman**

*William and Isabelle Curry Eminent Scholar Chair in Voice*

**Kimberly Cone**

**Michelle Murphy DeBruyn**

**Dian Lawler-Johnson**

**Constantina Tsolainou**

*Paul S. and Jean R. Amos Distinguished Chair in Music*

choral | studio | opera

### Degrees

BA in Music | BM in Music Performance | MM in Music Performance  
BM in Music Education

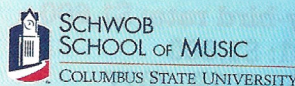
### Awards

Over \$800,000 in music scholarships annually

**Woodruff Award:** For entering undergraduate students. Winners receive full tuition, room and board, plus a \$5,000 stipend. Video applications due March 1

**Assistantships:** Tuition plus stipend for qualifying graduates

For audition and scholarship information, please visit our website



[ColumbusState.edu/music](http://ColumbusState.edu/music)

Bird and Matthew Burns as Susanna and Figaro in Virginia Opera's production of *The Marriage of Figaro*, 2013

photo by David A. Beloff



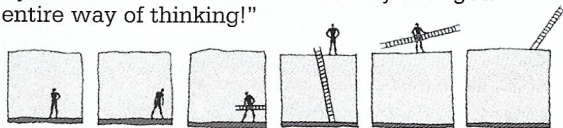
## nautilus music-theater

### The 2017 Wesley Balk Opera/Music-Theater Institute

An innovative and intensive three-week session featuring an outstanding staff of directors, coaches, and instructors working in a wonderfully stimulating, noncompetitive developmental environment!

#### For performers, directors, and coaches

"I've been stretched body, mind, and soul · I'm ready to embrace new challenges and situations full of imagination, creativity, sensitivity and an acceptance of myself I've never had before · It truly changed my entire way of thinking!"



**June 25 to July 15, 2017**

at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, MN

[www.wesleybalk.org](http://www.wesleybalk.org) · 651-298-9913

[balk@nautilusmusictheater.org](mailto:balk@nautilusmusictheater.org)

**TUITION: Special early-bird rate: \$1,600**

**After March 31: \$1,800**

**Registration due April 29, 2017**

that Bird did not have experience or knowledge in certain areas because some things can be taught. "Administrative and functional tasks are easy to learn," Allen says. "Having an artistic background was the driving factor for the reorganization."

This means that, just like she did in college, Bird is learning on the job—and excited about doing so. "This business is so multifaceted. I would love to run a company someday, so the more that I can learn, the better," she says. "I don't have time to go back to school, so the only way I can learn is on the fly."

Now that she is settled into her new role, Bird can afford to be reflective. "My philosophy is that the next step always presents itself when it's time," she says of her decision to reduce her singing commitments and find stability. "In January 2016, I had a conversation with my manager and said that I didn't want to be away from my family unless I was really interested in a project. I'm not saying 'yes' to everything anymore—it's not worth it to be away from my family for so long just to be able to say that I'm working. I'm going to be more selective, and there will be substantially less singing now that I have a full-time job that's perfect for me. I had a day of mourning because my performing career would never be the same, but I was fine after a day because I knew I was making the right decision."

Other singers might wonder, "Could this kind of decision be in my future?" Allen says that Virginia Opera's new position could represent a trend among opera companies to merge the two areas, creating

opportunities for those with talent, intelligence, experience, and ability. "Anne-Carolyn is great with patrons, donors, and board members," he says, "and can readily relate to singers, choristers, and orchestra members. Somebody like that is desirable."

For singers who are interested in gaining administrative experience and other insights into the opera industry, Bird highlights donor events as prime opportunities. "When you are asked to attend a donor dinner or donor cocktail party, don't hang out with the singers. Ask the contact person at the event who you should talk to. Learn how to interact with donors and learn about the development person's work." She also emphasizes organizational and computer skills, as well as volunteering at local theaters. "Keep your eyes open for opportunities that are not just about being onstage. Recognize all the other facets that go into your business and expose yourself to as many of them as possible."

Ironically, while Bird was looking for opportunities to teach, her husband was pursuing administrative jobs, but now he is an adjunct professor in the Voice Department at Virginia Commonwealth University, and she is an administrator.

"The feedback I've received from friends and colleagues has been overwhelmingly positive," Bird says. "Colleagues checked with me during our first rehearsals of the season to see how I'm doing. If I took this job but really wanted to still be singing, then I would have problems interacting with, managing, or being around other singers. But it didn't bother me a bit.

"This job was the 'aha!' moment for me, as I realized that all my past experience was leading me to this path," Bird continues. "I never even considered administration until I started here, and now it feels like everything has been guiding me to this point. I know that I am where I need to be. I love being close to the business in this way."

*Greg Waxberg, a writer and magazine editor for The Pingry School, is also an award-winning freelance writer. He can be contacted at [GregOpera@aol.com](mailto:GregOpera@aol.com).* CS

**SING IN  
NEW YORK CITY  
THIS SUMMER!**

**June 2-June 30, 2017**

*New York Lyric Opera*  
Theatre

Summer Music Program

Carnegie Hall  
Lincoln Center  
National Opera Center

For more information:  
[info@newlyricopera.org](mailto:info@newlyricopera.org)  
(646) 755-8043  
[www.newyorklyricopera.org](http://www.newyorklyricopera.org)

**GREVE OPERA ACADEMY**

*Don Giovanni in Greve's Piazza Matteotti - 2016 Program*

Connecticut Lyric Opera, New England's fastest growing opera company, and the CT Virtuosi Chamber Orchestra are pleased to announce the third season of their summer residency program in Italy, the *Greve Opera Academy*, part of the *Greve Opera Academy and Music Festival* in Greve-in-Chianti in the heart of Tuscany.

**June 12 - July 8**

Featuring fully staged performances with orchestra in Greve-in-Chianti and historic San Gimignano of

***Tosca* and *Così fan tutte***

Additional concerts, chamber music performances, excursions to Florence and Siena, Italian language, vocal technique, coachings, acting and more...

Participants will have the opportunity to compete in the **Greve International Vocal Competition**  
Grand prize includes 2017/18 contract with Connecticut Lyric Opera, other cash prizes

Application deadline is January 31  
Auditions early February in New York City or by recording  
Visit [GreveFestival.org](http://GreveFestival.org) for details and application