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BRAVO

THE MAGAZINE OF THE OPERA LEAGUE OF LOS ANGELES

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MUSIC ON THE BRAIN

BY JUDITH HYMAN

AN INTERVIEW WITH KRISTI BROWN-MONTESANO, LA OPERA AFFILIATED SCHOLAR



I first met Kristi Brown-Montesano, one of LA Opera’s affiliated scholars, when she taught classes for Opera for Educators, a program designed by LA Opera for teachers and educators. I was one of those educators, trained for eight weeks to inspire community appreciation of opera. Prior to each LAO production, I would join this group to attend lectures to deepen my understanding of the art form. The first time I heard Kristi present an amazing talk on the role of women in opera, I was totally wowed.

As the Chair of Music History at the Colburn Conservatory of Music, Kristi teaches courses across the broad history of music to undergraduate and graduate students, but opera is one of her specialized interests. Her book *Understanding the Women of Mozart’s Operas* has just been re-released in paperback.

Her focus on women was set off years ago after reading a book on Mozart’s operas published by Oxford University Press. The author offered a scathing description of Donna Anna from *Don Giovanni*, concluding that it would be beneficial for her to be “pleasantly raped” by Don Juan. That comment unsettled Kristi and set her off on a lifetime mission of focusing on Donna Anna and all women in opera, much to our benefit.

Recently, Kristi was invited to teach a course for the LAO board of directors by John Nuckols, LAO’s Executive Vice President and Chief Strategic Officer. John had taken one of Kristi’s courses for adults at the Colburn School and admired her knack for conveying a

deeper, yet accessible, understanding of opera, and wanted others to benefit. Soon after, LAO invited her to offer a class on *Tannhäuser* and *Cenerentola* as part of their Scholars Series this past October.

If you have been fortunate enough to attend one of the Opera League’s opera pre-lectures, part of our Overtures program, such as one of last fall’s on *Alcina* or *La Cenerentola*, then it’s possible you have heard Kristi speak, and that you and I exchanged a “Wow!” as she spoke.

In case you have missed any of these talks, check out her podcasts on the LAO website. She always seems ready to stimulate and educate. When I complimented her on her breadth of knowledge and the vigor with which she delivers it, she informed me, “Well, Haydn got started at 50, and he was only 60 when he first went to London.”

That kind of energy has fueled her throughout her life.

Kristi’s Grandma Marcie inspired her early love of ballet musical

theater, such as Stravinsky’s *The Firebird*. Kristi started piano early in life and played the flute in the school band, but her most serious classical lessons were in voice with Stephanie Friedman and Jeffrey Thomas.

By the time she finished her doctorate in musicology at UC Berkley, Kristi had two children, and in time had a third child. Today she has a daughter of 29 and two sons, 27 and 19. Everyone is bilingual, as Kristi’s husband, Bruno, is from Milan. “We met at a dinner party in Berkeley and immediately started debating issues of the day. We are opposites but completely complement each other. We just celebrated our 30th anniversary.”

Since her teaching responsibilities at the Colburn Conservatory have required her to teach subjects from across centuries of Western music history, Kristi has embraced the idea of the scholarly “generalist.” Fascinated by story, person, place and sound, her mission is to make people curious, entertained, enlightened—and to want more. ✨