

## Career Bridges Presents Seventh Annual Gala at the Essex House

A review by Nino Pantano

Barbara Meister Bender and David Schuyler Bender had a dream. Both had brilliant careers in opera and operetta but wanted to “give back” to the art that gave them and their audiences such joy.

Thus the Schuyler Foundation for Career Bridges was born. Its objective is to give scholarships to young singers to ensure that they too, can have the proper multi faceted training necessary for careers to preserve the glorious art of opera for future generations to enjoy.

The “Boulevard of Broken Dreams” as the old Tony Bennett recording would tell us, can be avoided for many students of voice with the proper mentoring and caring. Thus the Seventh Annual Gala Awards Dinner and Concert was held at the Jumeirah Essex House hotel overlooking Central Park South on May 19<sup>th</sup>.

After cocktails and a silent auction, the ensemble bade us enter the glittering chandeliered dining room, with their singing of the Brindisi from *La Traviata*.

The welcoming remarks by our hosts, the beautiful Barbara Meister Bender and the debonair David Schuyler Bender set the joyous tone for the evening.

Between the sets of arias from the 2009 award winning singers, four illustrious people from the opera world received awards.

Operatic organizer, the beloved Stephen DeMaio received the Lifetime Achievement Award. It was a surprise and well deserved!

General Director of the Seattle Opera, Speight Jenkins was given the Distinguished Achievement Award presented by the legendary and ever sparkling Spokane born soubrette soprano and film star (Melba) Patrice Munsel.

The great Maestro Julius Rudel was given the Distinguished Achievement Award by Barbara Meister Bender. She touchingly recalled her days at The New York City Opera when Julius Rudel was at the helm and she a novice soprano who was fortunate to have received his guidance and support.

And last but not least, the distinguished Achievement Award went to Metropolitan Opera Chorus Master Donald Palumbo who has restored brilliant life to the Met Chorus. As Mr. Palumbo was introduced, a recording of the Met Chorus singing The Anvil Chorus from *Il Trovatore* was heard. The award was presented by Margaret Juntwait from the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts who eloquently spoke of the many magical moments when the Metropolitan Opera chorus breaks your heart, especially in Act Two Scene Two in Verdi's *La Traviata*.

The singers performed in the glittering dining room between the presentations. Each and every artist showed élan and youthful promise, beginning with the Jewel Song from Gounod's *Faust*, sung with personality sparkle and agility by soprano Rachel Holmes.

Bass Joseph Barron sang a devilish "Vous qui faites l'endormie" from the same opera with plangent sound and malevolent laughter.

The Papagena-Papageno duet was most chirpingly and charmingly sung by soprano Hye Jung Lee and baritone Jorell Williams with brilliant staccato diction.

David Krohn sang a haunting "Lieben, Hassen" from Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos* revealing a truly fine lyric baritone.

Soprano Alyssa Cox sang a sparkling "Spring Waters" by Rachmaninoff with a powerful thrilling finale.

Baritone Young Joo An sang "Avant de quitter" from Gounod's *Faust* with a rich, full mellow sound, deep emotion and a beautiful swell at the finale that earned him an ovation.

Soprano Megan Hart sang the "Ah! non giunge" from Bellini's *La Sonnambula* with breathtaking ease, coloratura flights and ravishing portamentos and made it look easy!

Rebecca Jo Loeb negotiated the twists and turns of Hermia's aria from Benjamin Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with clarity and abandon and her creamy mezzo easily charmed us with the exotic path of this unusual repertoire.

Jonathan Gabriel Michie amused us with "I'm going to Maxim's" from Lehar's *The Merry Widow*. His pleasing and flexible high baritone hijinx truly beckoned us to join in the fun.

Soprano Valentina Fleeer captivated us with "Je suis encore" from Massenet's *Manon*, with a powerful and brilliant tone and captivating vocal flights.

(Scholarship donated by Irene Duell and Col. Jonathan de Sola Mendes)

The last cluster of singers began with soprano Desiree Alejandro who regaled us with "D'Oreste d'Ajace" from *Idomeneo* in a clear shimmering voice that was perfect for Mozart.

Basso Kevin Thompson sang a thrilling "Ecco il mondo" from Boito's *Mefistofele*, revealing a huge cavernous sound coupled with a dominating physical presence that stunned the audience. Mr. Thompson's full round register and profound interpretive gifts evoked memories of Paul Robeson and Boris Christoff rolled into one. A well deserved ovation followed.

Coloratura soprano Michelle Trovato sang an exciting “Regnava nel silenzio” from Donizetti’s *Lucia Di Lammermoor*. Ms. Trovato deftly and adroitly banished all vocal obstacles with ease and gave us hope that Lucia was in good hands (throat) for the future where she will surely shine among the luminaries.

The Quartet from Verdi’s *Rigoletto* concluded the entertainment with impressive baritone Young Joo An as Rigoletto, soprano Hye Jung Lee as Gilda, who swelled on and sustained her final note beautifully, mellow mezzo Rebecca Loeb as Maddalena and lastly, as the lecherous Duke, the stentorian Laurence Broderick. His strong, even, ardent tenor was an excellent portent of the sweet desserts that concluded a splendid evening.

The Brindisi by the entire ensemble ended the vocal portion of this splendid evening. The superb virtuoso piano accompaniment was provided by Ted Taylor.

Kudos also to event coordinator, the effervescent Jane Thorngren, who is also a soprano of note.

We spotted such illustrious sopranos such as Elaine Malbin, Elinor Ross, Lucine Amara, Jane Marsh and the legendary Hollywood film star Arlene Dahl among the many supporters of Career Bridges. The ever dapper Murray Rosenthal from Opera Index was spotted among the glitterati along with conductor composer Philip Hagemann and Janet Stoven and famed pianists and coaches Mara Waldman and Lucy Arner.

I recall an old radio program called “Can You Top This?” I don’t know how the Benders and Career Bridges can top themselves every year with such glorious musical soirees but they do, and lucky for us - bravo to all!

For further info: [www.careerbridges.org](http://www.careerbridges.org)