

WORLD PREMIERE COMING NOVEMBER 2007



MANITOBA OPERA 07/08 *35<sup>th</sup> Season*

# TRANSIT OF *Venus*

COMPOSER — VICTOR DAVIES  
LIBRETTIST — MAUREEN HUNTER  
DIRECTOR — LARRY DESROCHERS

A LOVE STORY THAT CHARTS A CELESTIAL  
COURSE BETWEEN DESTINY AND DESIRE

MANITOBA OPERA 07/08 35<sup>TH</sup> *Season*

# TRANSIT OF *Venus*

## Study Guide

Prepared by Manitoba Opera  
for use by educators in preparation  
for attending Student Dress Rehearsal  
November 22, 2007

*"The opera is the only refuge for poetry and fantasy...  
one is in an enchanted world.*

*The word is sung, the steps are pirouettes...  
an evening at the opera rests you from real life..."*

*- Théophile Gautier, La Presse*

## **WELCOME!**

We're very pleased that you have decided to bring your students to the world premiere of Manitoba Opera's FIRST opera commissioned for the main stage: *Transit of Venus*. It is indeed a very exciting time for the company and the community.

By attending the Dress Rehearsal, your students will be a part of history in the making, have the unique opportunity to experience a new work, and be amongst the very first people in the world to see the fully staged production of *Transit of Venus* unveiled.

We appreciate both your interest in this wonderful art form and your willingness to expose students to opera and thank you for that.

## **THE STUDY GUIDE**

This Study Guide has been created to assist educators in preparing students for their visit to the opera. It is our hope that you will be able to add this to your existing curriculum in order to expand your students' understanding of opera, literature, history, and the fine arts.

You can make the opera experience more meaningful and enjoyable by sharing with them knowledge and background on opera and *Transit of Venus* before they attend the Dress Rehearsal.

*Materials in the Study Guide may be copied and distributed to students.*

### **Singing in Full Voice at the Dress Rehearsal**

*Please Note: The Dress Rehearsal is the last opportunity the singers will have on stage to work with the orchestra before Opening Night. Since vocal demands are so great on opera singers, some singers choose not to sing in full voice during the Dress Rehearsal in order to preserve their vocal chords and avoid unnecessary strain.*



Many thanks to Jane Stewart for her assistance  
compiling the material for this study guide.

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## **TRANSIT OF VENUS PRODUCTION INFORMATION**

### ***Transit of Venus: The World Premiere***

**An Opera in Three Acts Commissioned by Manitoba Opera  
in celebration of its 35<sup>th</sup> Season (2007/08)**

**Composed by Victor Davies  
Libretto by Maureen Hunter**

**Based on the play *Transit of Venus* by Maureen Hunter  
which debuted at the Manitoba Theatre Centre in 1992.**

**Inspired by the real-life expeditions of 18<sup>th</sup> Century astronomer,  
Guillaume Le Gentil de la Galasière**

***Sung in English with surtitles***

**Performance Dates: November 24, 27, 30, 2007  
Dress Rehearsal: November 22, 2007**

***Approximately 3 hours in length, with one intermission  
between Acts I and II.***

**Centennial Concert Hall  
Winnipeg, Manitoba**

**Conducted by James Meena      Directed by Larry Desrochers  
Set and Costumes designed by Brian Perchaluk  
Lighting designed by Scott Henderson**

**Featuring the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra**

**Time: Late 18<sup>th</sup> Century  
Place: France, at the mansion of astronomer, Le Gentil**

#### **Characters:**

**Le Gentil, age 35, astronomer  
Celeste, age 15, his fiancée  
Margot, age 36, his mother's companion  
Demarais, age 18, his assistant  
Madame Sylvie, age 65, his mother  
La Tour, head servant  
Servants**

**Russell Braun, baritone  
Monica Huisman, soprano  
Jean Stilwell, mezzo-soprano  
Colin Ainsworth, tenor  
Judith Forst, mezzo-soprano  
Mark Booden, baritone  
Manitoba Opera Chorus**

## CREATING A NEW OPERA

### Why Create a New Opera?

Opera, like other creative disciplines, is a way for artists to speak to the world and tell stories. A new opera, just like any new creation, is a way of keeping the art form alive in ways that resonate with contemporary society.

Creating a new opera is rooted in the basic human desire to express ourselves artistically. A new opera also helps shift attitudes about opera because it can reflect current values and perceptions. Although the seminal works of opera will continue to delight audiences and challenge artists; new opera adds to the repertoire and helps change perceptions about the art form.

Undertaking the commission of a new work is a major task for any opera company as opera is the most challenging art form to create and perform at a high standard. With *Transit of Venus*, Manitoba Opera becomes one of the leading companies in North America to present new work.

### Why *Transit of Venus*?

Manitoba Opera commissioned a new opera to celebrate its 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary season in 2007/2008. Finding the right story for the basis of the opera was not difficult. The acclaimed play *Transit of Venus*, by Manitoba-based playwright Maureen Hunter, had all the ingredients needed for a successful opera. It is period piece set in 18<sup>th</sup> Century France; it explores expansive themes (looking at the nature of relationships between individuals as they each seek their destinies and between faith and science); characters caught in larger-than-life situations; and its success as a stage play is a solid basis from which to move to the operatic stage.

Historically, many of the great operas were based on existing plays or books. Examples of these include Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* which was based on a play called *Le mariage de Figaro*; Strauss Jr.'s *Die Fledermaus* which was based on the play *Le Réveillon*; Verdi's *Otello* which was based on Shakespeare's *Othello*, *The Moor of Venice*; and this season's second Manitoba Opera production, *La Traviata*, another Verdi masterpiece and based on the play *La Dame aux Camélias*.

The play, *Transit of Venus*, has been performed to critical acclaim by virtually every major theatre company in Canada and was the first Canadian play to ever be staged by England's renowned Royal Shakespeare Company.

"*Transit of Venus* is about great dreams and profound desires. It is about the will to accomplish and the price ambition can extract. It is a play, too, about the often dreadful costs of love. A superb drama." *Berkshire Record*, 1998

"It's an intelligent, compelling script that deals with big ideas and intense human emotions, a grandly tragic romance, and a comment on several deeply human issues." *The Globe and Mail*, 1995

## THE STORY IN SONG: COMPOSING FOR OPERA

Writing an opera gives a composer an extra dimension – the human voice – that is not available when writing a symphony or other piece for instruments alone. An opera is a multi-layered piece made up of melodies for the sung words with the added element of the orchestra emphasizing emotions and adding imagery through music.

The process of composing an opera requires collaboration with the librettist and periods of working alone to compose. Music ‘explodes’ the emotions of the characters, helping express their words with melodies that bring drama, comedy, or sorrow to the message.

While the degree of collaboration among librettists and composers has varied historically, often depending on the personalities of the artists involved, the words of the librettist and the music of the composer must build together to create an opera that will succeed once it moves from the page to the stage.

A composer writing a film score, on the other hand, may not be involved until the film has been completed. This allows the composer a chance to see the visual rhythms of the movie and then compose music to enhance or match that rhythm. Opera composers tend to have more ‘authorship’ of the final piece than with a film or ballet score.

Anyone planning to write an opera could consider the following basic guidelines suggested by *Transit of Venus* composer, Victor Davies:

1. Find a librettist who is willing to collaborate;
2. Find a great libretto because it is essential to a great opera;
3. Work with a libretto based on a successful play; and
4. Write in collaboration with others who will be involved in the production and staging of the opera.

### **Composing *Transit of Venus***

Victor Davies, composer of *Transit of Venus*, adhered to his own recommended guidelines. He spent many hours working with the opera’s librettist, Maureen Hunter to align the music and the words. Davies studied the libretto thoroughly to have a strong sense of the substance and structure of the drama before setting it to music.

The significant gaps in time from one act to the next posed a challenge in composing the music for *Transit of Venus*. Davies approached it by taking the bigger emotional moments for each character to create the major musical themes. These provide the musical expression for each character to communicate. From these themes, Davies composed the music for the rest of each act.

“The five powerfully drawn main characters are ideally suited to opera,” explains Davies. “They cry out for soaring lyrical moments, deep emotional colours, and accompanying lush orchestral sounds.

“To give the audience points of reference and instant entry into the world of these characters and their story, I have taken an eclectic approach to the score. Thus, there are echoes of sea shanties in the men’s choruses (*The Drinking Song* and *The Packing Song*) as they send Le Gentil off to India; the sounds of Gregorian chant in references to the Church; and a nod to the Baroque in both Madame Sylvie’s aria and Demarais’ reading of the letter from the British admiralty.

“I’ve also used a device called sound painting to evoke nature and states of mind. The wave motif which carries Le Gentil off to India in his mind, is an example, as is the Habanera motif associated with Celeste’s teen-aged strivings to become a woman.

“The aim of all this is to deliver immediate emotional communication in the music’s support of the libretto. This in turn gives the audience points of reference and instant entry into the world of these characters and their stories.”

Unlike the play, the opera *Transit of Venus* has had additional characters introduced in the form of the opera chorus. They help bridge scenes and provide another way to identify time and setting. From a composer’s perspective, the chorus provide another vocal and scenic element and often serve to bring the ‘rousing’ moments onto the stage, as with *The Drinking Song* heard at the opening of the opera.

The music for *Transit of Venus* was adjusted throughout the composition period as Davies responded to workshops held in the months during the opera’s creation. It was very important to be able to hear how the music worked with the libretto when it was being sung. The workshops also provided ideas for orchestral changes and resulted in Davies adding more orchestra to increase the density of the music in order to express the emotional depth of the story.



## WRITING A LIBRETTO

The libretto is the words or text for an opera. Since many operas are based on existing plays, the librettist – the person who writes the libretto – can use the text from the play as a basis for the libretto. Unlike a play, however, an opera libretto needs to be written to be accompanied by music. Successful librettists generally work well with the composer. Neither can create in isolation because their work must come together on stage.

Historically, the libretto – literally meaning “little book” – was published and given to the audience to let them read the poetry of the opera as it was being performed.

If you want to write a libretto for an opera, here are some tips suggested by *Transit of Venus* librettist, Maureen Hunter:

1. Be compatible with the composer;
2. Collaborate with the composer and director;
3. Work with and learn from the singers.

### Writing the Libretto for *Transit Of Venus*

The writer of the acclaimed play, *Transit of Venus*, Maureen Hunter, wrote the libretto for the new opera based on her play. Although it was beneficial having the story and characters already developed, the libretto was a new creation for a different art form.

“I never imagined myself writing an opera libretto, but it’s been gratifying to revisit the story as a librettist, to rediscover the characters, to realize how much I still like them, and how compelling the story remains,” said Hunter.

“I’ve been struck by the power, in opera, of the individual word. I’ve come to understand that a few bars of music can touch us in ways that pages of dialogue may not. So, although many lines that I loved in the play don’t appear in the libretto, the memorable, utterly beautiful music Victor has written for the lines that remain more than compensates for what is gone.”

Another challenge was adding text for a new dimension – the chorus. The play has five characters, but for the opera, it was necessary to create opportunities for the chorus. The librettist, composer and dramaturg (Larry Desrochers) had to decide where the chorus would appear, what it would say, and how it would advance the story.

The process of writing a libretto can be very different from writing a play. With a libretto, the writer must think about and understand how the music will fit with the language. Sometimes, the music already exists and the librettist is writing the words to the music. In the case of *Transit of Venus*, Hunter was writing the words first. Working closely with the composer, Victor Davies, she was able to envision how the music would come to build on her words.

Unlike a play, a libretto will use considerable repetition, with a singer repeating a line several times. This would not work well in most plays, but serves to emphasize critical emotions or messages in an opera.

Although there were many challenges, Hunter and Davies both expressed great joy at the chance to work together in creating the new opera.

### **The Idea for the Story**

Maureen Hunter first heard about Guillaume Le Gentil in an astronomy class she was taking at the University of Winnipeg.

“I was drawn to his story because of how much he sacrificed for the thing he wanted so much to do,” she explains. “In a way, Le Gentil is typical of all the great explorers who left their homes and loved ones – often for years at a time – in the pursuit of knowledge. Not surprisingly, we know a great deal more about these explorers than we do about the people they left behind. Part of the fun for me, in writing the play, was imagining who Le Gentil might have left behind and how they might feel about his long absences.

“As the story grew, I realized that each of the characters in the story was on a quest, with Le Gentil’s being the grandest. They lived at a time when mankind’s knowledge of the universe was expanding and people were questioning their traditional relationship with God. Who is He? Does He exist? How do we relate to Him and to one another? These are questions we still ask today and which bring relevance to the opera.”

## **FROM PLAY TO OPERA: THE ROLE OF THE DRAMATURGE & DIRECTOR**

Though the play and the opera tell the same story, how that story is told is immensely different in each medium. Adding music to words affects how the words are interpreted. The choice of melody, tempo, rhythm, and dynamics all have an effect on the meaning and emotional nuance attached to a single word. That is why the shaping of the libretto is been so important. The choices made about what to keep in the libretto and what to leave out had to be thought through very carefully.

In a play, and in particular with *Transit of Venus*, language is the primary element to express the ideas of the characters. With the opera, the words still exist, but they are supported by musical expression. What that music adds to the words spoken by the characters can be extremely powerful, and thus affects the telling of the story.

### **The Dramaturge**

The role of the dramaturge on the project, Larry Desrochers, had to ensure that the opera ended up with the same characters and story as were in the play. He worked with the librettist and composer to ensure that each scene retained a dramatic thrust. Though the basic structure of the play has not changed significantly in its new form as a libretto, they looked for ways where moments that existed in the play could be better expressed in an operatic form. In most cases, this meant creating room in the libretto for the music by eliminating dialogue and by reworking the syntax of passages that were used in the play.

### **The Director**

As the director, Mr. Desrocher's role will be to include the information that the music gives him from the score to the choices made as a director. While the libretto has laid the path for the story, the music is the guide. He will have to be sensitive to the emotional texture of each bar of music for all of the characters and listen to the orchestration to search for clues as to what the composer might be signalling in the score.

When directing a play, the director has much more freedom to set the tempo and the dynamics of a scene through clues in the language and the circumstances in which the characters find themselves. These choices shape the emotional intensity of scenes. In opera, the tempo is given by the composer, which some interpretation by the conductor, so the director has much less influence on this aspect of the production.

This is a significant difference for a director, for it removes a basic technique for setting interpretation. It is the director's job to make physical sense on stage of what the composer and librettist have written on the page. In doing this, the director tries to bring to life the shifting relationships between the characters.

"Having directed the play twice before I have a good understanding of the characters and how they grow throughout the story," commented Mr. Desrochers. "However, on this project, I also had the rare privilege of talking to the composer as he made compositional choices and how those choices might work on the stage. When one works with colleagues as open to collaboration as Maureen and Victor, this makes for an exciting creative process."

## DESIGNING SETS & COSTUMES FOR OPERA

Designing the sets and costumes for an opera requires special skills. Although the two can be separate roles, they are combined if an individual meets the criteria for both tasks.

Set designers are responsible for creating a vision for the stage production and designing the detailed elements of the physical set to suit the historical and place setting of the opera. This design has to work within budget constraints, adding another element of creativity to the process.

Costume designers have very similar roles, only their focus is on the outfits to be worn by all singers and the chorus. Like the set designer, they need to reflect the historical period of the opera. They also need to consider how many costume changes the singers may require. The more and the faster the changes, the more easily the costume must be able to be removed or put on.

Both sets and costumes help convey the themes and feelings of the opera. The set must allow for movement by the singers and visibility for the audience. Similarly, the costumes need to consider what kinds of actions the singers will be doing to give them the right freedom of movement.

Set and costume designers work with the director, with each other, and with the technicians, as well as with carpenters and tailors who will build the sets and costumes.

Here are some tips for future set and costume designers from Brian Perchaluk, set and costume designer for *Transit of Venus*:

1. Stick to your role of helping tell the story created by someone else;
2. Keep to simple designs to support, not distract, from the opera;
3. Work in the parameters given by the director and the story itself.

### Designing the Set and Costumes for *Transit of Venus*

In designing the set and costumes for *Transit of Venus*, Brian Perchaluk studied the libretto (the music was still in development) to identify major themes, understand the characters, and have a sense of the time and place. After looking at the story from a thematic, poetic, and stylistic perspective, he then considered the logistics of the opera.

*Transit of Venus* has a strong romantic sense along with the complex theme of the relationship of faith and science. These help drive the creative process in design; however, the opera also poses challenges because of the passages in time and the need for a three-level set.

Perchaluk designed the set using gothic arches to evoke images of a church; within the arches are geometric shapes to symbolize astronomy and science. He also used the set to give the sense of vastness of the universe contrasting with the 'trapped' life of the women who observe, but are not able to participate.

The costumes were designed to help tell the story by reflecting the period. One of the challenges in the costume design was the lavishness of the period in which the story takes place. Reproducing 18<sup>th</sup> Century French clothing for the non-working classes would be very costly. Perchaluk found a way to be true to the time period through stylized costumes that also allow necessary freedom of movement for the singers. In order to stay within budget, the costumes for the chorus were rented from a production set in the same time period.

**Brian Perchaluk, Set & Costume Designer**

The work of Winnipeg-based Brian Perchaluk appears regularly on stages across the country and has been seen in Winnipeg at Manitoba Theatre Centre (over 40 productions), Prairie Theatre Exchange, Manitoba Theatre for Young People, Rainbow Stage, and Le Cercle Moliere.

## SYNOPSIS

### An Opera in Three Acts

*Transit of Venus* takes place in France in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

It is inspired by the story of French astronomer, Guillaume Le Gentil who tried twice, unsuccessfully, to chart the transit of Venus across the Sun.

*"She was always there, shining in the distance like the sun."*

*- Le Gentil, Act 11*

#### Act I

The story begins as Le Gentil prepares to depart from France for India on his first attempt to record the transit of Venus. The transit was an important scientific event that would help measure the distance between the Earth and the Sun.

Le Gentil's departure is not expected and his household is disrupted. Celeste, the young woman to whom he is engaged is especially caught off guard. Celeste's mother, Margot, is shocked by the engagement as she and Le Gentil had had an affair when they were younger. Before he departs, Celeste attempts to seduce Le Gentil in his observatory to keep him from leaving, but he refuses her advances and convinces her to wait for his return.

#### Act II

It is six years later, and Margot and Le Gentil's mother, Madame Sylvie, are anxiously awaiting his arrival. They know that he was unsuccessful in recording the transit. When Celeste enters the room, she realizes something is wrong and goes to Demarais, Le Gentil's assistant, who was sent home from India because of a tropical illness. Demarais argues with Celeste about Le Gentil and tells her about how he has changed.

Leaving Demarais, Celeste enters the observatory to discover Le Gentil already has been there for some time. Although they still care for one another, they are tentative with each other. Le Gentil playfully teases Celeste and she chides him for his lengthy absence. As he tells her how much more infinite and beautiful the world is than he had imagined, he realizes she has an insatiable thirst for knowledge. She, too, becomes filled with the wonders of the universe.

Le Gentil asks Celeste to marry him, to which she agrees. When he admits that he is leaving to go to the Philippines because his first attempt to record the transit of Venus was unsuccessful, she begs him not to leave. He convinces her that they are 'fixed' by God in an orbit that, no matter how far he wanders, she will always draw him back. Celeste agrees to wait again for his return, but insists that he must come back immediately after the transit. She is not prepared to compete with the universe forever.

### Act III

Five years later, Margot finds Le Gentil sitting despondent and alone in the sitting room where everything is covered in sheets. During the intervening years, Le Gentil has been assumed dead and his estate has been sold. His mother is now senile and lives with relatives. But Margot assures Le Gentil that Celeste still is not married and will arrive shortly. Le Gentil tells Margot his journey was very difficult and it was hard to make it home.

When Celeste enters the sitting room, Le Gentil is struck by her beauty but senses something different about her. He is unsuccessful in reconciling with her even as he tells her of the inner struggle he has had. She can't bear to listen to him. She announces she is going to have a child and intends to move with Margot to New France. Le Gentil is hurt and angry and demands to meet the father. Margot has to mediate the fight that erupts between Celeste and Le Gentil. He offers to marry Celeste, telling her he loves her and will not be turned away by 'one fateful indiscretion.' Celeste denies it was an indiscretion.

In grieving for Le Gentil in his absence, she turned to the one person who knew and cared for him almost as much as she. As her grief diminished in time, she realized she had fallen in love with the man. Le Gentil realizes Celeste is referring to Demarais, but begs her to reconsider her position. Celeste refuses, telling him that she did love him once for what he was and what he taught her, but doesn't now and never will again. She leaves. Le Gentil is stunned.

Even at the worst of times, even after failing to chart the second transit, Le Gentil believed he would never lose Celeste. He tells Margot about the strange circumstances that prevented his charting the second transit – an unseasonable storm that blew in and obscured his view of the sky. Unable to find the words to console him, Margot leaves and Le Gentil is left alone in the ruins of his home.

## TIMING IS EVERYTHING: THE STORY OF ASTRONOMER, LE GENTIL

Travelling across the world could be gruelling in the 1700s and all transit expeditions then suffered hardships, but French astronomer Guillaume Joseph Hyacinthe Jean-Baptiste Le Gentil de la Galasière (1725-1792) was particularly unfortunate.

Initially intending to enter the Church before turning to astronomy, Le Gentil, as he came to be known, had already had some success as an astronomer and was a member of the French Academy of Sciences when he undertook to record a transit of Venus.

He travelled to India to observe the 1761 transit from the French colony of Pondicherry, a journey of over a year. Before he arrived, the British captured the colony, forcing Le Gentil to return to the French island of Mauritius. He did not get there in time to observe the transit.

Rather than return home, he studied the Indian Ocean cultures and planned to watch the 1769 transit from Manila in the Philippines. But he was ordered back to Pondicherry which was again under French control. He prepared to observe the transit and after a month of beautiful weather, he awoke in the early morning hours on the day of the transit to a blanket of cloud. Ironically, Manila experienced beautiful weather that day.

“That is the fate which often awaits astronomers,” he wrote. “I had gone more than ten thousand leagues; it seemed that I had crossed such a great expanse of seas, exiling myself from my native lands, only to be the spectator of a fatal cloud which came to place itself before the Sun at the precise moment of my observation, to carry off from me the fruits of my pains and my fatigues.”

Le Gentil had missed both transits and when he finally returned home (it took him two years to do so), after an 11-year absence he found he had been declared legally dead, his estate was in shambles and his spot was occupied in the Academy of Sciences. He eventually regained his position, married, had a daughter, and lived until the age of 67.

As with many other transit expeditions, Le Gentil left a legacy that went beyond astronomy. The two volumes he published upon his return contain a wealth of geographical, botanical, zoological, archaeological, and ethnographic information, maps, and illustrations.



## TRANSITS OF VENUS

Transits of Venus are rare events that occur when the planet Venus crosses between the Sun and Earth, causing the planet to look like a small dot moving across the sun.

For nearly four centuries, astronomers have chased Venus to the ends of the Earth to record a transit. Prior to June 8, 2004, only five other transits have been viewed before: in 1639, 1761, 1769, 1874, and 1882.

Transits of Venus offered astronomers an opportunity to calculate the distance between the Earth and the Sun (called the astronomical unit or AU). The astronomical unit once provided the fundamental means to map the positions of heavenly bodies and determine the size of the universe. The measurement was so central to those tasks that the British Astronomer Royal in the mid-19th Century called it "the noblest problem in astronomy."

Nations spent the equivalent of millions of dollars mounting transit expeditions that prefigured the Apollo missions and the robotic rovers now driving across the surface of Mars. Transit expeditions were the first large-scale international scientific collaborations. Hounded by bad weather, missed opportunities, and even wars, astronomers doggedly pursued these natural events in the name of science.

Prior to 2004, this celestial event last took place in 1882 and created such a stir that spectators jammed Wall Street and global powers provided funding in fits of patriotic frenzy to see which nation could best observe the phenomenon from remote spots on Earth.

The Earth only crosses the planet of Venus's orbit twice a year, in June and December, due to the angle between the two planets' orbits. A transit doesn't occur every six months because both planets need to be lined up exactly and Venus's orbit around the Sun (its year) is shorter than the Earth's (224.7 days compared to 365.3). Venus transits occur in pairs with an intervening gap of eight years and intervals of 121.5 and 105.5 years between the pairs of transits.

The next transit of Venus will occur in June 2012.

### **The Planet Venus**

The planet Venus, the second planet from the sun, is named after the Roman goddess of love and beauty. After the Sun and Moon, Venus is the brightest object in the sky and often is called the morning star and the evening star.

## A STELLAR CAST LINE-UP

Celebrated Canadian baritone, **Russell Braun**, heads the all-star Canadian cast of internationally acclaimed artists who will be featured in the world premiere of *Transit of Venus*. The other soloists in this star-studded cast are mezzo-soprano, **Judith Forst** (Madame Sylvie), mezzo-soprano, **Jean Stilwell** (Margot), soprano, **Monica Huisman** (Celeste), and tenor, **Colin Ainsworth** (Demarais). Russell Braun will sing the role of Le Gentil.

“This is the cast that I’ve had in mind since first starting this project,” explained Larry Desrochers, Manitoba Opera General Director and CEO. “I think this cast line-up would be the envy of any opera company in Canada and also speaks to Manitoba Opera’s growing reputation as a company where great opera productions are created.”

Not only are these artists exceptional singers, but they are also magnetic actors. In the role of Le Gentil, Russell Braun will capture both the passion of the astronomer pursuing his destiny to serve God by unravelling the mysteries of the universe and the pain of a man who loses what is really important in his life.

Judith Forst is one of the world’s great mezzos and has everything it takes to play Le Gentil’s mother, a woman who has a “unique” relationship with God. She brings a vibrant stage presence to each role she creates.

Jean Stilwell, in the role of Celeste’s mother, is sure to bring a powerful sense of drama to a character who puts everything aside in her own life to protect her daughter.

Winnipeg’s own Monica Huisman will be singing the role of Celeste. This role is likely the most challenging in the opera, as Celeste grows from a precocious young girl to a young woman who’s been aged too soon by loss.

The cast is completed by Colin Ainsworth, one of Canada’s best young tenors, in the role of Desmarais. His is one of the most beautiful young male voices in the country and will perfectly suit both the ambitions and ultimately, the disillusionment of Le Gentil’s young assistant.

### **Russell Braun, Le Gentil**

One of the most sought-after lyric baritones on the international stage today, Russell Braun performs regularly at the Met, the Salzburg Festival, San Diego Opera, the Lyric Opera of Chicago, l’Opera de Paris and the COC and debuted at La Scala and Covent Garden last year.

Mr. Braun first appeared with Manitoba Opera in 2005/06 singing the role of Count Almaviva in *The Marriage of Figaro*.

**Judith Forst, Madame Sylvie**

One of Canada's most revered artists, Judith Forst has been highly acclaimed for her operatic and concert performances throughout North America and Europe in many of the world's most prestigious theatres. Her versatile repertoire has encompassed all styles and periods, although in recent years she has focused on contemporary works and world premieres.

Judith Forst last appeared with Manitoba Opera at the tribute performance for Irving Guttman in 2002 and prior to that sang the role of the Witch in the 2000 production of *Hansel and Gretel*.

**Jean Stilwell, Margot**

Hailed on three continents for her complex portrayal of Carmen, Jean Stilwell is at the forefront of this generation's mezzo-sopranos. She is internationally renowned for the variety of her repertoire and has appeared at the Buxton Festival, New York City Opera, Welsh National Opera, English National Opera, and with all the opera companies of Canada.

Ms. Stilwell last appeared with Manitoba Opera in the Stories that Sing concert in February 2006 and in 2004 as Santuzza in *Cavalleria Rusticana*.

**Monica Huisman, Celeste**

Touted as the "next great voice on the Canadian opera scene" *Winnipeg Free Press*, this lyric soprano who hails from Winnipeg has been wowing critics both locally and nationally performing with the RWB, MTC, Vancouver Symphony, Pacific Opera Victoria, both Edmonton and Calgary Operas, Opera Hamilton, and Toronto Symphony, to name a few.

Ms. Huisman last appeared on the mainstage with Manitoba Opera as Musetta in the 2006 production of *La Bohème*.

**Colin Ainsworth, Demarais**

This young tenor has been heard on stages across North America as well as in Europe and the United Kingdom in a variety of operatic and concert roles including Tamino (*Die Zauberflöte*), Youth (*The Assassin Tree*), Jean (*Le Portrait de Manon*) and Don Ottavio (*Don Giovanni*).

*Transit of Venus* will mark Mr. Ainsworth's debut with Manitoba Opera.

**James Meena, Conductor**

James Meena is General Director and Principal Conductor of Opera Carolina. This American conductor had his conducting debut with Manitoba Opera in 2005/06 with *The Marriage of Figaro*. He is in great demand with major opera companies around the globe.

*For longer biographies, go to [www.manitobaopera.mb.ca](http://www.manitobaopera.mb.ca)*

## BIOGRAPHIES: COMPOSER, LIBRETTIST, DRAMATURGE/DIRECTOR

### About The Composer – Victor Davies

Born in Winnipeg, Victor Davies attended the University of Manitoba, Indiana University, and studied conducting with Pierre Boulez. During his career as a composer, pianist and conductor, Davies has created works for Manitoba Theatre Centre, the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, Contemporary Dancers, and Royal Winnipeg Ballet. He also has written film scores for dramas and documentaries for CBC, CTV, the NFB, and many independent producers.

Davies has composed and performed with his own jazz group and he wrote the first major score for a planetarium production, *The Beginning and End of the World*, recorded with Skitch Henderson. Davies' best known work, *The Mennonite Piano Concerto*, commissioned by Winnipeg's Fast Foundation, was recorded by the London Symphony Orchestra with pianist Irmgard Baerg and conductor Boris Brott.

His music ranges from children's songs to his major oratorio, *Revelation* for soloists, large chorus, and orchestra. His theatre works include *Beowulf* (a rock opera), staged in New York; the musical *Especially Babe* for the Toronto Theatre Festival; *The Musical Circus*, performed at the Zagreb Biennial; *The Big Top*, commissioned by the Royal Winnipeg Ballet; the theme song *Colours in the Dark*, for Famous People Player's Broadway show and American tours; and scores for the international award-winning films *The Last Winter* (Fox Video), *The Nutcracker Prince* (Warner Bros), and *i* (20th Century Fox).

Davies has conducted the Winnipeg, Edmonton, and Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony Orchestras and has been the conductor of his own film and television scores. He was musical director and composer for the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the 1999 Pan American Games.

Davies' music, aimed at a wide audience, is melodic, brilliantly orchestrated, and has a sense of drama. Equally at home in the concert hall, theatre, or recording studio, his music is heard around the world, live, via recordings, film and television (he won a Gemini Award for best documentary score in 2002), and is sought after by artists such as Wayne Marshall, Bramwell Tovey, The Boss Brass, Ofra Harnoy, and the Canadian Trio.

In 2006, Davies completed a comic opera based on *The Importance of Being Earnest* which was performed at Stratford Summer Music, and his piano trio, *Silhouettes* was performed at Carnegie Hall with players of the Philadelphia Orchestra. A CD of *The Big Top* (A Circus Ballet) with the WSO has just been released. He currently is working on two musicals, an overture for orchestra, and a tuba concerto.

This June, Davies received an honorary doctorate of laws from the University of Manitoba.

### **About the Librettist – Maureen Hunter**

Manitoba-based, Saskatchewan-born Maureen Hunter is one of Canada's most accomplished playwrights. Her work has been produced extensively on Canada's major stages as well as in Britain and the U.S. Her work has been nominated for two Governor General's Awards, two Dora Mavor Moore Awards (Outstanding New Play), and for the Lou Siminovitch Prize in Theatre.

Hunter's plays include *Vinci*, premiered by the National Arts Centre, Ottawa, in co-production with Manitoba Theatre Centre in 2002; *Atlantis*, premiered in English by MTC/Theatre Calgary in 1996 and in French by Theatre de la Manufacture, Montreal, in 1999; *Transit of Venus*, which received its Canadian premiere at MTC in 1992 and a year later became the first Canadian play ever staged by the Royal Shakespeare Company of Britain. It received its U.S. premiere in 1998 at the Berkshire Theatre in Stockbridge, Mass.

Other plays include *Footprints on the Moon*, *Beautiful Lake Winnipeg*, and *I Met a Bully on the Hill* (co-written with Martha Brooks). Hunter's plays have been published individually and in a number of anthologies.

In addition to the libretto of *Transit of Venus* for Manitoba Opera, Hunter recently has been working on a new stage play, *Wild Mouth*, for the Tarragon Theatre, Toronto.

### **About the Dramaturge & Director – Larry Desrochers**

Larry Desrochers is one of Manitoba's most respected theatre directors and arts administrators. His 22-year career spans work in the theatre, festivals, film, events, and opera.

As the General Director and CEO of Manitoba Opera, Desrochers is leading the company through an extensive rebuilding process resulting in significant growth in budget size, audience, and fundraising. He currently is dramaturging a new play by Rick Chafe based on an adaptation of Leon Rook's novel *Shakespeare's Dog* and will be directing the play for its world premiere at MTC in 2008. In April 2007, he directed the Manitoba Opera/Opera Lyra Ottawa co-production of Verdi's *Otello*.

Desrochers is the Founding Executive Producer for the Winnipeg Fringe Festival and served as the Associate Artistic Director of the Manitoba Theatre Centre where he directed numerous plays including the world premiere of *Transit of Venus* and the Canadian premiere of *M Butterfly*. In 2001, he directed his first opera, Mozart's *The Magic Flute*.

Prior to his position with Manitoba Opera, Desrochers served in different positions with Prairie Theatre Exchange and the Winnipeg Film Group and free-lance directed productions, including *Vigil* for Prairie Theatre Exchange and *Cherry Docs* for the MTC warehouse. Desrochers also has directed fourth-year acting students at the University of Winnipeg, as well as being a guest lecturer.

In 1997, Desrochers served as Artistic Director for the Opening and Closing Ceremonies for the 1997 Canada Summer Games in Brandon. In 1999, he was Producer and Director for Opening and Closing Ceremonies for the 1999 Pan American Games featuring over 5000 performers, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, Evelyn Hart, the WSO, Tracy Dahl, and The Guess Who. He also served as an Artistic Advisor for the Opening and Closing Ceremonies for the 2002 North American Aboriginal Games.

In 2003, the University of Winnipeg made Desrochers a Distinguished Alumni in recognition of his contribution to the arts community in Manitoba.

## A SHORT OVERVIEW OF OPERA

An opera, like a play, is a dramatic form of theatre that includes scenery, props, and costumes. In opera, however, the actors are trained singers who sing their lines instead of speaking them. An orchestra accompanies the singers. A conductor coordinates both the singers on stage and the musicians in the orchestra pit.

Opera consists of many dimensions: the human voice, orchestral music, the visual arts (scenery, costumes and special effects), drama (tragedy or comedy), and occasionally dance. The melding of these elements can make you cry tears of joy or sadness; produce laughter or anger, but most importantly transport you to a magical land of music and song.

Opera has its roots in Greek drama and originated in Florence, Italy, in the late 1500's, with a small group of men who were members of a Camerata (Italian for society). The intellectuals, poets and musicians of the Camerata decided they wanted words to be a featured aspect of music. They used ancient Greek drama as their inspiration, including the use of a chorus to comment on the action. The Camerata laid down three principles for their new art form:

- ◆ The text must be understood; the accompaniment must be very simple and should not distract from the words.
- ◆ The words must be sung with correct and natural declamation, as if they were spoken, and must avoid the rhythms of songs.
- ◆ The melody must interpret the feeling of the text.

The first significant composer to fully develop the ideas of the Camerata was Jacopo Peri (1561-1633), whose opera *Dafne*, based on a Greek myth, was performed in 1594 and is regarded as the first opera.

Operas are divided into scenes and acts that contain different types of vocal pieces for one or many singers. An aria is a vocal solo that focuses on a character's emotions rather than actions. A recitative is sung dialogue or speech that occurs between arias and ensembles.

Composers write the score or the music for the opera. Sometimes the composer will also write the text of the opera, but most often they work with a librettist. The story of the opera is written as a libretto, a text that is easily set to music. In the past, the libretto was also bound and sold to the audience. Today, the audience can easily follow the plot with the use of surtitles. Surtitles are the English translation of the libretto, which are projected onto a screen above the stage.

There are several differences between opera and musicals like *Phantom of the Opera*. One significant difference is the 'partnership' found between the music and the drama in an opera. While musicals use songs to help tell a story, in an opera, the music contributes to the drama, it does not only accompany it. The musical style is another important difference between the two art forms; opera is usually classical and complex, while musicals feature pop songs and sometimes rock and roll. Also, singers in musicals have microphones hidden in their costumes or wigs to amplify their voices. The voices of opera singers are so strong that no amplification is needed, even in a large venue. Furthermore, operas are almost completely sung, while the use of spoken words is more common to musicals. There are some operas with spoken words and these are called singspiels (German) and opera-comique (French). Examples are Mozart's *The Magic Flute* and Bizet's *Carmen*, respectively.

## GLOSSARY: IMPORTANT WORDS IN OPERA

**Act-** a section of the opera that is then divided into scenes.

**Aria-** means “air” in Italian. This is a piece of music written for a one singer (soloist), usually with instrumental accompaniment.

**Aside-** a secret comment from an actor directly to the audience that the other characters cannot hear.

**Baritone-** the middle singing range of the male voice. Russell Braun (Le Gentil) is an example of this vocal range.

**Bass-** the lowest singing range of the male voice.

**Basso buffo** (Italian)- a bass singer who specializes in comic characters.

**Basso profundo** (Italian)- the most serious bass voice.

**Baton-** short stick that the conductor uses to lead the orchestra.

**Bel Canto-** Italian phrase literally meaning “beautiful singing.” A traditional Italian style of singing emphasizing tone, phrasing, coloratura passages, and technique. Also refers to the operas written in this style.

**Blocking-** directions given to the performers for movement on stage.

**Bravo** (Italian)- a form of appreciation shouted by audience members at the end of a particularly pleasing performance. Technically, Bravo refers to a male performer, Brava refers to a female performer and Bravi refers to many performers.

**Buffo-** from the Italian for “buffoon.” A singer of comic roles (basso-buffo) or a comic opera (opera-buffa.)

**Cadenza-** a passage of singing, often at the end of an aria, which shows off the singer's vocal ability.

**Castrato** (Italian)- a castrated male prized for his high singing voice.

**Choreographer-** the person who designs the steps of a dance.

**Chorus-** a group of singers of all vocal ranges, singing together to support the vocal leads.

**Classical-** the period in music which comes after the Baroque and before the Romantic, roughly from the birth of Mozart to shortly after the death of Beethoven. It represents the greatest standardization in orchestral form and tonality.

**Coloratura-** elaborate ornamentation of music written for a singer using many fast notes and trills. Also used to describe a singer who sings this type of music.



**Composer-** the individual who writes all the music for both voice and instrument. Victor Davies is the composer of *Transit of Venus*.

**Comprimario** (Italian)- a nineteenth century term referring to secondary or supporting roles such as confidantes, messengers, and matchmakers.

**Contralto-** the lowest female voice range.

**Conductor-** the person responsible for the musical interpretation and coordination of the performance. The conductor controls the tempo, the dynamic level and the balance between singers and orchestra. You will see this person standing in the orchestra pit conducting the musicians and the singers. The conductor for *Transit of Venus* is James Meena.

**Countertenor-** a male singer with the highest male voice range, generally singing within the female contralto or mezzo soprano range.

**Crescendo-** a build in the volume or dynamic of the music.

**Cue-** a signal to enter or exit from the stage, to move or to change lighting or scenery; or a signal given by the conductor to the musicians.

**Curtain Call-** occurs at the end of the performance when all the cast members and the conductor take bows. This can occur in front of the curtain or on the open stage.

**Designer-** a production can have two or three designers: a lighting designer, a costume designer, a set designer, or someone who is both costume and set designer. They work closely with the stage director to give the production a distinctive look. Brian Perchaluk is the set and costume designer and Scott Henderson is the lighting designer for *Transit of Venus*.

**Director-** guides the production from rehearsal through to stage performances and is involved in every word, structure, and how the opera will 'live' on the stage. Larry Desrochers is the Director of *Transit of Venus*.

**Diva-** literally, "goddess" in Italian. An important female opera star. The masculine form is **divo**.

**Dramaturge-** acts as a sounding board or story editor for the writer and helps maintain the dramatic structure. Larry Desrochers is the dramaturge for *Transit of Venus*.

**Dress Rehearsal-** the final rehearsal before opening night, includes costumes, lights, makeup, etc. Sometimes it is necessary to stop for adjustments, but an attempt is made to make it as much like a regular performance as possible.

**Duet-** music that is written for two people to sing together.

**Encore-** a piece that is performed after the last scheduled piece of a concert. An encore is usually performed because the audience wants to hear more music even though the concert is over.

**Ensemble-** a part of the opera written for a group of two or more singers. This may or may not include the chorus.

**Falsetto-** the upper part of a voice in which the vocal cords do not vibrate completely. Usually used by males to imitate a female voice.

**Finale-** the last musical number of an opera or an act.

**Grand Opera-** spectacular French opera of the Romantic period, lavishly staged, with a historically based plot, a huge cast, an unusually large orchestra, and ballet. It also refers to opera without spoken dialogue.

**Helden-** German prefix meaning “heroic.” Can also apply to other voices, but usually used in “heldentenor.”

**House-** the auditorium and front of the theatre excluding the stage and backstage areas.

**Impresario** – the proprietor, manager, or conductor of an opera or concert company; one who puts on or sponsors an entertainment; manager, producer.

**Interlude-** a short piece of instrumental music played between scenes and acts.

**Intermission-** a break between acts of an opera. The lights go on and the audience is free to move around.

**Librettist-** the writer of the opera’s text. The librettist for *Transit of Venus* is Maureen Hunter.

**Libretto-** Italian for “little book.” It is the text or story of the opera.

**Lyric-** used to describe a light to medium-weight voice with an innocent quality, capable of both sustained, forceful singing and delicate effects.

**Maestro-** means “master” in Italian. Used as a courtesy title for the conductor (male or female).

**Mark-** to sing, but not at full voice. A full-length opera is very hard on a singer’s voice so most performers mark during rehearsals. During the Dress Rehearsal singers try to sing at full voice for part, if not all, of the rehearsal.

**Mezzo-soprano-** the middle singing range for a female voice. Jean Stilwell (Margot) is an example of this singing range.

**Motif or Leitmotif-** a recurring musical theme used to identify an emotion, person, place, or object.

**Opera-** a dramatic presentation which is set to music. Almost all of it is sung, and the orchestra is an equal partner with the singers. Like a play, an opera is acted on stage with costumes, scenery, makeup, etc. Opera is the plural form of the Latin word opus, which means “work.”

**Opera buffa** (Italian)- an opera about ordinary people, usually, but not always comic. First developed in the eighteenth century.

**Opera seria** (Italian)- a serious style of opera. The usual characters are gods and goddesses, or ancient heroes.

**Opera-comique** (French) or Singspiel (German), a form of opera which contains spoken dialogue.

**Operetta**- light hearted opera with spoken dialogue such as a musical.

**Orchestra**- an ensemble, led by a conductor, that is comprised of string, woodwind, brass and percussion instruments.

**Orchestra pit**- sunken area in front of the stage where the orchestra sits.

**Overture**- an orchestral introduction to the opera played before the curtain rises. Usually longer than a prelude and can be played as a separate piece.

**Pitch**- how high or low a note sounds.

**Prelude**- a short introduction that leads into an act without pause.

**Prima Donna**- literally, "first lady" in Italian. The leading woman in an opera. Because of the way some leading ladies behaved in the past, it often refers to someone who is acting in a superior and demanding fashion. The term for a leading man is primo uomo.

**Principal**- a major singing role, or the singer who performs such a role.

**Production**- the combination of sets, costumes, props, and lights, etc.

**Props**- objects carried or used on stage by the performers.

**Proscenium**- the front opening of the stage which frames the action.

**Quartet**- four singers or the music that is written for four singers. Also quintet, sextet, etc.

**Raked Stage**- a stage that slants downwards towards the audience.

**Recitative**- lines of dialogue that are sung, usually with no recognizable melody. It is used to advance the plot.

**Rehearsal**- a working session in which the singers prepare for public performance.

**Score**- the written music of an opera or other musical work.

**Serenade**- a piece of music honouring someone or something, an extension of the traditional performance of a lover beneath the window of his mistress.

**Soprano**- the highest range of the female singing voice. Monica Huisman (Celeste) is an example of this vocal range.

**Soubrette** (French)- pert young female character with a light soprano voice.

**Spinto** (Italian)- a lyric voice that has the power and incisiveness for dramatic climaxes.

**Stage Areas**- refers to the various sections of the stage as seen by those on stage. See diagram in Workshop #1.

**Stage Director**- the person in charge of the action on stage. He or she shows the singers, chorus and cast where and when to move and helps them create their characters. The stage director develops a concept for how the entire performance should look and feel. He or she works closely with the stage managers, lighting designer, set designer, costume designer and wig and make-up artists to make his or her vision into reality.

**Stage Manager**- the person who coordinates and manages elements of the performance.

**Supernumeraries** (Supers)- appear on stage in costume in non-singing and usually, non-speaking roles.

**Surtitles**- the English translations of the opera's language that are projected above the stage during a performance to help the audience follow the story. Much like subtitles in a foreign film.

**Synopsis**- the story of the opera.

**Tableau**- occurs at the end of a scene or act, when all cast members on stage freeze in position and remain that way until the curtain closes. It looks as though that moment has been captured in a photograph.

**Tempo**- speed of the music.

**Tenor**- the highest natural adult male voice. Colin Ainsworth (Demarais) is an example of this kind of singing voice.

**Trill**- very quick alternation between two adjacent notes. See coloratura.

**Trio**- an ensemble of three singers or the music that is written for three singers.

**Trouser role**-the role of an adolescent boy or young man, written for and sung by a woman, often a mezzo-soprano. Also known as a pants role.

**Verismo**- describes a realistic style of opera that started in Italy at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

The following list will help you (and those around you) enjoy the experience of a night at the opera:

- ◆ Dress to be comfortable. Many people enjoy dressing up in formal attire.
- ◆ Arrive on time. Latecomers disturb the singers and others in the audience. Latecomers will only be seated at suitable breaks - often not until intermission.
- ◆ Find your seat with the help of your teacher or an usher.
- ◆ Remove your hat. This is customary and is respectful to the artists and to people sitting behind you.
- ◆ Turn off cell phones, Ipods, pagers, digital watch alarms and all electronic devices.
- ◆ Leave your camera at home. A flash can be very disturbing to the artists and audience members alike.
- ◆ Save all conversations, eating and drinking, and chewing gum for the intermission. Talking and eating can be disruptive to other audience members and distracts from your ability to be absorbed by the show. The audience is critical to the success of the show – without you, there can be no performance.
- ◆ Settle in and get comfortable before the performance begins. Read your program before the performance – rustling through the program during the show can disrupt everyone.
- ◆ Clap as the lights are dimmed and the conductor appears and bows to the audience. Watch as the conductor then turns to the orchestra and takes up his or her baton to signal the beginning of the opera.
- ◆ Listen to the prelude or overture before the curtain rises. It is part of the performance. It is an opportunity to identify common musical themes that may reoccur during the opera.
- ◆ Sit still during the performance. Only whisper when it is absolutely necessary, as a whisper is heard all over the theatre, and NEVER (except in an emergency) stand during the performance.
- ◆ Applaud (or shout Bravo!) at the end of an aria or chorus piece to show your enjoyment. The end of a piece can be identified by a pause in the music.
- ◆ Laugh when something is funny – this is a performance and you are expected to respond!
- ◆ Read the English surtitles projected above the stage. *Transit of Venus* is sung in English (unlike many operas) but the surtitles help you understand the words.
- ◆ Listen for subtleties in the music. The tempo, volume and complexity of the music and singing often depict the “feeling” or “sense” of the action or character. Notice repeated words or phrases; they are usually significant.

**Finally, have fun and enjoy the show!!!**

## STUDENT ACTIVITIES

### Workshop 1: Write an Opera

1. You have been asked to create and produce an opera. Think of stories you know – from books, plays, movies – that you think would make a good opera and write down the names of one or two:

Name of book/play/movie \_\_\_\_\_

2. Think of the people you will need to help you complete your opera. Name the different tasks you will need to include.
3. Take the role of the librettist and write the words for one song for your opera.
4. Write down the historical setting for your opera and find out what kind of costumes you think you will need for your singers to match the time period.

### Workshop 2: Stage Business

**Objectives:** Students will be able to express and apply their knowledge of the areas of the stage through writing and movement. Students will investigate the historical background of stage positioning.

**Pre-class:** Tape a massive grid to the floor of the space you are working in. This can be used to physically point out the areas of the stage as well as be used for the game “Director Says.”

#### Activity #1: Group Discussion

Have a group discussion with your class regarding why individuals might need to assign names for the different areas of the theatre, questioning the purpose that it serves.

#### Activity #2: Historical Significance of the Stage

Explain briefly the historical significance for the set-up of the theatre. Include such points as how the stage was originally raked so that the back portion of the stage was higher than the front portion. This was done because the audience’s seats were not raised as they usually are today. It enabled those individuals sitting in the back row of the theatre to see the players clearly. As a result, the back of the stage is called up stage and the front of the stage is referred to as down stage.

You may also choose to discuss which areas of the stage are most important. For example, the strongest entrance is from stage left.

Distribute the “Stage Facts” on the next page, so that students can refer to it as you physically go to the taped area that you are explaining. You may choose to have them draw and copy the areas of the stage for themselves.

### Activity #3: "Director Says" Game

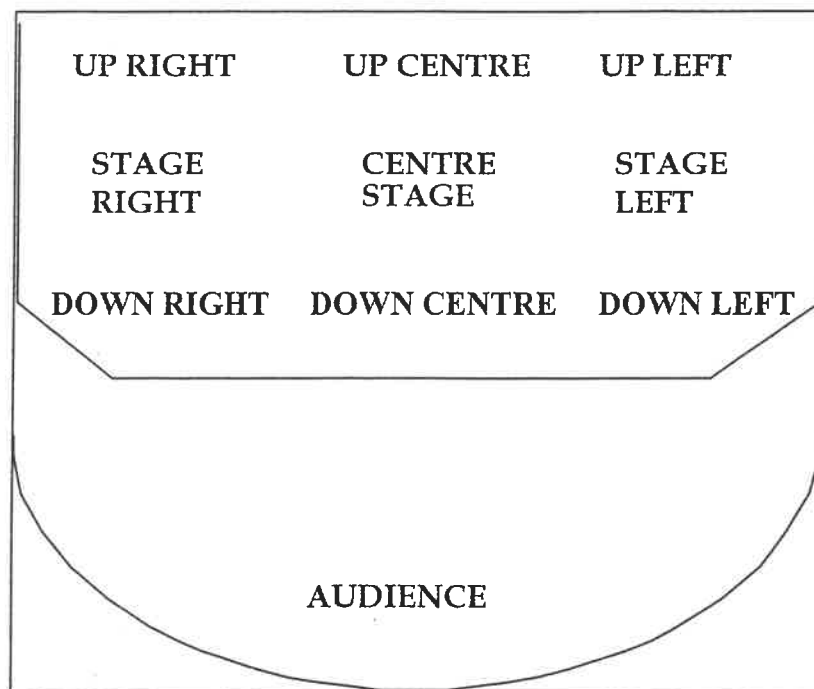
The teacher designates one of the students as the director, or for the first round you can be the director. The remaining students are the performers.

The director gives out the directions: "Move upstage," "Move stage right," "Move to up centre," etc. The director may give out directions to the entire group at once, small groups, or individuals e.g., "All performers with red socks go to stage left."

Students are out if they move in any direction other than the one the director gives. The director gives out directions more rapidly, and any performer who moves in the wrong direction or hesitates is out. You may need to have a judge.

### Stage Facts

Opera singers are required to act as well as sing and therefore they must understand the stage set-up. In rehearsals, the director will indicate to the singers what they should be doing and where they should do it. To do this they use a special vocabulary. Take a look at the diagram below in order to understand the different areas of the stage.



### Workshop 3: Understanding *Transit of Venus*

#### Objectives:

Student will be able to express their knowledge of the storyline of *Transit of Venus* through verbal and written expression. Students will be able to express their knowledge of character through writing a character sketch.

#### Activity 1: Story of *Transit of Venus*

Have the students read the play version of *Transit of Venus* or you can use the synopsis found in the Study Guide. Have the students discuss what happens to the characters and why they think each character behaved the way they did. Do they think a similar story could be told in modern times or can they think of contemporary stories that have a similar theme.

Another approach is to convert the synopsis into an improvised play. Have students create the dialogue between characters at key points in the story.

#### Activity 2: Sharing with a group

After viewing the Dress Rehearsal, have the students discuss what they saw. To help focus conversations, get the students to create a list of qualities that they feel are key to understanding *Transit of Venus* and its characters.

#### Activity 3: Creating a journal from point of view of a character

Allow students to pick a specific moment in the opera, preferably a point of conflict for the character. Have the students write a journal of those events from the point of view of their character. Explain to the students that they are to take on the persona of that character and should refer to the character through personal pronouns. Also, remind students that they are only to express information that their character would know.

#### Character Profile

Name and role

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Physical Characteristics (their style and physical attributes)

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Psychological Characteristics (mental aspects of character, how do they think about things?)

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Emotional Characteristics (are they generally cheerful, sad, snobby, “off-balance,” etc.?)

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Family

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Career/Income (if applicable)

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Interests and Hobbies

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Other interesting facts

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## **Workshop 4: Writing a Review of *Transit of Venus***

**Objectives:** Students will be able to write clear and well-supported expository essays. Students will utilize observation and critical thinking skills based on real-life, real-time experiences. Students can submit their writing for publication (school newspaper) or you can send the reviews to Manitoba Opera. We would love to hear what the students thought.

### **Activity 1: Think-Group-Share**

Individually students will write, in point form, the answers to the following questions:

1. What did you like about the opera? What did you dislike?
2. What did you think about the set, props and costumes?
3. Would you have done something differently? Why?
4. What were you expecting? Did it live up to your expectations?
5. What did you think of the singers' portrayal of their characters?

Break the students into groups to discuss their feelings and reactions to the production. Have the students write on poster papers their answers or important points of their discussion. Encourage the students to go beyond the questions posed. Place their poster papers on the walls.

### **Activity 2: Gallery Walk**

Have the groups travel around the room to examine the discussion poster papers. During the walk, students must write down one thing that surprised them, one thing that they didn't think of, and one thing that they would like explained. Once this is done, have a large group discussion about the different ideas that they encountered on their walk.

### **Activity 3: Outlining your review**

Go over the essential aspects of a review including:

- a clearly stated purpose
- a coherent comparison/contrast organizational pattern
- a summary paragraph
- capturing the interest of the reader
- precise nouns
- revision for consistency of ideas

You might give your students a few samples of reviews for fine arts events from the newspaper as examples – or ask them to bring in some reviews they find themselves. Have the students fill out the “Review Outline” worksheet. Once this has been completed, students may write their rough draft.

### **Activity 4: Peer Conferencing**

Students will exchange reviews to critique and edit. Have the students use the “Peer Evaluation” worksheet to help guide them. Encourage the students to focus on effective coordination of ideas in sentences and the correct use of grammar and punctuation.

### **Activity 5: Creating the Final draft**

Have students make the appropriate adjustments to their reviews. You could also have the students type the pieces up and organize them into a newspaper. Also have the students complete the “Self-evaluation” worksheet. Include this in the total mark.

## **Review Outline**

Purpose (why are you writing this and who is your audience?)

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Plot Synopsis (including who sang what role, etc.)

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Paragraph #1 (compare and contrast things you liked or didn't like)

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Paragraph #2 (compare and contrast things you liked or didn't like)

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Paragraph #3 (compare and contrast things you liked or didn't like)

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Summary/Closing Paragraph

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### Peer Evaluation *Transit of Venus*

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Name of peer evaluator: \_\_\_\_\_

Scale: 5-Outstanding 4-Above Average 3-Average 2-Needs improvement 1-Unclear  
0-Has not been done

- \_\_\_\_\_ Purpose of review was clear
- \_\_\_\_\_ Reader clearly taken into account (background, word choice)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Engaging to the reader (was it interesting to read?)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Complete sentence structure (grammar, spelling and punctuation)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Varied length and types of sentences used
- \_\_\_\_\_ Strong word choices (adjectives, adverbs and nouns)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Originality and creativity
- \_\_\_\_\_ Attention to detail and support of beliefs with examples

Total: \_\_\_\_\_ /40

Comments and Questions:

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### Self-Evaluation *Transit of Venus*

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Name of Reviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Scale: 5-Outstanding 4-Above Average 3-Average 2-Needs improvement 1-Unclear  
0-Has not been done

- \_\_\_\_\_ Purpose of review was clear
- \_\_\_\_\_ Reader clearly taken into account (background, word choice)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Engaging to the reader (was it interesting to read?)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Complete sentence structure (grammar, spelling and punctuation)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Varied length and types of sentences used
- \_\_\_\_\_ Strong word choices (adjectives, adverbs and nouns)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Originality and creativity
- \_\_\_\_\_ Attention to detail and support of beliefs with examples

Total: \_\_\_\_\_ /40

Comments:

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## **Workshop 5: Historical Research Opportunities**

Students can pick one of the following topics – or create their own – to research and report back to the class on their findings:

- The importance of astronomy in religion and the evolution of astronomy through the ages
- Transits of Venus – their historical significance, when they've occurred and where they've been seen; dates for the next visible transits
- History and hazards of travel in the 18<sup>th</sup> century – risks from disease, mode of transport, wars, permission to travel – compare to today's travelling to new frontiers, e.g., space travel and today's earthly conflicts
- Women's roles in the 18<sup>th</sup> century; contrast the three main female characters with women today

## Opera Comprehension Test

### General Opera

1. \_\_\_\_\_ A theatrical production incorporating both vocal and instrumental music, drama, and sometimes dance.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ The lowest male vocal range.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ An instrumental introduction to an opera.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ The area where the orchestra is seated.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ The female vocal range lying between soprano and contralto.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ A song for solo voice in an opera.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ The highest female vocal range.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ A song for two voices.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ The lowest female vocal range.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ The Italian word meaning "little book."
11. \_\_\_\_\_ The middle male vocal range.
12. \_\_\_\_\_ He/she has the artistic view for the performance of the opera.

### *Transit of Venus*

1. The opera *Transit of Venus* takes place \_\_\_\_\_ (give the location and approximate date).
2. Le Gentil is a \_\_\_\_\_ (name his profession).
3. In the first act, Le Gentil is making plans to travel to \_\_\_\_\_ (name the location) to try to record the transit of Venus across the sun.
4. In the second act, Le Gentil admits to \_\_\_\_\_ (name the character) that he will be returning to India.
5. In the final act, Celeste admits to Le Gentil that she no longer loves him but now loves \_\_\_\_\_ (name the character).
6. The composer of *Transit of Venus* is \_\_\_\_\_.
7. The librettist of *Transit of Venus* is \_\_\_\_\_.
8. The role of Margot, sung by Jean Stilwell, is composed for a \_\_\_\_\_ voice (name the type of singing voice).

**Answers**  
**General Opera**

1. opera
2. bass
3. overture
4. pit
5. mezzo-soprano
6. aria
7. soprano
8. duet
9. contralto
10. libretto
11. baritone
12. director

***Transit of Venus***

1. France, 18<sup>th</sup> century
2. Astronomer
3. India
4. Celeste
5. Demarais
6. Victor Davies
7. Maureen Hunter
8. Mezzo-soprano

## TEACHER'S EVALUATION SHEET

Your comments and suggestions are greatly appreciated. Please take a few minutes to fill out this questionnaire and return it to the address below. Thank you for your comments and suggestions.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

School: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Fax: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade(s) you teach: \_\_\_\_\_

Subjects: \_\_\_\_\_

Have you attended other performing arts events with your students in the past year?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, what were they?

\_\_\_\_\_

How did you find out about Manitoba Opera's Student Dress Rehearsal?

\_\_\_\_\_

Were you able to apply the Teacher's Study Guide in your classroom activities prior to coming to the opera?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Which sections of the Study Guide did you find most useful?

\_\_\_\_\_

If not, please explain \_\_\_\_\_

How appropriate was the information provided in the Study Guide?

\_\_\_\_\_

What would you add/delete?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



Did you spend classroom time discussing the performance after your students attended the opera?    ☐ Yes ☐ No

Do you have any comments about the performance itself?

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Would you like to receive information on our future Student Dress Rehearsals?  
☐ Yes ☐ No

How would you like to receive information:

☐ Fax            ☐ Email            ☐ Letters            ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_

Further comments and suggestions \_\_\_\_\_

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Please return this form to: **Education Coordinator, Room 105, 555 Main Street, Winnipeg, MB R3B 1C3; Fax: (204) 949-0377**

**THANK YOU!**