

Artists on Stage

Canadian tenor Isaiah Bell is the proverbial multi-talented Renaissance Man. He possesses a beautiful lyric tenor which has won him kudos on both sides of the Atlantic. He is also a prolific composer, having written four operas including *The Lives of Lesser Things*, toured by Edmonton's Opera NUOVA. Currently he's in discussion with Tapestry Opera (Toronto) and Intrepid Theatre (Victoria), to produce a one-man show developed around his own music and personal stories. To be sure, very impressive for a singer of any age, let alone someone who's all of 32.

Bell was recently in Toronto making his COC debut in the cameo role of the Zimmerkellner in *Arabella*. Born in the northern B.C. town of Fort St. John, four hours south of the Yukon, Bell took piano lessons at eight, and singing lessons in his teens from his first voice teacher, Bev Bar-radell. He attended the University of Victoria where he studied voice with soprano Alexandra Browning and tenor Benjamin Butterfield.

Bell's professional operatic debut as the Mad Woman in Britten's *Curlew River* with Vancouver City Opera (2010) was a good luck charm, leading to a reprise of the role with Mark Morris in Tanglewood and at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Appearances in Britten's *Owen Wingrave* (Edinburgh) and as Albert Herring (Opera on the Avalon) speak to Bell's connection with the British composer. The tenor looks forward to one-day tackling Peter Grimes and *Death in Venice's* Gustav von Aschenbach.

Surely, he's too young to be thinking of characters like these? But as we chatted, I sensed Bell is an 'old soul,' possessing a serious-minded maturity that belies his age. While fellow students were going to pubs, Bell recalls sitting on a bus, all of 19, listening to Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder*. He has already sung Schubert's *Winterreise*, the Mount Everest of song cycles: "I've sung it twice, and will do it again." Isn't it unusual to sing it before having tackled Schubert's archetypal young man's cycle, *Die schöne Müllerin*? "I feel the character [in *Winterreise*] is young," Bell counters. "It's about young love. You don't have to be old to sing it."

On the other hand, he finds it more difficult to channel his energies into sunny, uncomplicated characters like Nemorino in *L'elisir d'amore*, even if it suits his voice. Bell prefers roles that give him a

chance to dig deeper. Albert Herring is a good example. Often portrayed as a simpleton, Albert is actually quite complex. A young man trapped and desperate, misunderstood by those around him, and a social oddball. Bell readily admits that his affinity for Albert reflects his own personal life journey: "As a young gay man growing up in a small town, it's easy to feel connected with a character who's stifled by his environment. You don't want to play [*Albert Herring*] as a tragedy as it's happy in the end, but you don't play it as if you think it's a joke."

Isaiah Bell



Until recently, most of his operatic performances have taken place outside Canada. But that is about to change. Bell returns to Toronto in April to make his Opera Atelier debut as Eurimaco in Monteverdi's *The Return of Ulysses*. And if his COC debut in *Arabella* was lamentably brief, the company is bringing him back this fall in a high-profile gig, the world premiere of *Hadrian*, by Canadian composer/songwriter Rufus Wainwright. Bell will portray the historical figure of Antinous, Hadrian's lover.

Hadrian will be his first world premiere: "I've always been a fan of Wainwright's work; he has a truly unique point of view. I've never been good at fitting into boxes, and I get the impression that the same might be true of him. I have high hopes for the project!"

While it's always exciting to create new roles, contemporary music can pose special challenges for a singer. Bell has an interesting

take on this issue: "In order to sing well, your body needs to be in control. If I'm singing something that's less grounded in tonality... I try not to retreat into my brain too much, otherwise the sound suffers. I try to integrate the music, to become so intimately familiar with it that it feels like it is a natural expression. Then I can hand over more control to my body to make it sound good."

I often ask singers, "what's the best piece of advice you have received?" Bell's answer was unique, and a surprise: "I rely on many people for guidance and support, but my favourite advice is from [Rainer Maria] Rilke, via Ben Butterfield — 'No one can advise or help you. No one.' Onstage, as in life, we have to do it alone. Coming to terms with that is both terrifying and empowering." —Joseph So