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Review: National Council Auditions Winners Named at Grand Finals Concert

By VIVIEN SCHWEITZER MARCH 23, 2015



National Council Auditions Nine singers from across the country competed on Sunday at the Metropolitan Opera's Grand Finals Concert. It was hosted by the soprano Angela Meade, top right, who was a winner in the 2007 competition. This year's winners were (clockwise from top left): Marina Costa-Jackson, Reginald Smith Jr., Joseph Dennis, Virginie Verrez and Nicholas Brownlee.

“Grand Opera’s answer to ‘American Idol,’ ” said Peter Gelb, general manager of the Metropolitan Opera, describing the organization’s annual National Council Auditions while the judges deliberated on Sunday afternoon. The important vocal event has helped propel the careers of many young singers, including the soprano Angela Meade, who presented the Grand Finals Concert at the Met.

About 126 artists on the 2014-15 Met roster took part in National Council Auditions. Nine singers, laureates of this year’s regional auditions in the United States and Canada, competed in the final concert; five were chosen as winners. Mr. Gelb also pointed out that some notable singers did not win, including the soprano Patricia Racette.

Of those five winners, the soprano [Marina Costa-Jackson](#) (a sister of the mezzo-soprano Ginger Costa-Jackson, who has performed at the Met) sounded particularly promising. She offered “Uzh polnoch blizitsa” (“Midnight will soon strike”) from Tchaikovsky’s “The Queen of Spades,” a dramatically and musically alluring rendition notable for her burnished timbre and subtle phrasing. The young singers were elegantly accompanied by the Met Orchestra, conducted by Fabio Luisi.

Each performer sang one aria on each half of the program; after intermission Ms. Costa-Jackson, from Salt Lake City, sang “Si, mi chiamano Mimi” from “La Bohème.” The French mezzo-soprano Virginie Verrez also made a strong impression, her silvery, dark-hued voice attractive throughout her range, demonstrating impressive control in her interpretations of selections from Mozart’s “La Clemenza di Tito” and Barber’s “Vanessa.”

The bass-baritone Nicholas Brownlee proved the standout among the three male winners, charismatic and charming in his winning interpretation of the catalog aria from Mozart’s “Don Giovanni,” a vocally and physically confident performance that had the audience chuckling. After intermission he switched gears emotionally with a potent rendition of Aleko’s cavatina from the Rachmaninoff opera of the same name.

The other two winners were the tenor Joseph Dennis, who sang with expressive elegance in “Salut, demeure chaste et pure” from Gounod’s “Faust,” and the baritone Reginald Smith Jr., a passionate performer who showed his mettle in an aria from Verdi’s “Falstaff” and “Oh, Lawd Jesus, heah my prayer” from Louis Gruenberg’s “The Emperor Jones,” an opera that incorporates jazz and spirituals and had its premiere at the Met in 1933.

The winners received \$15,000 to further their careers; the runners-up, who were awarded \$5,000, showed promise but were less finished performers.

Before the judges announced their decision, Ms. Meade told the audience that she had entered 60 competitions (including the Met’s) and was “blessed to win 57.” After listening to her gorgeous rendition of “Casta Diva” from Bellini’s “Norma,” now one of her showpiece arias, there was no doubting why.