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## And Now for Something Completely Different

**BARRY SINGER** travels to Rochester, New York, to watch the Lotte Lenya Competition, a unique contest for young singers.



Lenya judges Berman, Kaye and Robinson and winners Hill, Ballenger and Edquist, 2014  
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### te Lenya

#### l. Hunstein/Lebrecht Music & Arts 2014

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The Lotte Lenya Competition asks singers to do the impossible. And why not? Musical theater, whether on an operatic or a Broadway stage, is an impossible construct, a teetering musical mass levitated by artistry, energy and alchemy. While other vocal competitions just ask singers to sing, the Lenya Competition asks its contestants to create their own one-person musical narrative out of found materials and make us believe that it is all true.

Each performer is given fifteen minutes onstage (a veritable lifetime in dramaturgic terms) to be filled with four categorically delineated vocal selections — an opera or operetta aria; a song from the so-called "golden age" of musical theater, pre-1968; a song from a "contemporary" musical, post-1968; plus something by composer Kurt Weill, Lenya's legendary husband and collaborator. These disparate numbers must be woven into a dramatic whole by the performers — acted, as well as sung, with consummate believability.

It is this requirement that distinguishes the Lenya Competition from all others. In an age of hyper-HD scrutiny, with the demand for acting ability and sheer telegenic attractiveness ever more decisive in opera, no vocal contest better targets today's total-package talents, unearthing up-and-coming singers who are ready for their close-ups.

On Saturday, April 12, from eleven o'clock in the morning until well after ten at night, the finals of the Lenya Competition, 2014 edition, ground through fourteen capaciously gifted young performers in the wood-paneled precincts of the Eastman School of Music's Kilbourn Hall up in Rochester, New York. Singing for an avid audience of local Rochester music-lovers and a smattering of Eastman School students and faculty, augmented by a crush of family and friends, these musical-theater thoroughbreds

ran the vocal equivalent of a marathon.

Kilbourn Hall is a petite jewel-box of a recital hall, the proscenium space a faux drawing room, exquisitely carved, with polished, wainscoted surfaces. Two matched French Provincial settees are perched coyly on the parquet, framing a nine-foot Steinway D concert grand. The setting is old-world classy but not cold. Clearly, we are welcome to loiter here for a bit, to look in at the artists as they stroll on, seemingly from some guest bedroom upstairs.

Kim Kowalke, president of the Kurt Weill Foundation — the competition's sponsor — greets everyone with exuberance and a few facts: the Lenya Competition, now in its sixteenth season, usually has twelve finalists. This year, a commanding pool of entrants has swelled that tally to fourteen — seven men and seven women, ages twenty-three to thirty-one, with a mean age of twenty-seven (a little older than at previous competitions). Five of the fourteen have been finalists before and have been invited back to try again for the big prize. All of these five are women.

"It's going to be a spectacular competition," concludes Kowalke, with barely suppressed delight.

What makes a singing competition "spectacular?" High notes? At the Lenya Competition, not necessarily. Melodrama and fireworks? Possibly, but such histrionics are very hard to sing.

The judges are sitting upstairs this morning. They have climbed shyly to the upper regions of Kilbourn Hall as if in search of anonymity, though heads turn as they go. The Lenya Competition boasts a very rich judicial history, commencing with Teresa Stratas, the great and diffident diva, who, despite her doubts about competitions, signed on in 1998 and quickly became a Competition adherent. Music directors John Mauceri, Julius Rudel and Eric Stern; music-theater administrators such as the Ravinia Festival's Welz Kauffman and the Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization's Ted Chapin; stage legend Harold Prince and composer William Bolcom — all these luminaries have sat in judgment at one Lenya Competition or another. This year, Broadway veteran Judy Kaye is joined by the music director of New York City Center's Encores! Series, Rob Berman, and the artistic director for Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, James Robinson. A glance their way reveals a tribunal practically quaking with anticipation, behind uniform poker faces.

The whole business began weeks ago. Two hundred preliminary audition videos were initially submitted. The videos were then winnowed down to twenty-nine semi-finalists, who auditioned live in March in New York City for two "adjudicator/ coaches" (as the foundation officially characterizes them), performer Rebecca Luker and composer Jeanine Tesori (*Violet*). These two ladies chose the final fourteen and also mentored them with quick master classes on the fly. Today the finalists are competing for three top prizes — \$15,000, \$10,000 and \$7,500, respectively. Everyone gets at least \$1,000 in prize money, plus an honorarium for travel costs. According to the Weill Foundation, more than \$500,000 in prizes and awards has been handed out since the competition began.

A door swings open, and the first singer bounds in. What a tough spot — singing lead-off, cold, on a chilly Saturday morning in Rochester. Jim Schubin, an apple-cheeked pro at twenty-four, who is currently working off-Broadway in *The Fantasticks*, hits the stage with a calculated winsomeness, bravely opting to open on a contemporary note — "Run Away with Me," by the relatively little-known but up-and-coming theatrical song team of Kait Kerrigan and Brian Lowdermilk. Schubin downshifts from there to the drinking song from *The Student Prince*, wafts through Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Younger Than Springtime" and closes with Weill's Teutonic take on a cowboy song, "Oh, the Rio

Grande," from *Johnny Johnson*, originally produced on Broadway by the Group Theater in 1936.

Broadway musicals have always been populated by vocal stereotypes — the sweet-voiced ingenue, the steely-voiced leading man, the reedy-voiced comic second banana, the burly-voiced villain. Each of these types is, of course, on display at the 2014 Lenya Competition, interspersed with straight-up opera types who possess more generically impressive pipes.

The day's most interesting aspect is watching these types blur. Natalie Ballenger, also twenty-four, knocks out her four numbers with alternating operatic heft and true comic daffiness. Arlo Hill, twenty-seven, manages to work some inspired slapstick footwork into his able readings of Gilbert and Sullivan's "I am a pirate king" and Stephen Sondheim's *Follies* tour de force, "Buddy's Blues." Heather Phillips, twenty-nine, ranges her stentorian soprano from Puccini's "O mio babbino caro" to "Gimme, Gimme," Tesori's *Thoroughly Modern Millie* showstopper. Carter Lynch, twenty-six, finds resonances between Gilbert and Sullivan (*The Pirates of Penzance*: "Oh is there not one maiden breast"), Weill and Langston Hughes (*Street Scene*'s "Lonely House"), Bock and Harnick ("She Loves Me") and Andrew Lippa's creepy "What Is It about Her?" from *The Wild Party*. Diana Rose Becker, twenty-eight, so perfectly nails Emily's goodbye aria from Ned Rorem's setting of *Our Town*, that she renders the rest of her beautifully sung and acted program a virtual anticlimax. Yes, sequencing very much matters here. In conclusion, Mikalai Znaharchuk, a glowering, twenty-five-year-old bass-baritone recently graduated from the Belarusian State Academy of Music, strides onstage to roar through "This Nearly was Mine," from *South Pacific*, before climbing onto a chair to belt out Tchaikovsky's "Yesli b milyye devitsky," from *The Queen of Spades*.

The afternoon blessedly, if drainingly, proffers more of the same. A luminous thirty-year-old named Lauren Michelle, in an incandescent ballgown (one of the very few on display), delivers an opera-centric trio from *La Bohème* to *Mahagonny* to *Porgy and Bess* — with a brief stopover Off-Broadway for an obscure showtune, "I'll Be Here," from the recent chamber musical *Ordinary Days*, by Adam Gwon. Robert Ariza, twenty-four, brings naked vocal purity to *The Mikado*'s "A wandering minstrel, I," "Something's Coming," from *West Side Story*, and Kander and Ebb's cross-dressing ode, "She's a Woman," from *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*. Twenty-seven-year-old Rachel Cordeiro finds equivalent majesty in Ahrens and Flaherty's "Your Daddy's Son," from *Ragtime*, and Brecht–Weill's "Pirate Jenny," from *The Threepenny Opera*. Ben Edquist, twenty-three, bridges the gulf between cartoon hilarity (an animated rendition of "Me," from Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*) and operatic poignancy ("She Called Him 'Curt,'" from Jake Heggie's *Three Decembers*). Katie Travis, twenty-seven, audaciously seats herself cross-legged on the stage to sing Adam Guettel's paean to pregnancy, "Baby Moon." Norman Garrett, thirty-one, roils the operatic waters from Verdi's *Falstaff* to *Ragtime* ("Make Them Hear You") to Weill's "Lost in the Stars." Finally, in what does feel like the dawn's early light (though it is really only 3:30 in the afternoon), twenty-eight-year-old Briana Hunter closes out the proceedings with a delectable rendition of Harold Arlen and Truman Capote's "I Never Has Seen Snow," from *House of Flowers*.

At 8:00 the same evening, they are all back, all fourteen, for the day's finale — a concert of select reprises from the daytime programs. In tribute to the earthy aesthetic of this competition, not one costume change is made for the evening show. In tribute to the value of practice makes perfect, and the potency, perhaps, of after-dark adrenaline, every concert redo is ramped up a notch — more secure vocally, more profoundly delivered.

Predictably, the judges' deliberations last a long time.

"We only wish we could have awarded everyone first prize," states Judy Kaye with apparent sincerity before the final announcement: third prize goes to ebullient Natalie Ballenger, second prize to eccentric Arlo Hill, and first prize at the 2014 Lotte Lenya Competition to Ben Edquist.

Everybody seems just a bit stunned that the day is suddenly over — including the winners, a multi-talented trio. Is there a Lenya among them — someone confrontational, someone sublimely dangerous, both vocally and in raw onstage mien?

Not remotely.

For Kim Kowalke, this is not a bad thing. "I think it's unlikely that Lenya would be able to win such a competition today," he remarks afterward. "The level of acting and singing, in both musical theater and most opera, is so much higher than was the prevailing norm in the 1920s. Lenya in 1928, with her 'sweet, high, light soprano, dangerous like a sickle moon,' as one critic described it, could have found an operetta number to sing and would have excelled at the Weill, obviously, but she would have perhaps been in the same boat as so many alumni of the competition who now sing at the Met — great at one end of the spectrum (the vocal one), but not the whole spectrum. Lenya would have been great at one end too (the singing actress), but the opera aspect would have been a stretch."

All three top prize-winners seem headed for solid musical-theater careers, and Ballenger clearly has performance-grade opera chops. It is nevertheless difficult, in the end — despite the Lenya Competition's clearly stated mission and tightly regulated format — to get a handle on the judging, to discern what precisely separated these winners from some awfully impressive losers. Perhaps the Lenya Foundation's preference for the "full package" elevates performers who are appealing over those who are compelling. Or perhaps what dazzles each of us on a theatrical stage, beyond obvious vocal perfection, is just too exquisitely subjective to quantify. Perhaps judging a vocal contest that demands the impossible ... is impossible. □

BARRY SINGER *has begun blogging about music and theater (and Winston Churchill) for the Huffington Post.*

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