

City's new opera company debuts tonight with 'Don Giovanni'

By Donna Doherty
Register Arts Editor

NEW HAVEN — The city may not be able to support sports teams, but it can sure get behind arts organizations, and now there's another: the Hillhouse Opera Company.

Founded and presided over by Yale-trained soprano Victoria Leigh Gardner last spring, HHOC is presenting its first full opera, Mozart's "Don Giovanni," tonight and Saturday at 7:30 at St. Mary's Church on Hillhouse Avenue, with a cast of accomplished local singers and a commitment to community.

It's billed as free, but Gardner is asking attendees for a \$10 donation or \$15 a family, the proceeds of which will be given to the church's choir program.

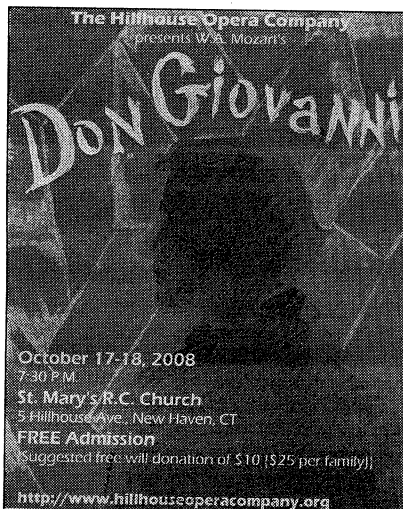
"It's important to me to keep the cost of tickets free or really cheap, because I think one of the barriers of opera and other classical music pursuits is cost," says Gardner by cellphone as she walks to her job at the Yale Department of Astronomy. "People can't afford to go ..."

Gardner, originally from Pennsylvania, came here to study music and archeology at Yale in 1999 and never left, getting her master's in music in 2005 from the Yale Institute of Sacred Music.



Anthony V. Riccio

Hillhouse Opera Company singer and president Victoria Leigh Gardner.



Bronwen McShea

singer is making his opera debut.

wanted to keep going. They incorporated as Hillhouse Opera Company and are currently awaiting nonprofit status.

Nonprofit is kind of a company theme: "We've been doing everything possible to keep costs down," says Gardner, noting that they all are volunteers, most of the 20 musicians are donating their time, the poster printing (from a painting created for free by New Haven artist Bronwen McShea) came out of their own pockets, and it's being performed in modern dress (theirs).

She noted the generosity of St. Mary's pastor Rev. Joseph Allen in allowing them to publicize themselves in the church bulletin — which has brought in even more opera lovers — and by donating the space for the performances.

"I like the fact that the church is part of the community, and this brings the community together through the church," she says.

Gardner also functioned as music director, planning and running rehearsals until veteran conductor Mercy O'Bourke joined the gang, and, according to Gardner, is "doing an amazing job."

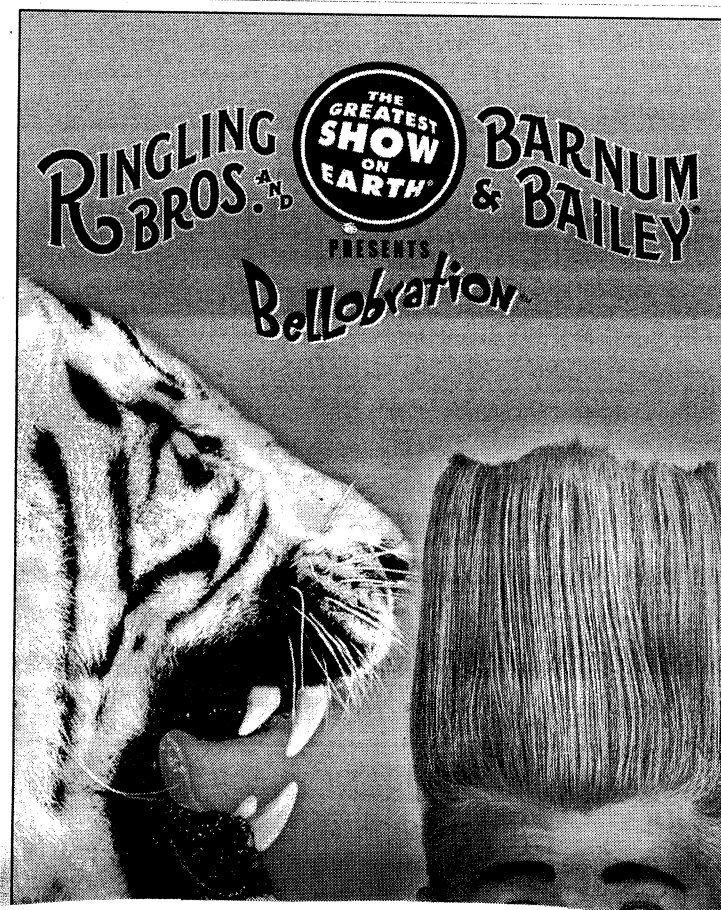
Gardner sings the role of Donna Elvira. She's joined by Michael Trnick as Don Giovanni, David Schancupp (Il Commendatore), Vicki

Revere (Donna Anna), Victor Khodabad (Don Ottavio), James Coatsworth (Leporello), Andrew Davis (Masetto), Grace Caroline Brooks and Music Director Nicole Rodriguez (alternate as Zerlina).

To reserve advanced seating

(money will be collected at the door on performance nights) e-mail hillhouseoperacompany@gmail.com.

Donna Doherty may be reached at (203) 789-5672 or ddoherty@nhregister.com.



"A year ago, I quit my full-time job to work part-time so I could do more opera. I had been auditioning, meeting people, and in the spring, decided, 'I have all these people who are good, I want to give them an opportunity to perform without having to go all over creation to audition.' And I wanted it for myself, too."

Gardner pulled together her local cast from singers she'd either performed with or met at various gatherings, such as choir, Troupers Light Opera, a Yale Opera production and even an opera program in Italy. One

"I felt that opera could build community, could bring people from all different places together through one place, through the cultural experience. ...

"I brought all these people to do one opera, 'Don Giovanni,' because in my opinion, it's the greatest opera ever, and I also thought we had the appropriate people for it based on the people who'd expressed interest in it."

The core group first formed the Hillhouse Opera Project just for "Don Giovanni," but in late summer, they realized they

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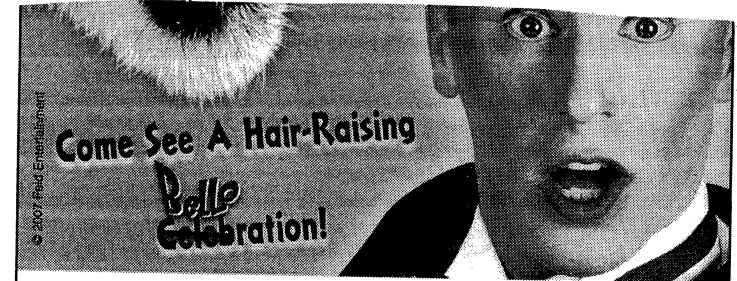
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