UC SANTA BARBARA
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The Voices of Experience

Graduate students working with faculty as teaching assistants are as common as skateboards at UC Santa Barbara. One small group of grad students, however, will soon work with a couple of professors in an exclusive setting: the production of a professional opera company.

The faculty and students in the voice program of UCSB's Department of Music will perform in Opera Santa Barbara's production of "The Cunning Little Vixen," by Leoš Janácek, March 3 at 7:30 p.m. and March 5 at 2:30 p.m. at the Granada Theatre. Soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian, an assistant professor of music, will star as the Vixen; tenor Benjamin Brecher, an associate professor of music, will perform dual roles as Mosquito and Schoolmaster; mezzo-soprano grad student Molly Clementz will perform as Lapák the Dog; soprano grad student Naomi Merer will perform as Chicken; and tenor Zachary Mendez and baritones Luvi Avendano and Byron Mayes, all grad students, will sing in the chorus off-stage.

Bayrakdarian, an international stage and recording star, said the opportunity for students to sing with professionals is the result of UCSB's "beautiful relationship" with Opera Santa Barbara (OSB).

"This whole partnership that we have with Opera Santa Barbara is fantastic for the students on so many levels," she noted. "Because they have a chance to get professional experience while still being at school. It's one thing to perform in student productions; it's another to perform for a paying audience that is a professional opera company. You learn not just by being on stage, but by observing

other professionals singing. You have the security of being at home, with teachers around you to guide you."

For the students, Bayrakdarian said, the experience is more than just being on stage with professionals. "They get to see their teachers in principal roles practicing what they preach. This unique situation — where just by demonstrating voice technique/stagecraft in your own character portrayal — enables the students to learn and grow the most, because they're observing cause and effect. Sometimes, to be a good teacher, you need to use words only 10 percent of the time. The rest, you can lead and inspire by example"

Brecher, who has performed around the world in more than 50 roles, said the intimacy of UCSB's voice program is its strength. "What I like about the voice area is the smallness of it and the attention that we can give each student," he said. "A lot of bigger programs, if you go as an undergrad, don't have a lot of opportunities, but here the undergrads perform with the grad students and get stage time if they're ready, and I think that's a great thing."

In staging "The Cunning Little Vixen," OSB lets the audience step outside the classic comfort zones of "Carmen" or "The Marriage of Figaro" to experience a rarely performed opera, said Bayrakdarian, who is the only member of the cast who has done it.

"You need to expand their horizons," she said. "Hey, we're not that scary. Come on in. Didn't you love 'Carmen'? Wouldn't you want to see something very different, like 'Cunning Little Vixen'? Let it open your mind. This is a 20th-century opera and it's considered very important operatic literature."

The decision to stage Janácek's opera, which will be performed in English, came during a brainstorming session with Kostis Protopapas, the company's conductor/artistic director. "I threw out 'Vixen' as a title," she said, "not expecting a small opera company to take it on. Usually bigger opera companies take it on. And he said, 'That's perfect for our vision!' "

Teaching and performing in Santa Barbara is something of a homecoming for Bayrakdarian, who first performed at the Lobero Theatre in "The Magic Flute" as Pamina. She was at the Music Academy of the West at the time, just a year removed from earning a bachelor's degree in biomedical engineering in her native Canada.

“I see the beauty of life coming back full circle and opening now a new chapter where I’m bringing a new generation along on this new chapter,” she said. “Truly I mean this: UCSB is a place of blessing for me. So I’m very grateful to be here at this point in my life. It just feels so right.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.