

“Essential Scottish Opera is the first major company Voldman has worked for, and he’s playing a storm”

Leger lines

Michael Tumelty



There’s a remarkable young American pianist touring Scotland at the moment. Don’t look for him on the main circuit or in the big cities. He’s travelling with Essential Scottish Opera (ESO), the company’s small-scale touring show which reaches the parts of Scotland the parent company can’t get to.

The pianist’s name is Philip Voldman. He’s 23 and from New York, though his family is out of Odessa in Ukraine. You won’t see much of him in the show, which reaches Craignish Village Hall in Ardfern tonight, then moves to the Aros Centre in Portree on Tuesday. You will certainly hear him.

Voldman has a very light touch as a pianist. He’s extremely dexterous and rattles through the music,

brilliantly and stylishly accompanying the four singers who lead from the front in a superb little touring production.

His is an interesting story. He has packed an enormous amount into his 23 years, and it all began in New York at LaGuardia High School of Music and Art, the legendary school that spawned Fame.

He was there for four years and did the lot as a pianist and conductor, bustling and jostling with his colleagues in other disciplines. The ethos and atmosphere at LaGuardia, he says, are “absolutely as you see them in the film. It’s mad.” It was at LaGuardia that he began to gravitate towards opera and got the bug which has driven him since.

After graduation he did an internship with a theatre company, then joined the tiny company Amato Opera, a hand-to-mouth labour of love run by 86-year-old Anthony Amato, which operated on the Lower East Side in the Bowery, paying its singers \$10 each per night.

Voldman spent two years with Amato, where he really

cut his theatrical teeth. “I did all the backstage work, the sets and all the nitty-gritty of the theatre. It was the experience of a lifetime.”

Meanwhile, he was applying to conservatoires all over the world (he is an extremely proactive young musician). He got lucky with the Royal College of Music in London, which, he says, was the only conservatoire that would allow him to do his conducting

and repetiteur work while studying.

Things kicked in when he met the great Scottish tenor Neil Mackie, then head of voice at the Royal College of Music. “It was really Neil who started everything for me at college.” Then he met tenor Dennis O’Neill, who appointed him repetiteur at the Cardiff International Academy of Voice. In Wales, demand for the young pianist increased, as accompanist, repetiteur and assistant in numerous opera productions.

Meanwhile he was doorstepping opera companies, offering his considerable services and looking for work. Scottish Opera did not escape the Voldman bombardment. He e-mailed the company’s head of music, Derek Clark, who



clearly knew something about Voldman that Voldman didn't know he knew.

The young pianist was brought up with a jolt when his phone rang and it was Derek Clark on the line, offering him a contract without audition. Voldman was gobsmacked. "They haven't even heard me yet, so they are taking a chance." The contract was for six weeks, and the job is the one he's doing right now with ESO: pianist and music director. It is, he pointed out, the first major company he has worked for. He's loving it, having the time of his life, and playing a storm, night in, night out.

And when it's all over, what next for the personable young New Yorker? He's heading back to Cardiff to work with Dennis O'Neill again. He'll also be working as deputy music director with another small touring opera company, Pavilion Opera, based in Bromley, Greater London, which has a production of Tosca that will go to Amsterdam and all over England.

But Scotland might not have seen the last of the "geezajob" musician, as Scottish Opera's general director Alex Reedijk described Voldman. There is a whisper of a possible vacancy in the company for the post of repetiteur. Maybe Voldman is being auditioned after all. ■

