

Former Winniepegger's career hits new high note

NEW ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF ROYAL SWEDISH OPERA CUT HIS TEETH IN PRAIRIE PRODUCTIONS

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Anita Watkins photo

Newly minted Royal Swedish Opera director Michael Cavanagh is a former Winniepegger.

OPINION

When locally born director Michael Cavanagh packs his bag for Stockholm next summer, he'll be living out his dreams while marking a major career milestone.

Now based in London, Ont., the 59-year-old artist, who grew up in River Heights, has recently been appointed the new artistic director for the venerable 248-year old Royal Swedish Opera (RSO), regarded as one of the world's greatest opera houses.

"It's a huge honour and I just feel so much gratitude, and also this enormous sense of responsibility for this job, which is really fantastic," says the effervescent director, who assumes the reins from retiring artistic director and CEO Birgitta Svendén this August for a five-year tenure.

"It's not just a national opera company, but it's a royal opera company with all this incredible history," he says, anticipating the opportunity to put his own creative stamp on what he calls this "big, beautifully run organization."

As one of Canada's most sought-after directors, the prolific Cavanagh has helmed more than 150 productions at more than 30 companies across North America and parts of Europe, including Vancouver Opera, San Francisco Opera, L'Opera de Montreal, Kansas City Opera, Opera Philadelphia, and naturally, Manitoba Opera, as well as serving as artistic director for Edmonton Opera between 1998 and 2001.

He made his Covent Garden debut in 2006, and also garnered rave reviews for his daring production of John Adams' *Nixon in China*. Staged in conjunction with Vancouver's 2010 Winter Olympics, it became his calling card as guest director for his inaugural RSO show in 2016, and was also subsequently remounted in San Francisco and Dublin.

The musician currently teaches part-time at Western University, where his wife, soprano Jackalyn Short, also serves on the faculty; the pair will become a "two city, two country and two continent" couple for the foreseeable future.

Cavanagh is honing his Swedish chops daily via the language app Duolingo and a private tutor as he prepares for his career leap across the pond.

Manitoba Opera's general manager and CEO Larry Desrochers, who hired Cavanagh to direct the company's 2016 productions of Verdi's *Falstaff* and Carlisle Floyd's *Of Mice and Men*, attests to the significance of the plum position — one that included Cavanagh sharing his long-term vision to RSO'S board of director members and hundreds of administrative staff members via Zoom due to COVID-19 travel restrictions.

"I'm not surprised that a Canadian was selected to run the company," Desrochers says via email. "We are well respected in the opera world internationally, and there have been many Canadians with stellar careers, and Mike has been working internationally for some time. But it is very special that a Winnipegger has been chosen," Desrochers says via email,

Desrochers has his own personal insights into why Cavanagh made the cut in a competitive selection process that was two years in the making.

"One of Mike's greatest strengths is his outgoing nature. He is a people person, and that has served him well as a director," he explains. "Casts like to work with him, and having been a singer, he understand their needs onstage.

"He's also very good in working with the chorus. It takes skill, patience, diplomacy and humour to keep 60-plus people engaged and rowing in the same direction while staging a production, and Mike is a master at this."

For his part, Cavanagh also sings praises for Desrochers' strong leadership of the troupe where he first cut his operatic teeth singing in the children's chorus, following in the footsteps of his late father, who was an original member of the Manitoba Opera Chorus.

He pays particular homage to MO's legendary inaugural artistic director, the late Irving Guttman, who took the younger artist under his wing to teach him the ropes and rigours of helming a major arts organization.

"Irving was a giant and such a committed visionary for Winnipeg, as well as for Western Canada. He had this incredible knowledge and an incredible ear for voices. When I wanted to begin directing, I told him, 'This is a crazy idea, but what do you suggest?' And he said, 'Let's get to work,'" Cavanagh recalls. "He gave me the best education I could ever ask for, because it was in a professional setting, and was always wonderfully supportive. I think about him often."

As the RSO's newest artistic director, Cavanagh's duties will primarily involve programming between 10 and 20 fully staged operas each season ("I'm basically responsible for everything that hits your eyeballs," he quips), commissioning new works, and collaborating with music director Alan Gilbert, a Grammy-winning conductor and former music director of the New York Philharmonic who also joined the RSO relatively recently.

The burning question now is whether Cavanagh will commission new works or highlight existing Canadian operas as a part of RSO's annual programming.

"My first priority and responsibility will be to the Swedish artistic voices, as it is a national state opera. That is my mandate," he explains. "But it is also an international opera house and Canadian artists and content of international calibre will absolutely be welcomed. I'll be thinking like an international guy who is responsible for a national opera house, but ultimately it's all about balance."

The director is also eager to tackle the unprecedented challenges of leading a centuries-old opera company during a global health crisis, including harnessing the power of digital technology even more robustly to bring the art form firmly into a 21st-century, post-pandemic world.

"Many people are saying we're just waiting for things to go back to normal, but I don't think there's any such thing," he says. "We're looking ahead into a new set of parameters and new realities about how we view the live performing arts with an even greater appreciation."

"It's a fascinating challenge for me, and particularly when you scale it up to a major opera house in Europe. But I'm really looking forward to it and can't wait."

Keenly aware that many will be observing what this Canadian hailing from the Prairies will do with a revered European company, Cavanagh responds confidently and quickly when asked how he will navigate the fierce pressures and responsibilities resting on his shoulders.

"I've got one incredible support system personally in my home, and I'll stay connected to everybody that I know," he replies. "But I'm also from Winnipeg and we're grounded people. I love my hometown so deeply, and everything that I am has been formed by my experiences there. I'm incredibly grateful to the culture of that wonderful city for placing my head squarely on my shoulders."

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