

Singers Perform 'BYOB Opera' in Uptown Apartments

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Uptown Opera Group Revives 'BYOB' Performances in Local Homes

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Opera Company of Brooklyn

UPTOWN — Locals don't have to head to Lincoln Center (<http://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/places/lincoln-center>) to hear an aria or vibrato this opera season.

Instead, they can stop by Jay Meetze's living room.

Meetze, director of the Inwood-based Opera Company of Brooklyn (<http://operabrooklyn.org/>), is reviving a series that ran in the neighborhood from 2005 to 2008 featuring opera singers performing for small audiences in their homes.

BYOB Opera (http://operabrooklyn.org/?page_id=5), so called because attendees are encouraged to bring their own beverages to the performances, showcases vocalists who belt out operas by Verdi, Mozart and other famed composers in a more intimate and casual setting than the opera house.

“When you’re inside an apartment, the voices really do strike you differently,” Meetze said. “You can feel the sopranos and soubrettes and tenors. It’s really something to be sitting there.”

Meetze founded the Opera Company of Brooklyn in 2000. While the nonprofit has always operated out of Inwood, he originally connected the organization to Brooklyn because of a grant he received from the Brooklyn Arts Council (<http://www.brooklynartscouncil.org/>).

The BYOB events, which he started in 2005, proved so successful that the group decided to move them to larger spaces like theaters and churches so more audience members could attend. However, Meetze felt the performances lost their intimate feel in the process and wanted to bring the series back to its roots.

The operas, which are held at various homes in Inwood, are similar to staged readings of plays. Singers attend two rehearsals before performing, and rather than memorizing lyrics, they perform with copies of the music in hand. They also perform very little of the dialogue between the music, without set pieces and accompanied only by a piano.

Meetze said this simplified setup harkens back to opera’s roots

“Opera was invented in Italy and it was performed inside of castles. There was no stage,” he explained. “Guests were eating and drinking and having fun.”

To that end, audience members are invited to bring their own drink to enjoy during the performances, hence the “Bring Your Own Beverage” moniker.

While the ambiance is low-key, the performances are anything but — with singers tackling challenging works by Verdi, Mozart and Donizetti. Meetze said the singers often use the BYOB events to try out new roles or to prepare for auditions with major opera companies.

In addition, he said that taking the emphasis off of memorizing lines and following stage directions allows singers to focus on the most important element of opera: their voices.

“By doing opera the way it was originally intended where it was very casual and relaxed, it allows the singers to be more casual and relaxed as well, and that allows their voices to do amazing things,” Meetze noted.

Brooklyn Opera Company has held two BYOB events since reinstating the series a few weeks ago: Menotti’s “The Telephone” (http://www.naxos.com/mainsite/blurbs_reviews.asp?item_code=8.111370&catNum=8111370&filetype>About%20this%20Recording&language=English) and Donizetti’s “La Fille du Regiment.” (<http://www.metopera.org/metopera/about/education/educatorguides/content.aspx?customid=6936>)

Three more BYOB events (http://operabrooklyn.org/?page_id=5) are planned for early 2015.

Tickets are \$35 each for adults, with a reduced rate for students. The price of admission includes a free drink at Inwood’s Indian Road Café (<http://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/places/indian-road-cafe>) immediately following the performance.

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