

## Pomp and ceremony in the barn

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### 29<sup>th</sup> Elora Festival kicks off with Handel, opera star

When they applaud the rehearsal, you know the show's something special.

The introduction to Part 2 of George Frideric Handel's oratorio Solomon drew enthusiastic applause from an afternoon crowd in the Gambrel Barn during Friday afternoon's open rehearsal.

Solomon, featuring the Elora Festival Singers and Elora Festival Orchestra under Noel Edison, opened the 29<sup>th</sup> Elora Festival Friday night.

People who sat in for the afternoon rehearsal got to watch Edison, who's also the festival's artistic director, work with the orchestra and choir to polish sections – tweaking a note here and a phrase there.

Written "for Handel's pocketbook," Edison told the audience, Solomon was the composer's favourite oratorio – even above the now more familiar Messiah.

"Jampacked with ceremony and pomp," Edison said, the piece showcases the wisdom of Biblical King Solomon, and was written in part to praise similar qualities the composer saw in Britain's King George II – and to satisfy 18<sup>th</sup> century listeners' love for Biblical tales told in musical form.

Canadian "superstar soprano" Karina Gauvin, who's been called "one of the dream sopranos of our time" was one of five soloists featured in the oratorio. Internationally renowned countertenor Robin Blaze, who's one of the foremost interpreters of Handel, Bach and Purcell, sang Solomon.

Jennifer Enns Modolo, Lawrence Wiliford, and James Westman were also featured soloists. Two days later, an internationally known soprano took to the stage in the Gambrel barn for a concert performance.

Kiri Te Kanawa, who's scheduled to perform later this summer at the Beijing Olympics, performed familiar pieces by Antonio Vivaldi, Richard Strauss, Franz Liszt, and Giacomo Puccini.

The barn was packed to the edges and outside, with several rows of seats added in the parking lot in front of the wide-open doors.

After a standing ovation as she stepped onstage, Te Kanawa joked briefly with the audience before beginning with Alessandro Scarlatti's "Hot Blood."

Appearing in the world's leading opera houses since her 1971 debut in London, Te Kanawa has had an extensive recording career in opera, choral music, popular music and musical theatre. She sang at the wedding of Prince Charles and Princess Diana, has performed at a 2002 gala at Buckingham Palace, and welcomed the first dawn of the new millennium in a special New Zealand concert.

After a series of concerts in Europe, she picked the Elora Festival as one of only three North American festival stops in her "farewell" tour "because they asked me," she said in an interview earlier last week.

While she may be “saying goodbye to certain areas” through the tour, she’s hardly retiring – at 64, she says there’s still “lots to be done.” One of the areas she’s going to spend more time with is her foundation, which aims to give support and financial aid to New Zealand singers and musicians.

She’s just finished spending three weeks working with up-and-coming artists at New York’s Metropolitan Opera – it’s important for her to help new singers and musicians develop.

“I never had that when I was young,” she said. During the only master class she ever took, she was “shredded” by the teacher – and never wanted to take another.

“We should try not to brutalize our young artists,” she said.

The Elora Festival’s opening weekend showed how international in scope the festival has become. Saturday’s concert in the Gambrel Barn was Black Umfolosi, a multi-disciplinary performing arts group from Zimbabwe that showcases traditional African dancing styles with music full of intricate rhythms.

Sunday began with Bach to Bach, featuring the Festival Singers and Chamber Players in two lesser-known Lutheran masses, and continued with top Canadian trio Triple Forte kicking off the festival’s Chamber Series with trios by Beethoven and Ravel at St. John’s Church.

The festival kicks into high gear this week with a full lineup of concerts from Thursday through Sunday.

Highlights include jazz pianist and singer Laila Biali in the “Starlight” series moved this year to the Gambrel Barn, the first of a series of concerts celebrating Ralph Vaughn Williams – this one “early influences, pianist Andre Laplante, the Paradise Rediscovered choral concert, and three young jazz talents together in Hot Fusion.

A complete line-up for the 2008 Elora Festival is available at [www.elorafestival.com](http://www.elorafestival.com). Tickets can be purchased by phone, 519-846-0331 or 1-888-747-7550, on-line at [www.elorafestival.com](http://www.elorafestival.com), by mail to Box 370, Elora, Ontario, N0B 1S0, or in person at the Festival office, 33 Henderson St., Elora.