



Maestro Lorin Maazel conducting

OFF THE TOPIC

Lorin Maazel and the Castleton Festival

by
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It is summer in Rappahannock County as a lazy breeze swirls over the rolling hills of Maestro Lorin Maazel's 550-acre idyllic estate, carrying with it the sounds of the farm, along with something a little different. Home to legendary equestrianism, fishing and an emerging wine scene, this picturesque Virginian countryside seems an unlikely home for a budding premier opera festival, but this is exactly what Maestro Maazel had in mind when he started the Castleton Festival.

After he stepped down as music director of the New York Philharmonic last year, many thought a slower pace was in store for the maestro. His distinguished career has taken him from continent to continent, conducting more than 150 orchestras in no fewer than 5,000 opera and concert performances. A trailblazer in the world of classical music, he brought the New York Philharmonic to uncharted territory in North Korea, where its groundbreaking performance in Pyongyang proved the unifying power of music, if only briefly.

After more than five decades at the podium, he is busier than ever. While

continuing his conducting engagements around the world, Maazel has also managed to spend a little more time down on the farm, expanding the mentoring program that he began more than a decade ago under the auspices of the Châteaueville Foundation. It was out of this program that the Castleton Festival took flight last year, transforming this classroom of voice, music, design and conducting into a full-scale series of productions on the stage. The resulting four-week festival provides attendees an opportunity to see the opera and classical stars of tomorrow in a uniquely intimate setting.

Maazel and his wife, Dietlinde Turban-Maazel, purchased their pastoral estate in the 1980s, as a rural retreat from the rigors of the maestro's schedule. With its beautiful lakes and sweeping vistas, the property encompasses the very best of Rappahannock scenery. The well-manicured grounds include a stately manor house, pool house, organic vegetable garden and a zoo that is home to some very unusual, non-native inhabitants, including a camel named Omar, a variety of emus, llamas and alpacas, and even a zonkey (the offspring of



Castleton Farm

The theater house



a zebra and a horse).

The *piece de resistance*, however, is the Elizabethan gem of a theater. Once home to several thousand chickens and a short-lived commercial hatchery in its previous life as a henhouse, the rustic structure was converted by the Maazels into a state-of-the-art theater in 1997. The theater house was originally intended for

private concerts featuring their community of musical friends and has hosted guest artists such as luminary pianist Alexander Romanovsky, renowned tenor Jose Carreras and local favorite soprano Harolyn Blackwell. The multi-purpose space is well suited for a variety of performances that occur throughout the year, ranging from world music and jazz to dance and theater.

The 130-seat house, with its warm, wood-paneled interior, is also open to the public as one of the venues for the Castleton Festival.

In order to accommodate the full festival schedule and to meet audience demand, the Maazels had to expand beyond the treasured theater house and create additional venues. The resulting 250-seat air-conditioned tent on Castleton Meadows is a tent in name only. With raked seating, a lobby area, large stage and complete bathroom complex, it is an ideal setting for symphonic concerts and several of the larger-scaled operas. The tent will be further expanded this year to accommodate the growing Castleton audience.

In this singular setting, the Castleton Festival showcases the work of more than 200 young artists – singers, musicians, conductors, costumers and set designers who live on the estate over the course of the summer. In addition to the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to learn from senior artists in residence at the estate, students at the Castleton Festival enjoy a spirit of community and the chance to meet other top young artists from around the world. These students represent more than a dozen countries and almost every state in America, and range in age from high school

to mid-30s. A select group of aspiring conductors are under the tutelage of the maestro himself, in his series of master classes which the public can purchase tickets to observe.

This nurturing environment has launched the careers of many performers, musicians and designers. One student, Dominic Armstrong, a tenor who will be reprising his role as Macheath in *The Beggar's Opera* during the 2010 Castleton season, has gone on to perform with the Chicago Opera Theater. He cites the Castleton Festival as a key formative experience in his young career: "I have been extremely fortunate to have such an open, creative environment to hone my musical abilities with the support and mentorship of world-class professional musicians and artists and a community of ambitious and passionate peers."

Supporting young artists comes naturally to Maazel, who started playing the violin at age five and made his conducting debut with the New York Philharmonic at twelve. By investing in the education of his pupils, Maestro Maazel is ensuring the future of the art form to which he has dedicated his life. According to Maazel, "I feel a responsibility to young artists after a lifetime of successes as an artist. I want to share my experiences, pass on what I've learned and encourage them to carry the torch."

In addition to the scenic location and the chance to see performances by the *crème de la crème* of young talent, Castleton is also the only American festival dedicated to chamber opera. Unlike their grander, more opulent counterparts, chamber operas are accompanied by a small chamber ensemble instead of a full orchestra. The productions themselves are also often smaller, an ideal fit with the intimacy of the venues providing Castleton attendees an unparalleled degree of communication with the artists and a much more personal opera experience.

The chamber-opera format was

created in the 1940s by Benjamin Britten whose operas, *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Rape of Lucretia*, were featured with Albert Herring's adaptation of *The Beggar's Opera* in the inaugural Castleton season. The critically acclaimed *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Beggar's Opera* will return this season for encore performances. Rounding out Castleton's summer offering is a trio of one-act operas comprised of Puccini's *Il Trittico*, Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat* or *The Soldier's Story* and the theatrical and technically ambitious Manuel de Falla's *El retablo de maese Pedro*, based on select chapters from Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and performed by puppets and singers.

The inaugural festival was a great success, receiving critical acclaim from publications including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and major opera magazines around the world. Attendees traveled great distances, flooding Rappahannock County with visitors. The local community also enjoyed special access to the festival with more than 125 individuals serving as Castleton volunteers. From taking tickets and acting as ushers to housing additional performers and staff, the volunteers were an integral part of keeping the festival running. Community members are not only getting involved backstage; they are also appearing in festival performances. Last year, the Charlottesville High School Orchestra became the first high school group to receive an invitation to perform at the estate and did so under the mentorship of Maestro Maazel. There will undoubtedly be further opportunities for involvement in the coming season.

The Castleton Festival returns in July 2010 for its second year of chamber opera and symphonic concerts, kicking off with celebrations over the July 2-4 weekend that include an open house, tours of the farm, fine art exhibitions and a range of free events, along with the premiere of *Il Trittico*. Trips to the estate make for a romantic midsummer date or a fantastic day



2009's critically acclaimed production of *The Turn of the Screw*

2009 production of Castleton favorite, *The Beggar's Opera*



of exploring with the entire family. Tickets and a full schedule of performances are available on the Castleton Web site, <http://www.chateauville.org> or by calling (866) 974-0767.

Abbey Franke recently moved to the D.C. area after an active career in the Denver arts scene. While her home is new, her love for experiencing and writing about the arts remains unabated.