

Choosing America's Next Opera Idols

Stakes are high and stars are born at one of nation's most prestigious talent contests

PIA CATTON

March 23, 2015 8:48 p.m. ET

The Metropolitan Opera House was abuzz on Sunday afternoon: The rookies were about to take the stage, and savvy fans knew they would soon see stars born.

The occasion was the Met's 2015 National Council Auditions, arguably America's most prestigious vocal competition. In its 62 years, it has transformed scores of hopefuls into international headliners, including Deborah Voigt and Frederica von Stade.

The competition finals call for each of the nine competitors, culled from approximately 1,500 auditions nationwide, to sing two arias: one in the first half of the program, and another in the second. Performing alone on the stage of the Met, accompanied by one of the country's most heralded opera orchestras, was for most their biggest stage moment thus far.

The prizes—\$15,000 checks to as many as five winners and \$5,000 checks to the remaining finalists—would come in handy. But the recognition would be priceless.

Below, a timeline of how the competition unfolded:

3 p.m.: Host Angela Meade, a winner of the 2007 competition, laid out the stakes. For the day's victors, she said, "doors will be opened." It's something the celebrated soprano knows firsthand: After her win, she soared to stardom in one year.

3:15 p.m.: Leading off was soprano Deniz Uzun, 26 years old, who took the stage looking like a Greek goddess in a red gown, with long gold earrings and an up-do of Hollywood proportion. She was bubbly but fierce in an aria from Rossini's "The Italian Girl in Algiers," finishing with her arms outstretched—and lingering in the pose.

The Met's artistic management determined the order of the nine singers. The cheers and bravos built up progressively, hitting a high point deep in the lineup for soprano Marina Costa-Jackson.

3:40 p.m.: If you closed your eyes and didn't know she was 27, her voice might have tricked you. Ms. Costa-Jackson sounds like a seasoned veteran. But her dramatic features and camera-ready makeup weren't something you would want to close your eyes on. Singing an aria from Tchaikovsky's "The Queen of Spades," she delivered the first home run of the day, for which there were bravos from all around the theater—not just one or two from a family cluster.

4:05 p.m.: Backstage during intermission, the contestants enjoyed a reprieve, kibitzing outside their dressing rooms or getting touch-ups from a team of hair and makeup specialists led by Tom Watson.

"I can't sit down in this dress," said soprano Kathryn Henry, the baby of the bunch at 22. "I'll wrinkle it."

So, standing in her black gown with lace sleeves—ordered on HouseOfBrides.com, she said—Ms. Henry kicked her silver high heels to the side. Nicholas Brownlee, a 25-year-old bass-baritone, was clearly not worried about wrinkling his tuxedo; he had sprawled on a couch, heavily into whatever was happening on his phone.

4:20 p.m.: But the stage soon beckoned. Starting at the top of the order again, Ms. Uzun was up, followed by baritone Jared Bybee, 28, who got the call over the loudspeaker: Please proceed to stage right.

Tension was alleviated somewhat by the jovial baritone Reginald Smith Jr., the only member of the men to wear a vest with his tuxedo.

"Knock 'em dead, slugger!" Mr. Smith, 26, called out.

4:25 p.m.: Soon enough, Mr. Bybee was onstage, singing the solemn aria "Sois immobile" from Rossini's "William Tell," and Ms. Henry was awaiting her turn, standing in the wings with shoes back on and making warm-up sounds like "Zmmmpph! Zmmmpph!"

4:35 p.m.: If there were benefits to being a slightly more experienced performer, the 30-year-old tenor Joseph Dennis was definitely enjoying them. Calm and chatty with stage manager Gary

Dietrich, he casually swigged from a water bottle and adjusted his tie before heading out for his second aria.

When he returned, he was greeted by two raised fists from Allegra De Vita, a 25-year-old mezzo-soprano who will make her debut this summer at the Glimmerglass Festival in upstate New York.

4:55 p.m.: As the second-to-last singer, mezzo-soprano Virginie Verrez, 26, sang “Must the winter come so soon?” from Barber’s “Vanessa,” the stage’s wings piled up with personnel. Met General Manager Peter Gelb sat on a stool near a control panel and prepped his speech. As the judges deliberated, Ms. Meade returned and sang two arias.

5 p.m.: Ms. Meade announced the winners: Mr. Brownlee, Ms. Costa-Jackson, Mr. Dennis, Mr. Smith and Ms. Verrez. They were joined by the other finalists for a photo onstage followed by a reception on the Met’s Grand Tier that was thronged with patrons.

5:30 p.m.: The winners squeezed through the crowd to a small stage, where they stood in a line and were all presented with checks. As the ceremony finished, patrons surged toward the future stars, congratulating them and holding out programs to be autographed.

Ms. Costa-Jackson posed for photos with some well-wishers and waved to more. Mr. Smith signed several programs, but had to put a stop to it when he saw a VIP: “I’m about to bomb through everyone to see my mom!”

Write to Pia Catton at pia.catton@wsj.com

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/choosing-americas-next-opera-idols-1427158136>



1 of 12

Hairstylist Timothy Harvey puts the finishing touches on checks Allegra De Vita's hair backstage during the Metropolitan Opera ...



[CLICK HERE FOR A SLIDESHOW OF PHOTOS](#)



Reginald Smith Jr. and Nicholas Brownlee are shown backstage Sunday during the Metropolitan Opera National Council Finals at the Metropolitan Opera House. *ANDREW HINDERAKER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*



Mr. Smith performs at the Metropolitan Opera National Council Finals on Sunday. He was a winner.
ANDREW HINDERAKER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



Marina Costa-Jackson, left, zips Kathryn Henry's dress backstage during the Metropolitan Opera National Council Finals on Sunday. *ANDREW HINDERAKER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*



Mr. Brownlee performs at the Metropolitan Opera National Council Finals on Sunday. He was also a winner. *ANDREW HINDERAKER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*



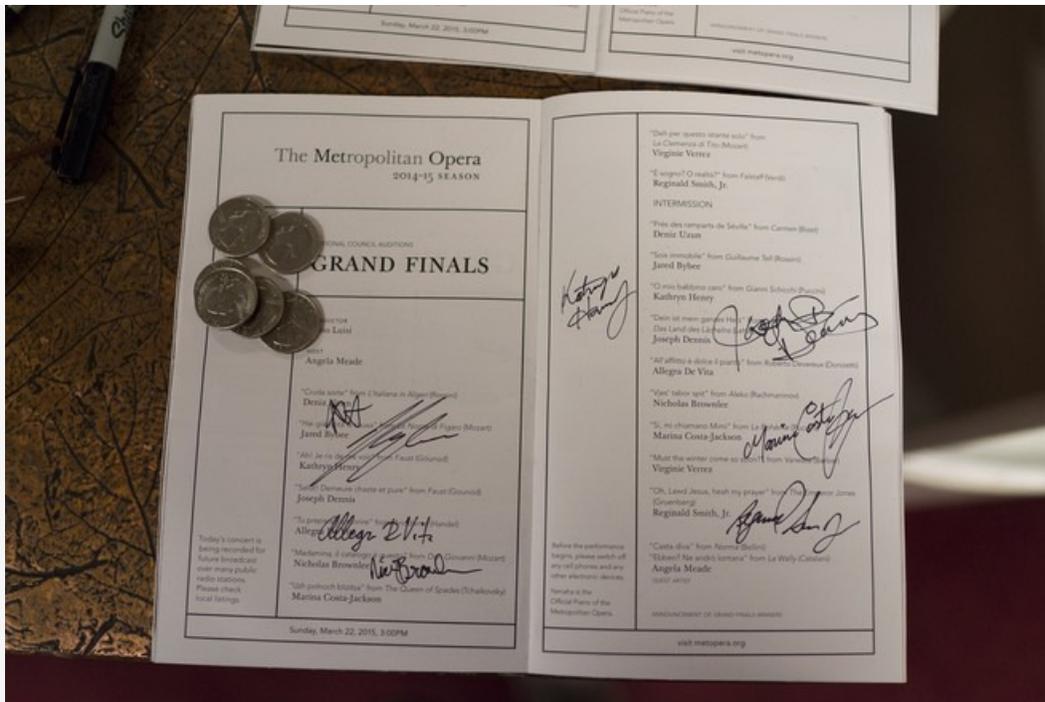
Finalists watch guest artist Angela Meade, not pictured, perform on stage Sunday at the Metropolitan Opera National Council Finals at the Metropolitan Opera House. *ANDREW HINDERAKER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*



Ms. Costa-Jackson, another winner, performs at the Metropolitan Opera National Council Finals on Sunday. *ANDREW HINDERAKER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*



Ms. Costa-Jackson, facing camera, gets a hug backstage from Kathryn Henry after performing at Metropolitan Opera National Council Finals on Sunday. *ANDREW HINDERAKER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*



A signed program at the Metropolitan Opera National Council Finals at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. *ANDREW HINDERAKER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*



Deniz Uzun poses for a photo backstage after performing in the Metropolitan Opera National Council Finals on Sunday. *ANDREW HINDERAKER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*



Conductor Fabio Luisi, left, appears with finalists on stage at the Metropolitan Opera National Council Finals at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York on Sunday. *ANDREW HINDERAKER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*



Ms. Costa-Jackson, center, during a reception Sunday after the Metropolitan Opera National Council Finals at the Metropolitan Opera House. *ANDREW HINDERAKER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*