

SPECIAL ISSUE! WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY BRANKSOME ALUMS

the

READ

THE MAGAZINE FOR THE BRANKSOME HALL COMMUNITY • WINTER 2023



FOREVER FIERCE

Branksome graduates blaze trails and create change—and these alums prove it



Vision To be the pre-eminent educational community of globally minded learners and leaders.

Mission Each day, we challenge and inspire girls to love learning and to shape a better world.

Values Sense of Community, Inclusiveness, Creativity, Making a Difference

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The cover features multiple alums for the first time, highlighting the group effort of this issue. Clockwise from top left: Rachel KREHM'03, Ariella MINDEN'11, Jacqueline FITZGIBBON Moss'80, Christina VEIRA'05, Veronica LIU'97, Sarah PSUTKA'99, Prity RUNGTA'95, Mary Pat JONES Armstrong'63 and Bernise WONG'13 (centre).

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Our Fiercely Independent Production

All the ways our alums are thought-challengers and ceiling-breakers

BY SARAH BAUMANN



I joined Branksome Hall in June 2022, quickly preparing for this, my first issue as editor of *The READ*. Inspired by our new school tagline, “Fiercely Independent,” we wanted this issue to showcase all the ways our alums are thought-challengers, innovators and ceiling-breakers. And we wanted it to be a group effort. Who better to make this a truly Branksome production than our alums themselves—as subjects, yes, but this time also as writers and photographers. In this issue you will read the words and see the images of these fiercely independent individuals, and, as always, learn about the achievements and life milestones of many more. A magazine is only as good as the team who puts it together, and I am proud to share what we have created. We hope you enjoy it.

Contributors



Megan EASTON'13, Writer

Megan currently works as a project manager at a planning and real estate consulting firm in Toronto. She graduated from Western University in 2017 and completed her master’s in planning at Toronto Metropolitan University in 2019. Megan continues to enjoy travelling, playing sports and volunteering.



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Jamie Day Fleck is an award-winning photographer and filmmaker based in Toronto with a bachelor of fine arts in photography from Parsons School of Design and an MFA in documentary media from Toronto Metropolitan University. Her films focus on artistic process and environmental issues.



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A semi-retired journalist, Melanie Jackson lives in Vancouver with her husband and very spoiled orange cat. Melanie is also a children’s and young-adult novelist, and in 2018 her young adult mystery *Medusa’s Scream* won a Canadian Children’s Book Centre-TD touring author award.



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Elizaveta Kozlova is a New York City-based opera singer, photographer and Instagram influencer. She has performed in concerts at renowned venues, including Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center. Her photographic works have been exhibited in France, Canada and the U.S.



Veronica LIU'97, Writer

Veronica Santiago Liu is the founder and general coordinator of the collective that operates Word Up Community Bookshop/ Librería Comunitaria in Washington Heights, New York City, and serves as the executive director for Seven Stories Institute. Raised in Toronto, Veronica is a 20-year resident of Washington Heights.



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Celia Milne is a medical journalist and corporate writer. Her articles have appeared in *Maclean’s*, *The Globe and Mail*, *Chatelaine* and many medical publications. Her work has earned 10 national and two international awards. Celia holds an MFA in creative non-fiction from the University of King’s College, Dalhousie, and a BA from Queen’s University.



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Amy VERNER'98, Writer

Based in Paris since 2011, Amy Verner is a journalist, copywriter and editor. She spent seven years as the style reporter for *The Globe and Mail* and now contributes regularly to *Vogue.com*. She thrives on the culture of Paris: the museums, galleries, local life and, of course, the croissants. **R**



Soprano Rachel KREHM'03
came to terms with loss and memory—by writing an opera

Healing through Song

BY MELANIE CHANDLER JACKSON'74 PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMIE DAY FLECK'00

Rachel KREHM'03 isn't just a Canadian opera singer. She's an opera advocate. The soprano's mission: bring more people to opera by shaking it free of its misleading stuffy stereotype. A not-so-impossible mission, she believes. As well as traditional operas, Rachel produces and performs in fun, friendly operatic shows. For example, as co-founder and general director of Toronto's Opera 5, she's partnered with Gazelle Automations on the irresistible puppet production *Threepenny Submarine*, available for free on YouTube. Energetically trilling out songs to music by composers such as Rossini, Wagner, Debussy and Ravel, Rachel as Lydian the Vixen and fellow soprano Caitlin Wood as Iona the Cockatiel plunge their sub into the deep on one wacky ocean adventure after another. Not very Wagnerian, perhaps, but leagues of fun.

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“The goal is to appeal to families as a free alternative to other children’s programming. Opera 5’s aesthetic is about whimsy and embracing the silly, which is what you find in the world of puppetry,” says Rachel, whose bright auburn hair matches the vivid tones of Lydian’s fur. “Gazelle Automations has a particular interest in how great music enhances filmmaking, and all of us also have a love of science fiction. On top of that, it is just so believable for a puppet to break into song. What could be more natural?”

Indeed. And thanks to support by the Canada Council for the Arts, this year fans of *Threepenny Submarine* can dive into brand-new episodes.

But Rachel’s greatest work, and one that’s intensely personal for her, grew out of family tragedy.

On November 17, 2012, Rachel’s sister, Elizabeth KREHM’08, died at age 22 of drug-related causes. “Losing your only sister when you’re 27 is pretty catastrophic,” recalls Rachel. “What made it even worse was that, because of Elizabeth’s addiction, she and I didn’t have the easiest relationship.”

Her first reaction was to bring down the curtain on all their memories. The family coun-

sellor wasn’t surprised. In many ways, the loss of a complicated relationship is harder to process than the loss of a happy one, the counsellor said.

However, as someone with a clear memory for detail, Rachel soon found herself feeling disoriented. Her late sister was becoming fuzzy and blurry to her. Who had Elizabeth been, really?

Answers began to emerge when Rachel read writings by Elizabeth their mom had kept. These included journals the younger sister had poured confidences into. For example:

*They thought I was strong, the unsinkable Titanic
Little did they know the iceberg was within me.*

“Amazing journals filled with raw, young writing—very powerful,” says Rachel.

And powerfully proving that a person isn’t defined by their addiction. “My sister was in many ways far more talented and artistic than I am,” Rachel recalls. “She played piano better. She was a violinist. Throughout elementary school, she was a member of the Toronto All Stars Steel Orchestra.”

Writing. Music. In Rachel’s own creative imagination, an idea stirred. A way to bring the memories of her wonderful, tortured, complicated sister back: set the poems to music.

“I thought about how to turn Liz’s writings into a song cycle that would explore grief and relationships,” she says. Through her husband, Kingston Symphony music director Evan Mitchell, Rachel approached award-winning composer Ryan Trew. “Ryan agreed to take on this incredibly difficult, emotional project: to start the cycle travelling through puberty, then end with Liz’s shocking, prophetic, yet somehow hopeful poem about herself looking down from the sky.”

*If you’ve ever felt like you wanted to cry,
Just close your eyes and look to the sky
because in the sky everything’s calm
everything fits in the size of your palm.
Come up with me and soar;
up here there’s so much more
no one’s sad or mad
Up here, everyone’s glad!*

The resulting orchestral song cycle, *Come Closer*, struck deep chords with audiences when it premiered in 2018. So, during the pandemic shutdown, Rachel began working with Ryan on a libretto to expand *Come Closer* into a chamber opera. (As a song cycle, *Come Closer* presents the poems in song form. *Come Closer* the opera has a plot.)

The resulting story explores memory. Big Sister discovers Little Sister’s journal. As Big Sister reads, Little Sister appears. “In the epilogue, the two girls connect by joining in a duet,” says Rachel. “The opera is a processing of grief, of what happened with addiction and Little Sister’s death. I came to realize that relationships continue even after one person has died.”

She notes also that the sisters in the chamber opera are unnamed. “That anonymous

“The opera is a processing of grief, of what happened with addiction and Little Sister’s death. I came to realize that relationships continue even after one person has died.”



Michael Barrett and Rachel Krehm in Opera 5's *Die Fledermaus*, 2016.



Lydian and Iona in Opera 5's *Threepenny Submarine*, 2021.

sister relationship is important in terms of the concept of the piece, since this isn't just my story or Liz's. None of us is on an island by ourselves; grief is universal."

The opera is about two-thirds written, with Amanda Smith, "a good friend in Toronto's indie opera community," set to direct. "Of all of the directors out there," says Rachel, "Amanda can make sense of the abstract. And this is a work that's very abstract, bouncing from memory to memory. Amanda brings clarity and focus. We can't wait to share it with the world!"

The Krehm family also pays tribute to Elizabeth with a memorial concert on each anniversary of her death. Proceeds go to the Intensive Care Unit at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto. So far the annual concerts have raised more than \$200,000.

As for *Come Closer* the opera, watch for its premiere most likely in 2024. In the meantime, Rachel's schedule is at a presto pace again—featuring similarly innovative projects.

Perceived stuffiness isn't opera's only challenge. "It's also seen as elitist," Rachel says. "Operas are often long and in different languages. If you don't go in with knowledge of the show, what's happening onstage is not always clear. This is such a missed opportunity for people who could really enjoy it!"

Enter Opera Cheats. The entertaining se-

ries, free on YouTube, is a fun, fast—about three minutes max—primer on both opera in general and individual operas. Opera 5 put up the first videos, hoping to garner maybe 500 views total. In the first week they got 3,000.

Another tongue-in-cheek resource is Canada's only opera improv team, *Whose Opera Is It Anyway?* With Rachel as a founding member, *Whose Opera?* improvises comedic sketches via operatic singing at clubs in Toronto and festivals around Ontario. Lob anything at the performers—a text on your phone, a fortune-cookie prediction—then laugh and enjoy as they scale the heights of absurdity.

"Whatever form opera takes, new or traditional, it's vital to focus on storytelling and character. Everyone relates to those," says Rachel. One of her own favourite roles is the lead in Richard Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos*. "It's the richest music! It soars—I adore that." In its glowing review, *Opera Canada* called her performance "soulful."

As for what got Rachel attuned to opera, it was a trip to New York City with her dad and a Metropolitan Opera performance of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*. "I fell in love! It was my lightbulb moment. I knew I wanted to be on the opera stage."

Back in Toronto, Rachel was taking piano lessons, and just down the hall was the studio of singing teacher Donna Sherman. "Donna was friendly, would come out and talk to people in the halls. She noticed me and suggested I audition for her studio."

From Grade 7 through high school, Rachel studied with Donna. "She encouraged me to enter a lot of competitions, like Kiwanis. She helped set me up to study voice at the Schulich School of Music at McGill."

Also instrumental: music teachers at Branksome. For example, Nancy Olfert, Head of Music. "I was in Nancy's choir all the way through. She was such a mentor, encouraging me to pursue music and singing. I became the Head of Choir; she even gave me opportunities to conduct." Rachel also cites creative writing and English teacher Karen Fabian as an inspiration.

"Everyone's journey has its peaks and valleys," Rachel says. "You have to have a deep desire to sing, because it isn't easy. It's the pain and the joy of creation. You never feel you're as good as you can be: you're always trying to improve and get better."

"It has to be total buy-in, a deep, deep love for musical expression, for acting and storytelling. All of that is why I'm following the path that I am. I don't think I could stop even if I wanted to." **R**