

BRONX

# A garden for Kenneth

*An Appreciation by Hannah Gries, DNOA Masters I*

*Pure light of mind, and tenderness of heart;  
Genius, and wisdom; the gay social sense,  
By decency chastised; goodness and wit,  
In seldom-meeting harmony combine;*

James Thomson – *The Seasons*

*La finta giardiniera* – The gardener in disguise. A production originating at the Badisches Staatstheater Karlsruhe is being re-staged by their wonderful directing team – Anja Kühnhold and Anna Sophia Blersch – to be brought on stage by the members of DNOA and the Residentie Orkest under the musical direction of Chloe Rooke.

A gentle and charming production full of depth, finesse, and care for details. Colourful, glamorous but in no way ever pretentious. Poetic and meaningful, delightful, and sensitive.

A garden, almost tailored to the spirit of Maestro Kenneth Montgomery.

As a Young Artist Programme, we get to learn from many different and brilliant professionals from the music industry. Every one of them can have an impact on us. They can influence the kind of artist we may become in the future, on how we approach the music, the art, the libretto.... And then a few of those professionals may leave traces that continuously touch our heart when remembering what they gave us. We had the privilege of exploring Haydn's *L'isola disabitata* under the guidance and mentorship of Maestro Kenneth Montgomery. Everyone who ever worked with him can never forget his magic, kindness, knowledge and love for people and the music!!!

Kenneth Montgomery was a true icon in the classical music world. Working with him meant an unforgettable experience to all of us. We knew before: we were about to work with one of the greatest. We knew it was big. We were nervous, excited, well-prepared, and ready to dive into rehearsal. The Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century led by Maestro Montgomery....that already meant a lot to us!

We certainly did not know what he would leave us with once we finished the project.

The first thing I will always remember about Kenneth was his genuine and deep love for what he did. It was astonishing how his smile could light up even a windowless grey painted Theaterzaal within seconds. Once he lifted his hands to begin the music, it was clear to each of us that we were invited into something magical.



*Kenneth Montgomery – January 2023 © Reinout Bos*



*Kenneth Montgomery with Benjamin Wenzelberg – January 2023 © Reinout Bos*

He encouraged us to be truthful to the music, the characters and to ourselves just like what he always aimed for himself. He took his musical achievements and high reputation so modestly. He needed us to commit to the island that Haydn created as much as he did. He shared his love, doubts, and admiration for the piece with us at all times, thus setting the ground for us to join his vision. He encouraged us to serve the art in the way that the music can speak its most beautiful language. He had a deep desire for the fidelity of what the composer wished for.

The excitement with which he approached the music was so contagious because none of what he created seemed strategic. All of what he brought to us seemed to stem from his shining, truthful, curious and sparkling personality, and with this he had the great gift of bringing out the best in each artist involved.

Now, knowing we were part of his last performance fills my heart with sadness and gratitude at the same time. That a man who has performed all over the world and had done so much could enter a rehearsal room every day filled with genuine curiosity is truly remarkable. As he said once: "There is so much out there. I am constantly surprised at how little I know and yet how much I have done."

I remember the first time I was requested (as each of us was) to come to his house for a working session. Prepared as much as possible, I arrived expecting to be judged on my singing. I ended up hardly singing more than half a page. We had the most exhilarating and interesting conversation about the world, society, history and so much more. Talking to my colleagues I came to learn that it was his approach with all of us in this session. He was able to set the path for a rehearsal period with this by inspiring us to learn as much as possible, so we can bring the music to life and keep it spontaneous at all times. What a wonderful, empowering, and strong mentor he was. As his assistant in the production, Benjamin Perry Wenzelberg, now a close and dear colleague and friend of DNOA and Montgomery student, said himself that Kenneth approached music through a "scenic" route of cultural history and anecdotes, passed down through generations about the human beings that created and performed such pieces before.

"I will never forget his generosity of knowledge, but – equally 'importantly' – of spirit".

It was incredible to see him transition from rehearsals with us in Amsterdam to then standing in front of the Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century, in many ways, "his" orchestra. The way he merged into his orchestra's sound and what he created with his hands, his heart and soul and his charm was magical. There he was, doing what obviously gave him an honest sensation of joy and appreciation for the world and therefore his artistry was real and intelligent. Not the least bit was it pretentious or artificial.

He gave us a little note of general instructions for his approach to the music. Samantha Faina (soprano DNOA) still has that, and it brings up such dear memories for her. When she sees it, she remembers his convivial nature. His honesty, his directness and his kindness were unparalleled. An admirer of community, in life and music, he gave us a sense of treating what we do with care, joy and curiosity.

His way of connecting with the music and connecting the music to us singers was magical. As the mezzo Maria Warenberg said so accurately: "The performances we have done were so special and I will always treasure them."

To quote Marcelo Alexandre: "He always made sure to share his knowledge and that we truly understood what he wanted. He wanted everyone to be in their best form and therefore took the responsibility to be the one creating the environment for that."

"While I mourn Kenneth's passing, I am so grateful that I had four years of a shared path where his kindness, friendship, insatiable curiosity, capacity for joy and uncompromising dedication to music have been a true inspiration. I will miss him more than I can say." – Paul McNamara (Artistic leader DNOA).

When I was sitting in his living room, we also spoke about Haydn's composition of *Die Jahreszeiten*. The poem that is underlying the composition is "The Seasons" by James Thomson. I had never read any of the poems in English and had only heard the German oratorio until Kenneth gave me the book recommending me to read it. After I had read about half of it, I wanted to return the book as the production had finished. He said "keep it, I have another one. Are you enjoying it?"

Now, as I am writing, I ended up reading "summer":

*Pure light of mind, and tenderness of heart;  
Genius, and wisdom; the gay social sense,  
By decency chastised; goodness and wit,  
In seldom-meeting harmony combine;*

As a musical mentor for *La finta giardiniera*, DNOA's current production conducted by former Montgomery student Chloe Rooke, he was invited to be a supervisor and share his knowledge and wisdom with all of us involved.

Chloe Rooke certainly brings part of his musical approach to the production, and we can see his handwriting adding to her artistry throughout her work. She says she can imagine what he would have said to the singers and the orchestra. "There are so many things I wish I could ask him."

Chloe having been under the influence of his mentorship, got such clear ideas about how to approach the highly complex recitatives of Mozart, the accompagnato recits and the ensembles. "He gave such a valuable framework to us students."

The plan was for him to also prepare the work together with Chloe starting in spring. Sadly, he passed away before they could even meet again. But him being the person he was, he had already started preparing the score for their work, the score from which Chloe is now working: "I will be using his score for the performances that are partly filled with his notes, his prep-work and his handwriting".

His spirit is with us on and behind the stage and on the conductor's podium. He remained a working musician to the end of his life, and he managed to bring his guidance to the production of *La finta giardiniera* even after his passing.

We all share such wonderful memories of him, and he gave us an experience that surely had a long-lasting influence on our lives on both the artistic and human level. Therefore, our production of Mozart's *La finta giardiniera* is dedicated to Maestro Montgomery. This means remembering, admiring, laughing and crying for his wonderful spirit.

This colourful, elegant, and glamorous garden of music is for you, dear Kenneth!

*"Mozart will never die." – Kenneth Montgomery*



*Kenneth Montgomery with Chloe Rooke – October 2021*

