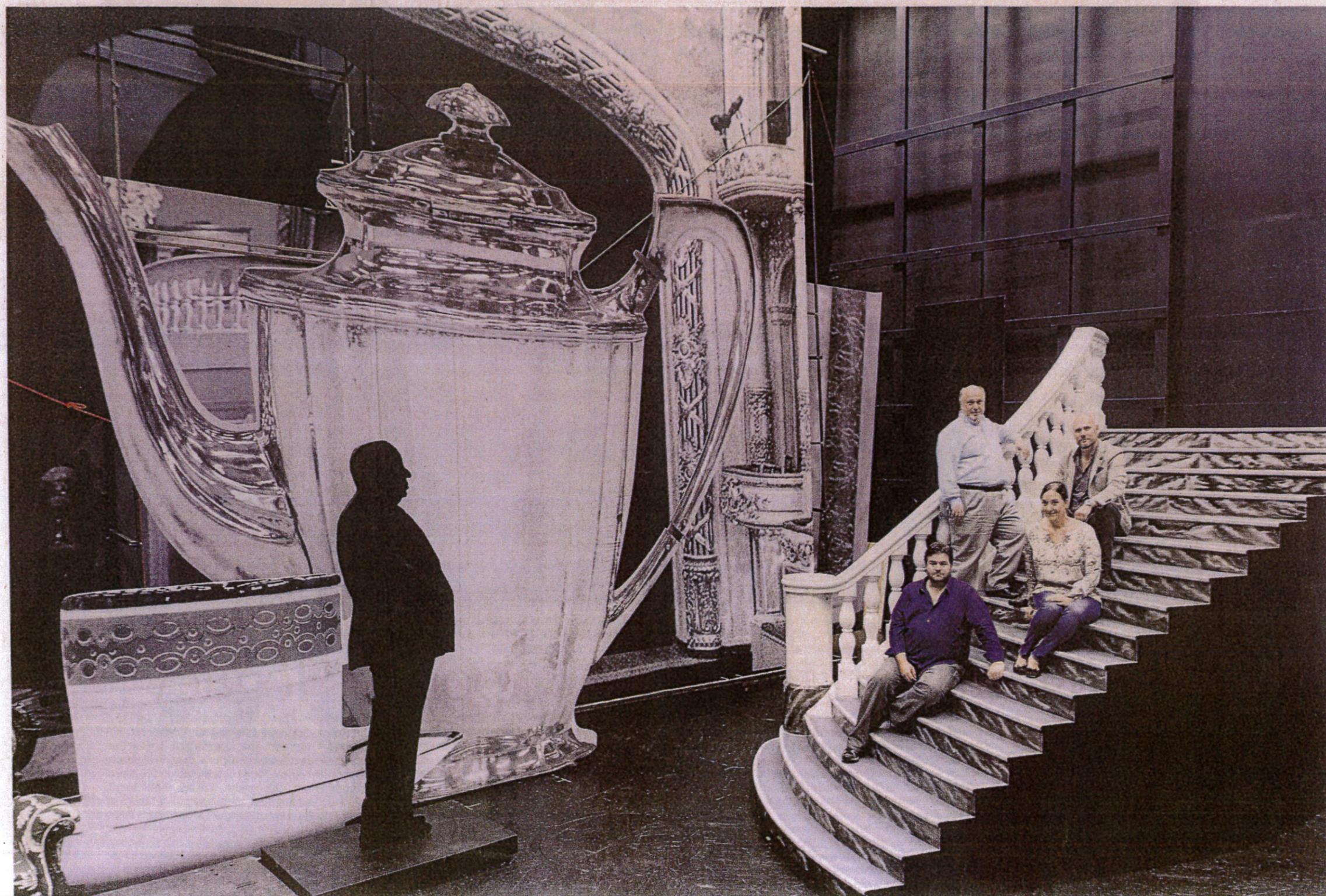


# FRONT ROW CENTER

SPECIAL REPORT



# Hitchcock classic takes its turn on opera stage

**'Notorious' is latest film to inspire homage aiming to exceed a mere retelling**

BY GEORGE LOOMIS

You can understand why a composer setting out to write an opera would be attracted to a story already told in a well-known film. The new work would profit from name recognition as well as the existence of a proven story line that can be adapted to the operatic stage as the composer sees fit.

Works of this type constitute a growing category of operas that includes André Previn's "A Streetcar Named Desire" (1997) and Charles Wuorinen's "Brokeback Mountain" (2014). This year, there have been the premieres of Jennifer Higdon's "Cold Mountain" and Kevin Puts's "The Manchurian Candidate."

Yet it seems that opera audiences simply cannot avoid measuring the new work against a film they know, and often to the opera's detriment. Ms. Higdon's

and Mr. Puts's operas drew mixed reviews, with critics being inclined especially to fault the new "Manchurian Candidate" for falling short of John Frankenheimer's 1962 thriller. Mr. Previn's version of "Streetcar" was questioned for not having a distinct enough rationale for making an opera out of the Tennessee Williams play (which, along with the 1951 Elia Kazan film, made a star of Marlon Brando).

Now the Goteborg Opera, in Sweden's second largest city, is preparing to unveil an opera based on "Notorious," the Alfred Hitchcock classic film from 1946. The new opera, which opens on Sept. 19, comes just after the centennial of the birth of Ingrid Bergman, the female star of the film, on Aug. 29.

The composer, Hans Gefors, and others involved in the production are aware of the challenges and are working to make sure that their "Notorious," while paying homage to the film, goes beyond a simple retelling of the story with music and adds dimensions that are unique to operatic theater.

One connecting thread between the

two works comes from the casting. As the film featured Bergman at the height of her career, the opera also has a Swedish star: the dramatic soprano Nina Stemme in her first operatic world premiere.

"It's a heavy-duty responsibility, of course, taking a role associated with Ingrid Bergman, especially in Sweden," Ms. Stemme said during a recent telephone interview. "Actually, it is an honor, but in doing it I have to do my own thing."

For Ms. Stemme, "Notorious" represents not just a break from singing big roles like Isolde and Elektra in the world's leading opera houses but also a kind of homecoming. Appearances in Goteborg, where she first sang roles such as Madama Butterfly, Tosca and the Marschallin in "Der Rosenkavalier," were important in launching her career.

The Goteborg audience "knows and loves Ms. Stemme," said the English director Stephen Langridge, the Goteborg Opera's artistic director. Her reappearance in the city, where she last sang in a 2006 production of Strauss's "Arabella," is "a matter of civic pride," he added.



"Notorious" will be the first world premiere on the Goteborg theater's main stage since Mr. Langridge joined the company.

"I've been here only two years, but 'Notorious' goes back six years," he said. "We're putting a lot of energy into the area of developing new works. Producing a new opera is sort of like midwifing. An enormous curiosity develops over how it will play."

The English director Keith Warner is directing the new opera.

"It's a pretty remarkable piece, beau-

tifully written," he said. "It answers the question of 'Why does something need to be turned into an opera?' convincingly. It shows real reasons for going operatic."

Like most of Hitchcock's best-known films, "Notorious" is part thriller and part love story, although Mr. Gefors, the composer, believes that it is primarily the latter, which he said was part of its appeal as an operatic source. Devlin, an American secret agent, recruits Alicia, a young German woman with a loose reputation and a Nazi spy for a father, to seduce Alex

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**Room for music**  
Above, on the set of "Notorious" in Goteborg, Sweden: from left, Michael Weinius, who plays Alex Sebastian; Keith Warner, director of the new opera; Katarina Karneus, who plays Madame Sebastian; and John Lundgren, who plays Devlin. Left: Nina Stemme, who plays Alicia, the role played by Ingrid Bergman in the film, with Mr. Lundgren.

## Hitchcock classic takes its turn on the operatic stage

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Sebastian, a member of an expatriate Nazi ring in Rio de Janeiro who was once infatuated with her. Devlin, played by Cary Grant in the film, and Alicia, played by Bergman, develop a romantic bond, but he becomes plagued by doubts about her and jealous of her involvement with Alex, which moves quickly into marriage. When Alex, played by Claude Rains, realizes that his new wife is an American agent, he and his domineering mother decide to poison her.

Mr. Gefors was drawn to Hitchcock, and "Notorious" in particular, by an aspect of the director's dramaturgical style.

"Hitchcock varied the size of a screen image in relation to its emotional importance within a given episode," he said. "I have tried to use musical dramaturgy in the same way. A shift to a close-up in the film might give rise to a short aria or ensemble in the opera. I've tried to develop as many responses like this as possible, each with its own quality, style,

imagery and sound."

Mr. Gefors, 62, came to prominence with his opera "Christina," which the Royal Swedish Opera in Stockholm produced in 1986. He has since written two other operas for the Malmo Opera as well as "Purification of the Soul Through Play," an opera designed to be listened to in the car that attracted attention on Swedish Radio 2. He has also written orchestral, instrumental and choral works, and has served as the Goteborg Opera's composer in residence since 2011.

Mr. Warner, the director, said the new opera reminded him of the works of the Czech composer Leos Janacek, with great narrative clarity and moments of lyrical reflection.

"Hans is very clever in finding ways to make room for the music," Mr. Warner said. For instance, the racetrack scene in the film — in which Alex, sitting with his mother, observes a meeting between Alicia and Devlin through binoculars and guesses that they are in love — is replaced by one at

the opera during a performance of Gluck's "Orfeo ed Euridice."

"Notorious" the opera also seeks to deepen the film's psychological dimension. Devlin, for instance, spends much of the movie treating Alicia coolly, even callously. It was Hitchcock's way of creating suspense within the love story to match the suspense of the thriller, with its improbable plot about ex-Nazis' storing

**"It answers the question of 'Why does something need to be turned into an opera?' convincingly."**

uranium in wine bottles. A sentence or two from Devlin could have put Alicia's mind at rest; indeed, near the end, she asks why he didn't tell her he loved her before, and he mutters something about being "a fatheaded guy full of pain."

Mr. Gefors has introduced a chorus, "figures of darkness," as he calls them, that creates, as Mr. Warner put it, "an amazing sound world that stands be-

hind the Hitchcock." Toward the end of the opera, as Mr. Gefors explained it, there is a big scene for Devlin, with participation of the chorus, in which the spy expounds on his conflicting emotions in 11 brief constituent parts.

Mr. Langridge, the Goteborg Opera artistic director, said, "A psychological underworld is brought to the fore."

The opera also delves deeper into the

character of Alicia, whose desire to distance herself from her traitor father and redeem her reputation is critical to the plot.

"Who is she in the eyes of others?" Ms. Stemme asked. "How does she want to be seen herself?"

It was important to the opera's librettist, the Swedish writer Kerstin Perski, "to show Alicia's development from

young woman to someone more independent, who frees herself from past models and figures," Ms. Stemme said.

The operatic Alicia is also informed by Bergman herself, who, as Mr. Warner pointed out, "was very much a modern woman who controlled her own destiny."

"She didn't want to be known as a dumb blonde," he added, "and Hitchcock rather liked that."

If Alicia's relationship with her father is a background element in the movie, Alex's domination by his mother is very much front and center. In some respects, Alex is the film's most sympathetic character, Mr. Gefors said, because "although a mama's boy, his love for Alicia is genuine," whereas one is not so sure about Devlin's.

As in his films, Hitchcock is a presence in the opera — his silhouette is part of the stage set. And his controlling style of directing is a metaphor for Alicia's control by her father, Mr. Warner said.

Or, as Ms. Stemme put it, "His soul is hovering over us."