

People & Places

Music

Kiwi opera diva retires

Robot steals show from Italy top tenor

PISA, Sept 13. (AFP): Italian tenor **Andrea Bocelli**'s voice soars to the rafters of the Tuscan theatre, but all eyes are on the orchestral conductor beside him — a robot with an apparent penchant for Verdi.

The concert in the heart of Pisa is a world first, with two mechanical "arms" conducting live music at the grand finale of the first International Festival of Robotics.

The Swiss-designed YuMi sweeps its baton skywards with one hand, while the other curves around in a caress that spurs on the strings as the operatic "La Donna E' Mobile" ("Woman Is Fickle") reaches its climax.

But music lovers beware: YuMi can conduct set pieces, but cannot improvise, react or interact with the musicians.



Bocelli

"It was extremely difficult to train," says Andrea Colombini, the conductor of the Lucca Philharmonic Orchestra which performed with Bocelli and soprano Maria Luigia Borsi on Tuesday.

YuMi, designed by robotics leader ABB, was taught to mimic Colombini's gestures.

The maestro said the automation was far more sophisticated than its "rival" Asimo, the white

four-foot (1.2-metre) robot designed by Honda which conducted the Detroit Symphony Orchestra in 2008.

"We're not talking about Asimo's limited up-and-down, one-arm movement ... YuMi is extremely flexible and its arms have the same mobility as mine," he told AFP.

YuMi does not stand, however: It sits on a pedestal that gives it the support it needs to move its long arms.

It's not a particularly friendly looking robot, and Colombini acknowledged that they did not get on at first.

"It was not love at first sight. At the start I kept getting wound up because it kept getting stuck, and when the robot gets stuck it takes 25 to 30 minutes to reset it," he said.

"It took a long time," he added: Training YuMi to perform six minutes of music "took 17 hours of work."

Borsi looked apprehensive as she stood in her shocking pink concert gown, waiting for the robot to begin directing the classic soprano aria "O Mio Babbino Caro" ("Oh My Beloved Father") by Puccini.

The effect is somewhat odd: the musicians watch for the first baton stroke and gamely follow it throughout the aria, but the traditional vitality of a human conductor — keeping tempo with the whole body, even through the breathing — is missing.

Bocelli, who is visually impaired, had to remember the tempo YuMi had been taught down to the second.

Any unprogrammed "accelerando" or "rallentando" would have been disastrous, as he had no way to get the conductor to follow his lead.

"There's no way it could replace the sensitivity and emotion of a conductor, because a robot has no soul. It's just an arm, not the brain, not the heart," Colombini said.

Later, when the conductor himself takes to the stage, his whole body sways and thrusts — and the difference is startling.

Also:

WELLINGTON: New Zealand opera singer **Dame Kiri Te Kanawa**, hailed as one of the greatest sopranos of the modern age, officially announced her retirement Wednesday at the age of 73.

Te Kanawa has not performed publicly for about a year but told the BBC she did not intend to perform in front of an audience again.

"I don't want to hear my voice, it is in the past," she told the British broadcaster.

"When I'm teaching young singers and hearing beautiful young fresh voices, I don't want to put my voice next to theirs."

Te Kanawa's career spanned more than five decades and included performances at the world's top opera houses, although she is best known as the diva who sang at **Prince Charles** and **Lady Diana**'s wedding in 1981.

"I've had such an amazing career," she said, adding that it had taken her five years "to say the goodbye in my own mind".

Her big break came in 1971 at Covent Garden when she was cast as the Countess Almaviva in **Mozart**'s "The Marriage of Figaro".

She soon found herself among opera's elite, sharing the stage with the likes of **Jose Carreras** and **Placido Domingo**.

She became a household name when performing a Handel aria at the royal wedding, watched by a global television audience of more than 600 million.

"It got me a lot of recognition," she later said. "But it was only a wedding and my job was doing opera at the time, so I wasn't into weddings. I just happened to sing at a very important one."

Te Kanawa was also invited to perform at Diana's funeral in 1997, but declined as she was too upset over the princess' death.

NEW YORK: Top names in entertainment Tuesday raised millions of dollars for survivors of mega-storms Harvey and Irma, with **Stevie Wonder** and **Beyonce** also urging attention on climate change.

Dubbed "Hand in Hand", the one-hour telethon was broadcast live on all US television networks with mega-stars from **George Clooney** to **Justin Bieber** to **Julianne Moore** answering phones to take pledges.

After an hour of performances in New York, **Los Angeles**, **Nashville** and **San Antonio**, comic **Billy Crystal** said the telethon raised \$14.55 million with more expected as calls came in.

Apple donated \$5 million — with co-host **Stephen Colbert** joking that the figure was the price of the company's new iPhone unveiled earlier Tuesday — and chemical giant **Merck** announced \$1 million, although it was not clear if the amounts were part of the total.

Stevie Wonder opened the evening with a rendition of **Bill Withers**' "Lean on Me" backed by a gospel choir as urged "love" rather than divisions.

Beyonce — in a video message that marks her most visible appearance since giving birth to twins in June — said the disasters caused more sorrow "during a time when it's impossible to watch the news without seeing violence or racism in this country."

"The effects of climate change are playing out around the world every day," she said, mentioning as well deadly monsoon floods in **India**.

While no celebrities overtly attacked President **Donald Trump**, he has pulled the **United States** out of the **Paris** accord on climate change, which experts say is contributing to worsening storms, and last week announced an end to protections for undocumented immigrants who arrived as children.



In this Sept 5 file photo, actress Michelle Pfeiffer poses for photographers at the premiere of the film 'mother!' at the 74th edition of the Venice Film Festival in Venice, Italy. (AP)

Film

Aronofsky's film internationally shrouded in mystery

Pfeiffer returns in 'mother!'

NEW YORK, Sept 13. (Agencies): When Michelle Pfeiffer first read Darren Aronofsky's script for "mother!" she had an understandable initial reaction.

"I thought: What the hell is this?" recalls Pfeiffer.

Aronofsky's film is not in any way typical, nor is the kind of project you'd expect a long-absent actress like Pfeiffer to join as her first big-screen performance in five years. The film, intentionally shrouded in mystery, is a wild and weird odyssey by one of the movies' expert conjurers of dark, surreal dream worlds that suspend its viewers — and often its performers, too — in a vividly atmospheric state of paranoia. "You don't even know, really, how to talk about it," says Pfeiffer, as if throwing up her hands, in a recent interview.

But one of the many mysteries worth pondering in Darren Aronofsky's allegorical thriller is a simple one: Why don't we see Pfeiffer more often? The good news is that "mother!" represents the start of what may be a kind of renaissance for the 59-year-old actress, whose steely beauty and cool, piercing intelligence remains just as devastating.

"I'm really excited to be back," says Pfeiffer. "Especially having worked with these exciting actors and these directors who I so admire. The most exciting for me is all of these really talented people that I'm able to do movies with."

Along with "mother!" which Paramount Pictures will release Friday, Pfeiffer co-stars in Kenneth Branagh's upcoming, more old-fashioned mystery "Murder on the Orient Express." She has joined the cast of the "Ant-Man" sequel and earlier this year premiered the Sundance Film Festival entry "Where is Kyr?" in which she plays a woman struggling to survive

in Brooklyn on her ailing mother's income. She also received an Emmy nomination for her chain-smoking Ruth Madoff in Barry Levinson's HBO movie "The Wizard of Lies."

It's a flurry of activity for Pfeiffer, who says she pulled back partially to focus on family. She and her husband, the TV producer David E. Kelley, who live in northern California, have two children. Now an empty-nester, Pfeiffer has eagerly returned to regular work.

"She wasn't on my mind because she hadn't worked for a while," says Aronofsky. "My casting director mentioned that she was interested in working again. I was immediately excited and interested by the idea of it. It's been a while so I wasn't so sure where she was at. But once we started to talk, it was amazing."

Aronofsky ("Black Swan," "Requiem for a Dream"), long a fan of Pfeiffer, was impressed by her still sharp skills.

Different

"I just wanted to applaud her at different times during the movie because she does things that are so hard to do," he says. "Like those things where someone says something in the moment and you're supposed to react in the moment with surprise or embarrassment and she was doing it take after take."

Jennifer Lawrence stars in the film as the sweet and sensitive wife to Javier Bardem's poet. They live in beautifully natural, labyrinthine house in the country, but they are soon beset by visitors, beginning with a man who shows up at the door (Ed Harris), who's followed by his wife (Pfeiffer) and then others. The movie grows in intensity with the sensation of invasion; Aronofsky conceived it as a kind of allegory for an overrun Mother Earth.

"I have these dreams sometimes,"

says Pfeiffer. "I'm in some house and I have to be somewhere or I have to do something and I can't get out. I can't find my way out. I know there's some disaster looming ahead and I know it's coming and no one will listen to me. This is like a really, really bad nightmare. It's like your worst nightmare and you can't wake up from it."

After her Oscar-nominated breakthrough role in 1989's "The Fabulous Baker Boys," Pfeiffer became one of the top actresses in Hollywood, stringing together a varied filmography including "Dangerous Minds," "Batman Returns," "The Age of Innocence" and "What Lies Beneath." That made her intimidating to her younger co-star.

"It took me two days to get over her beauty, and to go up to her and say hi," Lawrence told reporters at the Toronto International Film Festival. "She's very normal. She's a mother. She's a very smart woman."

She is also a still-adventurous actress who was willing to go well out of her comfort zone for "mother!" Pfeiffer considers the film "a real leap of faith" since she went in with only a partial understanding of it, along with a director whom she says would sometimes leave the cast in the dark on the finer points of the drama.

Aronofsky's "mother!" — about a woman (Jennifer Lawrence) who lives with her husband (Javier Bardem) on a deserted farmhouse — has generated more debate than any film to debut at this year's Toronto International Film Festival.

The Paramount Pictures release, which opens on Friday, has been shrouded in mystery, and critics are still trying to piece together what it all means. "I wanted to make a film about Mother Nature," Aronofsky told Variety. "So we're working on an allegorical level, where it's dealing with these big symbols."



Lebanese actor Adel Karam and actress Rita Hayek pose at the press screening of the film 'The Insult' in Beirut on Sept 12. (AFP)



Wilson



Mars

Variety

MELBOURNE, Australia: A judge awarded **Rebel Wilson** record damages of 4.56 million Australian dollars (\$3.66 million) on Wednesday over magazine articles the actress said cost her roles in Hollywood films.

A Supreme Court jury in Australia's **Victoria** state had decided in June the articles claiming she lied about her age, origins of her first name and her upbringing in **Sydney** were defamatory.

Justice **John Dixon** said a substantial award amount was required to "vindicate" Wilson after her reputation as an "actress of integrity was wrongly damaged."

Bauer Media, publisher of the Australian magazines **Woman's Day**, **Australian Women's Weekly**, **NW** and **OK**, said it was considering the judgment.

The 37-year-old Wilson, best known for the comedies "Pitch Perfect" and "Bridesmaids", was in **London** on Wednesday and her lawyers were unable to immediately talk to her about the decision. (AP)

LOS ANGELES: **Bruno Mars** will take the stage at **New York**'s famed **Apollo Theater** for a primetime special set to air on Nov 29. "Bruno Mars: 24K Magic Live at the Apollo" will be broadcast on CBS and is executive produced by the singer along with **Ben Winston**, who said: "For me, Bruno Mars is the greatest performer in the world. To be producing his first television special is a true honor. This will be a special show and a special night."

Though Mars has performed for a large television audience before, his two Super Bowl halftime appearances, for example, this will be his first solo television special. In addition to a performance with Mars' band the **Hooligans**, the event will also feature never-before-seen stage footage. (RTRS)

TEMPE, Arizona: The 21-year-old son of actor **Jean-Claude Van Damme** is accused of holding his roommate at knife point at

their apartment in suburban **Phoenix**.

Tempe police say **Nicholas Van Varenberg** was arrested Sunday night on suspicion of aggravated assault with a

deadly weapon, unlawful imprisonment, marijuana possession and possession of drug paraphernalia. He's out of jail after posting a \$10,000 bond.



This photograph taken on Sept 12 shows Italian conductor Andrea Colombini and the first robot 'YuMi' during a rehearsal prior to a concert where YuMi will conduct the **The Lucca Philharmonic Orchestra** at **The Teatro Verdi** in **Pisa**. (AFP)

Van Varenberg didn't have a lawyer at his initial court appearance, and it's unclear if he has one yet with a Sept 20 preliminary hearing looming.

Court documents released Tuesday say police went to the apartment after receiving reports about loud noise and yelling. (AP)

SPOKANE, Washington: Four members of a Polish death metal band arrested on charges of kidnapping a Washington state woman are also suspected of sexually assaulting her after a concert during a party on the band's tour bus, according to court documents.

The documents made public Monday said the assault by the members of **Decapitated** happened in the bathroom of the tour bus following the Aug 31 concert in **Spokane, Washington**.

The band members were arrested Saturday in **Santa Ana, California**, for investigation of first degree kidnapping. The four men appeared in court in **Los Angeles** Tuesday and waived extradition to **Washington, KABC-TV** reported.

Steve Graham, a lawyer for the band members, said in an email that the members of "Decapitated plan to fully fight the allegations that have been brought against them and are confident that their side of the story will be heard." (AP)