



## Festival Opera's *Turandot* to feature Canadian soprano Othalie Graham in the title role that launched her career in 2004

Lyric tenor Christopher Jackson, soprano Rebecca Sjöwall and bass Kirk Eichelberger also featured in the lavish production, opening July 11

Festival Opera will celebrate Giacomo Puccini's 150th birthday with its first production of his masterpiece, *Turandot*, opening Saturday, July 11. Considered by many as the last of the grand Italian operas, *Turandot* is a fanciful tale set in ancient China, where suitors for the hand of the merciless Princess Turandot must provide the answers to three impossible riddles, or die trying.

Making her Bay Area debut as Turandot will be acclaimed Canadian soprano Othalie Graham, who is regarded as one of the leading young interpreters of the role – with which she launched her professional career in 2004 at Opera Delaware. Delaware's *Courier-Post* noted at the time: "The centerpiece in this musically strong and dramatically vivid production is a new Turandot. Soprano Othalie Graham is undertaking Puccini's icy princess for the first time. Graham commands the stage with her imperious presence and powerful voice. Turandot is one of the most demanding roles in the dramatic soprano repertory. As she beheads the suitors vying for her hand, Puccini asks his princess to soar up to high B's and C's and dominate the massed voices of the chorus and other soloists. Graham commands the voice to do that. In Turandot's dramatic entrance aria, Graham's soprano flashes through the Grand Opera House like a javelin tipped with bronze. In the 'riddle scene' in which Turandot tests the unknown prince, her voice takes on a steely shine as it soars through the testing vocal lines. The audience cheered Graham at the end of Saturday evening's performance."

Among the other praise accompanying her many engagements over the last years, the *Salt Lake Tribune* wrote of her performance with Utah Festival Opera in 2005: "Rearrange schedules, change plans, and run

to see this vocally and visually stunning new production featuring a young dramatic soprano who is destined for international stardom. As *Turandot*, Othalie Graham electrified the audience with enormous vocal power, tonal depth, and dramatic savvy.” And just a week ago, the *Boston Globe* raved that her “timbre and power were thrilling.”

Along with Graham, Festival Opera’s *Turandot* will feature such noted performers as lyric tenor Christopher Jackson as Prince Calaf; soprano Rebecca Sjöwall as Timur’s loyal slave, Liù; and bass Kirk Eichelberger as Timur, the vanquished king of Tartary. *Turandot* will be conducted by Bryan Nies and directed by David Cox. Set design is by Peter Crompton.

Performances of *Turandot* are scheduled for 8 pm on Saturday, July 11; Tuesday, July 14; and Friday, July 17. A Sunday matinee at 2 pm will also be held on July 29. Location: Hofmann Theatre, Leshner Center for the Arts, 1601 Civic Drive, Walnut Creek, CA. Tickets: \$39 - \$100; \$10 discount for age 18 and under. Tickets can be ordered now by calling (925) 943-SHOW or purchased online at [www.LeshnerArtsCenter.org](http://www.LeshnerArtsCenter.org). For more information, visit [www.FestivalOpera.org](http://www.FestivalOpera.org) or call (925) 944-9610.

The composer’s final, unfinished work, *Turandot* is often portrayed as the grandest of grand operas, presented with more drama and extravagance than the triumphal march of Verdi’s magnificent opera, *Aida*. Puccini was already ill when he began the opera, five years before his death. The unenviable task of determining how to finish the master’s work fell to Arturo Toscanini, who had been working with Puccini and was to conduct the debut performance. Franco Alfano, a colleague of Puccini’s, was chosen to write the final 200 measures and labored over it for six months. Perhaps finishing such a major work was as great a challenge as one of *Turandot*’s own riddles; despite Alfano’s hard work, Toscanini was dissatisfied and after the first production he never conducted the opera again.

An opera famous for its extravagant productions can be intimidating for regional companies, but artistic and music director Michael Morgan has long believed Festival Opera, with its high artistic quality and professionalism, could stage a compelling production of *Turandot*. This summer audiences will have the opportunity to find out. With Puccini’s sweeping music, a stellar cast, and spectacular sets, the stage is set for Bay Area music lovers to feast on the wonders of opera at its best.

## About Festival Opera

Festival Opera under Artistic Director Michael Morgan and Executive Director Helen Sheaff has emerged as the third-largest opera company in the San Francisco Bay Area and one of the top three professional arts companies based in Walnut Creek. Founded in 1991, the non-profit organization has become a showcase for providing young, emerging artists – many of them San Francisco Opera Adler Fellows and Merola Opera Program participants – with principal roles in professional productions. Festival Opera’s season consists of two full productions presented each July and August. The company also provides a free

annual community outdoor concert, complimentary lectures on opera throughout the community and before each performance, and internship opportunities for college and high school students. For more information, visit [www.FestivalOpera.org](http://www.FestivalOpera.org).

\* \* \*

**MEDIA CONTACTS:**

**Lyla Foggia**  
Foggia Public Relations LLC  
(503) 622-0232  
[lyla@foggiapr.com](mailto:lyla@foggiapr.com)

**Helen Sheaff**  
Executive Director  
Festival Opera  
(925) 944-9610  
[info@festivalopera.com](mailto:info@festivalopera.com)