

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – June 16, 2009 – Walnut Creek, CA

Festival Opera goes all out for *Turandot* – its largest production yet



When the curtain rises on Saturday, July 11, for Festival Opera's *Turandot*, the occasion will mark more than just the beginning of another season. Two years in the making, this particular production will be both the largest and most lavish in the company's 18-year history – as well as apparently the first *Turandot* mounted in the Bay Area since San Francisco Opera's in 2002.

Set in the opulence of ancient Peking, *Turandot* is a riveting tale of the power of love over fear and terror. Princess Turandot is secretly afraid of men, so to avoid marriage she has created three riddles which each of her suitors must solve. So far, all have died trying. When Prince Calaf – the son of a deposed king, unbeknownst to Turandot – unexpectedly succeeds, she refuses to marry him anyway. Undaunted, he poses a riddle of his own. If Turandot can uncover his identity by dawn, he will gladly forfeit his life to free her.

Described by one critic as “a vocally demanding role that only a handful of full-blown dramatic sopranos are bold enough to attempt,” *Turandot* will be sung by acclaimed Canadian soprano Othalie Graham, who made her Bay Area debut in 2006 in the title role of *Tosca* for Festival Opera. “*Turandot* is a very difficult role to cast,” says executive director Helen Sheaff. “Most sopranos under 40 just don’t have the voice for it yet. Othalie is probably going to be the up and coming *Turandot* in the United States in the next few years.”

Among other critical praise, the *Sacramento Bee* reported that Graham’s 2006 performance for Sacramento Opera “lifted a tasteful production of *Turandot* to a noteworthy event. Her powerful voice and magnetic stage presence captivated the audience from the start.” Following her appearance with Utah Festival Opera in 2005, the *Salt Lake Tribune* urged readers to: “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, earlier this month, the *Boston Globe* wrote that her “timbre and power were thrilling.”

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

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.

“It’s the biggest thing Festival Opera has ever done,” says director David Cox, who previously helmed *Un ballo in maschera* in 2005 and *Rigoletto* in 2004 for the company. “It’s just a huge opera, and a very difficult piece to pull off.” Indeed, for a regional company that operates on an annual budget of less than \$800,000 and a full-time staff of one, *Turandot* could be considered a massive undertaking. Among other things, a national search for the principal roles had to be conducted – through which they found tenor Christopher Jackson for Calaf in New York and soprano Rebecca Sjöwall for the role of Liù in southern California. The all-volunteer Festival Opera Chorus, a crucial feature to both productions this

season, had to be expanded to 75 (including 15 preteens), requiring a round of extra auditions, along with an intensive twice-weekly rehearsal schedule that began in January. To integrate so many additional bodies into the onstage action, the production brought in choreographer Mark Foehringer to collaborate with stage director David Cox, as he did so successfully last season with stage director Michael Morgan on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The need for more than 80 costumes could have quickly swamped Festival Opera's wardrobe department – the costumes were acquired through one of the world's premiere houses, Malabar in Montreal. The extra cost of Peter Crompton's superb sets was defrayed through an arrangement with Opera Birmingham in Alabama – which utilized them in their own production last January. And as the project progressed, so did the recession. “When we started on *Turandot*, “the Dow was at 13,000,” says Executive Director Helen Sheaff with a laugh.

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. Join Festival Opera on July 11, 14, 17 or 19 for one of the most important musical events of 2009!

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 19. Location: Hofmann Theatre, Leshar 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.LesharArtsCenter.org. For more information, visit www.FestivalOpera.org or call (925) 944-9610.

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.

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PHOTO ID: Festival Opera's *Turandot* sets, designed by Peter Crompton, as they appeared in Opera Birmingham's production in January 2009.

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