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Stirring Verdi masterpiece, *IL TROVATORE*, returns to Festival Opera stage for first time in 15 years

Opening July 12, production features
Hope Briggs, Noah Stewart, Scott
Bearden and Kirk Eichelberger

Festival Opera will present *Il Trovatore*, Giuseppe Verdi's stirring masterpiece of obsession, madness and retribution, for the first time in 15 years. Opening July 12, with **Michael Morgan** conducting, *Il Trovatore* will feature tenor **Noah Stewart** as Manrico; soprano **Hope Briggs** as Leonora; baritone **Scott Bearden** as Count di Luna; dramatic mezzo **Patrice Houston** as Azucena; bass **Kirk Eichelberger** as Ferrando; and mezzo **Jessica Mariko Deardorff** as Inez. Stage direction and set design to be provided by **Giulio Cesare Perrone**.

To guarantee seating, tickets (\$36 - \$100) can be purchased now online at www.LesherArtsCenter.org or by calling (925) 943-SHOW. Performances are scheduled for 8 pm on Saturday, July 12; Tuesday, July 15; and Friday, July 18. A Sunday matinee at 2 pm will also be held on July 20. Location: Hofmann Theatre, Leshar Center for the Arts, 1601 Civic Drive, Walnut Creek, CA. For more information, visit www.FestivalOpera.org or call (925) 944-9610.

Il Trovatore (The Troubadour) has been entertaining audiences since 1853, when it debuted in Rome during an exceptionally creative and prolific period of Verdi's life. Already a critically-acclaimed composer at the age of 40, he had launched *Rigoletto* only two years earlier, and was simultaneously composing *La Traviata*, which was to make its debut in Venice barely two months after *Il Trovatore* opened. All three were immediate successes and have achieved a level of enduring popularity reserved for relatively few operatic works. Notably, librettist Salvatore Cammerano fell ill and died unexpectedly

before *Il Trovatore* was complete. Fortunately, most of the work was done, and his notes allowed another librettist to complete it.

Despite a melodramatic story worthy of the most imaginative soap opera, *Il Trovatore* has endured in the opera repertory for more than 150 years thanks to a rich and melodious score that has made it a favorite with singers and audiences alike. The famous “Anvil Chorus,” although unquestionably one of the best known opera “tunes” of all time, is just one of its many stirring and emotionally-charged arias and vocal ensembles.

This intense tale of political and family vengeance not only features a classic love triangle, but a story that stretches from mistaken identity, kidnapping and burning at the stake to imprisonment, poisoning and execution. Set in 15th century Spain, Lady Leonora rejects Count di Luna’s love, choosing instead the mysterious troubadour Manrico. Leader of a peasant uprising, Manrico is di Luna’s bitter enemy but both men are unaware that they are actually long-lost brothers. The gypsy, Azucena, who raised Manrico as her own, swore vengeance on di Luna’s father for burning her mother at the stake years before. Jealousy sparked by Leonora’s love, together with Azucena’s machinations, crescendos to a tragic conclusion.

One of the great challenges of *Il Trovatore* is the vocal demands it places on the lead singers. This is grand opera at its finest – with everything from tender love scenes and jealous confrontations to a stirring call to arms in the final act. Festival Opera is excited to bring this classic work to life through such gifted artists. Soprano Hope Briggs, who previously sang the role of Amelia in *Un Ballo in Maschereea*, recently appeared in concert with the Oakland East Bay Symphony to critical acclaim. Tenor and former San Francisco Opera Adler Fellow Noah Stewart last year gave a highly-praised performance as T. Morris Chester in the world premiere of Phillip Glass’ *Appomattox* at San Francisco Opera. Coincidentally mirroring Verdi’s chronology of works, baritone Scott Bearden will return to Festival Opera as Count di Luna following his recent highly-praised appearance in the title role of *Rigoletto* for Opera San Jose. His depth and skill in the Verdi roles was recognized recently with the top award in the Chester Ludgin Memorial American Verdi Baritone Competition, judged by a panel that included tenor Placido Domingo. In last year’s production of Rorem’s *Our Town*, Patrice Houston’s compelling mezzo-soprano voice and strong stage presence as the placid Mrs. Gibbs quietly underscored Emily’s anguish in the final act. Bass Kirk Eichelberger, who sang the role of Dr. Gibbs in Festival Opera’s West Coast premiere of *Our Town* last summer, made his Metropolitan Opera debut in *The Gambler* in March. Jessica Mariko Deardorff performed as Mercédès in Festival Opera’s production of *Carmen* last summer.

Stage director and production designer Giulio Cesare Perrone, a 1988 graduate of the Accademia di Belle Arti “Brera” in Milan, designed 28 productions for Italy’s most important festivals, resident and touring

companies, as well as directed plays, before moving to the U.S. in 1995. Perrone has since been responsible for the sets on more than 70 theatre and opera productions for such companies as Festival Opera, Opera San Jose, and the San Jose Repertory Theatre. Michael Morgan made his debut as an operatic stage director with Festival Opera's 2006 production of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Currently in his 18th year as music director of Oakland East Bay Symphony, Morgan has served as music director of Festival Opera since 1996 and artistic director since 2001. He also serves as artistic director of the Oakland Youth Orchestra and music director of the Sacramento Philharmonic. His operatic debut as a conductor came in 1982 at the Vienna State Opera with Mozart's *The Abduction from the Seraglio*.

Il Trovatore was last performed by Festival Opera in 1993, when the company was barely two years old. Although the production was praised at the time, the company was not nearly as polished or professional. Festival Opera is now known not only for its exceptional artists, many of them the emerging stars of the future, but for production values equal to those of far larger companies. This summer, when the curtain rises on *Il Trovatore*, audiences will get to experience not only the peak of Verdi's skill as a master composer, but the culmination of the artistic growth Festival Opera has achieved in the 15 years since it last presented this monumental work.

Festival Opera under executive director Helen Sheaff and Morgan 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 is nationally-recognized as a showcase for young, emerging artists, including San Francisco Opera Adler Fellows and Merola Opera Program participants.

Festival Opera's production of *Il Trovatore* is sponsored by Bell Investment Advisors. Oakland, CA.

Photo ID: Scott Bearden as Renato in *Un Ballo in Maschera* at Opera Memphis.

Photo Credit: William Moore, courtesy Opera Memphis

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