



Photo: Chautauqua Opera

Tenor Robert Breault as Cavaradossi in Chautauqua Opera's production of Tosca.

Tosca: A Milestone Opera

A decade ago, in July 1996, Festival Opera's curtain opened on Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca*. It was a production to remember—soprano Karen Anderson, with baritone Hector Vasquez as a darkly evil Scarpia, electrified the audience with their performances.

For Festival Opera, it heralded a return after being dark for two years, introduced Michael Morgan as its new music director, and set the company on the path to its current level of artistic quality. This July 8, *Tosca* will again grace the Festival Opera stage in a celebration of the company's 15th anniversary season. With newcomers soprano Othalie Graham and tenor Robert Breault, joined by a Festival Opera favorite, baritone Bojan Knezevic as Scarpia, *Tosca's* dramatic story and remarkable music will again enchant audiences as they do the world over.

Bringing Tosca to Life

The opera is based on an original play, *La Tosca*, written in 1887 by French playwright, Victorien Sardou. It was written specifically to

star the talented Sarah Bernhardt, who was at the height of her popularity. Although Puccini was fascinated by the play when he saw it, it would be more than a decade before the opera was completed. Both *Manon Lescaut* and *La Bohème* were completed and achieved success in the meantime. By the time *Tosca* made its debut, Puccini had achieved significant credibility as an opera composer.

Puccini became more actively interested in the project in 1895, when he heard that Giuseppe Verdi, who had been Puccini's inspiration as a young composer, was interested in the story. Then 81, Verdi declined to undertake the project, leaving the rights available for Puccini to obtain. The opera was completed five years later. Although reviews were mixed, the audience loved it and it has remained a favorite for more than 100 years.

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An Opera Rich in Context

Tosca has tremendous appeal; it is not surprising that it is one of the world's most familiar

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Piano Man

An interview with rehearsal accompanist Ron Valentino

Until the last week before the opera opens, when the orchestra joins the singers, all the music is quite literally in the hands of the rehearsal accompanist. Over the past few years at Festival Opera, that accompanist has frequently been Ron Valentino and this summer will find him there again for *Tosca*. An accompanist's work is typically finished when the curtain rises on opening night, but up until then, they're an integral part of the production.

Talented musicians like Ron also perform other roles in the opera world, including coaching individual singers, assisting conductors as the production reaches the stage, and accompanying singers at recitals and concerts. Ron has done all these for Festival Opera; he is now a familiar face at Sostenuuto events, Opera in the Park concerts, and the Guild's holiday event. *The Voice* caught up with Ron during a break in assignments this month.

FO: Was being a rehearsal accompanist a career goal for you?

RV: Oh no. I started taking piano quite late – at 13. Most people start much earlier, so I set conservative career goals for myself and went to college in Pittsburgh to become a music teacher.

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From the Chair

In this, our 15th anniversary year, we are approaching some very exciting new horizons. Our *Tosca* opens July 8th bringing new voices to the Festival Opera stage, soprano Othalie Graham and tenor Robert Breault. This co-production with Opera Santa Barbara marks our second co-production, following last year's *Un Ballo in Maschera* with Opera San Jose, and we're looking at another such opportunity for next year. Co-productions give us the ability to present a richer production at lower costs. August will see Michael Morgan's fascinating contemporary staging of *Don Giovanni*. This production, which stars bass Matthew Treviño, holds true to our mission of presenting a cast of outstanding young artists, in this case all the way from principals and comprimarios to the chorus. We will continue our pairing of classic and contemporary opera productions in 2007, presenting an opera favorite with the recently announced West Coast Premiere of Ned Rorem's *Our Town*.

Regardless of the new horizons we envision, however, we continue to face many of the same old challenges. Festival Opera is at a pivotal point – over the past decade and a half, we have

emerged as such an exciting and professional company that talented artists, directors and conductors now approach us to get involved. But at the same time, we have outstripped our infrastructure—we haven't the broad financial backing or enough staff to truly support the wonderful efforts we've managed to produce.

As chair this year, I see the top priorities of Festival Opera to be twofold: to ensure these coming seasons and at the same time to focus on strategic planning for the future. At the 15-year mark, now is the time to evaluate what we've been doing right and what we need to rethink. To that end we have begun a series of focus groups with donors, community leaders, and friends to gain their insights. We need to find a way to make Festival Opera a company that will get the financial and community support it needs and have the flexibility for long-term survival. If you'd like to help with our efforts or if you'd like to participate in an upcoming focus group, please get in touch. We've set our sights on some pretty exciting new horizons—but seeing them is only the first step in actually reaching them!

— Roberta Emerson ■

West Coast Premiere of *Our Town*

In 2007, Festival Opera will present the West Coast premiere of *Our Town*, a new opera composed by Ned Rorem, based on the classic drama by Thornton Wilder. The opera made its debut in February at the Indiana University Opera Theater, one of the most prestigious collegiate opera programs in the country. It will subsequently be presented by five other American co-commissioners around the country, including Festival Opera. Rorem, best known for his art songs, has composed a very broad range of instrumental and vocal works throughout his long and illustrious career.

Presenting the *Our Town* West Coast premiere is an exceptional opportunity for Festival Opera to play a role in developing opera for the 21st century. Festival Opera has primarily focused on creative stagings of standard opera repertory, and over the years the company has successfully challenged itself to advance the artistic level of its productions. The opportunity to present *Our Town* will both broaden Festival Opera's ability to reach new audiences and continue the company's challenge to present the kind of creative, high-quality opera Festival Opera supporters have come to expect. ■

Festival Opera's 15th Anniversary Season

Tosca

July 8 • 11 • 14 • 16

Don Giovanni

August 12 • 15 • 18 • 20

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and beloved operas. Its entirely plausible story of politics, passion and revenge, makes sense to nearly all watchers. That the painter Cavaradossi would assist his friend, political prisoner Angelotti, to make his escape... that the chief of police, Baron Scarpia, would use Tosca's jealous love for Cavaradossi to betray him... that Tosca, faced with the prospect of sexual submission to Scarpia, would murder him instead ... and then, seeing her lover killed, would fling herself to her death... are all logical plot developments, but more importantly, they touch a deep emotional nerve in all of us. Through the characters, audiences experience a range of passions, from the love and lust of Act I, to the pain of physical and emotional torture in Act II, to hope and absolute despair in Act III.

Tosca is one of the rare operatic stories that requires relatively little suspension of disbelief, and is also one of the few operas that has both a very specific historic and physical setting. *Tosca* is set in Rome in June 1800. Napoleon Bonaparte has attacked Italy and his sympathizers, such as Cavaradossi and Angelotti, are being largely suppressed by the monarchy, represented in the opera by the chief of police, Baron Scarpia. The "Te Deum" at the end of Act I celebrates the monarchy's apparent defeat of Bonaparte; Cavaradossi's stirring cry of "Vittoria" in Act II proclaims Bonaparte's actual triumph.

While working on *Tosca*, Puccini took the time to research the various elements of the story, visiting Rome to hear the acoustics of the churches surrounding the Castel Sant'Angelo and studying liturgical practices for the church scene.

Tosca made its premiere in 1900, the 100th anniversary of the opera's political events, and was performed at the Teatro Costanzi in Rome, the city where the opera is set. The three locations used in the opera, the church of Sant' Andrea della Valle (Act I), the Farnese Palace (Act II), and the roof of the Castel Sant'Angelo (Act III), remain standing today.

Familiar and New Voices

Festival Opera's production of *Tosca* for the 2006 season will open with a very familiar face. Featured in the role of the Sacristan will be company founder, baritone Ted Weis, who sang the role in 1996 and returns for this 15th anniversary celebration. Baritone Bojan Knezevic (Scarpia) is also returning to Festival Opera,

having been seen in a variety of roles including the title role of *Don Pasquale*, Amonasro (*Aida*), and Monterone (*Rigoletto*.) He makes his debut with Sarasota Opera this season as Figaro in *Le Nozze di Figaro*.

This production of *Tosca* will also feature two exciting voices new to Festival Opera. Canadian-born soprano Othalie Graham will be singing her first *Tosca* in her debut with the company. She has sung many other major roles including *Aida*, *Elektra* and, most recently, *Turandot*, which she sang with Sacramento Opera this season. As Cavaradossi, Robert Breault will bring his "mellifluous tenor, boasting clarity of both tone and diction" (*Opera News*) to the role. He returns in April to New York City Opera to sing the role of Don Jose in *Carmen*, after making his debut there in 2004 as Alfredo in *La Traviata*.

The sets for *Tosca*, a co-production with Opera Santa Barbara, were designed by Jean François Revon, who has also worked with Festival Opera in the past.

Setting New Heights

Although 1996's production of *Tosca* established a new artistic level for Festival Opera, under the musical leadership of Michael Morgan, the company has never been willing to stand still—Festival Opera has continued to move the bar higher with each successive year. This 15th anniversary year will be no exception. When the curtain opens on the church of Sant' Andrea della Valle this July, Festival Opera hopes that audiences will not only see a production of *Tosca* that stirs their senses, but one that will set the company successfully on its way for the next 15 years. ■

Photo: Opera Santa Barbara



The set for Act I at Opera Santa Barbara, Festival Opera's co-production partner for Tosca.

**For cast lists, synopses
and more on
this season's operas,
see us on the Web at
www.festivalopera.com**

Piano Man ...continued from page 1

I played at a soprano recital and found I liked accompanying, but there was no formal degree program. I worked with the dean to develop the program and was actually the first to graduate with a degree in accompanying.

FO: Did you choose opera specifically?

RV: *You know, I didn't particularly like opera at first. But as I got to know the individual operas better and began to appreciate the collaborative process involved, I really got to like it and, you know, when it all comes together, it's just exquisite—a great combination of visual art and music. After I graduated, I was very fortunate to work with Ezio Pinza's daughter who invited me to join a program in Italy to study with an opera vocal coach. Now opera companies are seeing the importance of vocal coaches. The Met has a program where people spend two years working with the coaching staff. Houston, LA and San Francisco do too.*

FO: What does a vocal coach do?

RV: *Singers work with vocal coaches when they're preparing for a role. The coach cues, or sings, the missing parts to give a sense of continuity. They go through to make sure all the notes*

and the diction is correct. The word "coach" is appropriate—it's like an athlete training for a race or an ice skater working a new program. The vocal coach can help the singer determine how to pace themselves over a long aria or over a whole opera. Singers often work on roles a year or more

out. Opera isn't something you can "stir and serve"—you have to take time to prepare.

FO: In what capacity do you spend the most time?

RV: *I started out just playing rehearsals and I probably still do that the most. I play recitals here and there, which I really enjoy. Like most musicians I do what comes up—there's not much job security in a music career! I like to work on productions best—collaborating with the whole team to make it happen... music, sets, lighting.*

FO: After accompanying opera so long, you must know the music to nearly all of them!

RV: *Well, I probably know about forty operas really well. But what I like is that this is truly a lifelong learning experience. It takes a lot of time to really know the repertoire and the languages. Even when it's the same composer, each opera is different. I think I enjoy the Italianate operas—Mozart, Rossini, Verdi—the best. I have played new works too, which are fascinating, especially when you get to meet the composer.*

FO: What makes an assignment "a favorite" for you?

RV: *I remember really enjoying Werther with Festival Opera. It's a great piece, very musically satisfying. It's always great if I like the piece and if I like the people I'm working with. I've worked with directors who have breathed new vitality into a piece that's been done a lot of times before. Even if they yell, you can tell it's in their enthusiasm to make it right.*

FO: I bet you've seen your share of operatic drama at rehearsals.

RV: *Well, there are some opera singers with big egos and it can be quite entertaining to see them taken down a bit. In one production of Il Trovatore, there was a bit of competition between the leads. They all kept moving forward in the first act trio and finally one of them, a "big name" soprano, was determined to take the front of the stage. As she swooned and fainted, holding her high note much longer than Verdi wanted, the curtain came down and half of her was exposed to the audience. It was hilarious to see the stagehands struggling to lift the curtain and pull her backstage!*

FO: It's fortunate that those things don't occur very often.

RV: *Definitely. There are a lot of people who are just a dream to work with, and they're great at what they do. And some companies are more friendly than others. I've really enjoyed working with Festival Opera and, over time, have gotten to know people. It's not as if they're saying, "oh no, not you again!"—I definitely feel connected and welcomed here.* ■



Photo: Tom Bacon for Festival Opera

Ron Valentino at Opera in the Park 2002, with guest conductor Francesco Milioto.

If you'd like to get to know Ron Valentino better, consider a performer sponsorship this season. You'll have the opportunity to attend a staging rehearsal to see him at work, as well as chat with him over lunch or dinner. For more information, call the Festival Opera office at 925-944-9610.

Here's Your Chance to Get to Know Our Stars!

This season, the talented artists coming to perform are coming from an equally wide range of geographic locations. As a result, Festival Opera is very much in need of artist housing this summer. If you have an extra room, an open apartment, or need a housesitter during July or August, please consider welcoming one of our artists.

This is a great opportunity to get to know our singers and learn a little more about how opera looks from the inside. It also allows Festival Opera to spend its budget on enhanced productions rather than on housing. If you can help, please call Helen Sheaff as soon as possible at 925-944-9610 to make arrangements. Thank you! ■

Donation Opportunities

There are many ways to help Festival Opera. For example, if you close a purchase or refinance a loan with Wells Fargo Home Mortgage, they will make a \$300 contribution to the non-profit of your choice. Ask about their Sharing Advantage program—and help keep opera close to home! ■

Choose Your Role in This Season's Operas

In honor of our 15th anniversary season, we're inviting you to "choose your role in our season's operas." We have been told by many people that what they really enjoy about Festival Opera is the personal experience of opera that it affords. We strive to connect you to opera not just through performances in our intimate theater, which is perfect for young voices, but through various opportunities to meet our artists and to learn how opera works from the inside.

Opera is fascinating from every perspective and there is no better way to hear about it than from someone involved. To that end, we've developed sponsorship opportunities that will allow you to get closer to Festival Opera this season. You can have dinner during rehearsal week with one of this year's talented singers, take a backstage tour with our director of production, attend the orchestra luncheon with the concertmaster, or meet the multi-talented young artist who will not only sing the role of Angelotti in *Tosca*, but will play the harpsichord accom-

A Volunteer of Excellence

For the past 15 years, Festival Opera has depended on office volunteer Anne Matthew for a myriad of tasks critical to making the company run. Now Anne has been acknowledged for all her hard work with a national award, the Partners in Excellence Award from Opera Volunteers International (OVI), an organization dedicated to promoting the awareness of opera and encouraging its growth in communities.

Each year it honors individuals who have made outstanding contributions to their opera companies and to their communities. Anne will be among the honorees at a special awards presentation luncheon this month as part of OVI's 2006 national conference in Kansas City.

An active volunteer since the company was founded, Anne oversees a variety of administrative functions, including mailings, photo archives, and donor records, as well as contributing in many other ways. We are indebted to Anne for her dedication and her contributions throughout the years! ■



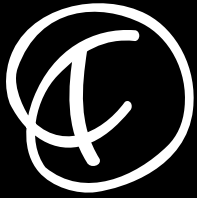
Photo: Festival Opera

Anne Matthew in a familiar setting—the Festival Opera office.

paniment for *Don Giovanni*. One of the most exciting sponsorship opportunities offers insight into the contemporary staging of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* from Festival Opera's artistic director Michael Morgan himself. These sponsorships, ranging from \$500 to \$5,000, are a unique opportunity to look inside our productions.

Performances of the caliber Festival Opera offers cost approximately \$250,000 to produce and ticket sales cover barely half those costs. Bringing opera to life is more than just finding the best people to put ON the stage – we greatly depend on support from individuals like you. This year we'd like to bring together those who work on the stage with those who help make it happen. Please consider choosing a role this season—we're certain you'll find the people involved with Festival Opera just as engaging as the operas themselves. ■

For a detailed list of all sponsorships available this season, please call the Festival Opera office at 925-944-9610.



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*Roberta Emerson
Editor*