



Photo: Terrence McCarthy for San Francisco Opera

Soprano Kendall Gladen makes her Festival Opera debut as *Carmen* on July 7.

A Passion for *Carmen*

Carmen is, if not the world's most popular opera, very likely the world's most well known. Thanks to its engaging melodies, there are few people in the Western world who cannot hum one or two of them, whether they know anything about the opera at all. In addition to its operatic form, the story has been produced as a musical, a drama, a film, and a ballet.

Its well-known tunes are heard in everything from symphony concerts to TV ads, elevator music, and cartoons. It is, therefore, nearly impossible to say anything about *Carmen* that has not already been said. But

every production of *Carmen* holds the power to enchant its audience, largely driven by the immeasurable talent of the artists it presents. Festival Opera's new production, which opens the 2007 season and features the debuts of three new artists, will be no different.

True-to-Life, Then and Now

Beyond the connection people feel to the familiar music, there is much that makes this opera compelling. It is a powerful story of ordinary people – some self-centered, some

innocent, or headstrong, or impulsive – caught in the timeless tragedy of making poor choices and having to live with the results. Verisimo opera, of which this is a fine if early example, is said to express stories that are "true to life." *Carmen* is set in Seville, Spain in the 1800's, but the out-of-control passions of the tempestuous gypsy Carmen and her lover Don José continue to be mirrored in today's newscasts.

And just as onlookers are fascinated by current stories of passion and violence, so too do they remain enthralled by the story of *Carmen* and the dramatic, memorable music of Georges Bizet.

A Controversial Beginning

It is unfortunate that Bizet had no idea of the tremendous

long-term success his opera would have. He died at the age of 36 in 1875, just a few months after *Carmen's* highly controversial debut at the Opéra Comique in Paris. The opera was met with dismay and incomprehension by the audience. Parisian opera society was used to plots about aristocrats, not "common people," and the fact that the gypsy Carmen was portrayed as working at a cigarette factory was considered in the poorest taste, not to mention her subsequent

...continued on page 3

*"You never forget
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Carmen!"*

From Chorus to Comprimario

An Interview with Francisco Aviles

Right now, Francisco Aviles may be better known for the music he plays elsewhere than for singing with Festival Opera. And given his special musical gifts, that might never change. But this summer, Festival Opera audiences will be given an opportunity to hear more of his vocal talents as he moves from chorus member to *comprimario* (supporting) roles.

Aviles first appeared as a member of the chorus in Festival Opera's production of *Un Ballo in Maschera*. He subsequently returned in *Candide* and *Don Giovanni*, and this year was invited to audition for a larger role. Music and artistic director Michael Morgan remarked afterwards that he was struck by the surprising beauty of his voice, "Having only seen him singing in the chorus I had no idea. He's always been one of my favorite people in the company, always willing to do extra things onstage to help a production." Aviles has been cast in this season's productions as Morales in

...continued on page 4

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From the Chair

The Festival Opera board recently announced that the 2007 season is dedicated to the memory of Grace Bacon, former chair and founding board member, who passed away in January. For the first 15 years of Festival Opera's history, Grace was actively involved in nearly every aspect of the organization. Few people involved with Festival Opera were not in some way touched by her efforts. I know that Grace was instrumental in convincing me that I could and should take on the role of chair when nominated last year.

Grace would have loved being part of this season. The momentum has already started to build, both artistically and in support. Our co-production agreement with Tacoma Opera meant that *Carmen* sets had to be completed in February, moving expenses into December 2006, rather than the following May when they would normally have been incurred. A small group of donors stepped forward to create a \$25,000 challenge grant specifically to build the sets and, thanks to your generous donations, it was successfully met by the January 31 deadline!

From a production perspective, *Carmen* can be challenging to stage. The opera has four distinct settings, and set designs are typically large and unwieldy, making it expensive. Our sets are unique in that they were cleverly designed to fit inside a single 53-foot trailer truck. This project, the brainchild of Festival Opera's director of production Frederic Boulay, working with set designer Peter Crompton, not only simplifies Festival Opera's production, it creates an income opportunity by renting the sets for this popular opera to other opera companies.

As a board, we are actively planning and budgeting for the future. I've recently been involved in preparing several significant grant appeals for Festival Opera. Never has it been so easy to talk enthusiastically and expansively about where we are now and what we hope to achieve in the future. This is an exciting time for Festival Opera and, although I'll miss her calling me up to tell me so, I know Grace would have been thrilled.

— Roberta Emerson ■

Three Tenors to Debut in *Our Town*

The premiere of *Our Town*, opening August 11, will introduce several new tenors to the Festival Opera stage. Tenor Richard Byrne brings a wealth of experience to his debut in the central role of Stage Manager for *Our Town*. He has performed extensively for major companies, including the Metropolitan Opera, Houston Grand Opera, Santa Fe Opera and others worldwide.

Tenor Thomas Glenn will make his company debut in the role of the young man, George Gibbs. A 2005 participant in the Adler program at San Francisco Opera, Glenn went on to sing several mainstage roles there, including the role of physicist Robert Wilson in the world premiere of John Adams' *Doctor Atomic*.

Making his debut in the role of Simon Stimpson will be tenor Trente Morant. Local audiences remember his remarkable voice from his role as the Preacher in Oakland East Bay Symphony's stunning 2005 presentation of Bernstein's *MASS*.

They will be joined by soprano Marnie Breckenridge, who returns as Emily Webb, following her debut in 2004 as Gilda in *Rigoletto*. She appeared as Cunegonde in the company's

2005 production of *Candide*, a role she recently reprised at Prague State Opera. Other returning artists include bass Kirk Eichelberger, baritone David Cox, and mezzo-sopranos Patrice Houston and Darla Wigginton. ■

New Board Members

In January, two new directors were appointed to the Festival Opera board. Art Keogh is Branch Manager for Sonoma National Bank in Walnut Creek and an active member of the Walnut Creek Chamber of Commerce. He also serves on the board of The Legal Center and has served on the board of the Make-a-Wish Foundation, where he continues to serve on the finance committee.

Sylvia Tobias is a member of the Chambers of Commerce of both Moraga and Lafayette. She heads the northern California user group for Alpha Software and is an independent consultant for the company. She serves as treasurer for Soroptimist International of Lamorinda and is a member of the Commonwealth Club and the San Francisco Museum Society. ■

A Passion for Carmen ...continued from page 1

scandalous behavior. Bizet was bitterly disappointed, as he had believed this would be the work that finally led him to critical acclaim. Despite some early success, Bizet's works up until *Carmen* had largely been plagued by failure. Listening to *Carmen* today, one can only imagine the works Bizet might have written had he lived longer.

Making the Familiar New

With *Carmen* so often seen and heard, the key for any opera company in making it unique is the quality of the voices that bring the characters to life. This summer, Festival Opera's *Carmen* will be set apart by the three exciting artists making their company debut in a new production staged by director Heather Carolo.

Soprano Kendall Gladen, in her stage debut as Carmen, is in her second year with the prestigious San Francisco Opera Center Adler program, where she was cast in the role of Mercédès in SFO's *Carmen* in 2006. Tenor Ryan MacPherson, as Don José, comes to Festival Opera from his debut at the Opéra National de Paris. He has sung a variety of roles at New York City Opera since his 2002 debut there. Appearing as Escamillo will be baritone Eugene Brancoveanu, who made his 2005 debut with San Francisco Opera in *La Forza del Destino* following his first year in the Adler Program and has since returned in other productions.

Soprano Rebecca Garcia joins them as Micaëla, following her prior appearances with Festival Opera in the title role of *Roméo et Juliette* and as Paquette in *Candide*.

Getting to Carmen

When she's onstage as Carmen, Kendall Gladen expects some people might dislike her. "She's strong and sexy, but she's also manipulative, dangerous and definitely bad luck," she says. Nonetheless, Gladen is thrilled to have the chance to sing this complex character and is eager to make the role her own.

As with many other singers, Gladen came to opera having sung in church. A high school choral teacher noticed how special her voice was and got her an audition with the Artists-in-Training program at Opera Theater of St. Louis, an innovative program to foster teen singers and introduce them to the art form. At the end of the program, Gladen received the highest scholarship awarded. After completing her degree at Washington University, she was initially afraid

to audition. As she says, "I thought you had to be perfect already, but my teacher convinced me I was ready and I moved to New York without any money but with HUGE dreams." She covered her bills by doing office work and auditioned for everything she could. After singing roles in Sarasota and at Washington National Opera, she was selected for the Merola program at SFO, leading to her two-year Adler fellowship. The program, especially the stage exposure, has been excellent training for her and she credits the independence it demands for helping her grow personally as well.

Taking on her first *Carmen* is another big step and according to Gladen, she can't wait, "It's incredible to be able to do this – exciting and intimidating too. I've always been fascinated by this opera, so singing *Carmen* will be such a treat. Back in St. Louis, I got to sing in the chorus for *Carmen* – that was like the appetizer. Then I got to sing Mercédès for SFO – it's a meatier role, like the main course. But singing *Carmen*, now that's the dessert!"

Gladen has studied the role, sung excerpts in concerts, and hopes to sing it many more times, but this first opportunity to sing it onstage at Festival Opera will be unforgettable. "It's a big role and, as they say about a voice, will be something I expect to continue to grow into. I'm sure I'll keep finding new interesting things, new layers to the role – it will only get better. But it won't be like this... you never forget the first time you get to sing a role like *Carmen*," says Gladen.

On opening night, as the orchestra weaves the mesmerizingly lyrical music of Georges Bizet around the audience, Gladen will be ready onstage. She'll be fully prepared to inhabit a character that people might dislike, but to deliver it in a thrilling mezzo-soprano voice that no one will be able to resist – and she'll be having the time of her life! ■



Set designer Peter Crompton's vision for Act I of *Carmen*.

From Chorus to Comprimario *...continued from page 1*

Carmen and as one of George's boyhood friends in *Our Town*. Although he came to the opera stage in a roundabout way, Aviles grew up in a musical family and admits he has "good music genes." He does indeed and, after this summer, opera audiences are likely to want to hear more of his beautiful voice.

FO: Did you grow up listening to opera?

FA: *Yes. My grandfather was an opera singer and my grandmother sang as well. My mother and her 10 siblings grew up with a father singing opera, so music was always in my life. In fact, my father also grew up with music and got a scholarship to the San Francisco Conservatory, but he ended up going to Vietnam instead.*

FO: Was singing opera a goal for you?

FA: *Not particularly, although I've always had a natural aptitude for singing. When I was about 13 a friend of mine gave me a tape of "La Donna e Mobile" from Rigoletto and I found I could sing along with it and just naturally make the right kind of sounds. I got into the Duke Ellington School for the Arts in Washington DC when I was 14. I was actually quite late in applying and at first they weren't going to let me audition. But my mother just wouldn't let up on them, and finally they agreed. Although I performed around Washington DC during school,*

I never really focused on opera.

FO: You've actually focused more on different types of music.

FA: *That's true. For a while I mostly played and "composed" instrumental guitar pieces, and for the past few years have been incorporating more sing-*

ing. My influences find their way into the music, be it flamenco, classical Indian music, Celtic, Brazilian. I've just been calling it "world music," for lack of a better term. I even intermix some operatic singing. I've been singing at an Italian restaurant in Fairfax and people really do seem to enjoy hearing what I do. When I play, I improvise a lot around a general structure so nothing is ever the same twice. It's from the heart – this music comes through me.

FO: So you are as much a composer as you are a singer.

FA: *I never really studied composition.*

I've learned just by listening and watching. I'm limited by my lack of knowledge – I have a little basic music theory and never really studied more. However, composition is definitely a passion I have. What comes through me seems to be a blend of folk music and art music, that I hope in the end we would just call music that is moving.

FO: How did you find your way to Festival Opera?

FA: *I was studying with Jim Toland and he suggested that I audition for the chorus to get back on stage, as it had been a while. I was mostly playing guitar without singing. Now and then, I'd sing at a wedding or funeral, but nothing on stage. I had started working with Jim because of an Italian song I heard one day. It was just so beautiful that I wanted to sing it. Then I heard a recording of Björling singing Puccini and I said to myself, this is the epitome of what a beautiful voice can be. But I knew if I wanted to sing Italian music, I couldn't just rely on my innate ability to make those sounds. I'd need much more than that and I'm still learning.*

FO: So, do you think there is more opera in your future?

FA: *It's hard to say, I'm still in the process of unraveling what the future holds. I'm someone who likes to experience music of all kinds. Singing with Festival Opera has opened me up to new things and a lot has been happening recently. I've had more opportunities to sing on stage, mostly musical theater, and now I will sing more with Festival Opera. I have also been talking to a producer who is very interested in recording some of my world music. So I don't know. My passion is the music... and I will just follow what comes naturally to me.* ■



Photo: Natalie Tarola

Francisco Aviles (r) with Isaac Hurtado in Candide (2005).

Get to Know Our Stars!

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. If you can help, please call Helen Sheaff as soon as possible at (925) 944-9610 to make arrangements. Thank you!

“Our Town” Around Town!

With the West Coast premiere of *Our Town* coming up fast, Festival Opera has put together a variety of programs designed to appeal to nearly everyone. Presented in partnership with groups around the Bay Area, these events will help get you ready for our exciting production of composer Ned Rorem’s newest work.

ART SONGS SERIES

Rorem, well known for his vocal works, has been called “the worlds best composer of art songs” by *Time Magazine*. This Festival Opera series features great American art songs.

• Walnut Creek

Start your weekend by joining us for a glass of wine and an early evening concert in the elegant downtown Walnut Creek piano salon at Sherman Clay. This concert is the first of several planned with Sherman Clay. Although this event is free, seating is limited and advance reservations are required.

When: Friday, April 20 at 6:00pm

Where: Sherman Clay,

1388 Locust Street, Walnut Creek

Cost: Free, but reservations required

Call: (925) 944-9610 for reservations

• Napa

Presented by Richard Williams, Director of Cultural Affairs for Meadowood Resort in St. Helena, this invitation-only event will include soprano Marnie Breckenridge, who will sing the role of Emily Webb in *Our Town* this summer.

When: Friday, May 18

Call: (925) 944-9610 for information

• San Jose

As part of the lecture series of the San Jose Opera Guild, an independent group supporting opera throughout the Bay Area, Festival Opera will present a concert of American songs including those of Ned Rorem.

When: Tuesday, June 19 at 10:00am

Where: Los Gatos History Club

23 Los Gatos Blvd., Los Gatos

Cost: \$10 at the door

Call: (408) 378-4823 for reservations

SAN RAMON LIBRARY PROGRAMS

Two events involving talented youth from our area have been developed in cooperation with the San Ramon Library.

• “A Celebration in Word and Song”

Attend this concert of singing and poetry-reading featuring talented young people from the East Bay. The program celebrates National Poetry Month by linking the works of American poets such as Pulitzer Prize-winner Robert Hillyer with art songs by American composers, including Ned Rorem.

When: Sunday, April 1 at 2:00pm

Where: Front Row Theatre, Dougherty Valley Community Center, 17017

Bollinger Canyon Road, San Ramon

Cost: Free

• Reader’s Theater

California High School drama students will lead a lively “Reader’s Theatre” presentation of *Our Town*. Be part of the audience or consider participating in this informal celebration of a major American play. Refreshments will be served.

When: Sunday, May 6 at 2:00pm

Where: San Ramon Library

100 Montgomery Street, San Ramon

Cost: Free

OTHER EVENTS

• The Works of Ned Rorem

Popular pianist and lecturer Jerry Kuderna will discuss the evolution of Rorem’s works, from his famous song cycles written in his 20’s, to work he is still producing in his 80’s. This event, sponsored by the Emeritus College of Diablo Valley College, is free to its members and \$10 for non-members, space available

When: Wednesday, June 6 at 1:00pm

Where: Diablo Valley College Campus

Cost: Free to Emeritus College members.

Non-members \$10.

Call: (925) 906-9105 for reservations

• “Our Town” Film Screening

See the famous American play on which the opera is based. Actor/director Paul Newman appeared as the Stage Manager in this production, aired on Masterpiece Theatre in 2003.

When: Sunday, July 29 at 2:00pm

Where: San Ramon Library,

100 Montgomery Street, San Ramon

Cost: Free ■



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Roberta Emerson
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