



Photo: Natalie Lane for Festival Opera

Baritone Scott Bearden returns to Festival Opera as Count di Luna in *Il Trovatore* (shown here as Renato in *Un Ballo in Maschera*, 2005).

Verdi's Masterpiece of Melodrama

Despite a melodramatic story worthy of the most imaginative soap opera, Giuseppe Verdi's *Il Trovatore* has endured in the opera repertory for more than 150 years. Listed continuously among the most often-staged operas, *Il Trovatore*'s rich and melodious score

has made it beloved by 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.

Thoroughly Dramatic

Il Trovatore (The Troubadour) is an intense tale of political and family vengeance. The classic love triangle is only the catalyst in a multi-faceted story line that stretches from mistaken identity, kidnapping and burning at the stake, to imprisonment, poisoning and execution. Set in fifteenth 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 ago. Jealousy sparked by Leonora's love, together with Azucena's machinations, result in the final tragic conflict that ends the opera.

"Caruso once quipped that all one needed for a good performance were the four greatest singers in the world."

Il Trovatore made its January 1853 debut in Rome during an exceptionally creative and prolific period of Verdi's life. Already a critically acclaimed composer at 40, Verdi had launched *Rigoletto* only two years earlier, and was simultaneously compos-

ing *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. Unlike the other two, which have linear story lines, *Il Trovatore*'s action is triggered by an event unseen by the audience and follows more than one character, with Verdi's stunning music providing a powerful connection.

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Opera America: The Bigger Picture

Festival Opera continues to build on its foundation of artistic excellence. Having talented singers, directors, and musicians on stage is what thrills audiences every season, but another important building block can't be seen or heard. Nonetheless, it represents a major step forward for the company: membership in the opera world's premiere professional organization, Opera America.

The company is now entering its third year as a full member. Of the many local companies in the Bay Area, San Francisco Opera is the only other full member of Opera America. Being a member allows Festival Opera to not just view, but be a part of the larger picture of opera in America.

A Premiere Organization

Opera America is the national service organization for the entire opera community. With more than 350 institutional members, its mission is to support the creation, presentation, and enjoyment of opera. One key objective is to foster visibility for what Opera America president Marc Scorca

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From the Chair

This year, my first as chair, is already well underway. At the start of the year, we welcomed three new members to the board of directors: James Bell, president of Bell Investment Advisors, Frank Vega, president and publisher of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and Dr. Theodore Weis, founder of Festival Opera, who returns to the board after some years absence. All three bring significant talent and experience to the table and we look forward to their contributions to the organization.

We have plans for an exciting 2008 season at Festival Opera. In July, we will present a new production of Verdi's thrilling drama *Il Trovatore*, followed by Benjamin Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, based on the Shakespeare play. The production will be staged by Festival Opera's artistic director Michael Morgan, whose

creative stage direction for *Don Giovanni* two years ago was highly praised.

Festival Opera is also looking beyond the current season. Our board retreat in March focused on strategic planning and how to position the company for the future. The board has taken a cautious approach to the 2008 year, knowing that we face an uncertain economy, and we will be working hard to control costs. Above all, we want to sustain the high quality and professionalism you expect from Festival Opera.

It will be a challenging year, but I am confident that it will be a good one. With the support of Festival Opera's friends and the arts community, we will continue our history of artistic success.

— David Kingsbury ■

Opera America: The Bigger Picture ...continued from page 1

once described as “the ideal multimedia art form in a multimedia world.” Bringing opera to the eyes and ears of more people is part of the power of Opera America.

Members range from small regional companies to the flagship, Metropolitan Opera, which dwarfs all other American companies. Festival Opera was an “affiliate member” for several years before being approved for full membership, and is currently listed in Category 4 with other companies whose revenues fall under one million dollars.

Benefits of Membership

Companies such as Festival Opera can benefit enormously from professional affiliation. Based in New York, Opera America provides resources for expert advice and counsel on a range of operational and production issues. The annual Opera America Field Report provides an excellent summary of quantitative metrics for more than 100 participating companies across the continent.

There are member-based forums for every facet of opera management, administration, marketing and production, making the exchange of ideas and solutions easy and immediate. Companies can benefit from the opportunity to connect with others regarding co-productions or production rentals. With the rising cost of opera, such efficiencies can be mutually beneficial.

Opera America offers an annual conference to inspire and stimulate new thinking in the world of opera, at all levels from production to board leadership. This year the conference will be part of an even larger arts community, taking place during the national Performing Arts Conference in Denver, June 10-14. Several Festival Opera board members maintain individual memberships in the organization and have attended the conference as well.

Part of the Whole

Membership in Opera America provides important access to the larger opera community. Through the Field Report and other research, Opera America can provide a window into how Festival Opera compares with similar-sized companies. It can also help local companies help each other. A recent initiative brought together many of the more than 40 opera companies in Northern California. The group hopes to cooperatively address a broad range of issues from online publicity to set storage.

Festival Opera is an important part of a vibrant and enthusiastic local opera community. There are more opera companies in the San Francisco Bay Area than anywhere else in the country outside the greater New York area. But producing opera is challenging for every company regardless of size or location. With membership in Opera America, Festival Opera can look to a much broader peer group to learn, grow, and continue to build for the future. ■



OPERA AMERICA

Verdi's Masterpiece of Melodrama ...continued from page 1

The creation of the opera itself wasn't without its own melodrama. 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.

A True Verdi Cast

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. The great tenor Enrico Caruso once quipped that all one needed for a good performance were the four greatest singers in the world.

Festival Opera is excited to present four very exceptional singers in this new production which will be designed and directed by Giulio Cesare Perrone and conducted by the company's artistic and music director, Michael Morgan.

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 last month. 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. Festival Opera audiences were fortunate to hear a preview of that winning performance. At the finals, Bearden sang "Eri Tu" from Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera*. The emotional aria at the heart of Act II is sung by Renato, a role Bearden performed for Festival Opera in 2005.

Soprano Hope Briggs, who will sing Leonora, recently appeared in concert with the Oakland East Bay Symphony. The highlight of that program was her performance of "Tacea la notte placida" from *Il Trovatore*, described by Joshua Kosman in the *San Francisco Chronicle* as "voluptuous and pure-voiced" and delivered with "intensity and emotional fluency." The role of Leonora marks her return to Festival Opera after her debut as Amelia in *Un Ballo*.

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. When Houston appears in the gypsy camp this year, audiences will have

an opportunity to see her in an entirely different character. Verdi originally saw Azucena as the lead character in the opera and considered titling the work "La Zingara" (the gypsy). Although *Il Trovatore* developed differently, the role of Azucena remains central to the plot and will be a wonderful opportunity to hear Houston's dramatic mezzo-soprano.

Tenor Noah Stewart rounds out the exciting cast as Manrico. While new to Festival Opera audiences, he was recently heard as T. Morris Chester in the world premiere of Phillip Glass' *Appomattox* at San Francisco Opera. A graduate of Julliard, Stewart joined the San Francisco Opera Merola program in 2006 and became an Adler Fellow the following year.

Artistic Heights

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 skills 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. ■

It's Showtime...
and it's opera!

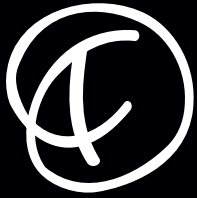
Don't miss Festival Opera's largest fundraising event of the year, set for mid-May. This fabulous gala evening celebrates the company's 18th season with dinner, entertainment and dancing, as well as live and silent auctions. Join the fun on Saturday, May 17, 2008 at the Round Hill Country Club in Alamo starting at 6:30 p.m.

The event committee is already hard at work gathering a number of unusual and exciting auction items, including fine wine, vacation destinations, art, and dining.

A successful event will support the coming season and help Festival Opera continue to bring exceptional opera to the East Bay. For reservations or information, call (925) 944-9610, during office hours. ■



From top to bottom:
soprano Hope Briggs,
mezzo-soprano Patrice
Houston, tenor Noah
Stewart.



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