

Photo: Frederic Boulay for Festival Opera



The Turandot sets, built in cooperation with Opera Birmingham, were commended by critics as “dazzling” this January.

Turandot: Transformed by Love

Few operas in the popular repertory are burdened with as historic a reputation or as great a sense of expectation as Puccini’s *Turandot*.

The composer’s final, unfinished work, *Turandot* is often portrayed as the grandest of grand operas, presented with more drama and extravagance than the triumphal march of Verdi’s magnificent opera, *Aida*. At its core, however, the story of *Turandot* is centered between a few individuals caught in an intimate, emotional challenge.

Turandot, a Chinese princess destined to wed but equally determined to remain free, confronts each royal suitor with three riddles. If they fail to answer correctly, they are beheaded. Arriving at the palace, Prince Calaf is spellbound by the imperious princess and undeterred by her challenge. Believing she can be won over by his love, he presents himself as a mysterious suitor and accurately answers her riddles. Turandot is enraged by his success, so he offers to release her from her promise, but

only if she can determine his name. Having seen Calaf speaking earlier with an old man, who turns out to be his long-lost father, and a young slave girl, Liu, the princess has them tortured to obtain his name. When Liu, who adores Calaf, forfeits her life rather than betray him, Turandot finally understands the depth and power of love and can thus be transformed by Calaf’s kiss as the opera ends.

A Final Masterpiece

Puccini spent the last five years of his life working on *Turandot*. He was fascinated by the story of the icy princess Turandot, so different from the more subservient female characters

“Some critics in the audience that night believed Puccini intended the opera to have a tragic ending!”

of his other operas. Turandot’s fairy tale transformation through the power of love and devotion would evoke what was arguably Puccini’s greatest work, and was called by some the last of the grand Italian opera tradition.

Puccini died in 1924 just as a new era of classical music was emerging and modern opera moved further from its traditional structure. The tonality of his *Turandot* reflects his intent to present a more modern sound despite retaining

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Money, Arts and the Opera: A Balancing Act

Of all the performing arts, opera has the reputation for being the most expensive, so it’s hardly surprising that concerns about money are a constant refrain at opera companies everywhere. For regional companies such as Festival Opera, finding a clear path between artistic aspirations and monetary reality can be a seemingly impossible balancing act. The choices are never easy. And today, the challenges faced by the arts are far greater than most companies have seen over the course of their existence.

The economic downturn has closed the curtain on many once thriving arts groups. In less than six months, Opera Pacific (Orange County, California), Baltimore Opera and Connecticut Opera have all ceased operations. Despite its recent merger with the local symphony to cut costs, Chattanooga Opera announced it would go dark this season. Even the mighty Metropolitan Opera reduced the number of new productions they will stage in the coming year. While no opera companies in

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From the Chair: Counting Our Blessings

Loss is never something that we choose to experience; it usually feels as if loss chooses us. Loss is on my mind now as it seems to be a universal human experience that began in the fall of 2007, stamped through 2008, and continues galloping in 2009. From loss of investment value in stocks and real estate, to loss of employment or loss of confidence, no one has been untouched – even Bill Gates has reportedly been affected. This shared phenomenon has created a remarkably strong sense of unity.

The experience of loss can be valuable if we allow ourselves to use it as an opportunity for growth, to turn inward and discover what we really care about. Once we feel loss and grieve it, we can then make a choice to count our blessings. What are you grateful for? I have heard many people speak recently of their love for their

spouse, their children, their home, their friends and community, and yes, the performing arts.

Difficult times evoke our very real desire to be transported and transformed. The experience of opera can satisfy this need and is what Festival Opera always strives to give its audiences. In good times and hard times, we seek to celebrate the vast and beautiful reaches of our human experience.

I hope as you count your blessings, Festival Opera is among them and that you will find ways to support our efforts. Now more than ever, we need to celebrate the good in our community, and to experience the transformation only opera can produce. I look forward to hearing from you and seeing you at our performances this summer.

— Jim Bell ■

New Board Members

Festival Opera welcomed six new members to its board of directors this year. The new year also opened the term of new association chair, **Jim Bell**, president of Bell Investment Advisors, Oakland. A long-time supporter of arts in the East Bay, Bell joined the Festival Opera board in 2008 and has served on the development and finance committees.

New to the board are **William Barlow, Jr.** of Barlow and Hughan CPAs, San Francisco; **Mark Cederborg** of Cederborg and Bret LLP in Walnut Creek; **Mary Beth Kelly**, Operational Excellence Coordinator for Chevron, San Ramon; **Donald Morris, Jr.** of Sitzmann, Morris, and Lavis, Oakland; **Erica Simpson**, Director of Promotions and Events for the *San Francisco Chronicle*; and **Laurie Snyder**, manager at UCSF PainCARE in San Francisco.

“We’re very pleased to have these distinguished individuals joining the board. Each brings skills that can benefit Festival Opera, as well as an enthusiasm for enhancing performing arts in the East Bay,” said outgoing chair David Kingsbury, who remains on the board as immediate past chair. “We believe the new energy on the board, as well as our success in meeting the \$25,000 challenge grant from the Dean and Margaret Leshner Foundation late last year, are positive signs of the company’s ability to successfully negotiate the challenges that we, and all arts organizations, face in these times.” ■



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Get to Know Our Stars!

Although many of the talented artists we’ll feature this summer live locally, some artists join our cast from considerably further away. As a result, Festival Opera is always in need of artist housing. 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 better allocate its budget rather than spending it on rent or hotel costs. If you can help, please call Helen Sheaff as soon as possible at 925-944-9610 to make arrangements. Thank you! ■

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a classic structure of ensembles and arias, including *Nessun Dorma*, one of the most famous opera arias of all time. *Turandot* also remains true to the “verismo” style, which emphasizes dramatic interpretations of real life. It was important to Puccini to incorporate a strong sense of reality in his operas. For example, *Tosca* was aligned with authentic locations and historic dates of the Napoleonic period. Before writing *Turandot*, Puccini listened to Chinese instruments and music, incorporating some of their sounds into his work. In *Turandot*, as with his other tragedies, he interspersed some lighter comic moments with palace ministers, Ping, Pang and Pong.

Puccini was already ill when he began the opera and predicted that he would die before it was complete. When he died in November of complications from throat cancer, an outline and most of the score was written, but the climax of the opera – the transformation of Turandot – was incomplete. 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.

At the opera’s debut on April 25, 1926, to honor Puccini and mourn his passing, Toscanini stopped the performance after Liu’s death, turned to the audience and said, “il maestro e morto” (here the maestro died). Unfortunately, without the final scene that showed the transformation of Turandot through Calaf’s love, some critics in the audience that night believed Puccini intended the opera to have a tragic ending!

Universally Magnificent

An opera famous for its extravagant productions can be intimidating for regional companies, but artistic and music director Michael Morgan has long believed Festival Opera, with its high artistic quality and professionalism, could stage a compelling production of *Turandot*. This summer audiences will have the opportunity to find out. Already the stage is being set. With designs by Peter Crompton, the sets were built in coop-

eration with Opera Birmingham in Alabama and present a spectacular red and gold palace well suited to the princess Turandot. A review of Opera Birmingham’s opening night particularly noted the sets’ “striking visuals,” calling them both dazzling and imposing.

But the setting is only the most visual element of the multimedia experience of opera. Above all, it is the emotion of the human voice that involves the audience in the drama. Returning as Turandot will be soprano Othalie Graham who made a compelling company debut in 2007 singing the title role of *Tosca*. Tenor Christopher Jackson, making his debut as Prince Calaf, has appeared in a variety of roles for New York City Opera, and last fall sang Don Jose (*Carmen*) for Anchorage Opera. Also making her company debut, as Liu, will be Los Angeles soprano Rebecca Sjöwall, who impressed Bay Area audiences last season as Micaëla (*Carmen*) for West Bay Opera. David Cox returns to direct, following his previous stagings of *Rigoletto* in 2004 and *Un Ballo in Maschera* in 2005.

For nearly 20 years, Festival Opera has enchanted audiences with creative and powerful interpretations of both classic and contemporary operas. This summer will be no different. Puccini’s sweeping music, a stellar cast, and spectacular sets will have as transformative an effect on audiences as the power of Calaf’s love on his imperious princess. ■

A Golden Mirage

All that glitters is NOT gold. Although audiences will be dazzled by the opulent gold carvings on *Turandot*’s elaborate palace when the curtain rises this summer, real gold leaf is well beyond the reach of the company’s limited budget!

Instead, the intricate details on the golden panels are sparkling paint on styrofoam. The skilled scenic artists and carpenters took nearly two months to shape and carve the traditional dragons and other classical Chinese shapes using basic materials such as plywood, styrofoam and expandafoam. The forms were then spray painted and carefully affixed to each panel. To the audience the golden mirage will appear no less than the real thing, especially as the opening notes of Puccini’s grandest opera sets the stage for a fairytale experience. ■



Photo: Frederic Boulay for Festival Opera

A decorative element for Turandot’s palace is shaped with foam before being painted to a bright golden sheen.

Money, Arts and the Opera: A Balancing Act *...continued from page 1*

the San Francisco Bay Area have announced their demise, every company, large and small, is struggling to find the right balance between budgeting and artistry.

The Joy of Music

Regardless of the challenges, music and the arts continue to be essential, emphasized artistic and musical director Michael Morgan at Festival Opera's annual meeting in December. And perhaps more than ever in troubled times.

Music provides a medium for the expression of human emotion, for joy and sadness. The drive to create and experience art is a natural one. As Morgan once told a student only half in jest, you don't get into music for the money – many great composers and artists were poor – it's the passion. And it's that passion that similarly drives companies like Festival Opera to continue to present their finest work.

In fact, as Morgan went on to say, creativity can be fostered by adversity. "We've actually done some of our very best work when we didn't have the budget we'd hoped for," Morgan said, "It forces you to think harder about what can be done and how to make it happen." The results can indeed be impressive but the process becomes that much more challenging.

The Value of the Arts

The contribution of the arts to local communities is significant. On a tangible level, arts companies employ a variety of workers, invite visitors, and generate revenues at nearby res-

*"Music washes away
from the soul the
dust of everyday life"*
—Berthold Auerbach

taurants and businesses. The intangible benefits can be even greater. Experiencing opera, ballet, symphony, or theater can light a spark in the imagination and creativity of young people. They are not only the audiences of tomorrow, but the leaders and inventors of our future. *San Francisco Chronicle* writer James Canales recently cited the fact that 93 percent of parents believe the arts are essential to a well-rounded education. He also referenced economist Richard

Florida's statement that many of the new jobs needed in the coming decade will require the kind of creative skills best developed by experiencing the arts.

The capacity to enchant and entertain audiences comes at a price, yet over the last few

decades in the US, the arts have received little public support. Responsibility has been shifted to performing arts groups to provide experiences that benefit both young people and the community at large. Companies are largely dependent on the generosity of individual donors and are now at risk as supporters across the country suffer from the economic downturn.

Balance and Beyond

Arts companies must find the balance between artistic and budgetary considerations. While most are unwilling to compromise artistic values, opportunities to share costs through co-productions, as Festival Opera has done in recent years, is one way to help bridge the gap. In addition to sharing construction costs with Opera Birmingham, choosing to build sets locally for *Turandot*, Festival Opera was able to keep some freelance carpenters and craftspeople employed between other jobs. But cuts and sacrifices must be continually weighed.

While there is shared joy in music and the arts, there is also shared responsibility for preserving it. Companies such as Festival Opera are indebted to the support of individuals, companies and foundations who appreciate what opera brings to its audiences. Those who understand the value of the arts – arts companies and individuals alike – must do everything they can to keep the arts alive. From lobbying government to keep the arts a priority and making donations, to simply buying tickets and bringing friends, everyone can do something to help keep the arts in balance. ■

What Can You Do?

Everyone has the power to help sustain companies like Festival Opera. **ATTEND** events and performances—and bring friends: introduce them to a magical experience. **VOLUNTEER:** With minimal staff, there's always something that needs to be done—your skills may be just what's needed. **DONATE:** Gifts of cash or stock in any amount are always welcome. Now is a great time to join at the Member level with \$100 or more. Members get to choose their seats for the season before anyone else. You can also help by securing matching gifts from your company, soliciting auction items for fundraisers, or negotiating pro-bono printing or other resources for the company. And don't underestimate the power of your support – Festival Opera wouldn't be here without you! ■

Alumni Notes: Watch Their Stars Rise!

Regional opera companies can play a direct role in fostering talented artists by providing early opportunities to sing key roles in smaller venues. Over the past 20 years, Festival Opera has watched with pleasure the career growth of many exceptional singers who have graced the company's stage in past seasons. Following are exciting updates on some of the artists Festival Opera audiences have been privileged to hear:



Brandon Jovanovich. *Alumni Notes* has often featured tenor Brandon Jovanovich since his last appearance with Festival Opera as Sam in *Susannah* during the 2002 season. His career path has soared as he made his debut at La Scala, was featured in *Opera News*, and won the prestigious Richard Tucker Award in 2007. Last fall he made his debut as Don Jose in *Carmen* with Washington National Opera and in January 2010 will reprise the role opposite Olga Borodina's *Carmen* in his debut with the Metropolitan Opera. In addition to appearances at LA Opera, Glyndebourne, and Lyric Opera of Chicago this year, local fans will be pleased to hear Jovanovich as Luigi (*Il Tabarro*) in San Francisco Opera's production of Puccini's *Il Trittico* this September.



Ani Maldjian. In her company debut with Festival Opera last season, soprano Ani Maldjian sang a splendid Tytania in Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Later in the year, she

made her mainstage debut with Atlanta Opera in Rossini's *La Cenerentola*. As the stepsister Clorinda, opposite mezzo-soprano Jennifer Larmore in the title role, Maldjian won notice in *Opera News* and with local critics. She returned to Long Beach Opera early this year in the title role of *The Cunning Little Vixen* and appears this month for the first time with Opera Santa Barbara as Valencienne in *The Merry Widow*.



Brian Frutiger. Since he last appeared with Festival Opera in the role of Don Ottavio in *Don Giovanni* during the 2006 season, tenor Brian Frutiger has appeared in roles across the country. He made his mainstage debut with San Francisco Opera the following year as Le Remendado in *Carmen* and won acclaim as Abolitionist Tappan in Anthony Davis' opera *Amistad* with the Spoleto Festival USA in 2008. Frutiger made his Metropolitan Opera debut as Poisson in *Adriana Lecouvreur* this past month and will return there this coming fall as part of the Ensemble in a new production of Shostakovich's *The Nose*.



Noah Stewart. As a recent San Francisco Adler Fellow, tenor Noah Stewart earned high praise in his Festival Opera debut as Manrico in *Il Trovatore* last season. He went on later in the summer to win first place in the Mario Lanza Competition for tenors in New York. This coming month Stewart sings his first Cavaradossi (*Tosca*) with Augusta Opera, before preparing for his debut with Michigan Opera Theater as Ismaele in *Nabucco*. His 2009 Fall season also brings an appearance in Mozart's *Requiem* at Carnegie Hall under the baton of John Rutter and the role of Narraboth in *Salome* with Arizona Opera. ■

Sponsorships

Do you work for or with a company or business that could use some added visibility in the East Bay? Festival Opera has several sponsorships available for season performances and events including the popular Opera in the Park concert. Depending on the level of support, benefits to the sponsor include prominent listing at the performance venue and/or on advertising and marketing materials, as well as invitations to exclusive events and performances. If you are interested in a sponsorship, or know someone who might be interested, please contact executive director Helen Sheaff at 925-944-9610 for more information. ■





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