



Hope Briggs returns to Festival Opera next July in Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera*

## 2005: A Season of Hope and Optimism

Next year, Festival Opera's curtain will rise on a season filled again with passionate singing and stirring music. In July, the company will present Giuseppe Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera* (*The Masked Ball*) an involving tragedy about a love triangle doomed by fate and political mayhem. This classic Italian opera will be followed in August by the company's second American opera production, Leonard Bernstein's comic satire *Candide*, based on the original novel by Voltaire.

*Un Ballo in Maschera* was chosen specifically by Festival Opera artistic and music director Michael Morgan to showcase the talents of rising star soprano Hope Briggs. She returns to Festival Opera's stage, following her debut with the company a year ago as the High Priestess in *Aida*. Briggs, who spent the large part of her childhood in the Bay Area, has performed locally in many roles and won many awards. She made her acclaimed debut with San Francisco Opera as the Duchess of Parma in their June 2004 production

of Busoni's *Doktor Faust*, where her singing was described as "rich and lustrous." As Morgan said, "This is a role that Hope has been eager to sing and which I believe to be ideal for her impressive vocal skills and regal stage presence. We're very pleased to be able to present her as Amelia this coming year." Directed by David Cox with sets by Peter Crompton, plans for a magnificent production of this traditional opera classic are already underway.

Following Festival Opera's successful production of Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah* two years ago, the company's management has sought the right opportunity to present another well known American opera. The opera *Candide*, arguably one of Bernstein's most popular works, offers a rich combination of musical styles married to the improbable adventures of the eternal optimist *Candide*.

Opening in August 2005, this production will feature two stars who made their debut with Festival Opera last season. Tenor Isaac Hurtado, who delivered an energetic and lovesick young Roméo, and soprano Marnie Breckenridge, who lit our

...continued on page 3

## Perspective: From the Pit

### An interview with concertmaster Barbara Riccardi

For the past dozen years, a number of singers have come and gone on the Festival Opera stage. Through it all, one consistent note has remained, that of violinist Barbara Riccardi, who serves as Festival Opera's concertmaster. Riccardi joined Festival Opera early in its history, having been recruited to lead the orchestra by James Sullivan, the company's founding artistic director. Since then, she has played in virtually every performance.

Riccardi moved here from New York in the early 1970's to join the San Francisco Symphony. At the time, the symphony performed in the opera house, so she could play in both companies. When Davies Symphony Hall opened and season dates overlapped, Riccardi chose to stay with the opera and seek more chamber music jobs. Even though opera requires twice the time symphony does, as she says, "[musicians] love to play opera. It's not just that it's more challenging, it's more interesting, more creative. It's unpredictable—that's the beauty of working with the voice as an instrument."

Over the years, Riccardi has seen Festival Opera grow and mature. She took a moment from her busy schedule to speak with us about her view from the orchestra pit.

...continued on page 2

**Festival Opera  
Board of Directors**

Susie Hanson  
Chair  
Grace Bacon  
Dick Brundage  
Ann Carter  
Karin Eames  
Roberta Emerson  
David Kingsbury  
Barbara LaGrandeur  
Barbara Sellers  
Terri Stuart  
James Toland

Helen Sheaff  
Executive Director  
Michael Morgan  
Music/Artistic  
Director

**Perspective: From the Pit** ...continued from page 1

**FO:** How has Festival Opera changed in your years with the company?

**BR:** *It's become so professional. You would expect the lead singers to get better as the company grows, but now the chorus and comprimarios are very good too. We have a consistent orchestra with good musicians. With such long breaks between seasons, it matters a lot that the group remains the same from year to year—we don't have to relearn how to play together. Our orchestra manager values the players' skills and the company doesn't treat us like a "pickup band."*

**FO:** What role does the concertmaster play?

**BR:** *Officially, my role is to serve as a conduit between the musicians and the conductor. I'm also responsible for translating specifics about how the music should be played, and for leading on entrances. But I really don't try to be a "boss"—I don't see that as helpful. Mostly I just try to set the tone musically and socially. I try to support the orchestra and help them become a true accompanist for the opera.*

**FO:** Is opera more challenging to play?

**BR:** *It's different. Opera isn't just about the orchestra. It's more challenging artistically, because you have to really listen and follow the conductor for it all to come together. It's more like a large chamber music experience. There are the vocal nuances; you have to support, but not fall behind, the singers. You have to be flexible, able to adjust on the fly. Once, during my early years in the San Francisco*



Maestro Michael Morgan and members of the Festival Opera orchestra

*pit, we performed a particularly difficult opera and I got lost, literally, for pages! Even now, it can sometimes be a scramble to keep up when things on stage shift unexpectedly, as they often do—the human voice can be unpredictable. It's a special technique that can take years to learn.*

**FO:** Does being a smaller, regional company add to the complexity?

**BR:** *The biggest challenge for Festival Opera's orchestra is completely out of our control*

*—it has to do with the size and design of the pit. To hold the 38–40 musicians needed for opera, the pit has no extra room for risers. In order for the singers to see the conductor, he has to sit much higher than the musician's line of sight. We have to look up—it can feel like being in a ditch. Michael [Morgan] really helps because he understands the problem and can help us make the connection with the stage, but it's awkward.*

**FO:** Festival Opera is professional, but hardly the highest paying job for a violinist. You must enjoy it to keep coming back.

**BR:** *Absolutely! I look forward to the season. Every year it's been different, more challenging overall and more fun. I like feeling that I'm part of a good thing with good*

*people. I've had a great time working with my associate concertmaster, Kathleen Dillon. She's a wonderful, interesting person with an unusually diverse background. One day, I found her meticulously marking in all the vocal cues in Italian! It turned out that she knew the part because she'd been a vocal coach before playing in orchestras. And now she's going back to school to study in a medical field. You just don't get to meet people like that in San Francisco. Pit musicians there are primarily focused on their music. People in Festival Opera's pit are very talented, but they have these other, fascinating interests and experiences.*

**FO:** Just being in the pit can be a fascinating experience—in past years we've had a plate roll into the pit (*La Tragédie de Carmen*) and a musician faint during a performance (*Aida*). But the orchestra plays on!

**BR:** *We do... but we laugh too. My favorite memory was during Pagliacci. I'm supposed to play this solo where he tunes his instrument. There are written notes, but a mentor of mine had told me he actually tunes his violin. I thought that was a neat idea, so I decided to do it. But I must have accidentally tuned the wrong string and the strangest sounds came out. I don't know what the audience thought, but Michael almost fell off his stool he was laughing so hard. Needless to say, I didn't make that mistake again! You have to be prepared for anything. You're part of a bigger picture than just the orchestra—that's what makes playing opera so satisfying and enjoyable.*

## Rotunda Revisited

Festival Opera's annual fund raising event, held at the Oakland Rotunda on October 23, was truly a very special evening. Despite a rainy night, everyone greatly enjoyed the lively opera and musical theater entertainment staged by Harvey Berman and sumptuous food prepared by Patrick David's of Danville. Auction items, from delectable food baskets to a ride in a vintage 1947 KZ-VII airplane, raised welcome proceeds in support of Festival Opera's upcoming season.

The elegant Rotunda was so popular, a planning committee is already exploring ideas for next year's event there. If you're interested in being part of the committee, please call us at (925) 944-9610. And be sure to watch for the date of our next spectacular event! ■

### Festival Opera 2005 Season

***Un Ballo in Maschera***  
by Giuseppe Verdi  
Opening July 9, 2005

***Candide***  
by Leonard Bernstein  
Opening August 13, 2005

## Hope and Optimism ...continued from page 1

stage as Rigoletto's ill-fated daughter Gilda. Accomplished baritone David Cox, director of 2004's *Rigoletto* and next season's *Un Ballo*, will make his Festival Opera singing debut as *Candide's* irrepressible tutor, Pangloss. This new production of *Candide* will be directed by Michael Scarola with set designs by Matthew Antaky. Both new to Festival Opera, Scarola and Antaky are quickly earning reputations as specialists in the visual presentation of Bernstein's quintessential American works.

*Un Ballo in Maschera* and *Candide*, widely diverse in musical style and presentation, offer not completely unrelated stories of political shenanigans, personal manipulation, and high passion. Combined with the vocal excitement of an exceptional cast, Festival Opera is pleased to be able to offer a traditional operatic tragedy and a light comic satire with just the right level of Hope and optimism needed as the company enters its fourteenth season. ■



Isaac Hurtado in the title role of Roméo et Juliette



Marnie Breckenridge as Gilda in Rigoletto

## More Than Just the Singers

Although opera provides such rich visuals on stage, the single most expensive element in an opera production—though arguably one of the most valuable—is one you don't see. For Festival Opera, the orchestra represents 22 percent of the total cost of a production. What would the heartrending close of *La Traviata* be without soaring violins, or *Aida's* triumphal march without crisp trumpets? And it is not just the music itself, a skilled orchestra is critical to an opera's success. Regardless of a singer's talent, if the orchestra fails to follow the conductor, play the right notes on time or with the right volume, the production is greatly compromised.

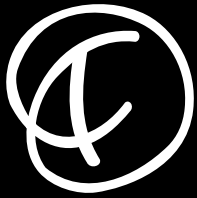
The cost of producing opera continues to rise across the country and Festival Opera is not alone in looking for creative ways to address cost challenges. Some expenses are quite concrete however, as we consider professional level singers and orchestra to be minimum requirements.

Emerging technology is also driving cost increases. Supertitle projection, now considered a

cornerstone in opera production, is undergoing a paradigm shift. Since their inception in the early 1980's, supertitles have been projected on 35mm slides. Over the past few years however, most major houses have moved to more flexible computer-generated supertitles. San Francisco Opera, from whom Festival Opera usually borrows slides, will soon eliminate its 35mm slide library. Festival Opera is seeking a sponsor to underwrite the high-lumens projector needed for computer graphics, as this is a cost that will be unavoidable. Supertitles, while a significantly smaller percentage of the total cost, have become nearly as essential to an opera production as professional singers or an expert orchestra.

Opera is arguably the richest art form in terms of how the audience experiences the wealth of visual and aural elements involved. But it is also, unsurprisingly, the "richest" in terms of cost! ■

See us on the Web at  
[www.festivalopera.com](http://www.festivalopera.com)



# FESTIVAL OPERA

675 Ygnacio Valley Rd.  
Suite B-215  
Walnut Creek, CA 94596  
(925) 944-9610  
info@festivalopera.com  
www.festivalopera.com

*Festival Voice*

© 2004 The Festival Opera  
Association, Inc.  
All rights reserved.

NON PROFIT  
ORGANIZATION  
U.S. POSTAGE  
**PAID**  
WALNUT CREEK, CA  
PERMIT NO. 79

*The Festival Opera Guild*  
**HOLIDAY DINNER**  
AT THE PARK  
*Wednesday, December 15, 2004*

*The Lafayette Park Hotel & Spa*  
*3287 Mt. Diablo Boulevard*  
*Lafayette, California*

*No-host bar 6:30 p.m.*  
*Dinner 7:30 p.m.*

*\$85 per person*  
*For reservations, call*  
*(925) 944-9610*

*Proceeds benefit Festival Opera*

*Special Guest:*  
*Michael Morgan*  
*Festival Opera Artistic/Music Director*

**Featuring:**

*Baritone*  
*Ricardo Herrera*  
*2004 Adler Fellow*

*Mezzo- Soprano*  
*Jessica Deardorff*

*Tenor*  
*J. Raymond Meyers*

*Soprano*  
*Krista Wigle*

*Roberta Emerson*  
*Editor*