

Changes in store for Opera San José as season begins

By Crystal Chow

cchow@community-newspapers.com

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(Photo by Jacqueline Ramseyer/Bay Area News Group/August 22, 2014) Opera San Jose's Music...

For the first time in three decades, two stalwarts of the local arts scene will be missing in the fall. Opera San José's 31st season will soon unfold minus Irene Dalis, its indomitable founder and general director, and David Rohrbaugh, who came in with Dalis as the company's music director. Both retired in June.

Their successors are Larry Hancock, who was Dalis' second in command from Day One, and Joseph Marcheso, staff conductor at San Francisco Opera who has conducted 11 productions at OSJ since 2007. In the position of artistic adviser to Hancock will be acclaimed company alumna Khori Dastoor.

The trio's first production will be Verdi's "Rigoletto," running Sept. 6-21 at the California Theatre, 345 S. First St., San Jose.

The changing of the guard has resulted in big adjustments at the country's only resident opera company. Perhaps most significant, no longer will there be alternating casts. Last season, two casts rotated between eight performances given for all four operas. There are seven resident artists this season, only one of whom, mezzo soprano Lisa Chavez, is a returnee.

For 2014-15 there are still four operas--following "Rigoletto" in order will be "The Italian Girl in Algiers," "Where Angels Fear to Tread" and "The Magic Flute." However, just one cast will be used for each of the six performances, although some of the more taxing roles will have a second singer. "Rigoletto," for instance, will

feature both Matthew Hanscom and Evan Brummel in the title role; Brummel and Kiril Havezov will share the part of Monterone.

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Dalis had established the company in 1984 to train and showcase emerging singers, a mission that is still being kept--to a degree. Says Marcheso, "Opera San José began as a workshop. It kept growing and adding more parts, but it hasn't had a chance to curate the parts and make them more cohesive. We still have elements of education; all the [major parts] will be debut roles. But some of the singers already have experience."

"The change that's happening is subtle yet clear," he adds. "We're going from an educational institution to an artistic one."

Hancock and Marcheso are also keen to expand the company's repertoire and, in the process, perhaps begin weaning local audiences off safe programs that lean on predictable classics. "Where Angels Fear to Tread," based on the E.M. Forster novel about social and national differences, will be a world premiere.

Marcheso, who admits to having had an aversion to Wagnerian operas in his youth ("I came from an Italian family"), is quite comfortable with works of relatively late parentage. Among his favorite titles are "Nixon in China," which premiered in 1987. In San Francisco he worked on that production as well as on "Moby-Dick," which made its debut in 2010 at Dallas Opera.

The music of "Angels," he says, "is very expressive, very beautiful. It's not the kind of work that usually connotes modern opera." Still, he acknowledges that a major effort must be made to encourage both subscribers and non-subscribers to come out for this first-ever event, as well as for the others that follow.

"I don't agree that [large productions] like Puccini's 'Turandot' can't be done at Opera San José," he says. "Our goal, our commitment is that each season have one work that's never been done here before."

A native New Yorker, Marcheso came to the Bay Area "on a lark" to try out for the just opened conducting program at San Francisco's Conservatory of Music. "I got in and that totally changed my life," he says. For one thing, he met Jimmy, a fellow conservatory student and his future husband, in 2005. And after graduation, he was tapped to conduct 'Lucia di Lammermoor' at Opera San José.

Now that he's music director here (a post he also held at the now-defunct Amato Opera in New York), Marcheso is already hard at work helping to define the new era

at Opera San José. "When you work in a place for seven years and have played many roles, you can't help but have many ideas when you get the chance" to do this job, he says. "It's mostly about implementation and optimizing," he adds, referring to bringing new operas to the company.

"You find that balance that's very elusive, of doing the things that people love and trying to love new things. It starts with you loving something and figuring out where you want to make your stand."

Tickets are \$51 to \$111 at operasj.org or 408-437-4450. Available 90 minutes prior to curtain at the California Theatre box office only: Seniors 65 and older 10 percent discount; students 25 and younger with current student ID \$11 (cash only).