

» **SOUND** | by Roxana Popescu



Hot Seats

The San Diego Opera promises a season of seat-treats you won't want to miss

EDWARD WILENSKY is used to people hitting him up for free tickets. But the San Diego Opera's media-relations director has never seen anything like this. Colleagues from Seattle to New York are calling to score seats for *La Bohème*, which opens the 2010 season on January 30 and brings together two of opera's biggest names: Piotr Beczala and Anja Harteros.

"I would rarely cross the street for another *Bohème*, but I'm willing to fly across country for this cast," Wilensky says they tell him. Will he indulge their requests? He hedges. With four operas this season instead of five, and the tricky task of maximizing revenues after sales took a hit last year during the recession, the company needs to fill every seat it can. "Of course we want to get the word out, but tickets this year are precious. I hope to have none left to give."

That shouldn't be too hard. This season's theme is "Desire," and the operas were picked to be crowd-pleasers. Leave the heroics for the stage, not the programming, says Ian Campbell, SDO's general director. After opening with Puccini's *La Bohème*, a wistful story of love and loss, the pace quickens with Verdi's *Nabucco*, an epic drama about Hebrew slaves and a murderous thunderbolt sent from on high. Next is Gounod's *Romeo and Juliet*. Verdi's *La Traviata* wraps up the season with Italian aplomb.

Campbell promises this: "Nobody will leave any of these operas unsatisfied." His confidence springs from two simple facts. "The singers this year are of an extremely high caliber. And true to operatic tradition, someone dies at the end of every opera."

For Campbell, the weeks before a season kicks off are often the hardest. Not in terms of stress or agitation, since the workload never really slackens between productions; it's because he gets impatient. After booking singers sometimes five years in advance, his excitement builds in that final stretch before they arrive.

Fortunately, there's the Internet, which has turned Campbell into something of a YouTube junkie. He types "utube" into his browser ("It's quicker that way," he explains) and finds exactly what he was looking for: Beczala singing a sublime aria in German, smiling beatifically and looking a bit like he's just seen God.

As does Campbell. "This is the most beautiful new tenor around," he says, adding that he only signs singers he has heard performing live. "We may never get him back. He's booked through 2015." Campbell then returns to the video as several staff members trickle into his office and watch with him.

That is, more or less, the story of this season. It's built around a roster of artists who

are as gorgeous to look at as they are to listen to, and who could be anywhere else in the world—and who will be, in coming years, as demand for them is high—but who chose San Diego.

Beczala, sandwiching his debut here between performances at London's Covent Garden and the Metropolitan Opera in New York, and Harteros, one of the commanding sopranos of her generation, who returns to San Diego before singing Wagner at La Scala, are one delectable pairing. Others include a young husband-and-wife duo singing *Romeo and Juliet*, Italian conducting sensation Renato Palumbo breathing new life into Verdi, a female director and conductor joining forces for two of the four operas, and two leading sopranos—fiery French phenomenon Sylvie Valayre, and Elizabeth Futral, widely considered to be the quintessential Mimi—taking on each of the Verdi operas.

People who are familiar with these works will be amazed by the quality of the singing, Campbell predicts, and newcomers will be drawn in by the accessible marriage of story and song.

Karen Keltner, the company's resident conductor, who will lead *La Bohème* and *Romeo and Juliet*, finds that after almost three decades in the business she's still in awe of the whole thing—how months and, in some cases, years of preparation culminate in a few frenzied hours, when the sounds from the orchestra pit and stage suddenly rise up and seize her and anyone else who happens to be in their way.

"You're thinking, 'My God, how can somebody do that?' There is nothing like being in a theater when this is happening around you," she says. "It's a visceral feeling—you can literally feel the vibrations. That's why being there and participating in the live performance is unlike anything else."

For a different sort of rush, donors can indulge in dancing, dining and cocktails at this year's opening-night gala, themed "La Belle Époque," January 30 at the U.S. Grant Hotel. With a \$1,250 benefit ticket, attendees are invited to slip back into Puccini's Paris, complete with French cuisine and mingling with cast members.

Death may be dominating the stage, but offstage it seems the San Diego Opera is poised for new life. ■

San Diego Opera productions play at downtown's Civic Theatre. More info: 619-533-7000, sdopera.com.