



FESTIVAL
OPERA

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FESTIVAL OPERA ANNOUNCES 2005 SEASON

Un Ballo in Maschera (A Masked Ball) by Giuseppe Verdi
July 9, 12, 15, and 17, 2005

Candide by Leonard Bernstein
August 13, 16, 19, and 21, 2005

Walnut Creek, CA – Festival Opera announced today that its 2005 season will include new productions of Giuseppe Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera (A Masked Ball)* in July and Leonard Bernstein's *Candide* in August. Both operas will be presented under the musical direction of Festival Opera's artistic and music director **Michael Morgan**. All performances will be held at the Dean Leshner Regional Center for the Arts in Walnut Creek.

Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera*, a compelling story of a love triangle doomed by fate and political power struggles, will feature rising soprano **Hope Briggs** who will sing her first Amelia. Appearing with her, in their company debuts, will be tenor **Mark Duffin**, as the governor, Riccardo, and baritone **Scott Bearden**, as Amelia's husband Renato. *Un Ballo in Maschera* will be directed by **David Cox**, who returns to Festival Opera after his critically acclaimed production of Verdi's *Rigoletto* last season. Sets will be designed by **Peter Crompton**. In August, the company will present its second American opera production, Bernstein's famous *Candide*, wherein the innocent Candide tests the limits of optimism in the face of misadventure. The production will unite two stars who made their company debuts last year: tenor **Isaac**

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Hurtado, as *Candide*, and soprano **Marnie Breckenridge**, as his beloved Cunegonde. Baritone **David Cox** will make his stage debut with the company as Pangloss. *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.

"The company is very pleased to be able to present two such different, yet equally challenging, works that will build artistically on the success of our 2004 season," said **Helen Sheaff**, executive director for Festival Opera. "With continued community support – including our year-end challenge grant and the recent receipt of renewed commitments from the Vodaphone and Bank of America Foundations – we have been able to strengthen our financial position as we enter this exciting season."

Un Ballo in Maschera (A Masked Ball)

Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera*, which made its debut in Rome during February 1859, is loosely based on the assassination of a Swedish king at a masked ball in 1792. In a concession to vigilant Italian censors, Verdi moved the story's setting to Boston making the king a colonial governor. The governor, Riccardo, is secretly in love with Amelia, the wife of his best friend and secretary Renato. While investigating the political activities of the fortune-teller, Ulrica, Riccardo overhears Amelia privately ask for a remedy to cure a hopeless love. After Amelia leaves, a disguised Riccardo asks Ulrica to read his palm, but scoffs at her warning that he will be killed by a friend. Amelia, following Ulrica's instructions, visits the gallows at midnight seeking a magic herb and is surprised by Riccardo. In a moment of passion they declare their love, but they are interrupted by the arrival of Renato, who warns Riccardo of a plot against him. Told to take the veiled woman back without asking her name, Renato is accosted by the conspirators and Amelia's identity is revealed. While awaiting the masked ball that evening,

Riccardo reluctantly decides he cannot compromise Amelia's life and resolves to assign Renato and his family to a distant post. Before he can do so, Renato, believing himself betrayed by both his wife and friend, joins the conspirators and kills Riccardo during the ball.

Un Ballo in Maschera was chosen specifically by artistic and music director **Michael Morgan** to showcase the talents of soprano **Hope Briggs**. This represents the most significant role Briggs has sung with the company, although she appeared as the High Priestess in *Aida* during 2003. Briggs, who spent a large part of her childhood in the Bay Area, has sung extensively throughout the US and made her acclaimed debut with San Francisco Opera in 2004 as the Duchess of Parma in *Doktor Faust*. The role of Riccardo will be tenor **Mark Duffin's** debut with Festival Opera. During 2004, Duffin was highly praised in the role of Mao for Opera Theatre of St. Louis' production of *Nixon in China*. He made his debut with San Francisco Opera in Verdi's *Don Carlos* during the 2003-2004 season, stepping into the title role on short notice. Well-known for his roles with Opera San Jose, most recently as Tonio in *I Pagliacci*, baritone **Scott Bearden** makes his debut with Festival Opera as Renato. This past November, Bearden completed a stellar turn in the title role of *Falstaff* for Mississippi Opera, a role he had previously been selected to sing under Maestro Seiji Ozawa at Tanglewood Music Festival's 60th Anniversary.

Un Ballo marks the company's second production under stage director **David Cox**. Prior to directing Festival Opera's *Rigoletto* last season, Cox directed a number of critically acclaimed productions for Opera San Jose, including *Faust* and *Eugene Onegin*. He is currently directing their production of *Carmen*. Cox has directed numerous productions for Pacific Repertory Opera, and made his directorial debut at USC with *Gianni Schicchi* in 2003. An accomplished baritone, Cox will also appear as Pangloss in Festival Opera's production of *Candide* in August.

Un Ballo in Maschera will be sung in Italian with English supertitles.

Candide

Arguably one of Bernstein's most popular works, *Candide* will be Festival Opera's second American opera production, following Floyd's *Susannah* in 2002. Based on Voltaire's novel of 1759, *Candide* is a comic fable that mocks nearly every political and philosophical teaching. The Baron of Westphalia's children, Cunegonde and Maximillian, together with Candide, his illegitimate nephew, and a servant girl, Paquette, are instructed in the Philosophy of Optimism by Dr. Pangloss, who tells them that "all is for the best in this best of all possible worlds." When Candide and Cunegonde have the temerity to fall in love, Candide is banished. Westphalia is subsequently invaded and Candide is told that Cunegonde has been killed. Candide meets up with Pangloss in Portugal where they are arrested by the Spanish Inquisition for their liberal proclamations. Candide evades punishment and, with the help of an Old Lady, is reunited with Cunegonde, who had actually been abducted and is now the mistress of two wealthy men. Candide inadvertently kills the two men and the three escape. On their way to the New World, Candide is again separated from Cunegonde, but meets up with Paquette and Maximillian. After accidentally stabbing Maximillian in an argument, Paquette and Candide set off for the fabled El Dorado. Despite the perfection of their surroundings, Candide is determined to find his true love. Once reunited, the group seeks out "the wisest man in the world." There, they are surprised to find it is the venerable Dr. Pangloss, whose new philosophy they happily adopt: settle for the life one is given and "make [your] garden grow."

Tenor **Isaac Hurtado**, who delivered an energetic and lovesick Roméo during Festival Opera's 2004 season, will take on another youthful role, singing the eternally naïve Candide. Hurtado completed his doctoral studies at Florida State University last year under the tutelage of noted American tenor Stanford Olsen, and is a former member of the Opera North (New Hampshire) Young Artists Program. Soprano **Marnie Breckenridge**, who lit our stage as

Rigoletto's ill-fated daughter Gilda, will appear as the beleaguered Cunegonde.

Breckenridge made a notable appearance with San Francisco Opera as Papagena in *The Magic Flute* during their 2003-2004 season and performed at the gala opening of the Lincoln Theater in Napa this month. She will sing her first Lucia for West Bay Opera in February. An accomplished baritone in addition to his directorial credits, **David Cox** makes his debut on Festival Opera's stage in the role of Candide's wily tutor Pangloss. He has appeared in a number of roles both here and abroad, including the title roles in *Don Pasquale*, *Falstaff* and *Rigoletto*. Both stage director **Michael Scarola** and set designer **Matthew Antaky** make their Festival Opera debuts with this new production of *Candide*.

Scarola, a member of the New York City Opera directorial staff since 1998, has also served on the directorial staff of the Metropolitan Opera. He has staged numerous operas around the world, both classic and contemporary. Antaky's unique and visually exciting work has been seen in all forms of theater throughout the US, Canada and Europe, where he has been the recipient of numerous awards. During the past few years, Scarola and Antaky have collaborated on several works by American composers, including a major production of Bernstein's *MASS* with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra in 2003.

Candide will be sung in its original English, using the 1988 Scottish version of this much revised work.

Festival Opera's artistic and music director, **Michael Morgan**, is in his fifteenth year as music director of the Oakland East Bay Symphony. After winning first prize in the Hans Swarovsky International Conductors Competition in 1980, Morgan became Assistant Conductor of the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra under Leonard Slatkin. He made his operatic debut in 1982 at the Vienna State Opera and became Assistant Conductor of the

Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1986. In addition to working with the Oakland East Bay Symphony and Festival Opera, Morgan serves as Artistic Director of the Oakland Youth Orchestra, Music Director of the Sacramento Philharmonic, makes frequent appearances as a guest conductor with orchestras throughout the United States, and is on the board of the American Symphony Orchestra League. He is very involved in schools throughout the Bay Area and nationally, and is widely regarded as an expert on the importance of arts education and minority access to the arts.

Festival Opera is the largest regional opera company in the East Bay. Founded in 1991, it is considered a showcase for young American artists and strives to make opera accessible to a diverse audience. Cast lists, artist photos, and additional information on the company and its productions can be found in the Press Room section of the Festival Opera website, at www.festivalopera.com. Tickets for the 2005 season range from \$35 to \$100 and will be available in February 2005.

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