

Sarasota Opera opens 64th season with both classics and rarities

BY PATRICIA HORWELL

Town Chronicle Correspondent

February is synonymous with the beginning of opera season on the Suncoast. And Sarasota Opera, in its 64th season, has chosen a lineup in tune with its proven formula of presenting well-known classics coupled with a rare selection, as well as a Giuseppe Verdi composition.

Known internationally as a Verdi house, under the baton of Artistic Director and Principal Conductor Victor DeRenzi — who is in his 41st season here — the company has performed every note that Verdi wrote. In fact, it is the only company in the world that can make that claim. And just as Maestro DeRenzi blends old favorites with rare productions, so he has brought back some of the audiences' favorite performers while introducing new talent to opera patrons.

The operas are performed in repertory, with a new production introduced weekly. The company is known for its Opera Lovers Weeks, which occur on the tail end of the season. During those weekends, opera aficionados can attend all four productions during a three-day period.

Singers performing for this company come from all corners of the globe, and Maestro DeRenzi auditions singers in Sarasota, New York City and Chicago. The company also runs Apprentice Artist and Studio Artist programs. All are trained singers. Apprentices take classes and perform in the choruses for all four operas, while studio artists cover principal roles, take on smaller roles and sometimes perform in the opera chorus.

What should you see?

"I think opera is like anything else," Maestro DeRenzi said. "You know people who

love to read, but not everybody who loves to read reads the same books. It's the same thing with opera, so to say your first opera has to be *Madama Butterfly* or whatever just doesn't make sense."

He suggests you get a feel of what you think would suit you and come to see it — with no preconceived expectations or limitations.

The company is known and reviewed nationally and internationally.

"I think the people who are most surprised by the quality of the arts here are people who come from bigger cities," Maestro DeRenzi said. "There is the assumption, 'Oh, I'm from Chicago' or 'I'm from New York and I have seen theater and heard orchestras before.' I find those people are actually quite surprised when they get here and realize what the quality of the arts culture is — without the aggravation of finding a parking spot in a big city. Expect much and you'll get it from the arts in Sarasota."

And you don't have to dress up if you don't want to. Pretty much anything goes.

"We want you to come to the opera," he said. "If you want to be comfortable, especially if you're driving up from the south, you don't have to put on your tuxedo or your best ball gown (but you can). Just come!"

This season features the following productions:

"Madama Butterfly"

The season will open Saturday, Feb. 18, with this heartfelt tragedy by Giacomo Puccini.



ROD MILLINGTON / COURTESY PHOTO

Sarasota Opera's 2012 production of "Madama Butterfly."

Last performed here in 2017, it's a popular one among operagoers.

"It's one of the big, great operas and it's time for us to do it again," Maestro DeRenzi said.

Soprano Raquel González will make her Sarasota debut as Cio Cio San (*Butterfly*). She recently performed the role at Washington National Opera. She has sung with Glimmerglass Opera and the Lyric Opera of Chicago, among others.

Heather Johnson, a Sarasota Opera alumna, plays Cio Cio San's faithful servant, Suzuki. Ms. Johnson has sung at major venues throughout the country, including the Metropolitan Opera, Carnegie Hall and Boston Lyric Opera, as well as locations in Germany and Italy. She appeared here as Maddalena in "Rigoletto," the title character in "La Cenerentola," Elizabeth Proctor in "The Crucible" and others.

The dastardly B.F. Pinkerton will be played by Christopher Oglesby, new to this company. He has performed in "Antony and Cleopatra" and "Dialogues des Carmelites" with San Francisco Opera.

"Don Giovanni"

Last performed here in 2011, Mozart's comedy opens Saturday, Feb. 25. David Weigel will play the title character, a licentious nobleman. He sang the role of Angelotti in "Tosca" and Nourabad in "Les Pêcheurs de perles" in Sarasota last season.

Internationally famous bass and a Sarasota favorite, Stefano de Peppo, will play Don Giovanni's complicit sidekick, Leporello. Mr. de Peppo began his career as a boy soprano in the Children's Chorus of La Scala in Milan, Italy. In Sarasota, he has been seen in "Attila," "Tosca," "Il matrimonio segreto," "La Cenerentola" and more.

Another longtime audience favorite, Young Bok Kim, returns after his 2022 role as Attila to play the role of Il Commendatore. Making her Sarasota debut in the role of Donna Anna will be Erica Petrocelli. She previously sang at LA Opera, Opernhaus Zürich and the Opera Theatre of St. Louis.

"Ernani"

This Verdi entry has not been seen in Sarasota since 1997. Rafael Davila, longtime favorite here and an internationally acclaimed tenor, will sing the title role of the outlaw bandit. He has performed leading roles with the Metropolitan Opera, Chicago Lyric Opera, Washington National Opera, Teatro San Carlo and other international companies.

The three remaining principal artists are

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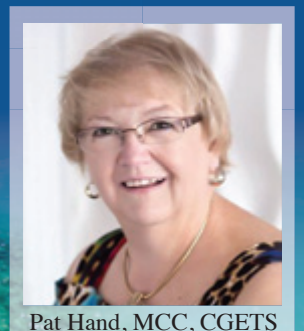
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all new to Sarasota Opera. Soprano Aviva Fortunata will play the role of Elvira, a young noblewoman. She recently performed with Pacific Opera Victoria, l'Orchestra symphonique de Québec and Dallas Opera. Don Carlo, the King of Spain, will be sung by baritone Ricardo José Rivera, who has performed with the Chicago Symphony, Houston Grand Opera and Opera de Puerto Rico. Internationally known bass Mariano Buccino will play the role of Elvira's elderly uncle and fiancée, Don Ruy Gomez de Silva.



DEB HESSER / COURTESY IMAGE

Sarasota Opera's 2005 production of "Don Giovanni."

"Thérèse"

Jules Massenet's rarely heard work about a love triangle, and set during the French Revolution, opens March 17.

Mezzo-soprano Lisa Chavez will play the title role. She has sung principal roles in several Sarasota productions and made headlines across the country as Maggie in New York City Opera's premiere of "Stonewall." Andrew Surrena, who performed here in "Les Pêcheurs de Perles," plays nobleman Armand de Clerval. Baritone Sean Anderson, another audience favorite, returns to sing the role of André Morel. He has performed here many times and sang the role of John Proctor in "The Crucible." He was last heard in "Sas Germano" in La scala di seta, and was recently Count Almaviva in "The Marriage of Figaro" with Opera Delaware.

More than just opera

Sarasota Opera offers "Understanding Opera" Talks, presented by General Director Richard Russell and Director of Education Martha Collins at 5:30 p.m. on select Wednesdays in the Jonas Kamlet Library in

the Sarasota Opera House. Admission is \$15 per talk. For more information and tickets, see www.sarasotaopera.org/opera-talks.

Other events at Sarasota Opera include concerts, tours of the opera house and special functions. For more information, see the calendar at <https://tickets.sarasotaopera.org/events>.

Sarasota Opera

- >> **When:** 7:30 p.m., with Sunday matinees at 1:30 p.m.
- "Madama Butterfly" – Feb. 18-March 24
- "Don Giovanni" – Feb. 25-March 25
- "Ernani" – March 11-26
- "Thérèse" – March 17-25
- >> **Where:** 61 N Pineapple Ave. Sarasota
- >> **Cost:** \$33-\$145
- >> **Tickets:** 941-328-1300, boxoffice@sarasotaopera.org or www.sarasotaopera.org

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