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BRAVO

THE MAGAZINE OF THE OPERA LEAGUE OF LOS ANGELES

BACK TO THE FUTURE

AS THE WORLD OPENS BACK UP AND LIFE RESUMES, TEN FRIENDS OF THE OPERA LEAGUE REFLECT ON OPERA'S EVOLUTION.

By TOM LADY

WHAT'S INSIDE

James Darrah named
LBO Artistic Director

Volunteer Spotlight:
Ron Streicher

My First Opera:
Dr. Debra Myers



As I write this, Los Angeles County has just graduated to the yellow tier, the least restrictive of the four tiers in California's framework for reopening our economy. A month from now, the state will discard the framework and throw open the doors to normal life.

While it has only been a year and change since the pandemic began, it can feel like an age has passed since we last took in an opera performance in person. So much has happened on so many fronts. So much has changed. It is safe to say the world will never be the same. That includes opera.

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operaleague.org

From the President



Photo by Kenny Goldberg



Love in the Time of COVID-19

Gabriel Garcia Marquez' novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* is a story of two people in love who overcome insurmountable obstacles through their determination and faith in each other to reunite after a long separation.

My riff on that title for this final President's Message, my farewell address and love letter to you, is because this is how I feel looking back on much of my time serving as your president.

Seven months into my term, we were separated by overwhelming circumstances. However, being the sturdy, resourceful and, above all, loving folk that we are, you and I found ways to come together, if only virtually.

We moved your beloved gatherings, seminars and recitals online, and you responded by watching in great numbers. (Don't forget to check out the schedule on the back page!)

We sent you numerous informative eBlasts to keep you abreast of the latest and greatest in our virtual programming.



Photo by Peggy Knight

Letters of encouragement and, of course, our BRAVO publication landed in your mailboxes.

We extended your memberships on good faith that you would stick by us during this trial. And you have. Our mutual love for opera and for each other was kept alive, perhaps even grew.

Some of our past Opera League presidents and members of our current board have not only set to work documenting our 40-year history, which will ultimately result in an online album, but they are also assembling a digital photo archive of Opera League events and the people who

made them special. These herculean projects have truly been a labor of love and have brought founding members of the Opera League together with other members in the process.

We also strengthened our already formidable bonds with LA Opera (LAO) through new and exciting virtual collaborations this year. Did you enjoy the May 15 virtual LAO Young Artist Recital and post-recital Opera League Happy Hour? Both organizations look forward to doing more of the same in the coming year.

I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your support and love these past two years. This has been an exhilarating journey that I will never forget, an experience from which I am certain I gained much more than to which I contributed.

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BREAKING THE MOLD

JAMES DARRAH IS NAMED ARTISTIC DIRECTOR AND CHIEF CREATIVE OFFICER FOR LONG BEACH OPERA

By BOB BERNHARD

“The future of opera is both cinematic and live. I’m excited to continue my exploration of operatic cinema with the amazing team at Long Beach Opera, creating diverse, robust streaming content while also building towards a safe return to live performances.” So says James Darrah, 36, the Los Angeles-based director, designer and filmmaker.

In a year of sparse good news, opera fans in Southern California sang with joy earlier this year when Long Beach Opera (LBO) tapped the L.A. native to be its third artistic director in its 42-year history. LA Opera regulars may know Darrah from his digital shorts, visually arresting work that, like a lot of his work, exists at the intersection of theater, opera and film. Indeed, Darrah recently created two new music videos for LAO’s Digital Shorts series with composers Missy Mazzoli and Ellen Reid.

Darrah’s LBO tenure, which runs through 2024, has already begun: LBO’s current season, dubbed “Season of Solidarity,” has been overseen by Yuval Sharon in an interim capacity, and featured Darrah making his company debut with an outdoor drive-in reimaging of Philip Glass’s hypnotic meditation on youth, *Les enfants terribles*, conducted by fellow Angeleno Christopher Rountree on May 21, 22 and 23.

James Darrah is one of a handful of artists who has found more work than ever during the pandemic. He was tapped to be creative director for digital content for the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra (LACO) in the fall of 2020,

directing sixteen short films with dozens of composers’ works inspiring episodic visuals in a new orchestral series called *Close Quarters*.

He partnered with Opera Philadelphia as the producer, production designer and screenwriter for a new film adaptation of *Soldier Songs* by David T. Little, released earlier this year with Johnathan McCullough starring and directing.

This summer he will direct the world premiere of *The Lord of Cries* by Academy Award-winning composer John Corigliano at Santa Fe Opera. And he is currently in post-production for his new film adaptation of Poulenc’s *La voix humaine*, starring the soprano Patricia Racette, set to be released in the fall.

Also this summer, Darrah is collaborating for the second time with Boston Lyric Opera’s streaming service, operabox.tv, on the world premiere of *desert in*, an original eight-part miniseries produced in association with LBO. Darrah is director and co-creator along with Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Ellen Reid and screenwriter christopher oscar peña. His first BLO production, a groundbreaking animated feature-length film of

Philip Glass’ opera *The Fall of the House of Usher*, based on the Edgar Allan Poe short story, is currently streaming.

And lest we forget: Darrah staged Missy Mazzoli’s *Breaking the Waves*, a major LAO online offering this spring.

With a commitment to training the next generation of artists, Darrah is Creative Director of the Music Academy of the West’s Vocal Institute in Santa Barbara, while holding two faculty positions at UCLA: opera faculty at the UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music and the production design faculty of the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television.

“These unprecedented times call for unprecedented action,” Darrah says. “And the team at LBO is ready to innovate, evolve and explore new territory for the operatic form. In that pursuit, LBO and myself are deeply committed to bringing together as many fresh voices and collaborators as possible. I’m also excited to have some extended time at home in the Los Angeles area in order to spearhead a new artistic chapter in Long Beach, a city that has shown itself unafraid to make bold choices that meet this unique moment.” 🌻

HOW WILL OPERA EVOLVE TO ADAPT TO A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD?

We posed this question to ten people from different opera-related walks of life. Here are their answers.



In my position at OPERA America, I've heard regular reports over the past year from members across the country. I've learned that

inventive programs offered during the pandemic—streamed performances, film projects, digital symposia, outdoor performance in tents and drive-in movie theaters, and more—have broken down barriers to participation in opera. Many projects have transcended time and location, been offered for free or at low cost, have been relatively short and are generally casual. They have reached opera lovers in rural areas and around the world, children at home and in school and people who may not feel comfortable in an opera house. They have challenged the negative stereotypes about our art form that still inhibit our progress.

It's my hope that as companies are able to return to their theaters when it is safe to do so, they will find a way to continue at least some of this activity so the new audiences who have been drawn to our art form continue to find enjoyment and inspiration through opera.

– MARC A. SCORCA, PRESIDENT AND CEO, OPERA AMERICA



What can we do as musicians and artists, to not only try to keep our tradition of fine arts and music alive, but to really reach out to a broader audience in these

fast-paced modern times?

With the inspiration of reaching out to a younger audience, I started a group, and we are creating an opera production utilizing augmented reality (AR). This one-hour opera, entitled YOUiverse, has already gained attention and support from various organizations, including our own LA Opera.

At the same time, I have another project on my plate, a musical spectacular using film and AR, entitled Dragonwings, based on an award-winning novel by Laurence Ye with the screenplay by movie producer/screenwriter Keith Resnick. This story depicts a family of Chinese immigrants in San Francisco during the early 1900s, the hardship and racial discrimination they endured, with an uplifting ending. I am very passionate about this project because not only does it paint a picture of immigrants achieving the American Dream, but it also reflects the reality we face now, where people with integrity march along with Asian Americans in fighting anti-Asian hate crimes.

– OLIVIA TSUI, FIRST VIOLIN, LA OPERA ORCHESTRA



The role of opera becomes even more important at a time such as this. We must tell stories that connect us as human beings. We must tell stories that reflect

the diversity of the community we serve. We must tell stories that inspire us to be our best selves. This is the unique power of opera that we have so deeply missed over the past year. The post-pandemic opera house should be a place of equity, access and openness. Creating and nurturing this kind of space only serves to intensify the power and drama of this art form we all love so much.

– BRIAN LAURITZEN, CLASSICAL KUSC



Maybe this reset will turn out to be just what opera needs. Maybe opera will embrace film as a medium instead of merely as archive-forcing intimacy

of perspective and expansion of access. Maybe it will reimagine the settings and trappings and traditions that sometimes bog it down. Maybe it will dig into the celebrated repertoire to excavate riveting injustices in one-sided narratives that long to be retold. Maybe it will stay silent long enough to finally hear the new voices making new work who are ready to move this glorious thing along.

– PEABODY SOUTHWELL, MEZZO-SOPRANO



Considering the lack of interest European politicians have shown towards the arts in recent years, it seems logical that opera subsidies will be cut drastically

resulting in less opera performances, less grand opera productions and even less opera houses. Many opera house artists will lose their permanent engagements. The only chance to avoid this scenario would be an outcry of arts support by the voters. The audience needs to stand up for opera. After all, one must remember that German concert halls and opera houses usually sell more tickets to performances than the national soccer league does to its matches. Hope dies last.

- STEPHAN BURIANEK, VIENNA, AUSTRIA-BASED FOUNDER OF OPERN.NEWS—A NEW GERMAN NON-PROFIT ONLINE MAGAZINE



I have a hopeful vision about what we will be seeing on our stages after this pandemic period. We have seen that digital formats are here to stay, but we will be experiencing hybrid models, staged and virtual formats, without canceling each other.

We have learned in this period that now, more than ever, we need art to be resilient and adapt to the times. We have been transforming during the pandemic, and we needed art for weeping and laughing. Art has been our best friend, and no doubt opera is a perfect vehicle: word, painting and images working together to pour all our emotions into an art form. If we have learned our lesson correctly, we will experience operas that reflect our times and troubles. Casts will be representing diversity, and works will be in different languages rather than only in Italian, German and French.

- ANDREA PUENTE CATÁN, DIRECTOR OF MAJOR GIFTS AND HISPANIC AFFAIRS, SAN DIEGO OPERA; EDITOR OF MUSICAL CATALOGUE DANIEL CATÁN, 1972-2011



My vision for opera post pandemic would be finding a way to connect in this newfound virtual space more meaningfully, with artists collaborating

to create works on a smaller scale but with great impact. Having artists at all stages of their development and careers using this innovation to continue connecting with audiences, independent of opera companies and/or with the support of opera companies, even if not from the opera house. Continuing even more forcefully a drive to diversify the institutions at all levels. Finally, opera companies being brave enough to present productions that are scaled down in size but not in impact. If the right balance is struck, it can be sustainable.

- RUSSELL THOMAS, TENOR, LA OPERA ARTIST IN RESIDENCE



In a post-pandemic world, opera should evolve with a sense of acute consciousness and awareness on how we have been impacted as a society. It will need to find

a delicate balance between mirroring on stage and in logistical matters the hardships that we have been through on a community and global level, while also providing a carefree escape and enjoyment for the audience that allows them to experience the joys of an in-person performance reminiscent of a pre-pandemic time.

- MILA LÓPEZ, EDUCATOR, GRIFFITH STEAM MAGNET MIDDLE SCHOOL



As I look ahead to a post-pandemic world, I can't help but to look behind at what we have learned from this time and at what has been created. The opera industry has

been forced to innovate in ways that couldn't have been predicted. Access to the art form has been opened up in unprecedented ways through online platforms and free and low-cost entry price points.

The racial reckoning that gripped the country has pushed the industry to deal with a (partial) endemic racist and white supremacist repertoire and, in some cases, culture, and there are significant strides being made to address this. My fervent hope is for lasting systemic change. I also hope that our return to in-person [performances] doesn't distract us from the strides we have made as an industry but rather helps to continue the forward momentum.

- BETH MORRISON, BETH MORRISON PROJECTS



After fourteen months without live performances (except in highly constrained conditions), the first thing many of us want is simply to be in a room with our

fellow human beings, sharing that unique experience of simultaneous togetherness and otherness that only live music can provide.

Operatic singing emerges organically from the human body, and in so doing it reminds us that we have bodies. This is crucial in a society that, like ours, is perilously close to de-incarnation. We spend much of our time in a huge imaginary room called the Internet, and the Internet is a chilly, bodiless space, one where it is scarily easy for us to be cruel to one another.

So I think opera's first task, post pandemic, is also its most basic one: to bring us close together again, to cause our chest cavities to vibrate in sympathy with an astonishing voice, to remind us that the human body is capable of more than we could have imagined.

Longer term, opera needs to continue the vital work of expanding its tent, of inviting new voices to contribute to its huge cosmic mosaic—not just singing “voices,” but composers, directors, conductors and impresarios from the widest possible range of backgrounds. If it does so, I think we'll find out that opera, at four hundred-odd years old, is barely an infant. It's just getting started.

- MATTHEW AUCOIN, COMPOSER, CONDUCTOR, WRITER, PIANIST, 2018 MACARTHUR FELLOW; AUTHOR OF THE IMPOSSIBLE ART: ADVENTURES IN OPERA, TO BE PUBLISHED DECEMBER 8, 2021 BY FARRAR, STRAUS & GIROUX ✨



YAPPING WITH CHORISTERS: ALANNAH GARNIER AND MARK BEASOM

SOME JUGGLING MAY BE REQUIRED

By JUDITH HYMAN

In this issue of *BRAVO*, we're taking a break from our usual "Yapping with a YAP" segment, wherein we interview an ascendant singer in LA Opera's Young Artist Program (YAP), to have a chat with two members of LAO's Chorus, one veteran and one relative newcomer.

Our veteran chorister is Mark Beasom, LAO's longest-serving chorister. Mark has been with the company since its 1986 founding, appearing in 144 productions to date. Our newcomer is also the chorus's most recent addition: soprano Alannah Garnier, who has been the featured vocalist at our annual Father's Day recital presented by the Opera League's African Americans for LA Opera chapter (AALAO) more than once, including Father's Day 2020, the League's first virtual event of the pandemic.

Speaking of virtual, that is how I spoke with Alannah and Mark as I got them both together on Zoom. Mark spoke about the beginnings of LAO. "In the beginning days of the opera, members of the Los Angeles Master Chorale (LAMC) were brought in as opera choristers."

These days, it's still common to find LAO choristers who also sing with LAMC, as both Alannah and Mark do.

After completing her masters at the Conservatory of Music and Dance at the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC) in 2015, Alannah returned to her native Los Angeles, applied to the LAO Chorus and was rejected. At the same time, she applied to LAMC, survived what she calls an "intense" audition and got in as an auxiliary. The following year, she advanced to full time at the LAMC, auditioned again for the LAO Chorus and got in.

Many choristers hold down full-time jobs while devoting weekends and some weeknights to singing together, memorizing their parts in between the day jobs and day care and all the domestic duties in between.

Mark has raised two daughters while singing

with LAO and other choral organizations. He has worked various construction jobs and worked with a company in Glendale that flame-proofs cloth, curtains and costumes, including many for LAO. Incidentally, the owner of that company sang in the chorus for many seasons.

Alannah says she felt welcome right away when she joined the LAO Chorus. Noting some gender differences, she laughs, "The guys' dressing room is a lot noisier, they just seem to have more fun!"

Mark chuckles in agreement. "Yes, we do like to joke around a lot."

Alannah and Mark's playful banter belies their next topic: their most demanding roles as choristers. They both agree that honor goes to Philip Glass's Gandhi opera, *Satyagraha*. For starters, they had to reckon with the seemingly insurmountable task of memorizing Sanskrit.

"There was no way to break up the words into English, and we had no experience with Sanskrit," Mark laughs.

Alannah adds, "We just had to learn a bunch of syllables. In every show there was always a mistake! But for me, I set up a competition with myself, and I was determined not to make the same mistake again."

On that topic of Philip Glass, Mark remarks how much he enjoyed learning how to juggle for *Akhnaten*. "That was a lot of fun. I was on the top row, and every once in a while, someone would not catch the ball."

Explaining what has kept him as a LAO chorister these past 35 years, Mark marvels at the quality of the chorus. "They are all so talented, their voices are

fantastic!" He adds, "I spend most of my non-performance time in the men's dressing room reading or talking with the others, cracking jokes, etc. Others may nod off for a quick nap, having come from their day job. We kind of interact like a family in some ways, dressing together, telling stories, sharing joy and grief, all sorts of things. It's very devoted work. As the most senior member, I take it upon myself to introduce myself to new folks and try to make them feel welcome."

Alannah and Mark pointed out that the green room is another popular chorister hangout. Orchestra members and principal artists sometimes relax there as well. Mark points out, however, that the green room can also be used to conduct business.

"There are times when the chorus is not in a particular scene, that a member of the musical staff will request all members of the chorus together in the green room for notes. And perhaps the notes will come from [Associate Chorus Master] Jeremy Frank, [Resident Conductor] Grant Gershon or [Music Director] James Conlon."

When I ask Alannah how she feels about diversity and inclusivity at LAO, she proudly states that LAO is "far more diverse than the Met, but of course much more is needed." She feels more work needs to be done with community outreach to provide more exposure to opera and make people of color feel more welcomed to the opera world.

As we concluded the fun conversation, both Alannah and Mark raised special cheers to the Opera League, especially for the cast dinners we provide during the week of dress rehearsal. "What a bonus!" they both agreed. 🌟

FEELING FESTIVE?

A LOOK AT SUMMER 2021'S OPERA FESTIVALS By GARY W. MURPHY

With travel restrictions still in flux, summer vacation plans remain a challenge.

For many, it would not be summer without European opera festivals. While that may still be possible, ever-changing health protocol hurdles may prove a bit too high to jump.

Rather than mope about pining for where we can't go, let's consider the summer of 2021 as a time to discover opera festivals closer to home.

For example, if you can't join a German opera tour this year, consider spending a few days visiting Cincinnati's historic Over-the-Rhine neighborhood. This well-preserved former working-class German neighborhood is home to craft breweries, hip gastropubs and trendy bars. Better yet, it's not so far from Summit Park, this year's home to **Cincinnati Opera (July 11-29)**. A stellar lineup of talent will perform including many known to Opera League members: Janai Brugger, Ana María Martínez, Russell Thomas, Morris Robinson, who also serves as Cincinnati Opera's Artistic Advisor, J'Nai Bridges and more. And while you're there, stop by and say hello to former LA Opera stage manager Lyla Forlani, who now helps run the show as Cincinnati Opera's Director of Production.

STILL GOT THE OPERA BUG? CHECK OUT THESE SUGGESTIONS AND THE FULL LIST OF SUGGESTIONS AT OPERALEAGUE.ORG

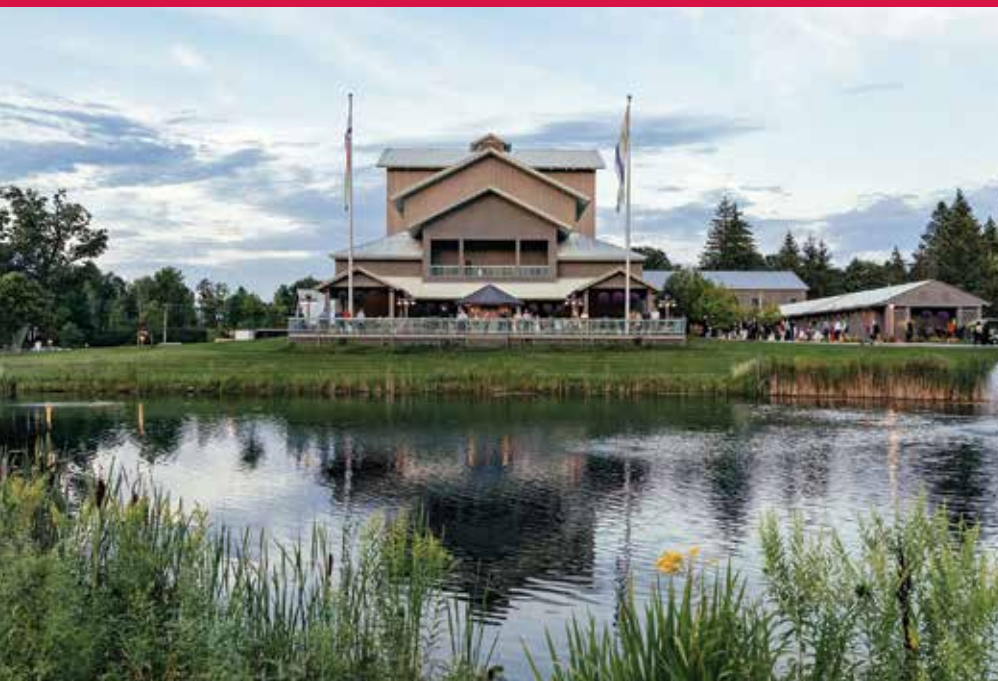
PACIFIC OPERA PROJECT June 4-6

The ever-resourceful Pacific Opera Project is dusting off a little-known bel canto comedy by George Bizet created in 1859 when the composer was all of 21 years old. *Don Procopio*, which shares a similar plot line with Donizetti's *Don Pasquale*, tells the story of Donna Bettina, in love with Odoardo but forced to wed her miserly uncle's miserly friend Don Procopio. However, Bettina, with the help of her aunt Eusebia and brother Don Ernesto, manages to thwart those plans so she can wed the one she loves.

All three showcases will feature socially-distanced audiences. The showcase will feature Ben Lowe in the title role alongside Rachel Policar, Jon Lee Keenan, Armando Contreras, E. Scott Levin, Jessica Gonzalez-Rodriguez and a four-person chorus. Maggie Green will supply costumes with Josh Shaw directing. Charlie Kim will conduct.

WEST EDGE OPERA July 24-August 8 | Orinda, CA

East of San Francisco you'll find Orinda, home to the always intriguing West Edge Opera, which presents early and contemporary works and reimagines opera tradition to engage and entertain a diverse audience. Located between Berkeley and Walnut Creek, West Edge Opera gets edgier this summer as they move outside for Festival 2021 and offer *Katya Kabanova* by Leos Janáček, *Elizabeth Cree* by Kevin Puts and Mark Campbell and *Eliogabalo* by Francesco Cavalli. ☀



ABOVE: The Glimmerglass Festival 2018, Alice Busch Opera Theater ©Karli Cadel

IN THE PIT

MARISA SORAJJA, ASSOCIATE PRINCIPAL SECOND VIOLIN ONE TRUE VIOLIN JUNKIE By DIANE EISENMAN

Marisa Sorajja cannot remember a time when she was not playing the violin.

Born and raised in Amarillo, Texas to parents who had immigrated from Thailand in the 1970s, Marisa was all of three when her physician father enrolled her in a violin training program that utilized the well-known Suzuki method. After high school, she studied at the University of Southern California with Robert Lipsett. It was in the USC practice rooms where she met the budding clarinetist whom she would ultimately marry.

When Robert Lipsett left USC for the Colburn School Conservatory of Music, where he still works as Jascha Heifetz Distinguished Violin Chair, Marisa followed him there and completed her Artist Diploma.

As bad luck would have it, Marisa and her husband both finished school in May 2009, when the Great Recession was in full swing. Orchestra jobs were all but impossible to find, eventually leading them to decide that one of them had to step up to become the breadwinner. Marisa's husband, despite

his DMA in music, suspended his music career and became a lawyer.

Marisa, meantime, performed with Los Angeles-area symphony orchestras and substituted with the LA Philharmonic until finally landing her current position with the LA Opera Orchestra in 2015. Along the way, she learned that a musician's life was anything but stable. Alternative plans were necessary, so she diversified into teaching and studio work – until the pandemic.

And her pregnancy.

With the pandemic came yet another economic crisis. The opera world went dark. Even with the financial stability from her husband's legal career, finding herself out of work, especially after having played those strings her entire life, left Marisa feeling adrift and fending for herself.

Having a baby during the pandemic meant going to doctor's appointments alone. And when she went into labor for eighteen hours? She had to wear a mask the entire time.

Marisa did not get to enjoy any baby showers or after-birth celebrations, or receive any visitors, even if they were

“[Playing violin] is a huge part of who I am. It is tough to be silenced... I'm relearning the instrument and the technique. And I have a practice schedule now around my daughter's naps.”

family. "I realized how tough I am," she says. "We are so isolated that the only visitors my daughter has met are COVID-tested photographers."

It goes without saying that Marisa really misses performing. "[Playing violin] is a huge part of who I am. It is tough to be silenced." She thrives in the orchestra of the great music hall, the acoustics and the energy of the audience. So rather than stew in abject boredom at home, Marisa picked up her violin and went back to school, with herself as teacher and student. It was time, she figured, to go back and, as she says, "fix my playing."

Today, Marisa is practicing more than when she was in school. "I'm relearning the instrument and the technique. I give myself one-month goals, such as perfecting my vibrato. And I've learned every piece I've wanted to learn, including Paganini's 1st Caprice, challenged by the bowing technique and crazy hand positions. I watch videos of the violin masters and try to copy them. And I have a practice schedule now around my daughter's naps.

"My orchestra friends say I'm crazy," she continues. "Only you would do that," they say. But with no performances, I'm bored now. And I'm a violin nerd. I love everything I can do with my instrument." And perhaps it's in the genes. Marisa's baby daughter, just seven months old, has already taken to classical music. She calms down, eats and sleeps to Mozart arias and Wagner's prelude to Act 1 of *Lohengrin*.

To stay in shape, Marisa exercises about an hour a day, which keeps her stamina up for those Mozart operas, notorious for requiring near-constant playing for violinists. Indeed, she says *The Marriage of Figaro* has so many notes, "it hurts!"

Like the rest of us, Marisa looks forward to the end of the pandemic so she can perform in groups again and get back to her love of travel. Her husband's mother lives in Spain while her father is still in Amarillo. Those may very well be their first destinations to introduce them to their new granddaughter. 🌸

A BRAINY BOUQUET

Okay, fine. So we Angelenos don't exactly endure harsh winters. But that doesn't mean we don't get excited about the prospect of witnessing a super bloom, or of nursing mimosas on the beach before June gloom hits our coastline...

...or of catching a whiff of an opera quiz designed to tickle our intellect, if not our sinuses.

And so here blooms a flower-and-spring-themed quiz to help us celebrate the season in gloriously operatic style, as pollinated by Mark Lyons, LA Opera's Associate Director of Communications and Publications.

In back-to-back Wagner arias, he first describes winter storms yielding to springtime; she then responds: "You are the spring!"

- A. Lohengrin and Elsa in *Lohengrin*
- B. Siegmund and Sieglinde in *Die Walküre*
- C. Siegfried and Brünnhilde in *Siegfried*
- D. Wotan and Erda in *Siegfried*

This character sings: "When the thaw comes, the sun's first rays are mine! The first kiss of April is mine!"

- A. Calaf in *Turandot*
- B. Cherubino in *The Marriage of Figaro*
- C. Cio-Cio-San in *Madama Butterfly*
- D. Mimi in *La Bohème*

"Florals for spring? Groundbreaking." Well, they are in this opera featuring a murder by poisoned violets.

- A. *Adriana Lecouvreur*
- B. *I Vespri Siciliani*
- C. *Lucrezia Borgia*
- D. *Tancredi*

This moody poet sings: "Pourquoi me réveiller, ô souffle du printemps?" [Why do you awaken me, o breath of spring?]

- A. Andrea Chénier
- B. Rodolfo in *La Bohème*
- C. Werther
- D. Monsieur Triquet in *Eugene Onegin*

In *Faust*, what happens to the flowers Siebel gathers for Marguerite?

- A. Marguerite scoffs at them. After all, Faust gave her a box of jewels. (Can you blame her?)
- B. Faust steals the bouquet and presents it to Marguerite as his own gift.
- C. Marguerite's brother Valentin furiously destroys them, believing they prove she is unchaste.
- D. They wilt, thanks to a curse by Mephistophélès.

Given this quiz's theme, we couldn't leave out the Flower Maidens in *Parsifal*. Where would you find them?

- A. Conjured from Kundry's spell
- B. The fields outside the Hall of the Grail
- C. The garden at Klingsor's castle
- D. The forest where Parsifal meets Gurnemanz

Cio-Cio-San and Suzuki decorate the house with cherry blossoms as they sing the Flower Duet. What much less well-known opera also has a very famous Flower Duet, made popular through British Airways commercials and frequent usage in film and television?

- A. *The Snow Maiden* by Rimsky-Korsakov
- B. *Lakmé* by Delibes
- C. *La Finta Giardiniera* by Mozart
- D. *Edgar* by Puccini

MY FIRST OPERA: DEBRA MYERS

By GARY W. MURPHY

We are launching a new series in this issue called “My First Opera,” wherein we sit down with an Opera League member to talk about that unforgettable moment when they fell head over heels for this unique art form.

For our inaugural sit-down, we got to meet eager Leaguer Dr. Debra Myers, graduate of Harvard Medical School, who has been in practice for over 20 years. Currently, Dr. Myers runs a private practice in West Los Angeles where she specializes in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy for adults and adolescents.

BRAVO: SO TELL US ABOUT YOUR FIRST OPERA?

DEBRA MYERS: It was LA Opera’s production of *Tosca* at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. In 2008, a physician colleague pointed out that as I planned to begin my training as a psychoanalyst, experiencing opera would be important as a part of my development in the humanities. The way he described opera as a totally immersive experience was quite appealing since I enjoyed musicals and theater. It sounded as if opera had everything. At that point I had never experienced opera other than parodies such as *Looney Tunes*’ “Kill the Wabbit” cartoon with Bugs Bunny. I always wondered how anyone could enjoy listening to something in a language one didn’t understand? So up to that point opera was out of the question. But, encouraged by my colleague, I purchased a ticket for my first opera.

BRAVO: WHAT DREW YOU TO THE OPERA LEAGUE?

DM: I joined the Opera League as I considered this part of my natural progression as a human being. When I attended my first opera, *Tosca*, I walked into the auditorium and sat down. I didn’t know anything about the performers, the plot, the narrative. And I was just blown away. It was riveting. And I wanted to understand more, to learn more. At that point I discovered the Opera League sponsored the pre-performance talks by James Conlon, and I started to attend those and quickly became a “Conlon fan girl”. He’s just wonderful, and now I consider an opera performance incomplete if I didn’t listen to his lectures.

BRAVO: WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE ASPECT ABOUT GOING TO THE OPERA?

DM: The only way I could imagine saying the “best thing” about it for me would be the total sensory experience: that I have a lovely story that is usually incorporating ideas of psychoanalysis and my work with patients; lovely costumes, beautiful music, a group of people enjoying it with me who also appreciate it. It’s the whole package.

BRAVO: AT THIS POINT, DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE OPERA?

DM: Oh no, impossible. I’m still so young in my opera-going experience that I haven’t seen enough of the basic repertoire. I took a few semesters in Opera Appreciation at Emeritus College, the last lectures focusing on French opera. I appreciated the uniqueness of French opera and the idea of the primacy of ballet which I saw in LA Opera’s recent *Anonymous Lover* production. Learning about that opera’s composer, Joseph Bologne, was a revelation!

BRAVO: HAVE YOU VENTURED INTO THE WORLD OF WAGNER YET?

DM: I saw [LA Opera’s] *Ring Cycle* [in 2010] but was a bit disappointed. I am not so much a contemporary fan, so for that to be my first Wagner, I was disheartened. Perhaps if I had experienced the *Ring Cycle* with a more traditional production, I would have been able to expand into a more imaginative frame.

BRAVO: IS THERE AN OPERA HOUSE YOU WOULD LOVE TO VISIT?

DM: I’ve been meaning to go to San Diego Opera with the League and look forward to doing so again. But I would so love to visit all the European opera houses, particularly Paris, Rome and Milan. It would be great to do a tour visiting some of the great opera houses, wouldn’t it?

BRAVO: WHAT IS ONE THING ABOUT THE OPERA LEAGUE YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE WITH OTHERS?

DM: The Opera League is a particularly good vehicle not only to be exposed to opera but also to meet people who are also interested and passionate about opera. I like how the

League structures the neighborhood gatherings where we have a chance to experience hospitality and music in a League member's home.

BRAVO: IS THERE AN OPERA YOU'RE LOOKING FORWARD TO SEEING IN THE NEAR FUTURE?

DM: Oh, I'll be glad just to get back to seeing live performances, won't you?

BRAVO: YES! 🌸



ARTISTRY AND ADVOCACY

AN INTERVIEW WITH BASS-BARITONE DERRELL ACON AND PIANIST LENNY HAYES By TOM LADY



Derrell Acon and Lenny Hayes will be our featured performers at the Father's Day Virtual Recital presented African Americans for LA Opera, a chapter of the Opera League.

BRAVO: LENNY, WHEN DID YOU KNOW THE PIANO WAS YOUR FUTURE? WHICH PIANISTS DID YOU ADMIRE GROWING UP?

LENNY HAYES: I began formal piano study at the age of ten, a somewhat late start for the serious classical pianist. However, with a lot of consistency and tenacity, I accepted a full scholarship to attend Interlochen Arts Academy for my senior year in high school. During that year, I realized that the piano would be my lifelong musical partner. As for role models, John Tatum and Eva Flowers, my first co-private teachers, continually inspire me to reach the highest expression of myself in pedagogy, performance and mentorship. My favorite performing pianist is Andre Watts. His unmatched ability to communicate the range of emotional, technical and musical expression in Mendelssohn and Liszt leaves me speechless.

BRAVO: HOW DO EACH OF YOU THINK OPERA IN PARTICULAR, AND MAYBE ARTS IN GENERAL, CAN CHANGE FOR THE BETTER AFTER THE EVENTS OF THE PAST YEAR?

DERRELL ACON: My biggest hope is that opera will not attempt to "return to normal." There have been so many important conversations catalyzed by the pandemic, including those around racial justice, the importance of digital media, the sustainability (or lack thereof) of certain structures in the performing arts, etc. We all do well to transition

into a refreshed industry that seeks to incorporate these many learnings into how we move forward as an art form.

LH: The global pandemic forced the world to suspend its daily operations and to reckon with the bleeding wounds of social, economic and health injustices. The arts have always been the immediate reflection or expression of the human condition and social consciousness. However, last year will force the arts organizations, specifically in America, to produce new operas, new musicals and community programs that grapple with the bleeding injustices between cultural groups in America.

BRAVO: LENNY, IF YOU COULD ACCOMPANY ANY OPERA SINGER YOU WANT, ALIVE OR DEAD, WHO WOULD THAT BE?

LH: Jessye Norman, hands down. Ms. Norman has the uncanny ability to connect two or more musical phrases with an endless amount of breath support, almost like sustained pedaling at the piano. Though Ms. Norman's voice produces an enormous amount of sound, her careful attention to the nuance of color and tone within any phrase length lures me. Please listen to her audio recording of "Die Nachtigall" ["The Nightingale"] from *Sieben frühe Lieder* [Seven Early Songs] with Pierre Boulez and the London Symphony Orchestra. I played the complete cycle during my college days.

You can find the rest of this interview on our website, operaleague.org.

Be sure to join us for the Father's Day Virtual Recital featuring bass-baritone Derrell Acon and accompanist Lenny Hayes on June 20. Visit operaleague.org for details. 🌸



A REX FOR OUR TIMES

GREAT NEWS, LA OPERA DEVOTEES! By GARY W. MURPHY

The company is planning a return to live performances on June 6 with the company premiere of Igor Stravinsky's 1927 opus, *Oedipus Rex*.

An opera-oratorio based on Sophocles' classic Greek tragedy with a libretto by Jean Cocteau, it will be conducted by Music Director James Conlon and directed by Matthew Diamond in creative collaboration with Manual Cinema, the Emmy-winning collective, design studio and film and video production company.

The cast will feature six singers including tenor, and LA Opera's new artist in residence, Russell Thomas in the title role, as well as a male chorus of 16, a full orchestra of nearly 30 and a narrator.

Oedipus Rex is a 55-minute one-act opera created to be performed with minimal movement while the principal singers wear masks and the audience remains at a distance, perfectly in sync with today's post-pandemic safety guidelines.

Making the piece yet more relevant to today is the plot, featuring a plague-scourged society and its headstrong, deeply flawed leader who stumbles into tragedy after disregarding repeated warnings.

A special video presentation of the opera will subsequently stream on LA Opera's *On Now* digital platform, free of charge, beginning June 17.

For more information, visit laopera.org.



RESILIENT NO MATTER WHAT

By SHELL AMEGA

LA Opera's new artist in residence talks about finding his voice and helping the next generation of Black opera singers find theirs.

If you have ever had the pleasure of seeing Russell Thomas perform, you would not be surprised that the *New York Times* called him "a tenor of gorgeously burnished power." *The Wall Street Journal* raved he has a voice that "marries Wagnerian stamina with Italianate beauty." One reviewer even noted that Thomas' "voice seems to be built from silvery tears."

You might, however, be surprised to know that his first encounter with the world of opera was not from the guidance of a voice coach. Instead, it was the pure serendipity of an eight-year-old Thomas fiddling with the dial on his grandmother's radio looking for "99 R&B Hits."

As the young Thomas turned the knob intently, he breezed by Miami radio stations playing pop, jazz and Latin music. Then he came across the clear sound of someone singing opera and his fingers froze on the dial.

"I was amazed that the human voice could make these sounds!" said Thomas, his face lighting up at the memory. "It was love at first hearing." In the years following, he listened to that station every single day, soaking up arias sung by Leontyne Price and other opera greats.

When he was 18, a woman heard him sing in a chorus and exclaimed that he would be able to make a career of singing opera and "would be accepted everywhere," if he studied with her, reflects Thomas. "And I was accepted everywhere!"

Thomas, who was previously headed for a career as a politician, changed course and catapulted onto opera stages internationally, singing at the Salzburg Festival and in a variety of roles in productions for the Canadian Opera Company, Deutsche Oper Berlin, The Washington National Opera, LA Opera and many others.

Speaking of his latest LA Opera role as the Emperor Titus in *La Clemenza di Tito*, he reflects on the ruler's experience of extreme betrayal and almost other-worldly forgiveness.

"Here is this man who had been betrayed by the people he loved the most and whom he thought were the most loyal. It takes a special kind of person to be that forgiving. It's that sort of Jesus Christ energy, and I don't know if that kind of person really exists in the world. That level of forgiveness and selflessness is something we all aspire to...That's what I love about opera so much. There are these themes that are so universal to what we feel as humans, these overarching themes that people really do experience in real life. We all experience betrayal, love, joy, lust. I really enjoy that about opera and storytelling."

His deep thinking about issues of human nature, in addition to his command of opera, must be a delight to his students. Thomas, who has residences in Atlanta, Los Angeles and Indiana, is Associate Professor of Music at the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University Bloomington.

Teaching, like mentorship, comes naturally to Thomas, who is passionate about his advocacy work for aspiring African American opera singers. "It's important because I feel there aren't a lot of people advocating for us. Just so they know there is somebody thinking about them, advocating for them and caring about their futures and their making of art. It's

something that I've done for a long time. We live in a very white-facing world, and our art of opera is reflective of that white-facing world."

In addition to promoting aspiring African American opera singers, he counsels them on attitude, presentation and preparation. The stereotypes that need to be overcome

prompt him to remind his mentees that they need to be "better than." In particular, Thomas says, "We need to make sure we are flying above the tropisms—I don't know where they come from—but the ones that say 'Black people are lazy and don't show up prepared.' We need to make sure we are flying above that and addressing these very racist ideals that have been placed on our people for God knows whatever reason. We have to make sure we are taking care of that and being our best selves."

Thomas notes that, "I am a gay man and I'm a Black man, but people see the blackness first. It's [Opera's] no different from working in a law office, you're dealing with micro-aggressions, code switching, and it's like, 'How Black can I really be in this space, this very white space?' Those are things I do think about, and I try to do everything I can to represent myself and my people in the best possible way that I can as a Black man."

Yet Thomas carries it all with a sense of grace, enthusiastically sharing that he recently "heard a dancer say that 'resilience is Blackness. We have to be resilient no matter what.' We still have to do our jobs and not be hyper-emotional about it."

The pandemic was another challenge that required resilience. It was tough for him to experience the distressing cascade of contract cancellations as the "stay at home" mandates shut down opera stages across the world. "I've never been depressed before, but I may have been because I went through a period of not enjoying singing," recalls Thomas.

A smile crosses his face as he thinks of a pandemic silver lining: valuable time spent bonding with his six-year-old son. "My son was the best decision I ever made."

Fortunately, things are opening up again, and soon opera lovers will be able to enjoy Russell Thomas this summer as Cavaradossi in *Tosca* at the Cincinnati Opera, and as Don Alvaro in *La Forza del Destino* in Berlin at the Deutsche Oper.

Closer to home, he will be the artist in residence at LA Opera through the end of the 2023-24 season. Don't think that will crimp his performance schedule though. This summer Thomas will tackle the title role in LAO's company premiere of *Oedipus Rex*. 🌸



RON STREICHER CONNECTS

By NICHOLAS DAHL



It's safe to say Ron Streicher is a tried and true lover of opera.

His is a love that was born in the orchestra pit of the UCLA Opera Theatre where he played the tympani. A love that has only grown over time, Ron has been attending LA Opera performances since the company's 1986 founding.

Following his lifelong credo, "the music always comes first," Ron earned a BA in Music from UCLA and an MA in Communications Arts from Loyola University.

His interest in audio production evolved into a career that spanned more than five decades. He has worked with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Bolshoi Orchestra, the Philadelphia Orchestra and the touring companies of the New York City Opera and Metropolitan Opera. During his eighteen summers with the Aspen Music Festival and School, he served as the recording engineer and sound designer for more than fifty opera productions, many of which were conducted by LAO's very own Maestro James Conlon.

Today, Ron is still putting the music first. He is a speaker, officially known as a Community Educator, with LA Opera Connects, LAO's education and community engagement department. In addition, no sooner did the Opera League begin its series of virtual gatherings last summer than Ron quickly became one of our featured lecturers.

"I had a desire to be not only an observer of opera, but a participant in opera. When they [LA Opera] opened up the speakers program [Community Educators], it seemed to me like the perfect fit. I've been doing technical lectures about audio and recording and production for many, many years, so it was a natural transition to start talking about my favorite pastime, opera itself."

Before the pandemic, when Ron would give lectures, he'd be at The Music Center or go around to libraries, schools and community centers, but

when the pandemic came around, he didn't seem phased. Once again, he put the music first and transitioned his talks to the virtual world.

"The virtual talks are an interesting, but different experience," Ron says. "I enjoy talking to a live audience because there is interaction. If somebody has a question, or if I want to ad lib a little bit or elaborate, I can do that more easily live. When I'm doing a Zoom presentation, it's usually pretty well scripted. It's prepared well in advance using audio and video clips that I get off of CDs or DVDs or download from the Internet."

He talks about these lectures as if they are a privilege to give, but no doubt they are a privilege to hear.

"I love Ron's talks!" gushes Tom Lady, the Opera League's head of Marketing and Communications and the editor of BRAVO. "Part of the fun is waiting to see what his next topic will be. Ron's done talks on debauchery in opera, how it can't be an opera if nobody dies, how clothes make the man even if he's a she, opera's best supporting characters... And of course, the talks themselves are very professional, and his choice of media to play throughout each talk



always help make his talks more than mere talks. You got to watch snippets of lots of great operas!

"And let me just add," Tom continues, "that as we in the Opera League have adapted to the virtual sphere, Ron's engineering background has been invaluable in helping us troubleshoot technical hiccups. Regardless of who's giving the talk, Ron always shows up to the gathering early to lend a virtual hand if need be."

That is pretty impressive indeed, especially when you consider the amount of preparation Ron and the other speakers put into their talks. The aggregate number of hours can add up, depending on the subject matter. "It really depends on the complexity of the talk, and especially how difficult it is to find and work with the recorded examples," Ron explains. "I have spent as little as 50 hours and as many as 150 hours preparing a talk. Thus far, all of the talks I have given for the Opera League's virtual gatherings have been talks I gave previously for LA Opera Connects. Even so, I do spend another ten or so hours refining and reformatting them for the gatherings."

While his audiences certainly get a lot out of his talks, so does Ron.

"Getting inside an opera production and studying up on it and learning how it looks, and by studying the score and studying the music, then putting together a talk, it helps me to keep involved in the whole world of opera in a way that is more fulfilling than just sitting in a seat watching the stage."

Suffice it to say you should mark your calendars for Sunday, June 27 at 1:30pm PT. That is the date of the Opera League virtual gathering featuring Ron giving a talk entitled "Puccini's *Turandot*: The Quest for a Proper Ending." [See the back page for the League's full schedule of upcoming virtual events.]

Ron Streicher has built a stage for himself, a stage built for his love of opera, a stage built because the music always comes first. 🌟

SING IT WITH US NOW: VIVA VERDI!

THE OPERA LEAGUE WELCOMES FILMMAKERS BEHIND UPCOMING DOCUMENTARY FILM By GARY W. MURPHY

Currently in post-production and slated for a 2022 theatrical release, the documentary *VIVA VERDI!* is an intimate glimpse into the lives of celebrated opera singers and musicians who are living out their "third act" while mentoring international music students at Casa Verdi, the Milan retirement home built by Giuseppe Verdi himself in 1896.

On the first Sunday in May, producer Christine La Monte and director Yvonne Russo stepped out of the editing room to host a special afternoon for League members and provide an exclusive update about the film.

As the filmmakers explained, filming had been nearing completion in the spring of 2020 when the pandemic hit and turned Italy into one of the world's first COVID hotspots. Casa Verdi shut down.

"We were editing the film in Los Angeles and had the option to fly to Milan for some final pick-up photography," Christine told the League members. "But that became unavailable to us, so we began working in three different cities. Director Yvonne Russo was in New York, editor Federico Rodelli was in Rome and executive producer James Tumminia and I were in L.A. along with our music composer Nick Pike. It was a bit of a bump, but we all adjusted to a new process of editing via Zoom."

Through one-on-one interviews and archival footage, *VIVA VERDI!* takes us inside Casa Verdi to get to know these distinguished maestros and divas in their golden years. Ranging in age between 77 and 107, the subjects share

an array of personal and professional stories filled with music, magic and passion. Verdi called Casa Verdi his "best work," and indeed as we watch and learn from its residents, many of whom mentor music students from around the world who live with them, it becomes clear that Verdi's legacy is thriving.

A very special guest who joined the conversation was soprano Ana María Martínez, who recorded "Sweet Dreams of Joy," an original composition created for the film by Nike Pike.

We also welcomed *VIVA VERDI!*'s Premier Partner Eataly, which provided attendees with a complimentary glass of wine voucher to be enjoyed at the company's Century City location.

As the world emerges from the pandemic, production on *VIVA VERDI!* will return to Milan for the last bit of filming.

And here's one nugget of very good news: Not one Casa Verdi resident was lost to COVID-19.

Viva Verdi! 🌟





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OPERA LEAGUE CALENDAR OF EVENTS

SUMMER 2021

Please note that all of the below events will be conducted virtually via Zoom. Event details, including how to join, will be broadcast via operaleague.org with supporting eBlasts.

JUNE

GATHERINGS

Terror, Opera and the French Revolution

Sunday, June 13 at 1:30pm

SPEAKER: Larry Verdugo

SPONSOR: Santa Clarita Gathering Group

HOST: Kim Jones

Puccini's Turandot: The Quest for a Proper Ending

Sunday, June 27 at 1:30pm

SPEAKER: Ron Streicher

SPONSORS: South Bay and Downtown Los Angeles Gathering Groups

HOSTS: Laurel Howat and Kathy Crandall

MASTER CLASS

African Americans for LA Opera

(AALAO) Present: Master Class with Soprano Reri Grist

Sunday, June 6 at 10:00am

RECITAL

African Americans for LA Opera

(AALAO) Present: An Afternoon with Bass-Baritone Derrell Acon

Sunday, June 20 at 3:00pm

VOCALIST: Derrell Acon, Bass-Baritone

ACCOMPANIST: Lenny Hayes

(See our interview with Derrell and Lenny in this issue!)

SEMINAR

Operetta on Film

Saturday, June 19 at 4:00pm

SPEAKER: Richard Barrios, Film Historian

JULY

GATHERINGS

Play Ball!: Baseball in Opera

Sunday, July 11 at 1:30pm

SPEAKER: Steve Kohn

SPONSOR: Hancock Park and East San Fernando Valley/Hollywood Gathering Groups

HOSTS: Anne Russell and Gayle Kirschbaum

Puccini among Friends

Monday, July 19 at 7:00pm

SPEAKER: Larry Verdugo

SPONSOR: San Gabriel Valley Gathering Group

HOST: Michael Sholer

Verdi vs. Shakespeare

Sunday, July 25 at 1:30pm

SPEAKER: Len Lippman

SPONSOR: South Bay Gathering Group

HOST: Laurel Howat

If It Weren't for Opera... Part 1: I Would Not Know a Thing about Akhnaten!

Saturday, July 31 at 1:30pm

SPEAKER: Ray Busmann

SPONSOR: Beverly Hills Gathering Group

HOST: Ruth Bachofner

AUGUST

GATHERINGS

Read Any Good Books Lately?: Great Books and Opera

Sunday, August 8 at 1:30pm

SPEAKER: Larry Verdugo

SPONSOR: Westside Gathering Group

HOST: Ruth Bachofner

Wine, Songs and Collective Joy

Sunday, August 22 at 1:30pm

SPEAKER: Bettyna Bluwal

SPONSOR: Orange County Gathering Group

HOST: Lorna Blancaflor and Christa Marks

If It Weren't for Opera... Part 2: I Would Not Know a Thing about Emanuel Schikaneder!

Saturday, August 28 at 1:30pm

SPEAKER: Ray Busmann

SPONSOR: Santa Clarita Gathering Group

HOST: Kim Jones

SEPTEMBER

GATHERINGS

If It Weren't for Opera... Part 3: I Would Not Know a Thing about the Chevalier de Saint-Georges!

Wednesday, September 1 at 7:00pm

SPEAKER: Ray Busmann

SPONSOR: San Gabriel Valley Gathering Group

HOST: Michael Sholer