

ISSUE 63
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BRAVO

THE MAGAZINE OF THE OPERA LEAGUE OF LOS ANGELES

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for Excellence in Volunteering

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PETER HEMMINGS AWARD HONOREE
PRESENTED BY THE OPERA LEAGUE.

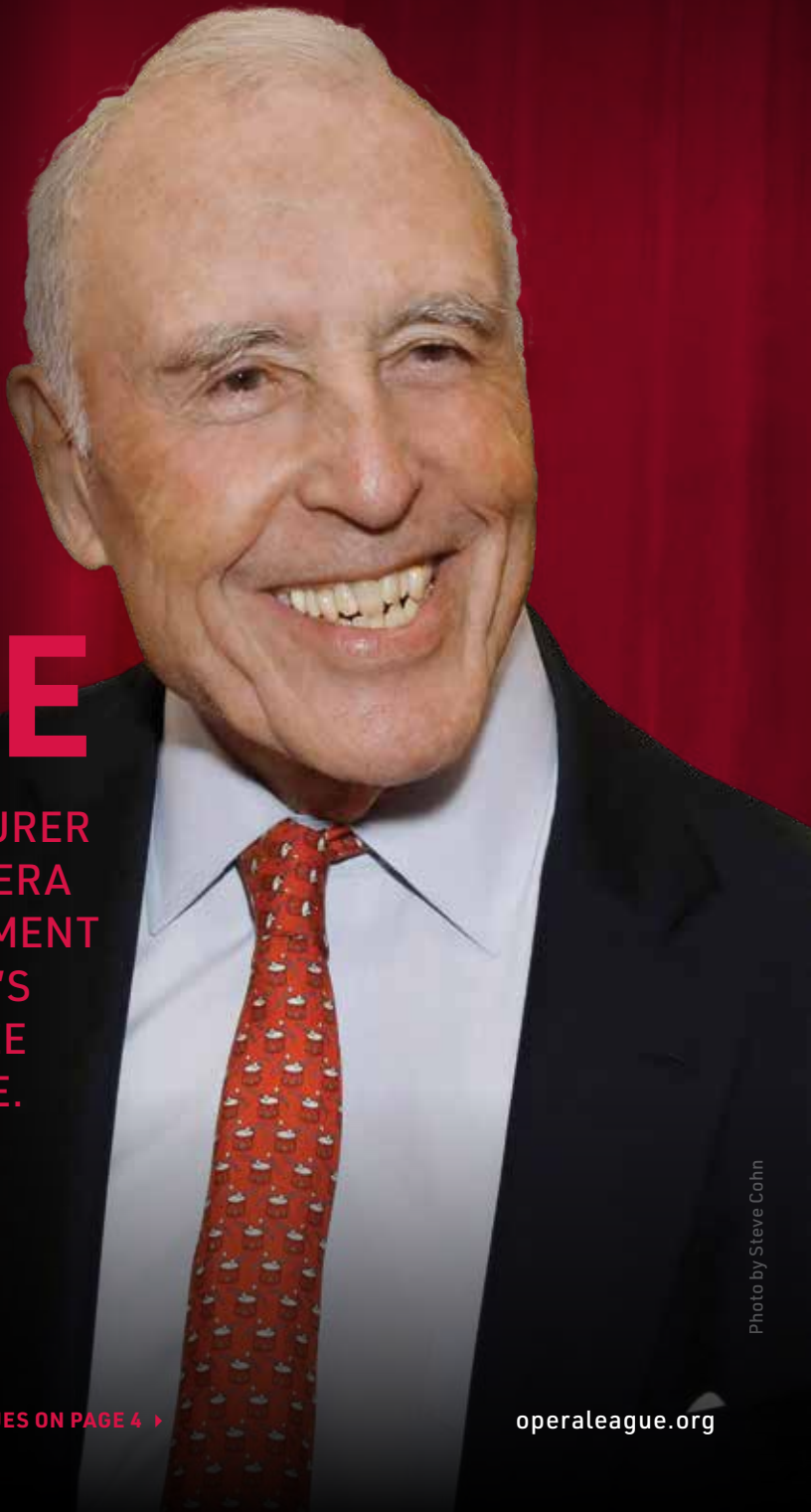
By TODD L. CALVIN



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operaleague.org

Photo by Steve Cohn



From the President



Photo by Stephanie Girard



All Good Things...

I am writing this column on a Saturday morning while giving my ears a warm bath in Metropolitan Opera on the radio.

The Met broadcasts introduced me to opera over 40 years ago, and I have heard similar stories from many of you, my fellow Opera League members, about how these cherished broadcasts were your portal into the operaverse.

When I first started listening to these performances featuring some of the world's finest vocalists, my teenage self could hardly imagine that one day I would get to meet many of these very artists. But that is just one of the many joys of volunteering for the Opera League.

It is difficult to believe that my tenure as president is nearly over. These two years seem to have raced by, and I am delighted to report that the number of League activities and offerings are back to pre-pandemic levels, including seminars, recitals, master classes and Backstage Magic. Our neighborhood gatherings are happening once again in-person on a weekly basis during the season.

The month of May at LA Opera brings the return of grand opera at its best: Giuseppe Verdi's brilliant *Otello*. The topnotch cast includes LAO's artist-in-residence, Russell Thomas, who has won acclaim for his performance of the title role. We hope those of you who attended our *Otello* seminar on May 7 got to learn more about this masterpiece, as well as the Shakespeare play on which it is based.

On Sunday, May 21, the Opera League presents its annual Peter Hemmings Award Dinner, wherein we recognize an individual who, over time, has made significant contributions to the development of opera in Southern California. This year we are honoring Robert Ronus, an enthusiastic League member and LA Opera board treasurer. I interviewed Robert for this issue's cover story, and as you'll see, his joie de vivre is contagious.



Todd Calvin and Brita Kohlfürst-Millard

We are also honoring our beloved veteran Opera Leaguer, Brita Kohlfürst-Millard, with the inaugural Volunteer Award. Brita's tireless devotion to the League is an inspiration to us all. You'll find an article about her and all she's done for the League in this issue as well.

All net proceeds for the Hemmings support LAO's community engagement and education programs, including Opera Camp, back this year for the first time since 2019.

On Thursday, May 25, the Opera League presents tenor Anthony León at the Ebell for his Los Angeles recital debut. A first-year member of LAO's Domingo-Colburn-Stein Young Artist Program, Anthony is receiving international recognition, and we are honored to showcase this rising star. You can read more about his journey in this issue.

Summer brings us back to three of our favorite venues: the Ebell, the Hollywood Bowl and Santa Fe Opera.

On Father's Day (Sunday, June 18), African Americans for LA Opera, an Opera League chapter, presents baritone Ralph Cato at the Ebell. On Tuesday, July 11, League members and guests will gather for our annual Hollywood Bowl picnic and a performance of Verdi's *Requiem* under the stars. And in August, Hemmings honoree Brita Kohlfürst-Millard leads a League field trip to Santa Fe for a week of opera in the high desert.

Information and tickets for these events can be found, as always, on our website, operaleague.org.

It has been an honor and an absolute delight to have served as Opera League President. Thank you for your continued support and dedication to this wonderful organization.

See you at the opera!

Todd L. Calvin
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RIVERDANCING WITH SCARPIA

AN INTERVIEW WITH RALPH CATO, LYRIC BARITONE

By DIANE EISENMAN

African Americans for LA Opera (AALAO), a chapter of the Opera League, is proud to present the annual Father's Day Recital on Sunday, June 18th at noon at the Ebell of Los Angeles.

The featured vocalist will be lyric baritone, Dr. Ralph Cato, with veteran accompanist Althea Waites on the piano.

Ralph Cato has sung with orchestras across the U.S. and Europe, performed as soloist in several chorale groups, including the Pacific Chorale for over 20 years, and has participated in jazz festivals from Montreux to the Hague to Germany and Los Angeles.

Reviewers have praised his voice as "warm and mellow," a "warmly rounded voice" with a "charismatic" delivery.

Dr. Cato resides in Los Angeles and teaches vocal arts and diction for singers at the University of California, Riverside. He is also director of the Heritage Choir at L.A.'s Bel-Vue Presbyterian Church. This fall Dr. Cato will be teaching on the faculty at Pierce College in the San Fernando Valley.

BRAVO: HOW DID YOU DISCOVER YOUR LOVE OF MUSIC?

RALPH CATO: It was quite a journey of discovery. When I was seven, I was assigned the lead role in a musical called *This Old Man*. But at that point, I did not know I would choose to do this sort of thing for my life's work. Six years later, when I was 13 and in the eighth grade, I was asked to sing the solo in a work called *The Holy City*, to be performed before the entire school. After that, I thought I might like to pursue singing as a career. Also during these early years, I signed up for tuba lessons, and that's how I learned to read music. By the time I got to

high school, my dream was to be a pop singer, so I joined a rock band in addition to a rhythm and blues jazz band. This was around the time I started taking piano lessons. I practiced piano every day during my lunch hour, and practiced on weekends at Tulane. Eventually, I was accompanying the high school choir.

BRAVO: WHEN DID YOU BECOME PASSIONATE ABOUT OPERA?

RC: Not until college. After graduating high school in New Orleans, I moved out to Los Angeles to enroll at CSUN [California State University, Northridge]. I was a music major, and the music and theater departments were next door to each other, so I decided to try acting classes, as well as backstage courses, camera workshops, anything where I could learn about the stage and movie industries while keeping up with my music studies. The first theater production I was in at CSUN was a stage play called *Noah*. After that, I declared a minor in theater. Around the same time, my music studies led me to art songs and opera, not just pop music. In pop music, each song is shortlived, you are only as good as your last song. I found art songs and opera much more satisfying, and so I switched my path in CSUN's music school from pop to artistic. I wasn't totally new to this genre. My senior year in high school, I got to sing the role of the Judge in *Trial by Jury*, an operetta by Gilbert and Sullivan. And then at CSUN I got to sing in my first full-length opera, *The Ballad of Baby Doe* [by American composer Douglas Moore]. After that experience, I felt I might become passionate about opera. And then during my masters studies at USC, I sang the role of Dr. Bartolo in *The Marriage of Figaro*.

BRAVO: DO YOU HAVE ANY HEROES IN THE OPERA WORLD?

RC: So many. I would include [bass-baritone] José van Dam from Belgium, [baritone] Sherrill Milnes, especially as *Tosca's* Scarpia, [tenor] Luciano Pavarotti, [soprano] Leontyne Price, [soprano] Beverly Sills and, more recently, [LA Opera Young Artist alumna, soprano] Angel Blue.

BRAVO: WHAT STEPS DID YOU TAKE TO BECOMING A PROFESSIONAL SINGER?

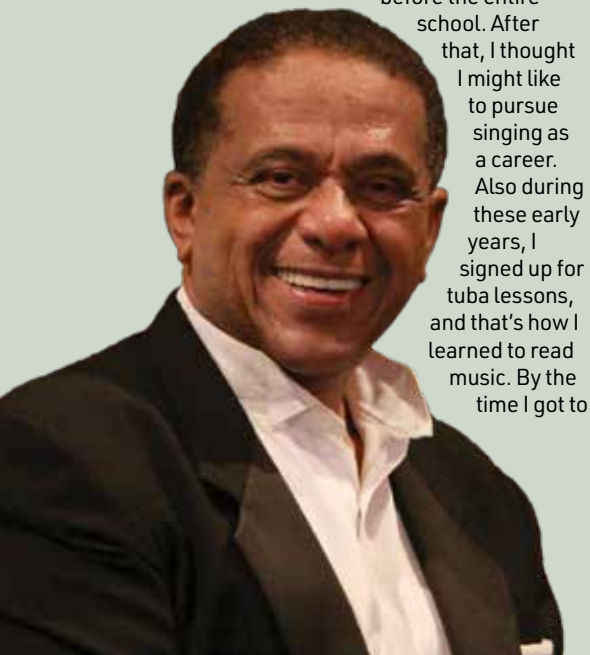
RC: When I was in college, I trained to have a low speaking voice and a singing range of over three octaves. Part of that training saw me conduct three church choirs and join the Albert McNeil Jubilee Singers, a well-known Afro American gospel group that traveled frequently. After graduating, I sang at every opportunity, even at [the historic] Bullocks department store, and I sang in the L.A. Jazz Choir at Pierce College. I joined Pacific Chorale and other groups in Southern California to gain all of the experience I could. I did anything I could do to be a better artist. I wanted to be good at all of it.

BRAVO: SO WE HAVE TO ASK, HOW DID AN OPERA SINGER LIKE YOU FIND YOURSELF IN A BROADWAY HIT LIKE RIVERDANCE, A SHOW FEATURING IRISH FOLK MUSIC AND DANCE?

RC: That happened while I was living in New York. I got a call from London to do a two-week gig in a show called *Riverdance*. This was the mid-nineties, *Riverdance* was still pretty new. Little did I know the show would continue for several years, and that I would be traveling around the globe. Eventually, I left the show to pursue my doctoral studies in vocal performance at UCLA and received a teaching position there. But *Riverdance* called me back, this time for a tour in China. I couldn't say no. I worked it out with UCLA, traveling China with *Riverdance* while completing coursework on my downtime.

BRAVO: LOOKING BACK AT THE MANY ROLES YOU HAVE SUNG, WHICH ONES STAND OUT?

RC: I especially loved singing Amonasro in *Aida*, Scarpia in *Tosca*, Germont in *La Traviata*, Leporello in *Don Giovanni* and Escamillo in *Carmen*. And I have loved all the different roles I have sung across many productions of *Porgy and Bess*. 🌟



The Father's Day Recital, featuring baritone Ralph Cato and accompanist Althea Waites, takes place on Sunday, June 18 at noon at the Ebell of Los Angeles. For tickets, please go to the Opera League website, operaleague.org.

A REAL TREASURE

CONTINUED FROM COVER



ABOVE: (L TO R): LA Opera Board member Gillian Wagner, Honorees Robert Ronus and Brita Kohlfürst-Millard, and Opera League VP Gary W. Murphy



William Owens and Robert Ronus

Photos by Julie Levitow

London-born Robert Ronus and his late wife, Ann, have been enthusiastic supporters of opera and classical music in Los Angeles for over 30 years.

Robert serves as treasurer of the LA Opera Board of Directors and is a great friend and supporter of the Opera League. He and Ann shared a deep commitment to the artistry on LA Opera's stage and to ensuring that opera extended across the community through the many programs offered by LA Opera *Connects*, LAO's community engagement and education department.

The Opera League is honored to present Robert with this year's Peter Hemmings Award at our annual Hemmings Award Gala Dinner on May 21, wherein we recognize an individual who, over time, has made significant contributions to the development of opera in Los Angeles County.

Robert recently sat down for a discussion about his life in and love of opera. Read the full interview on our website, operaleague.org, and to buy your tickets for the May 21 Hemmings Dinner.

BRAVO: HAVE YOU ALWAYS BEEN AN OPERA FAN?

ROBERT RONUS: I was not brought up in an opera family. My father was Swiss and not musical at all. However, my mother was quite musical.

In my teens, I became interested in cultural stuff and started to go to all sorts of things, particularly the theater and artsy films. Initially, I must admit that I preferred ballet to opera. I found opera a bit long and hard-going. Remember, this was before supertitles, while ballet—beautiful girls, dancing, Tchaikovsky... What's not to like?

I am a bit of a hoarder who keeps performance programs, and the earliest one [opera program] I have is from *Aida* in March 1962 at Covent Garden. I was 19 years old, and I guess I liked it. The next one, while visiting Hamburg in September 1963, was

an unlikely choice for a newcomer: *Salome*. However, I vaguely recall being impressed with it for a variety of reasons, including, no doubt, [German soprano] Anja Silja in the leading role.

A few years later, I took my wife, Ann, to see Michael Tippett's *The Midsummer Marriage*. I guess it was the first time I had heard an opera in English, and some of it sounded rather silly. I always remember this one scene: a character sings, "Knock then, Bella, and enquire within," and Bella replies, "There's no knocker, but a kind of bell." Ann had a great laugh over that, but I think the experience turned her off opera for a while. She was a very good pianist and much more into classical music: symphonies and piano. Her mother's whole family were professional musicians. Her mother became a professor of piano at the University of Queensland and had earlier played a piano recital at London's Wigmore Hall.

Ann and I were married for 53 years until she died in February 2022. Fifty-three years with only one wife—very good by L.A. standards!

ARTICLE CONTINUES ON PAGE 6 ▶

THE HEMMING'S CONNECTION

LA OPERA *CONNECTS* MARCHES TO THE BEAT OF A NEW DRUMMER AS FUNDS FROM THE HEMMING'S AWARD DINNER HELP MAKE POSSIBLE THAT TEAM'S COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS. By BILL GREEN

The proceeds from the Opera League's annual Peter Hemmings Award Dinner provide funding directly to LA Opera *Connects*, the hard-working team at LAO that oversees the company's community engagement and education programming. *Connects'* mission is "to share the wonder and promise of opera with all ages, neighborhoods and communities, because we know our connections enrich *all* our lives."

To that end, Hemmings proceeds support and help make possible many programs designed not only to expose our local communities to opera, but also to show people young and old how this unique art form can connect back to experiences in their own lives.

Examples of how proceeds from the Hemmings Award Dinner have made a difference include the Opera League Bus Fund that provides bus transportation for local schools so that their students may attend LAO dress rehearsals at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion; and the beloved summer Opera Camp, back this year for the first time since 2019, that provides kids ages nine to 17 with a two-week immersion in musical, dramatic and movement coaching.

BRAVO recently enjoyed a wide-ranging conversation with the head of *Connects*, Tehvon Fowler-Chapman, who just joined LAO's leadership team as *Connects* Vice President last October.

As a student, Tehvon's interest in music led him to be a percussionist. He spent 15 years primarily in bands and drum corps, with some experience along the way in orchestra pits and with marching and concert bands.

One of those bands performed a series of concerts playing selections of various operas including *Prince Igor*, *Turandot* and many others. Tehvon still remembers being enthralled the first time he heard *Turandot*, and in general fondly remembers the positivity and warmth of being part of a musical group, the camaraderie and the commitment to achieving a common goal under the steady hand of a conductor. He strives to create a similar environment in organizations he leads.

His most recent positions prior to LAO include serving as the Executive Director

of the Washington Concert Opera, which specialized in producing concert productions of operas, and working with the Debbie Allen Dance Academy in L.A. Both experiences saw Tehvon define and pursue a set of artistic goals while juggling staffing and fundraising responsibilities. He believes what he learned with Washington Concert Opera during the pandemic will be crucial in helping him lead *Connects*. At Washington Concert Opera, the pandemic forced his team to reckon with a complete reevaluation of the organization's goals, discuss how best to achieve those goals and to rethink how an opera company can, as part of those goals, discover and attract new audiences across a diverse community.

Tehvon and the *Connects* team are focused on broadening and strengthening the many programs already in place while striving always to remove perceived barriers for local communities to experience and enjoy opera.

Connects produces the long-cherished student matinees and opera performances for seniors; provides opportunities for college-age music students to attend rehearsals; funds development of operas designed for young people based on themes relating to contemporary and resonant issues, and manages the rehearsals and performances of those operas in schools; and coordinates hospital visits by professional opera singers.

One of the oldest and closest collaborations between the Opera League and LAO, dating back to LAO's founding in the 1980s, is the Community Educator program, managed by LAO *Connects*. Community Educators are Opera League volunteers who are LAO-trained to deliver engaging multimedia presentations at accessible venues across Los Angeles County. *Connects* coordinates the Community Educator programming at venues including libraries, community centers, civic groups, schools and senior centers.

All of these opera-enriched and -enriching programs are part of a grand plan to provide "opera for all" in our communities, opening operatic doors for those who may not always be able to purchase a ticket at

the Dorothy Chandler. "And age is never a factor," Tehvon stresses.

Tehvon looks forward to continuing and deepening the close partnership with the Opera League, and is deeply grateful for the funding the League provides, both from the Hemmings gala as well as other volunteer-powered League efforts, such as our Shop at the Opera.

Speaking of volunteers, Tehvon gives a special shoutout to those tireless eager Leaguers who show up to lend a hand during *Connects* programs, assisting students as they get their first big dollop of culture on the Plaza, guiding families through activities during Saturday Morning at the Opera and otherwise helping to host students and educators at the many events planned for them by *Connects*.

If you haven't already bought your ticket to this year's Hemmings, taking place on Sunday, May 21, we hope you go to our website, operaleague.org, and help the League support LA Opera *Connects* as it continues to find ways to reach out and engage our diverse community. 🌟



A REAL TREASURE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

BRAVO: I'M CURIOUS ABOUT YOUR INVOLVEMENT WITH THE OPERA LEAGUE.

RR: Well, as LA Opera Board Treasurer, I thought I should support the Opera League. It's our major volunteer support group with very devoted members. I felt somewhat guilty with all of these volunteers doing great things and me just being a passive consumer.

I began to attend several of the League's programs and always enjoyed them. You have some excellent lecturers. I joined a trip to San Francisco Opera that [past Opera League President] Kathy Crandall organized some years ago, and more recently I joined [Opera League board member and fellow Hemmings honoree] Brita [Kohlfürst-Millard's] trips to San Diego and to Austria and Switzerland last summer. It was fabulous, absolutely fabulous. Brita's trips are the best! She is such a good organizer. And the cost is a lot more reasonable than many of the

major travel companies, and just as good, if not better. I'm so pleased you are honoring her with the [inaugural] Hemmings Volunteer Award this year.

BRAVO: SPEAKING OF THE LA OPERA BOARD OF DIRECTORS, HOW DID YOUR INVOLVEMENT WITH THAT COME ABOUT?

RR: [LA Opera Board Member and past Hemmings honoree] Gene Stein was a colleague of mine at Capital Group, and he was the treasurer of LA Opera and very active on the board.

When I retired from fulltime work at Capital in 2006 and went parttime, Gene, who knew I went to the opera, told me I should join the board. I wasn't really sure what I was getting into, but it has been a wonderful experience.

I joined the Education Committee, now known as LA Opera *Connects*,

under Stacy Brightman, who was just fantastic. We learned all about the programs for schools, Opera Camp and many other marvelous programs. One time, Stacy arranged to bring a group of homeless veterans to see Verdi's *Macbeth*. Of course, all these guys could identify with a mad, ambitious general. We got these amazing letters back: "Never been to an opera; never thought of going to an opera; never dreamed I'd like an opera; but I loved it!"

BRAVO: I'M ALWAYS CURIOUS TO ASK FELLOW OPERA LOVERS ABOUT THEIR FAVORITE OPERA.

RR: Well, if I had to choose one—and it is not easy, there are about six others very close behind—I'd say *Rigoletto* is my favorite opera.

As someone who does not have the musical ear of many of my opera friends, the theatrical and visual sides of opera are very important. I like operas with a good story, and *Rigoletto* fits the bill, with wonderful and memorable characters. Visually, it lends itself to great sets and costumes. And then there is Verdi's marvelous music, full of drama and excitement. There is a reason why "La donna è mobile" is one of the best-known arias in opera, although I always think it is unfair to women, and "L'uomo è mobile" makes more sense.

Ann was much more musical than me. Her favorite opera was *Der Rosenkavalier*, which I just saw again at the Met, and I can see why. The music is gorgeous! 🌟

For more of the fascinating conversation, wherein Robert discusses his London roots and early years in Europe and Los Angeles, visit our website at operaleague.org. And while you are there, if you have not yet done so, be sure to book your place at our May 21 Peter Hemmings Award Gala Dinner. We can't wait to see you there!



Photo by Julie Levitow

ABOVE: Hemmings Award Co-Chair Mary Lewis and Chair Marlene Chavez with Robert Ronus

A MASTER CLASS By TOM LADY IN VOLUNTEERING

BRITA KOHLFÜRST-MILLARD MAKES HISTORY AS THE OPERA LEAGUE'S FIRST RECIPIENT OF THE NEW HEMMINGS AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN VOLUNTEERING.



It is an age-old Austrian adage that once in your life, you must plant a tree.

True to her overachieving nature, Vienna native Brita Kohlfürst-Millard planted three trees: one at her home in West Los Angeles and the other two back in Salzburg, where she lived for many years as a young adult working in her family's hotel business. Fun fact: Brita at one time was the personal assistant to the Princess Sophie of Hohenberg, the only daughter of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

"When my older grandson visited me in L.A. many years ago—he's thirty-three now!—we planted an avocado tree," she smiles. "But back in Salzburg, he and his brother each got their own tree: cherry for the older one and apricot for the younger one. They each baptized their tree and take good care of them over there, and yes, whenever they visit me in L.A., they check in and say hello to the avocado tree."

On Sunday, May 21, the Opera League's annual Peter Hemmings Award Gala Dinner, our flagship fundraising event, will mark the start of a new era for the League. In addition to recognizing an individual who, over time, has made significant contributions to the development of opera in Los Angeles County (see cover story on Robert Ronus), we are presenting a second Hemmings Award for significant contributions to opera through volunteering.

This inaugural award will go to veteran Opera League member, board member, volunteer and fundraising powerhouse, Brita Kohlfürst-Millard.

Recognizing Brita as the first recipient of this award is beyond appropriate, as it was Brita whose volunteering prowess, cultivated back in Austria, helped supercharge the League's fundraising program soon after she joined our ranks in 2005.

Indeed, Brita pioneered many events that have become highly anticipated annual traditions, such as the springtime jaunts up and down the coast to Santa Barbara and San Diego, epic summer journeys to Germany and Austria for opera and cultural immersion, and of course the treasured August tradition of spending a week soaking up opera in the high desert of Santa Fe.

While getting all that off the ground, Brita played critical roles in programming and popularizing League events closer to home, such as Backstage Magic, the LA Opera season preview and the master classes with LAO Young Artists.

And it was Brita who helped mainstream the Hemmings Gala, as the Opera League had only just established this event in 2004, the year before she joined the League. Brita has since chaired Hemmings several times.

So what will she do now that she's achieved this summit?

After this August's Santa Fe trip, Brita will bid adieu to L.A.'s sunny climes and relocate back to Salzburg to be closer to her two children, two grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

But will that mean retiring from the Opera League?

"I want to remain connected to the Opera League," she says. "I'm thinking about continuing to organize fundraiser trips for League members in Europe.

"I will also be getting involved again with the International Foundation Mozarteum, like I was before coming to the U.S., financially supporting them in collecting Mozart-signed memorabilia. I helped them produce a book about the Cuban Mozart Society, for example."

Relocating to Salzburg completes a circle of sorts, as it was Salzburg's fecund cultural landscape where a young Brita planted a metaphorical tree, a deep-rooted love and passion for the arts that bloomed into the difference-making skillsets she would bring to the Opera League.

For the entirety of the 1980s, Brita was assistant manager at the International Foundation Mozarteum, home to the annual

Mozart Week (Mozartwoche) and concert series. This is where Brita cut her teeth on the operations side of things, such as juggling logistics, planning and coordinating, communications and marketing and all the cultivating of relationships that implies.

In subsequent years, Brita got involved in the annual Salzburg Summer Festival. She also became program director of the American Friends of the Salzburg Festival, a group co-founded by the late Richard D. Colburn, music philanthropist and namesake financier of the Colburn School in downtown Los Angeles; and the late Joseph F. "Joe" Troy, the Harvard-educated lawyer who also co-founded the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra and served on the LA Opera board of directors.

In the years between landing in L.A. in 1990 and joining the League in 2005, Brita continued cultivating her love of volunteering, structured around her knack for operational acumen, at events such as the Los Angeles Times Festival of Books, where she volunteered for close to ten years.

After landing her musicology degree at UCLA, becoming the first Bruin to do so summa cum laude, Brita landed a job as an academic counselor in UCLA's College of Letters and Sciences. Such a job allowed her to continue nurturing those very traits that helped her thrive in the volunteer-verse, traits such as empathy, emotional intelligence and active listening. Students would literally come into Brita's office asking for a hug.

When she finally found her way to the Opera League in 2005, the League leadership recognized straightaway the talent in their midst. Brita laughs as she marvels at her earliest League memories. "My first year, I took on the LA Opera season preview, which at the time was at the Biltmore Hotel in downtown L.A., as well as the master class, for which I was able to get the Russian baritone Vladimir 'Vlad' Chernov to be the guest singer-instructor. Those first two events turned into big wins and helped seal my reputation that I had a knack for event planning and operations."

And the rest, as they shall very soon say, is Hemmings history. 🌻



MY FIRST OPERA:

KARYN BENKENDORFER

By GARY W. MURPHY

Observant Opera League members may have noticed a new face volunteering at our Shop at the Opera in the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion lobby, or at one of our recent cast dinners. If so, you were probably noticing one of our newest Opera League members.

A native of Southern California, Karyn Benkendorfer has many years of experience in the entertainment industry as a writer-director-producer for television and film. She has also worked in creative advertising, international distribution and sales, publicity, programming, acquisitions and promotions for four international networks.

Karyn co-chaired the Producers Guild of America's Diversity Workshop and is former chair of its Documentary/ Non-Fiction Committee. She has been invited twice by the Royal Film Commission Jordan to teach production workshops in Amman and is an active member of the Human Rights Watch L.A. Film Club Committee.

As a storyteller, Karyn is engaged in changing the conventional narrative through creating impactful content. To that end, she focuses on contemporary global issues including human rights, social justice, climate change, gender equality and diversity and inclusion.

And she loves opera!

BRAVO: HAVE YOU ALWAYS BEEN AN OPERA FAN?

KARYN BENKENDORFER: Yes! It's such a beautiful way to tell a story. The Music Center is such a special place to me. When I was in high school, I first attended a performance at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. My high school organized a field trip to attend a performance, as well as a backstage tour. It was magical. One highlight was meeting the incredible actor Robert Morse, who took the time to speak with our group and answer our questions. The memory has stayed with me all these years, and it was my first time seeing a production of that scale. I loved every minute of it.

In college, I had the chance to study abroad in London, where going to the theatre, opera and ballet was amazingly affordable, so I went to several performances on a bi-weekly basis. It was the best of times most definitely. One evening, I was outside English

National Opera on St. Martins Lane when I saw a poster for *Don Giovanni*, so I decided to get a student ticket for only five pounds for that evening's performance. My seat was in the center stalls, five rows back. I was mesmerized by the staging and performances. The sets, costumes, Mozart's music and the orchestra were flawless.

That was it. From then on, I would take advantage of all opportunities to visit opera houses as I travel the world. My personal favorite is the Paris Opera House.

BRAVO: ONE ADDITIONAL PLUS TO OPERAS SUNG IN ITALIAN IS THAT YOU CAN PRACTICE YOUR ITALIAN LANGUAGE SKILLS, DON'T YOU THINK?

KB: This is true! A few years ago, I saw LA Opera's production of *The Barber of Seville* with Juan Diego Florez, Joyce DiDonato and Nathan Gunn. I had spent a lot of time in Italy through the years, and I had studied Italian, but after attending this performance, I was inspired to pick up my Italian language studies.

Recently, after [LA Opera's production of] *The Marriage of Figaro* earlier this season, I realized my Italian had improved. Plus, the recent *Figaro* was so visually stunning with such fluid staging, it was so engaging. It's inspiring to see different interpretations and the retelling of these timeless stories.

BRAVO: YOU'VE WORKED YOUR ENTIRE CAREER IN THE ENTERTAINMENT BUSINESS. DID YOU GROW UP IN A SHOWBIZ FAMILY?

KB: Actually, I haven't always worked in entertainment, but I did grow up here in Southern California. And no, I had no family connections in the business but along the way have had amazing mentors. After I graduated from university with a degree in film and television, I wanted to pay it forward, so before I started my career in entertainment, I decided to teach high school for three and a half years.

At a very young age, I knew I wanted to tell stories and make movies. I would write scripts and shoot the stories with an old Super8 camera. My brothers and I would then edit them on an old splicer. My mom exposed us to many creative and artistic performances. I recall one adventure when I was three to the Bob Baker Marionette Theater. My parents divorced when we were young, and my mom went to work full-time, but she made every effort to expose us to the creative arts whenever possible and to encourage us to take dance, music and summer theater courses at the local elementary school.

Movies were often a family outing, and my first film was *Mary Poppins*. I had just turned four, and I was transfixed for the entire two hours and 19 minutes. I still love watching that version, and I think it was part of my decision to study abroad in London. And my love of film.

BRAVO: ESTABLISHING CONNECTIONS WITH OTHERS IS SO IMPORTANT FOR OUR OVERALL HEALTH. IS THAT ONE OF THE REASONS YOU JOINED THE OPERA LEAGUE?

KB: I am an extrovert for sure, and having to be isolated during Covid, like for so many, had its challenges. During that time, I continued to volunteer for my guild and Human Rights Watch but wanted to explore other opportunities.

This past January, I was online and came across the Opera League site [operaleague.org]. I sent an email for more information, and League President Todd Calvin immediately responded. We emailed back and forth, and because Todd was so helpful and gracious, I decided to join the next day.

Everyone has been so welcoming. Meeting other members through volunteering has been a perk of joining this organization.

My first time volunteering for a cast dinner was earlier this season for *The Marriage of Figaro*. I found the cast and crew to be the most gracious, grateful and kindest group I have had the pleasure to meet. Also, what stood out to me was that [LA Opera Music Director and Principal Conductor] James Conlon took the time to thank each one of the [Opera League] volunteers. I was very impressed with the entire experience, and it was so enjoyable also because of my fellow volunteers.

BRAVO: IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU HAVE ALREADY SEEN QUITE A BIT IN YOUR TIME AS AN OPERA LEAGUE VOLUNTEER.

KB: That's true. I volunteered at the Shop at the Opera during *The Marriage of Figaro* and noticed how many families attended. What a special way to share time together and create memories.

The Shop at the Opera is such a great way to meet and engage with people. Two attendees that evening were from the Spanish Consulate in Los Angeles, and another couple was looking for their Valentine's Day gifts for each other. Spoiler alert: they found them. I helped a young man who was attending opera for the first time at the encouragement of his friend. He was so excited and didn't want to miss a moment, so he purchased a pair of opera glasses from the Shop. As a volunteer, you have an opportunity to help people make memories that they will hold for a lifetime.

BRAVO: HAVE YOU TAKEN ADVANTAGE OF OTHER LEAGUE VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES?

KB: Most definitely. I am now qualified for the Education team's volunteer activities, and I've helped on a few cast dinners already. I also volunteered at our recent gatherings at the Los Angeles Athletic Club, which have been so informative and enjoyable.

Volunteering for all these programs really touches me deeply and makes me feel connected to my community and the wonderful treasure that LA Opera is.

I have always loved the opera, but I had no idea that I could become a part of such an astounding organization. It's been such a great gift to be able to use my skills for something I believe in so much.

BRAVO: AND FINALLY, WE CAN'T LET YOU GO WITHOUT ASKING YOU TO SHARE ONE OF YOUR MOST FAVORITE OPERA MEMORIES.

KB: I was in New York City for work and had some unexpected time off, so I decided to head over to the Lincoln Center. That night featured Juan Diego Florez in [Gaetano Donizetti's] *The Daughter of the Regiment*. It was sold out, so I waited in line for returns, and because of the kindness of strangers who had an extra ticket, I had one of the most memorable nights in my opera-going life.

Juan Diego sang nine high C's in his "Ah, mes amis" aria, and the crowd went wild, and he sang it again. It's no wonder *The Daughter of the Regiment* may be my favorite opera, as the entire experience at the Met was so remarkable.

I was also fortunate to see Juan Diego Florez in recital this year at the Dorothy Chandler. What an evening! Another amazing performance and evening.

Opera connects people from all walks of life. 🌟

"Volunteering for all these programs really touches me deeply and makes me feel connected to my community and the wonderful treasure that LA Opera is."

IN THE PIT

BRADY STEEL, ORCHESTRA PERSONNEL MANAGER

INSTRUMENTAL SUPPORT

By DIANE EISENMAN

Little four-year-old Brady Steel was given the opportunity of a lifetime: to be the first four-year-old to play the bass.



His first bass teacher, Don Beller, thought about trying to teach Brady using the Suzuki method, a method that is “basically learning by ear,” Brady says. “Hear this, then play it on your instrument, much like learning a language as a child.”

Brady’s parents agreed. Thus, young Brady found himself as a preschooler playing a baby cello tuned to fourths with a half-size viola bow.

The result? Teacher and student were championed in an issue of *Strings Magazine*, and they still believe Brady was the first.

Problem was, Brady didn’t want to practice. He became good enough to participate in various groups during his school years, but he stopped taking private lessons after second grade until his senior year of high school. While he enjoyed playing, Brady was self-taught and didn’t really take it seriously.

Fortunately, he had some good teachers in the public schools of his native Billings, Montana. In high school he was able to participate in orchestra, jazz band and church band. Bass players were hard to come by in Billings, so he actually got to do a lot of playing. “It was the week I got two paid offers doing what I was already doing that I started thinking that this is something I could actually consider [as a profession],” he says.

Someone told Brady the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York happened to be holding auditions for their fall freshman class in nearby Seattle. Brady auditioned, “having no idea what I was doing,” he laughs, and went home to wait for that rejection letter.

A month later, a fat envelope landed in his mailbox. Brady looked at the envelope and cried, “Oh shit! They said YES!”

He and his parents agreed he could try out Eastman for a year and see if he liked it. He discovered that he liked hanging out with other musicians, enjoyed playing and earning money doing it. “Life was good.”

While attending the University of Colorado in Boulder for graduate school, Brady joined the Boulder Philharmonic where he helped

with personnel and trained as an assistant orchestra manager, in addition to playing.

A year later he moved to Los Angeles and landed a few odd jobs in TV production before he found a training position in orchestra management with the Young Musicians Foundation’s Debut Orchestra, a pre-professional three-year training program for orchestra members and management.

During the second year of training with Debut, Brady overheard a visiting guest conductor announce that a friend of his was looking for an assistant. Was anyone interested? Brady’s hand shot up without knowing anything about the job, and he offered to drive this conductor to the airport the next day in the hopes of finding out more. By the time they reached the airport, Brady was getting a recommendation for the job.

The job? Assistant Orchestra Personnel Manager at LA Opera.

Thus, in 2002, Brady wrapped up his third-year training at Debut while serving his first year with LA Opera. Six years later, LAO’s personnel manager resigned, and Brady took over that position on a six-month trial basis. During intermission of *Carmen* in October 2008, in front of the whole orchestra, LA Opera Music Director James Conlon offered him the job of LAO’s personnel manager permanently.

Brady found himself in an adrenalin panic at a dream come true. “I didn’t even know how much I wanted it until then.”

Today, 15 LAO seasons later, Brady is still loving it. “I get to work with the best musicians in the world playing the most amazing music,” he raves. “I get to call my friends and say, ‘Hey, do you want to come play some music? I’ll pay you!’ And then I get to listen to my friends play music, and I get paid!” Brady loves that every day is different, yet always interesting, fun and challenging “despite the notes on the page being always the same.”

When he first started his management career, Brady did not have exposure to opera, as being the assistant was more about management, less about opera. Hence, upon becoming personnel manager, he dove into

learning all he could about the art form, including following along with the score during rehearsals.

What exactly does an opera orchestra personnel manager do? Brady explains that, besides scheduling the musicians needed for each opera, calling replacements for last-minute cancellations and scheduling annual auditions, he is the support person orchestra members call whenever they have an issue. "I always want to do my best to make sure the orchestra musicians can have as few distractions as possible," he explains. "A broken chair, a missing music stand, overseeing all aspects of the orchestra's day-to-day life in the pit."

Whenever the orchestra is holding a meeting, Brady is present. He sits at a special table in front of the pit during every rehearsal, going in and out of the pit as needed. He is the main point of contact between opera management and the orchestra. He ensures union rules are followed and benefits get paid.

Most of all, the job demands flexibility.

Like all of LAO's orchestra personnel, Brady is employed parttime. He also works as personnel manager at MUSE/IQUE, Los Angeles Master Chorale, Dance at the Music Center Orchestra (for visiting companies) and the New West Symphony. He also maintains a pool of freelance musicians.

Asked what he does for fun, his immediate answer is, "I work!" To shut his brain off on occasion, he enjoys coffee and a good book, a glass of wine with a movie or happily cooking on his deluxe BBQ grill.

He has one request for LA Opera on his opera bucket list: *Rusalka* by Anton Dvorak. In 1997 he played bass in this opera outside a castle in Heidelberg, Germany for ten performances. He recalls it being an all-embracing experience, from the beautiful setting to the amazing music to the outdoor ambiance, all the senses alive.

"I am incredibly grateful to the volunteers from the Opera League," he enthuses. "I've been lucky enough to have League members help us with orchestra auditions, and it's wonderful when our nervous candidates are met by your smiling faces. You've all become an integral part of the audition process, and I'm looking forward to resuming auditions next season." 🌸

ALL THE WORLD'S A QUIZ SHAKESPEARE MEETS OPERA

*"O, beware, my lord, of the opera quiz:
It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on."*

Okay, so Iago was referring to jealousy, not opera quizzes, but we couldn't resist.

With LA Opera's production of Verdi's *Otello* closing out the 2022-23 season, we thought we'd take a parchment page from the rich theme of Shakespeare's influence on the opera stage for this edition. Countless composers have found inspiration from the Bard.

Care to test your gray matter's mettle? After all, it was Desdemona who declared so passionately in Act 5 of *Otello's* source material:

*"Kill me tomorrow;
let me take the opera quiz tonight."*

1. Verdi's *Falstaff* is generally regarded as the crowning glory of Italian comic opera. But it wasn't the first time that Shakespeare's lovable rogue turned up on the opera stage. One of the most enduring is an 1849 German adaptation of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, which still turns up on stages today once in a while. Who was the composer of *Die lustigen Weiber von Windsor*?

- A. Eugen d'Albert
- B. Albert Lortzing
- C. Otto Nicolai
- D. Carl Maria von Weber

2. Did Wagner influence Verdi? Wagner's operas make heavy use of Leitmotifs (recurring melodic phrases associated with a specific character, idea or thing). Verdi's *Otello* features one particularly distinctive Leitmotif, which is last heard in the opera's closing moments. What does it represent?

- A. A kiss
- B. A handkerchief
- C. Desdemona's innocence
- D. Iago's treachery.

3. Verdi's *Otello* isn't the only operatic adaptation of that Shakespearean tragedy. Seven decades earlier, one of the great bel canto masters premiered his version of *Otello*. It differs from Verdi's in several ways. Most notably, there are no less than three leading tenor roles—*Otello*, *Iago* and *Roderigo* (a supporting role in Verdi's work)—and there is an especially zingy duet for *Otello* and *Roderigo* ("Ah! vieni, nel tuo sangue" which

is well worth looking up on YouTube). Who was the composer of the first Italian *Otello*?

- A. Vincenzo Bellini
- B. Gaetano Donizetti
- C. Gioachino Rossini

4. Verdi completed three operas based on Shakespeare: *Macbeth*, *Otello* and *Falstaff*, and he made major steps toward composing another. His librettist, Antonio Somma, completed his work on it, but Verdi never got around to composing any music for it. The unrealized project might be the greatest "what if?" in opera. What would have been Verdi's fourth Shakespeare opera?

- A. *Amleto* (*Hamlet*)
- B. *La morte di Cesare* (*Julius Caesar*)
- C. *Re Lear* (*King Lear*)
- D. *La Tempesta* (*The Tempest*)

5. What is unusual about the role of Puck in Benjamin Britten's operatic adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?

- A. He sings more lines than anyone else in the cast.
- B. It's a speaking role.
- C. It's a role for a non-singing, non-speaking dancer.
- D. It's a trouser role.

6. Who created the title roles in the 1966 world premiere of Samuel Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra* for the inauguration of the "new" Metropolitan Opera House?

- A. Justino Diaz and Leontyne Price
- B. Robert Merrill and Roberta Peters
- C. Ezio Pinza and Renata Tebaldi
- D. Richard Tucker and Marilyn Horne

YAPPING WITH A YAP: ANTHONY LEÓN, TENOR

FROM PRE-MED TO
POST-OPERALIA


By JUDITH HYMAN

Fresh off winning the Metropolitan Opera Laffont Competition, tenor Anthony León will perform the Opera League Spring Recital on May 25.

While attending LA Opera's 2023-24 season preview in February, my fellow Opera League member Francine B. and I glanced glowingly at each other as we listened to Anthony León perform for the program.

While we both recognized that we were hearing an exceptional tenor voice, neither of us realized we had heard Anthony several times this past season, singing a variety of roles: Normanno in





Lucia di Lammermoor,
Spoletta in *Tosca* and Don
Curzio in *The Marriage of Figaro*.

I knew too, at that moment, that Anthony was to be my next “Yapping with a YAP” interviewee.

The interview would have to be remote to accommodate Anthony’s rigorous travel schedule, for soon after the season preview, he was enroute to Paris to perform four arias for a 25th anniversary special on Mezzo TV, the French TV channel devoted to classical, jazz and world music.

Born in Riverside, California, Anthony was raised in a Cuban and Colombian musical family, with a tenor father, soprano mother and four tenor uncles. He was listening to opera before he could talk, and by the time he was two, he was singing *Rigoletto*. “While my extended family does run a few medical clinics in the Riverside and San Bernadino areas,” he says, “my father’s primary occupation is in hospital administration.”

At first, Anthony was uncomfortable with the attention he received with his singing and wanted, instead, to follow in his parents’ footsteps. Entering college as a pre-med student, he says, “The itch [to sing] was always there. Whenever I had a chance, I would go listen to

the
Three
Tenors, sing or
play my sax or the piano.
Music was always calling to me.”

That call persisted until Anthony finally dropped pre-med for music and graduated with a Bachelor of Music from La Sierra University in Riverside. From there, he headed across the country to the New England Conservatory of Music (NEC) in Boston focusing on Vocal Performance, studying under the guidance of Bradley Williams, “one of opera’s most sought-after tenors in the bel canto repertoire” and chair of NEC’s Voice Department.

Growing up just outside Los Angeles and attending many LA Opera productions in his youth, Anthony was always aware of LAO’s Domingo-Colburn-Stein Young Artist Program. In May of 2022, not long after completing his graduate voice work at NEC, he auditioned for the program. Then, that summer, he flew to Santa Fe to work with Dr. Stephen King, the LAO Young Artist Program’s head of vocal instruction. After singing the role of Remendado in *Carmen* for Santa Fe Opera, LAO’s former YAP director, Josh Winograde, offered Anthony the opportunity to be a YAP.

No sooner did he start the program last fall than this shooting star took first place at October’s Operalia. And in April, he was a winner of the Met’s National Council Auditions. If you’d like to bask in his tenor voice, head to YouTube and search for his name.

When he’s not thriving in opera, Anthony loves to jam on his sax with younger brother Andrew, himself a rock star on guitar, sax and clarinet. Spending time in nature, traveling, reading and binging his favorite shows are also favorite pastimes. His favorite ways to stay fit include boxing and jumping rope.

Meantime, you can look forward to hearing Anthony sing the role of Roderigo in LAO’s spring production of *Otello*, and take on Don Ottavio in next fall’s LAO season-opening *Don Giovanni*. 🌸

The spring recital featuring tenor Anthony León will take place Thursday, May 25 at the Ebell of Los Angeles. Tickets are available at our website, operaleague.org.

REQUIEM FOR A BOWL

VERDI'S *REQUIEM* BEAUTIFIES THE OPERA LEAGUE'S ANNUAL SUMMER PICNIC AT THE HOLLYWOOD BOWL. By BILL GREEN

One of the Opera League's most popular events and cherished traditions will return on Tuesday, July 11.

That evening, Opera Leaguers and guests will enjoy a jaunt to the Hollywood Bowl for a twilight hour picnic followed by a nighttime concert under the stars featuring classical goodness in this most incomparable venue, with the LA Philharmonic's star conductor, Gustavo Dudamel.

The picnic portion of the event kicks off at 5:00pm in a reserved picnic plot on Highland Avenue at the foot of the Bowl. Your ticket purchase gets you a choice of delectable sandwiches and dessert treats, all courtesy of Mendocino Farms, which you can wash down with your choice of wine or non-alcoholic refreshments.

With bellies full of yum, we'll trek up the hill to the Opera League's reserved seating area where we'll bask in the aural glow of Verdi's *Requiem*, the sublime masterwork the maestro composed in 1874 in honor of the writer and philosopher Alessandro Manzoni. Featuring the LA Phil and the Los Angeles Master Chorale, Maestro Dudamel will begin waving the baton at 8:00pm. The featured artists include soprano and L.A. native Angel Blue, who graduated from LA Opera's Young Artist Program, as well as Guatemalan tenor Mario Chang, who sang the role of Rodolfo in *La Bohème* conducted by Gustavo Dudamel, as well as Ismaele in LAO's production of *Nabucco*.

When Dudamel last conducted this "darkly dramatic rollercoaster ride" of a piece for the Bowl a decade ago, the *Los Angeles Times* marveled at the "radical and wondrous performance that drew in the Bowl audience for moments of intimate, personal expression, while also soaring in the many massive moments that shook the Cahuenga Pass."

For tickets to what promises to be a "darkly" amazing experience, please head to the Opera League website at operaleague.org. Be sure you are logged into your Opera League account before placing your order. Due to the high demand this event usually sees, and the finite number of seats, there is a limit of four tickets per order. 🌟

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the event lead, Cathy Foldvary, at cfoldvary@aol.com.



OPERA LEAGUE CALENDAR OF EVENTS

SPRING AND

SUMMER 2023

Event details will be broadcast via operaleague.org with supporting eBlasts.

For Education events, all volunteer slots have been filled as of press time, but if you would like to join the volunteer wait list, or have any other questions about the Education programming, please contact Larry Verdugo at (626) 590-5697 or larryverdugo@icloud.com.

MAY

EDUCATION

Opera for Educators

Saturday, May 6 from 8am-12pm
LOCATION: Dorothy Chandler Pavilion,
4th Floor

OperaWise: Verdi's Otello

Monday, May 8 from
6:45pm-10:20pm
LOCATION: Dorothy Chandler
Pavilion

Opera Prep: Verdi's Otello

Wednesday, May 10 from
4:45pm-10:30pm
LOCATION: Dorothy Chandler Pavilion

GATHERINGS

Verdi's Otello

Monday, May 1 from 7pm-9pm
LOCATION: Private Residence
in Santa Clarita

Shakespeare's Othello and Verdi's Otello

Saturday, May 6 from 3pm-5pm
LOCATION: Private Residence
in Santa Monica

Verdi's Otello

Monday, May 8 from 7pm-9pm
LOCATION: Private Residence
in the San Gabriel Valley

RECITAL

Anthony León, Tenor

Thursday, May 25 at 8pm
LOCATION: Ebell Club of Los Angeles
VOCALIST: Anthony León, Tenor
ACCOMPANIST: Lucas Nogara

SPECIAL EVENTS

Otello Dress Rehearsal for Opera League Members at the Contributing and Premier Levels

Wednesday, May 10 at 7:30pm
LOCATION: Dorothy Chandler Pavilion

Peter Hemmings Award Dinner

Sunday, May 21 at 6pm
LOCATION: Jonathan Club

SEMINAR

Verdi's Otello

Sunday, May 7 from Noon-2pm
LOCATION: Dorothy Chandler Pavilion,
4th Floor,
Rehearsal Room 1

JUNE

RECITAL

African Americans for LA Opera (AALAO) Presents: Father's Day Recital

Sunday, June 18 at Noon
LOCATION: Ebell Club of Los Angeles,
Third Floor, President's
Tea Room
VOCALIST: Ralph Cato, Baritone
ACCOMPANIST: Althea Waites

GATHERING

Baseball and Opera

Sunday, June 25 from Noon-4pm
LOCATION: Los Angeles Athletic Club

JULY

SPECIAL EVENT

Hollywood Bowl Picnic and Concert: Verdi's Requiem

Tuesday, July 11 at 5pm
LOCATION: Hollywood Bowl

AUGUST

SPECIAL EVENT

Opera in Santa Fe July 30-August 6

LOCATION: Santa Fe, New Mexico
RSVP AND QUESTIONS: Brita Kohlfürst-
Millard at bmillard_99@aol.com



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VOLUNTEERS WANTED

Located in the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion lobby and open during every LA Opera performance, the **Shop at the Opera** donates all proceeds to LAO's community engagement

and education programming. Our cast dinners during the week leading up to opening night are a critical source of nutritional, and spiritual, sustenance for LAO cast and crew.

If you are a League member and would like to volunteer for either the Shop, our Education or Cast Dinners team, please email us at info@operaleague.org. ☀️