

THEATER

High culture

Portland Opera's 40th season begins on a high note

BY FLOYD SKLAVER

When we think of the term "culture clash," most of us think of red states and blue states...or the war in Iraq...or people screaming at each other on talk radio. But the world of opera contains clashes just as dramatic.

For its 40th season, Portland Opera artistic director Chris Mattaliano has aptly assembled four pieces that speak to the passions of our times and the difficulties of disparate cultures living together. In each piece, the central characters come from markedly different backgrounds, cultures and beliefs, and each opera asks the question, "How can we live together harmoniously?"

The season opens Nov. 6 with the forgotten Rossini masterpiece *The Journey to Reims*, a delightful confection displaying the best that the composer of *The Barber of Seville* has to offer: comic timing, ensembles that build with intense crescendos and virtuosic coloratura that dances around the highest reaches.

The scene takes place as a group of international travelers passes through a fashionable spa on their way to the coronation of King Charles X at Reims. Instead of a plot, the opera is a procession of unconnected conversations between European aristocrats that gives more than a dozen singers the chance to act up a storm and dazzle with bel canto beauty. Taking inspiration from the art deco elegance of movies like *Grand Hotel* and *The Thin Man*, Mattaliano and director Casey Stangl have set the action in the 1930s.

Rossini wrote his vocal tour de force for three sopranos, one contralto, two tenors, two baritones and four basses. So much technical virtuosity in one place is rare, which may account for Viaggio's absence from the standard



Portland Opera rehearses for its season opener, the forgotten Rossini masterpiece *The Journey to Reims*

repertoire. Yet, this rarely produced work is a gem that is not to be missed.

The second show of the season is Puccini's great *Madama Butterfly* (Feb. 5, 8, 10 and 12), one of the best-known and best-loved operas ever. Taking place at the beginning of the 20th century, just 50 years after Japan was first opened to Westerners and at a time when the United States was fascinated by the exoticism of the Orient, Puccini's masterpiece tells of the tragic affair between a Navy lieutenant and a geisha.

Anyone familiar with the musical *Miss Saigon*, which recently played in Portland, will recognize the story of a woman trapped between cultures. A tale of poignant heartache with beautifully haunting melodies, *Madama Butterfly*

was identified by Puccini as his favorite operatic creation, and for 100 years—it was first produced in 1904—audiences have, too.

Next up is Kurt Weill's *Street Scene* (March 26 and 31 and April 2), based on the Pulitzer-winning play by Elmer Rice. Weill, composer of the jazz-inflected *The Threepenny Opera*, escaped Nazi Germany and went on to reinvent himself as a stylish Broadway composer.

Street Scene is considered by some to be Weill's greatest triumph, a mixture of Broadway sass with operatic class. Since the original play dealt with such realistic subject matter—immigrants and lower-class residents of a New York street pursuing their dreams while experiencing a complex series of seductions, betrayals and

murder—Weill used the vernacular sounds of American pop music to heighten the play's naturalistic language and create a fusion that was unusual at the time on the musical stage.

Finally, Muslims and Christians tangle and dance in Mozart's exotic favorite, *The Abduction from the Seraglio* (May 14, 17, 19 and 21). A delicious mix of comedy and drama, *Abduction* was Mozart's first huge success and has continued to be one of his most widely produced operas.

The beautiful Konstanze and her maid Blondchen are held prisoners in a Turkish harem under orders to love their captors. Their true sweethearts, the valiant Spanish Lord Belmonte and his servant Pedrillo, arrive to rescue them. But can they?

Featuring arias of astounding virtuosity next to music of incredible pathos and redeeming humanity, *The Abduction from the Seraglio* is one of Mozart's most demanding and beautiful works and has been delighting audiences for more than 200 years with its wickedly funny take on the battle between East and West, male and female.

When *Cultures Collide* is the name of a popular book that teaches businessmen to manage their work force across cultures. But it also could be the title of this season's offerings from Portland Opera, which will take audiences on a journey both entertaining and emotionally powerful. **J**

THE JOURNEY TO REIMS plays 7:30 p.m. Nov. 6, 11 and 13 at Keller Auditorium, 222 S.W. Clay St. Tickets are \$35-\$127 from 503-241-1802 or Ticketmaster. For more information visit www.portlandopera.org.

FLOYD SKLAVER is a Portland free-lance journalist.

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