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Sacramento-area classical music groups hit high notes in hard times

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Classical music is holding its own in Sacramento – despite a down economy – as major arts groups report hitting some financial high notes.

The Sacramento Opera, the Sacramento Philharmonic and the Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts reported robust ticket sales for the 2008-09 season, and they say their current subscription ticket sales look promising for next season.

The three are matching or bettering a trend in classical music nationally.

"In general the kinds of reports that we are hearing nationally is that tickets sales this past year look similar, in some instances, to last season," said Jesse Rosen, president and CEO of the League of Symphony Orchestras.

The bright news about ticket sales runs counter to the expectations that took hold last fall when the economy plunged.

"We were anticipating the worst for 2008-09 because we had never been faced with this kind of economic crisis," said Rod Gideons, executive director for the Sacramento Opera.

But the opera saw its ticket sales rebound 37.5 percent over what it sold in the lackluster 2007-08 season.

The healthy ticket sales, plus the cutting of operating expenses, resulted in the Sacramento Opera ending its fiscal year in the black. It also eliminated all its long-term debt, said Gideons.

Some of the effects of the sputtering economy worked in the company's favor.

With several opera companies closing and many others curtailing seasons, opera singers began to lower fees, and the concert booking circuit rapidly became a buyer's market.

Gideons said ticket sales also were boosted by the opera's entering the world of marketing via Facebook and Twitter.

Despite the good news, the company's subscriptions sales for the 2009-10 season are lower than expected, with sales running \$70,000 behind projections, said Gideons. But the fact that the opera company will not present its first show until November may be a factor. Last year the company sold 2,400 subscriptions.

The Sacramento Philharmonic posted strong ticket sales in 2008-09, selling 20 percent more single tickets last season than forecast, said Marc Feldman, the orchestra's executive director.

So far, the Philharmonic is beating its projections on next season's subscription ticket sales by 14 percent, and is close to meeting its goal of 1,100 subscriptions. The Philharmonic offers a package of four subscription concerts that range in cost between \$74 and \$296.

The company, which operates on a \$1.3 million budget, ended its 2008-09 season with a \$30,000 deficit. But Feldman said that deficit was substantially lower than expected.

"Last year we were looking at a fairly large budget deficit, that for us, would have been troublesome," said Feldman.

A successful pledge campaign brought \$150,000 into the orchestra's coffers, which proved crucial in making up for the vexing loss of corporate pledges. The reduced deficit came even as the orchestra received 5 percent less in support from a Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission Cultural Arts Award grant than it had received in 2008. That award, which 57 area arts nonprofits rely on each year, will be reduced further in 2010, said SMAC executive director Rhyena Halpern.

But the orchestra got relief from \$25,000 awarded by the National Endowment for the Arts as part of the Obama administration stimulus money.

Feldman believes that the encouraging ticket sales figures suggest that Sacramentans place an intrinsic value on the arts during tough economic times.

"In this economy, people do not want to stop their lives," Feldman said. "They want to have the arts, they want to go out and have a good time, and they want to be moved."

That viewpoint is shared by Sacramento Ballet artistic director Ron Cunningham.

"I think Sacramentans really value what we deliver and think that the classical arts are an important part of the social life in Sacramento," he said.

No local arts nonprofit is more emblematic of how such organizations flirt with disaster during trying economic times than the ballet during its 2008-09 season. The ballet was forced to cancel its February and March performances this year at the Community Center Theater because of a six-figure budgetary shortfall.

Instead of shutting down for the season, the company shifted its focus to offering performances at its studio. For the ballet, it proved a blessing in disguise, said Cunningham, as the intimate forum allowed it to reach out to a new audience.

"It made us more cognizant of what our demographics are and showed us that we can capture a new audience and a younger demographic," he said.

As a result, the company ended the year \$50,000 in the black, he said.

And next year's subscriptions are coming in at a healthy clip with the company now surpassing half of its intended goal of selling \$120,000 worth of subscriptions, Cunningham said.

By far, the largest presenter for classical music locally is the Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts.

Of its 62 performances next year, Mondavi is offering 22 classical music concerts.

In 2008-09, Mondavi sold more tickets than expected. "We had projected ticket sales income to be flat – at around \$2.75 million," said Mondavi Executive Director Don Roth. "Actual ticket sales were \$2.76 million. And we did fewer shows, so this is actually pretty good."

Subscription ticket sales last season were up 3 percent, said Roth. For the 2008-09 season Mondavi sold nearly 25,000 subscription tickets as part of its flexible packaging offerings, of which the biggest income generator is classical music.

And sales of subscriptions are looking healthy for the upcoming season, Roth said.

"The trend is upward for us with subscriptions," he said. However, Roth added that the number of tickets it will sell overall in 2009-10 will be lower than last year because the subscription packages entail fewer concerts.

Despite the strong ticket sales, the center ran a \$300,000 deficit for 2008-09, on an \$8 million annual budget. However, Roth said the center had expected a \$400,000 deficit last year.

Although ticket sales and contributions have risen the past two years, expenses remain an issue, Roth said.

As a result, the center recently moved to slash its operating expenses, including trimming its staff from 50 employees to 46 and offering seven fewer performances.

While economic challenges still loom, local arts organizations are faring better than expected, said the art commission's Halpern. Her organization surveyed 60 local arts groups last December and identified 15 at risk for closure.

"We were thinking that some of them might not make it through the year," said Halpern. "And none of them have failed. And I think that says a huge amount."

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