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Sac Opera scales back – and remains ambitious

eortiz@sacbee.com

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With the specter of a \$500,000 shortfall looming next season, the Sacramento Opera chose to scale back the number of staged productions to two from three.

The company will perform Gaetano Donizetti's "Elixir of Love" and Giuseppe Verdi's "La Traviata." In lieu of a third production, Executive Director Rod Gideons said, he plans a semi-staged performance of highlights from two Tchaikovsky operas – "Eugene Onegin" and "The Queen of Spades."

Even with trimming back the season, Gideons said, the company still faces a \$160,000 shortfall that he hopes to make up from donors.

"In all my years in this business, there has never been so much uncertainty as to what next year's ticket sales will be or what our contributions will be."

The Sacramento Opera, along with other opera companies nationwide, have seen contributions and subscriptions falter as their patrons rein in spending to weather the recession. Even grants are dwindling because the sliding stock market has depleted foundation endowments and government tax coffers have declined with incomes, property values and spending.

The board of the Sacramento Opera considered several options to mitigate the shortfall: the elimination of the third opera, the dropping of two of the opera's three Tuesday performances, or staff furloughs.

"Virtually every opera company is cutting back," said Marc Scorca, president and CEO of Opera America, the leading opera advocacy organization in the United States. "It's a necessary step to preserve the health of companies and to be in a good state of affairs to restore programming when the economy improves."

"So, I'm optimistic that the Sacramento Opera has made a wise choice about short-term financial management."

Subscription sales will tell

The huge unknown is how the economy will affect subscriptions and contributions.

The next three months will reveal how deeply the Sacramento Opera will be affected. Subscription-renewal solicitations will arrive in patron mailboxes this week.

"Perhaps subscriptions will fare better than we expect as people cancel trips to Europe and devote their dollars to the local cultural community," Scorca said.

Season opens in autumn

The company's season opens Nov. 20 with Donizetti's bel canto gem "Elixir of Love," a two-act comic opera wherein a farmer resorts to magic to win the heart of a rich young woman.

"The beauty of it is it doesn't have to stay frozen in the early 19th century," said Timm Rolek, artistic director and conductor of the Sacramento Opera.

For this "Elixir," the company picked a Kansas City Opera production set in the Napa Valley in the 1930s.

The company will bring back "La Traviata" – last performed here in 2003 – for three performances in February. The opera, based on an Alexandre Dumas play, is from a Utah Opera production. Cast and director have yet to be chosen, Rolek said.

But Jose Maria Condemi has signed on to direct. A former Adler Fellow in stage direction at the San Francisco Opera, Condemi directed Puccini's "Suor Angelica", "Gianni Schicchi" and "La Bohème" for the Merola Opera Program, and Mozart's "Così fan tutte" for the main stage of the S.F. Opera.

The concert staging of Tchaikovsky's "Eugene Onegin" and "The Queen of Spades" will bring two works rarely performed in Sacramento to the Community Center Theater in May 2010. Both operas are based on writings by Alexander Pushkin. Four singers will share the stage with the orchestra for the concert, Rolek said.

"Rather than simply do highlights from each show, what I want to do is take each of these operas and condense them into two 60-minute operas without the ballet or chorus."

That performance will also make minimal use of props, plus an actor who will perform the part of Pushkin, he said. The company is also considering using projections for the concert.

Staying true to the mission

Despite the economic obstacles it faces, Gideons believes the company has stayed true to its philosophy of offering vibrant and provocative programming.

"We want to communicate to the public that our third production is not just a concert, it's more like a cross between a concert and a full-blown staging," said Gideons.

Season subscription tickets go on sale today. Single tickets go on sale July 17. For more information, call the Sacramento Opera at (916) 737-1000 or visit <http://sacopera.org>.

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