

**Las Vegas Philharmonic
2009-2010 Season
Program Notes**

By Richard McGee, Associate Conductor/Educational Coordinator

Masterworks V, May 8, 2010

A Night at the Opera (for those people who think they hate opera)

If you are already an opera lover, congratulations! Tonight's program will include some of your favorite moments in all the literature. If you belong to the category in the title, and are sure that opera is not your thing, we invite you to let Maestro Itkin, our wonderful soloists, and the Las Vegas Philharmonic try and change your mind. I, like many of you, was sure that I did not like opera for part of my life. However, that opinion changed, and the more I learned about it, the more I liked it. First, consider the concept. People in 1600 were trying to invent the first multimedia form of entertainment, combining music, theatre, choreography, poetry, literature, visual art, and costuming. The whole idea was extraordinarily ambitious, and frankly, it took several years and many different approaches before the first really successful operatic venture (Monteverdi's *Orfeo*) established opera once and for all. Think about it – Hollywood movies, Broadway shows, even live rock concerts and music videos owe their existence to opera, that bold experiment of 400 years ago.

Operatic singing is one of the most amazing tasks that the human body can be asked to perform. In opera, there are normally no microphones, no public address systems, and often the orchestra outnumbered the singer fifty to one, or greater. Yet, through rigorous training that would humble even a professional athlete, opera singers' voices are developed to the extent that they can truly balance the volume of a full symphony orchestra. Furthermore, they can sing at all dynamic levels with musicality, clarity, and precise diction. Being in the performance hall with great operatic singers and a fine orchestra can be an unforgettable experience, so don't pass up an opportunity to witness firsthand a well-produced opera. You won't be disappointed!

Rather than giving a synopsis of every opera represented here this evening, these notes will "group" the selections by period and/or composer. Sit back, relax, and enjoy the Las Vegas Philharmonic in "A Night at the Opera!"

Some of the most familiar music from opera, indeed from all of classical music, comes from opera overtures. One of the prime examples of this is Gioacchino Rossini's timeless overture to *The Barber of Seville*. Its energy and humor are infectious; by the time this overture is finished, the audience is more than ready for the comedy that lies ahead in this delightful tale. Even without the opera, this overture has been performed on literally thousands of orchestral programs, and even is the musical basis for the Bugs Bunny/Elmer Fudd cartoon classic, "The Rabbit of Seville." In tonight's program, the music of Rossini (1792-1868), the leader of early Romantic Italian opera, is appropriately followed by his "heir", Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901). Verdi's operas are still the most often performed in the repertoire, and for one simple reason; the melodic sense and dramatic power of his music is unsurpassed. To illustrate the melodic inventiveness of

Verdi, consider the “Anvil Chorus” from *Il Trovatore*. Is there one child or adult in the Western Hemisphere who does not know that tune? In terms of dramatic effect, the first scene from the final act of *Aida* finds the hero Radames buried alive for a crime he did not commit. He is convinced he will never see his love (Aida) again. When he discovers that Aida is there with him, hidden in the tomb so that she could die in his arms, well, the music speaks volumes about the torn feelings of both characters.

In the first half of the program, the music of Rossini and Verdi is contrasted with works by two other composers. The first is the famous Toreador Song, from the opera *Carmen* by Georges Bizet (1838-1875). This opera, one of the best loved of all operas, embraced the idea of realism (later called *verismo*). Instead of frivolous *opera comique* or larger-than-life Wagnerian *music drama*, *Carmen* is the simple story of a promiscuous cigarette girl who woos a young soldier, then drives him to murder because of her free-loving ways. The “other man” in this case is the toreador Escamillo, who enters the stage singing the famous “Toreador Song.” Later composers would build upon the concept of *verismo*, including Giacomo Puccini and Leonard Bernstein. Bernstein’s masterpiece *Candide*, like *West Side Story*, fills a gap between “pure” opera and the Broadway musical, with *West Side Story* leaning more toward the Broadway side, and *Candide* more light opera or “operetta.” On tonight’s program, the delightful tune “Glitter and Gay” will be heard.

The second half of the program opens with one of the most famous of all tenor arias: the haunting “Vesti la Giubba” from *I Pagliacci* by Ruggero Leoncavallo (1857-1919). The pain of the main character is evident as he sings this familiar tune, with the translation “put on the greasepaint.” The next aria is “O mio babbino caro” from *Gianni Schicchi*, composed by Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924). This opera is a short, one act tale concerning a fight over an estate, a cleverly manufactured will and testament, greed, and of course, love. This aria, translated “Oh my dear Papa”, is sung by the daughter Lauretta to Schicchi, imploring him to help by “reading” the will of a deceased man in such a way that the estate will be divided among all the relatives. This lovely aria may sound very familiar to everyone, even those who don’t care for opera, because it has been used in movies and commercials for many years.

Pietro Mascagni (1863-1945) was an Italian conductor and composer, and though he composed several operas, his masterpiece *Cavalleria Rusticana* completely overshadowed his other compositional efforts. Tonight we hear two great segments from the opera, starting with the lush instrumental *Intermezzo*. Next, we return to music of Verdi, beginning with the riveting quartet from *Rigoletto*, a story of assassins, curses, and deception. What follows is Verdi’s romantic overture to the opera *Nabucco*. It is worth noting once again that, as with Rossini and Mascagni, many of operas most engaging musical moments might be instrumental overtures and interludes. The dramatic power of these instrumental pieces are often, as with film music, critical to maintaining or creating an emotional link to the visual action.

Reaching farther back in history, the next aria comes from the pen of the great Italian composer Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848). A contemporary of Rossini, Donizetti was nearly as celebrated during his lifetime, composing well over forty full operas. Tonight we hear a timeless example of *bel canto* (“beautiful singing”) opera, the *scena e preghiera* (scene and prayer) from the comic masterpiece *Don Pasquale*. The program ends with three diverse, yet equally beautiful works of composers from three different

lands. First, the haunting “Flower Duet” from *Lakme* by French composer Leo Delibes (1836-1891). Next, perhaps the most famous of all tenor arias by Puccini, “Nessun Dorma” from *Turandot*. This aria (“no one shall sleep”) is the proud dare of Calaf to the cold princess Turandot. If she can guess his name before morning, she can execute him, but if she does not, she must marry him. With the chorus singing “no one shall sleep” quietly in the background, Calaf defiantly informs the princess that no one shall know his name, his secret is safe within him, and that ultimately he will win. In fact, he does.

Finally, we return to music from Leonard Bernstein’s *Candide*, for a wonderfully inspirational chorus that concludes the operetta. *Make our Garden Grow* is both a marriage proposal and a prayer: a simple request to live a happy, normal life. It is a wish that we all share, eloquently stated through the wonder of music.