
Blending companies not an easy task

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Here's what the crowd sings to Turandot and Calaf, finally a happy pair, at the end of Puccini's "Turandot" (in Italian, of course):

"Glory to you! Glory to you!"

Let us extend this sentiment to Cleveland Opera, which ended its 2005-06 State Theatre season -- and, in many respects, its existence -- Saturday night, when the curtain fell on its splendid production of "Turandot." Earlier in the week, the company merged with Lyric Opera Cleveland to become Opera Cleveland, with the noble aims of preserving the identities of both troupes and opera in Cleveland.

To say that this endeavor will be tricky is to venture into the realm of understatement. No two opera companies in the same American city have done what Opera Cleveland has achieved, so far. Blending a company that presents grand opera (Cleveland Opera) with a colleague known for intimacy and innovation (Lyric Opera Cleveland) will result in a model that will be observed closely from near and far.

We won't really begin to know how things turn out until (a) Opera Cleveland announces the programming, in mid-May, for its first season, set for next April through fall 2007; (b) who will run the company as executive director, a post expected to be filled in two or three months; (c) who ultimately - this could be years away - will be sole artistic head of the new company, which is being guided by Cleveland Opera artistic adviser Leon Major and Lyric Opera Cleveland artistic director Jonathon Field; and (d) whether Opera Cleveland can become a real national player.

The people who've come together to create Opera Cleveland deserve hearty applause for saving two companies that were struggling for support in a burdened artistic environment. Professional opera will continue in Cleveland, if on a somewhat reduced basis, since plans for the new company's grand-opera portion call for two productions per season, rather than the four Cleveland Opera presented.

The new powers-that-be at Opera Cleveland have taken on a huge responsibility: nurturing an artistic vision that preserves and extends the traditions of both former companies, without allowing one to consume the other. Possible? Only time will tell.

Peter Rubin, former president of Cleveland Opera and newly elected president of Opera Cleveland, was encouraging by saying last week that the new company hopes "artistically to make a dual-edged statement to the audience: Opera Cleveland will be home to

standard repertoire and will introduce operas we haven't seen here, some contemporary, some by American composers."

The fact that Opera Cleveland will do so only from spring through fall must be disappointing to people whose operatic cravings don't end when temperatures drop. Rubin said Cleveland Opera had difficulty selling tickets in December (competition from other entertainment events in town) and February (what else? the weather). It is feasible, he said, that the new company could present a winter production in an unconventional venue.

But most artistic plans for coming years remain to be discussed. The only definite performances are Cleveland Opera's presentation of Paul Dresher's "The Tyrant" next month at the Cleveland Play House's Bolton Theatre, Lyric Opera's season this summer at the Play House's Drury Theatre and an Opera Cleveland gala Friday, Oct. 6, at Playhouse Square.

For Opera Cleveland to have true impact locally and nationally, it must continue on the upward artistic swing Cleveland Opera initiated with the arrival of general director Robert Chumbley (who left mysteriously in October) and artistic adviser Major, while giving equal consideration to the Lyric Opera aspect.

Rubin said the new company's artistic priorities are voices, orchestra, staging and production. But first, Opera Cleveland will have to show its sense of adventure in terms of repertoire.

The possibilities are endless. Cleveland Opera tended toward the mainstream. Lyric Opera made some daring choices. But unless my memory is going, I can't recall either troupe performing an opera by Barber, Bartok, Berg, Berlioz, Charpentier, Debussy, Delius, Dvorak, Janacek, Korngold, Massenet, Mussorgsky, Prokofiev, Rameau, Rimsky-Korsakov, Shostakovich, Smetana, Richard Strauss, Stravinsky, Weber or Weill.

Between them, Cleveland Opera and Lyric Opera staged only three Britten operas, "Albert Herring," "The Rape of Lucretia" and "The Turn of the Screw."

And the limited list above is restricted to the deceased. Living composers, such as John Adams, Thomas Ades and Hans Werner Henze, have contributed worthy stage pieces to the repertoire. Cleveland needs to experience them.

Many of our wishes could be granted if Opera Cleveland raises sufficient money and establishes itself as a genuine artistic contender. Along these lines, we all should take stock of Calaf's words at the end of his exultant aria, "Nessun dorma":

"I will win! I will win!"

From Calaf's lips to the opera gods' ears.