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Art to poetry to music expands opera's outreach

By Michael J. Solender

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Long before Madama Butterfly landed on Opera Carolina's stage in 2011, general director James Meena gave a great deal of thought to expanding the company's outreach, specifically into Charlotte's growing Asian community.

The Opera, like many Charlotte arts institutions, uses a number of techniques to build audience including elementary school programming, affinity groups and partnering.

Meena turned to Weihong Yan, the executive director of the Confucius Institute at Pfeiffer University, and together the men began to sow the seeds of collaborative programming combining ancient Chinese artistry such as calligraphy with western music that will culminate Thursday at Knight Theater, "Art to Poetry to Music."

The program is an eclectic grouping of grand opera selections, traditional Korean and Chinese songs and live-feed projected interpretive calligraphy by Chinese master calligrapher, Dr. Hong Zhao.

Dramatic soprano Othalie Graham will perform "Ritorna vincitor" from "Aida" giving audiences a preview of what to expect next month when she performs the title role in Opera Carolina's season debut.

Other performers include the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra and several Opera Carolina guest performers, including mezzo Victoria Livengood, tenor Justin Lavender, soprano Jill Gardner, baritone Sun Yu, the Women of the Opera Carolina Chorus. Meena is directing the program.

"This is the second time we've collaborated with the Confucius Institute," said Meena, "We put together a similar program on a smaller scale that was performed at the Bechtler Museum in January. What's exciting is pulling together a diverse group of world-class performers and combining traditional and classic music and pairing them with beautiful poetry and interpretive calligraphy."

A narrative will precede each act, highlighting the performance and providing context.

Meena said much of the program will feature familiar arias from such notable operas such as "Aida,"

- Art to Poetry to Music

When: Reception, 6:30 p.m., performance, 7:30 p.m. Thursday.

Where: Knight Theater, 430 S Tryon St.

Tickets: \$40.

Details: www.operacarolina.org

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“Turandot,” “Das Rheingold.” “We’ll have some surprises too,” he said. Meena noted that the program is a celebration of the theme for Opera Carolina’s 2013-14 season: “The Architects of Love.”

The Confucius Institute at Pfeiffer University in Charlotte is one of several hundred such institutes across the world that focuses on Chinese language instruction as a gateway to cultural and educational understanding and exchange. The Institute is in its fifth year of operation at Pfeiffer, said Yan, who is a professor of Chinese Literature.

“To be able to bring national treasures of China such as poetry, literature and our calligraphy to the west is a great honor,” said Yan. “Our mission is to build bridges between cultures and use language and cultural exchange as a vehicle for better understanding. We are very excited to participate in this type of programming.”

Performing on stage at the Knight offers the Charlotte audience a more intimate look and feel than Opera Carolina’s primary home at the Belk Theater. Audiences can expect a great deal of visual imagery including projection screens to take the place of elaborately constructed full production sets. Local artists John W. Love Jr. and Phillip Larrimore are assisting in the visual design elements of the program.



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