

Suburban Symphony and Choral Arts Cleveland to celebrate joint anniversaries with *Carmen*

by Daniel Hathaway



We know about serial relationships, but what do you call an event that celebrates the overlapping anniversaries of two performing arts organizations? On Sunday, March 15 at 3:30 pm in the Masonic Auditorium Performing Arts Center, the Suburban Symphony and Choral Arts Cleveland will mark their respective sixtieth and fortieth anniversaries — adding up to a hundred years of music-making — with a performance of George Bizet's opera, *Carmen*.

Martin Kessler, who conducts both organizations, said in a telephone conversation that *Carmen* has become a recurring “celebratory vehicle” for the Suburban Symphony. “It was first performed in 1975 for the

twentieth anniversary of the orchestra, conducted by Robert Weiskopf. Grace Reginald, a friend of Bob and his wife, Eunice Podis, may have proposed it. At least she put the cast together. The performance also celebrated the opening of Beachwood High School, then the orchestra’s performing venue. Then Suburban wanted to honor me in 1990 on my tenth anniversary, and they suggested that I do it then.”

Reflecting on that performance, Kessler said, “it was a lot of fun, but we didn’t take full advantage of the choral sections because I wasn’t involved in rehearsing the chorus. Now that I have my own choir, Choral Arts Cleveland, the chorus can shine as brightly as the orchestra. And the orchestra for *Carmen* is not just a pit band. Richard Strauss said, if you want to know how to orchestrate an opera, just look at *Carmen*.”

Kessler has cast both a wide and local net for soloists. “We’re bringing two nationally prominent young singers in. Carmen is kind a cult role — you have to have exactly the right person to fill it. Irene Roberts, a CIM grad, was about to do it, as she will later in San Francisco, but she is pregnant and unable to travel. Her management firm recommended Audrey Babcock, who has sung fourteen Carmens in her young career. She travels with her own castanets, as I like to say, and has a recording entitled *Songs for*

Carmen that features traditional, flamenco, Arabic and Ladino melodies.” Chicagoan Scott Ramsey, who will sing the role of Don José, was recommended by a friend of Kessler’s. The singers and conductor will meet for the first time this week.

Two celebrated local artists, Marian Vogel and Brian Keith Johnson, will fill out the principals as Michaela and Escamillo. “This is our sixth or seventh collaboration with Brian,” Kessler said. “We go all the way back to a *Carmina Burana* project. And Marian is just a dream. She’s everything you want to work with.”

For a venue, the two organizations finally decided on the Masonic Auditorium, which was originally built to present touring productions of the Metropolitan Opera. “It has a great acoustic, it’s the right size, and they made it financially viable for us to schedule two full rehearsals,” Kessler said.

The production will be a cross between a staged and a concert performance. “We’ll do what I call relational staging,” Kessler said, “with entrances and exits and groupings of performers.” The chorus and some of the principals will be using scores, Carmen plans to do a dance for Don José, and three Spanish dancers from the Fairmount Center will enhance the Gypsy scene, but a lot of the details remain to be decided during final rehearsals. “I’m still not sure what to do when Don José kills Carmen at the end,” Kessler said. “I don’t want her to just stand there. Maybe we’ll have the rest of the cast circle around her so she disappears from view.”

Kessler will also toss out the recitatives that were written later — and not by Bizet — to replace the original spoken dialogue. “We’ll revive the Opera Comique tradition,” he said. “I didn’t want to have supertitles, and I didn’t want to print out the entire libretto, so I’ve written a ten-part narration that will be spoken by Irish-born actress Derdriu Ring, who has lived in Spain.” Kessler is also omitting the children’s chorus but will restore chorus parts that are most often cut from the fourth act.

Martin Kessler, who describes *Carmen* as a “miracle of tragicomedy,” is amused by the fact that everyone embraced the opera after its disastrous debut in Paris except the French. “Tchaikovsky loved it, and Brahms was practically a *Carmen* groupie. He’s said to have seen it twenty times.”

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