

## Chautauqua Opera: a conversation with director Steve Osgood

by Mike Telin



Now that summer is officially upon us, it's time to take profit of the many cultural activities that Northeast Ohio offers. But if you're searching for something just outside the region, why not follow the lead of many area residents and head toward Jamestown, New York to the [Chautauqua Institution](#)? A two-and-a-half-hour drive from Cleveland, Chautauqua is the perfect summer getaway.

Located on 750 acres on Chautauqua Lake, the Institution was founded in 1874 by inventor Lewis Miller and Methodist Bishop John Heyl Vincent as a teaching camp for Sunday school teachers. Today it offers a variety of public programs that explore the important religious, social and political issues of our times. The Institution also offers recreational and cultural activities including popular entertainment, theater, symphony, ballet, and visual arts exhibitions.



“We were founded in 1929, about 55 years into the Institution’s existence,” Chautauqua Opera’s General and Artistic Director Steve Osgood said during a telephone conversation. “The Company is one of the oldest continuously active summer opera companies in the U.S.”

All of Chautauqua’s arts programs operate under the umbrella of the Institute. “We’re the artistic side of this community that rounds out everyone’s experience if they are here for the literary or ethical studies side of things. Conversely, now I think the arts attract as much of the audience to the Institution as vice versa.”

Osgood, who is in his second year leading the Company, said that the three mainstage productions this summer account for only five of the three dozen performances during this year's six-week season. "This is something that we have been trying to highlight for the community and for industry as well." Click [here](#) to view a complete season calendar.



On Saturday, July 8 at 8:15 pm in the Amphitheater, Chautauqua Opera will present the U.S. stage premiere of Ottorino Respighi's re-orchestration of Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*. Directed by Keturah Stickann, the cast includes Daniel Belcher as Orfeo (above), Chelsea Friedlander as Euridice, and Heather Johnson as Music/Hope/Messenger, and Steve Osgood will lead the Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra. The production will be sung in Italian with English supertitles.

Osgood discovered Respighi's re-orchestration in 2007 when he conducted the North American premiere of the piece in a concert performance at the Wintergreen Festival in Virginia. Respighi, like many composers of his generation, had heard about Monteverdi's then-lost opera from 1607. After the score was discovered, Respighi was one of the first of several composers to make their own versions of *L'Orfeo*, "His fascination with antique music had been a driving force of his own compositions, so it was a natural place for him to gravitate," Osgood said. The work was premiered at La Scala in 1935, shortly before the composer's death.

"What I find fascinating is that Respighi's version also fell into obscurity. It was in 2007 that Larry Allen Smith, who was running the Wintergreen Festival, had been reading about Respighi's realization and wanted to find it. It took about a year of digging in the

Ricordi warehouse in Milan, but they found the parts. I've been wanting to do a staged production of it ever since but I never found a company who wanted to take me up on it. Now that I have my own company, I'm excited that we get to do the stage premiere."



Does it sound more like Monteverdi or Respighi? "It sounds like both simultaneously," Osgood said. "The orchestration is huge, but he doesn't use the entire orchestra all at the same time. He has all of these different orchestral colors at his disposal, so what you hear a shifting sound palette. Only about five or six times during the course of the piece does he pull out all of the stops. Because he is so careful in how he deploys the orchestra, those places are all the more effective."

A new venture for the Company this season is running two productions back to back. July 28 and 31 will feature performances of Donizetti's *Don Pasquale*, and on July 27 and August 1, audiences can take in *Hydrogen Jukebox*, a collaboration between composer Philip Glass and poet Allen Ginsberg. Both operas will be performed in Memorial Hall.

"The two operas fit together nicely," Osgood said. "We have eight apprentices in our [Young Artist](#) program, and two of the roles in *Don Pasquale* are ideal for singers at that stage in their careers. Being able to offer roles like those has helped to raise the Company's profile in the National Young Artist Program scene. We're doing this as an experiment, but it's something we're excited to be trying. Also, the company has always performed the Memorial Hall operas in English, but this year we'll be singing *Don Pasquale* in Italian with supertitles."

Directed by David Schweizer, the production stars Stefano de Peppo as Don Pasquale and Kyle Pfortmiller as Doctor Malatesta. The role of Ernesto will be sung by Arnold Livingston Geis, and Norina will be sung by Laura Soto-Bayomi. Steve Osgood will lead the Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra.



Osgood first encountered *Hydrogen Jukebox* five years ago when he conducted the work at the Fort Worth Opera Festival. He noted that the collaboration between Philip Glass and Allen Ginsberg was ongoing and evolving, but they ultimately decided to set about twenty of the Beat Generation poet's works. The work is scored for six singers and an instrumental ensemble of two synthesizers, two percussionists, and two wind players performing on saxophones, flutes, and clarinets.

“In my experience with Philip Glass’s music, you do think of it as being incredibly repetitive,” Osgood said. “In *Jukebox*, with its miles and miles of Ginsberg poetry, while the rhythmic and melodic figures do get repeated quite a bit, none of the text is. It was originally conceived to have characters but since there is no literal narrative to the piece, approaches to it have been numerous. In our production, the characters represent the words and the performers are the ones who bring this evocation of the American spirit to the audience.” Directed by Cara Consilvio, the opera will be sung by six of Chautauqua Opera’s Apprentice Artists.

Art song recitals have long been a staple of the Company’s activities. This year the eight Apprentice and sixteen [Studio Artists](#) will curate hour-long programs presented in the parlor of the Athenaeum Hotel. “It’s a beautiful space and a perfect place for an art song recital.” Other performances include a series of open mic nights as well as an opera



highlights program and opera pops program with the Chautauqua Symphony featuring Apprentice Artists.



“I work a lot in contemporary opera, and I have my finger on the pulse of how active and engaging the American opera scene is — it is a thriving art form which is not necessarily what people think,” Osgood said. “It was important for me to show, not tell people how active it is. Part of how we do that is through the composer-in-residence program. This year [Gity Razaz](#) will be with us for the entire summer and we have commissioned three pieces from her. Two will be premiered on the recital programs and the third on the opera highlights program.”

Getting into the community plays an important role in Osgood’s mission to “show” people what a vibrant art form opera is. “We do opera open book events where three singers bring their audition books. We create a menu for the audience, and they tell us what they want to hear next. I also do a

reality show-style competition with the Boys and Girls Club called ‘So You Think You’re Louder Than an Opera Singer’. This year I’ll teach them a few phrases from *L’Orfeo*, then we’ll go out on the baseball field for a morning and see who can be the loudest. The goal is to show them that opera singers are unamplified, and to give them a hands-on experience of trying to be as loud as an opera singer.”

Osgood also gets into the physical side of opera. “There’s a 3k race that is another staple of the Institution. I run it with two studio artists while carrying a Casio keyboard. We stop along the way and perform arias — an opera singer needs to be able to run around and sing at the same time.”

*Photos by Dave Munch, Sara Noble, and Amanda Mainguy courtesy of Chautauqua Opera.*

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