

# DESCRIPTION OF PROGRAMS

## OPERA PRODUCTIONS

Pacific Lyric Association (PLA) is an independent Southern California opera company created in 2006 by Dr. Carlos Oliva and Teresa Hughes-Oliva. PLA offers classically trained singers the opportunity to perform in independent productions accessibly priced to the public. A single ticket at a large opera house costs an average of \$150-250. This eliminates a large portion of the art-loving population who simply cannot afford it. Our ticket prices are \$60-140, and the operas are presented in the Center Theater of the California Center for the Arts Escondido, a cosy and intimate 400-seat venue. Our productions are accompanied by a 30-piece professional opera orchestra.

The signature format of our shows features slightly condensed versions of the operas, with spoken narrative in English before and during the play. These narrative vignettes, performed by professional actors, are designed to keep the audience engaged in the musical drama without being distracted by supertitles. This format has proved successful in attracting younger or first-time audiences to this complex (universal) art form. Our performances often sell out and we often overhear audience members, even youth, comment on how much they were able to understand at their first opera. We do our best to live by our motto "Opera you can understand and afford".

In 2019 we joined with the California Professional Ballet Program, under the direction of Maxim Tchernychev. The added element of ballet to opera brought Pacific Lyric Association on a par with European opera houses, where it is common practice for opera houses to have their own ballet companies. When we presented Romeo and Juliet, it included the wonderful 17-minute ballet at the end of Act IV. This dance portion of the opera is often cut in the United States because the vast majority of operas simply do not have ballet companies to pull it off. We have an international team of people making up our artistic staff and onstage talent. Our founder/senior advisor studied opera in Spain, our stage director was born in Cuba, our conductor is Ukrainian, our orchestra concertmaster is from Hungary, our set designer received her degree from Mexico City, and our ballet director was trained in Moscow. Many of our singers are from Tijuana. Attend any rehearsal and you will hear English, Spanish, and Russian being spoken freely.

For the past 13 years, Pacific Lyric Association has been funded solely by Dr. and Mrs. Carlos Oliva. They retired from their medical practice last year and are no longer in a position to solely fund the organization. We are now in a transition period as we seek private and corporate donors

to help continue this very successful arts organization.

PLA has an innovative and unique approach on the presentation of opera, which we believe is the only way to attract new audiences of young adults and children. Scientific research shows that in modern times, attention spans are tremendously shorter than they were in the era when operas were being written. People are no longer entertained by the lengthy and monotone scenes that occur between famous arias, lasting 3-5 min each (and available instantly on YouTube). The foreign languages in which most operas are written also makes it a challenge to understand the story. Our own research shows that the main reasons why people do not attend opera (and the main reasons many opera houses are struggling to fill their houses) are:

1. "It's boring."
2. "It's too expensive."
3. "I can't understand what they're singing."

For those of us who were lucky enough to grow up in musical environments where opera was a natural part of life, it is a very pleasant and familiar experience to listen to a three-hour live production. We read the story in advance, we know the music, we are familiar with every character, and we are able to tell the difference between good and bad. We are insiders. It is not the same for younger generations who grew up marching with their music instrument on a football field, or singing in high school choir. School music teachers do not talk about opera because the vast majority of them do not understand it, they do not know it, and they never learned to appreciate it themselves.

Every opera production we do is based on the original score. But to make the story more compact and easier for the first-time audience members to understand, we make custom cuts. Most of the time it is music material that expands some secondary characters. In the full production those episodes are appreciated by the sophisticated listener, but they make the production much longer and harder to absorb by first-timers.

To address the language problem for those who do not necessarily read the whole story beforehand, we freeze the action between large episodes and a storyteller (a professional actor) comes on stage and describes in English what just transpired and what is going to happen in the next scene. Now the audience can enjoy the power of music in full and not worry about trying to understand the plot. By interviewing our audience members with children and teenagers after the shows, we are absolutely convinced that our format is the future of the opera theatre. Every single family noticed that their children stayed engaged from the very beginning to the last note, they understood the story, they liked and disliked the characters, they loved the music, and they want to come back to see another opera. We prefer this method over supertitles projected on a screen, which takes the eyes of the audience off the performers.

Despite our modest yearly budget, PLA is a professional opera company. Every production uses a professionally-trained opera conductor, professional orchestra musicians and singers, professional set designer, and stage director. Together with our costume designer, makeup artist, and stage manager, we bring decades of experience in the field. After every production we receive emails and social media comments on how people were pleased with the high quality of music, acting, costumes, and operation in general.

Every year PLA holds open auditions for all roles in our productions. We do no pre casting, and none of our singers are under long-term contracts. We believe in equal performance opportunities for mature and established singers as well as younger, less experienced candidates who possess beautiful voices and are perhaps in the very beginning of their professional career. The opera world in Southern California is somewhat small, and people know each other. But every year our audition panel is surprised with three or four applicants who are new to the area, back from vocal rest or just students who are ready to try for their first major role. Over the years PLA became a first professional trampoline for many young singers whose careers took off after their debut with us.

Our pit orchestra consists of 24-30 professional musicians. The majority of them are members of the San Diego Symphony or the San Diego Opera orchestra. The orchestra is led by Romani-American conductor Dr. Alexandra Keegan, who has over twenty years of international experience in the opera field. Dr. Keegan does free-lance conducting around the globe, and is also well-known in San Diego as a dedicated advocate for free comprehensive music training for talented children and youth.

For 12 years we have been presenting operas to the community in the most attractive and compelling way we can. And we do our best to use our available budget in a most efficient way. But with more funds we can do so much more - expand our repertoire to include popular musicals and operettas which are similar in genre to general opera. We invite you to become a Pacific Lyric Association supporter, and partner with us to help keep opera alive for generations to come.

In October 2022, we will be presenting Georges Bizet's legendary work Carmen.

October 14, 15, 16 - California Center for the Arts, Escondido, CA

October 21, 22, 23 - Joan B. Kroc Theater, San Diego, CA

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## **OPERA EDUCATION PROGRAM**

Imagine a theater full of excited 4th Graders seeing their first ever opera production. The young audience has little idea what is in store. Will they understand the story? Will they like the singing? Will they realize that the music being played is coming from a live orchestra just a few feet away just below the stage? Will they want to stay to the end? How will they feel at the end?

Back in 2019, we sent invitations out to every 4th Grade teacher and music teacher in Escondido, inviting them to bring their students to see our dress rehearsal of Romeo and Juliet, free of charge. 150 students responded and experienced their first opera. A few of them were able to arrive early enough to get a backstage tour, led by our founder, Dr Carlos Oliva.

It was truly a touching experience observing the youth leaving the theater auditorium. Many had tears in their eyes as they reacted to the tragic ending of Romeo and Juliet. They stayed to meet the actors and be photographed in front of our backdrop. It was truly a memorable evening of culture for these students.

We did the same thing last Fall with our production of Die Fledermaus. Local youth were able to see their first operetta. Most were not aware that operatic style of singing can go together with scene work and dialogue, and most of all, comedy. To them (and to a good portion of the general public), opera is not funny at all. This experience changed their minds.

This Fall, we will once again open the doors to our dress rehearsal of Carmen to local school children. To make sure we offer this experience to more kids, we will perform for one weekend in Escondido (Oct 14-16) and one weekend in San Diego (Oct 21-23).

Pacific Lyric Association's Opera Production Tour is designed to educate families with children and newcomers about opera, how it is created, and what kind of work is involved to prepare a full production.

The idea of these tours was presented by our orchestra conductor, Alexandra Keegan, as a way to make sure we are doing our very best to introduce tomorrow's audience to the genre of opera. Most youth today are totally unaware of this art form, other than vague references to "opera singing" with overdone vibratos and bad acting. As a result, we are faced with a growing generation of youth and adults who have never seen an opera production and have no interest in attending one.

Yet this art form has survived for over 500 years. Why? It is because it showcases the best of vocal training, orchestra playing, ballet, set and costume design, etc, in one place - opera. But the overwhelming majority of singing and instrumental playing is geared toward musical theater and "pop" styles, today's youth - when they do seek out private instruction - gravitate toward these

styles and teachers and many are not learning to use their voice properly. Or instead of learning an orchestral instrument, they want to take guitar or drum lessons. While we do not want to diminish the importance of learning these instruments, nor take anything away from many wonderful teachers, the fact remains that it is becoming increasingly difficult to find qualified singers and musicians to hire for professional positions in world-class orchestras and opera houses.

Why is this happening? It is because young people are not being taken to ballet, symphony concerts, etc. Why not? Is it because of lack of interest in these art forms? Cost of the ticket? Not enough concerts available? Perhaps it is a combination of all of these factors. At Pacific Lyric Association, we are working to solve these step-limiting factors so everyone can enjoy opera and ballet, no matter what their economic situation is.

We understand that besides cost, other factors which keep youth (and adults) away from opera is the issue of language. Of course, many years ago when opera was first created, it was written in the language of the people, whether it was Italian, French, or German. Even so, this opera does require a bit more from the average audience member. Just like we will enjoy a movie based on a book if we have actually read the book first, so it is with opera. The more we understand the story, the more we will appreciate the aria and scene, even if we may not understand every single word that is being sung at the moment.

We have heard the argument many times that people don't go to operas because they can't understand all of the lyrics. Consider the fact, though, that at a rock or pop concert, we may not comprehend all the words the performer is singing, yet we have no problem enjoying the performance because experiencing a live concert involves taking in the whole scene - the live singers, live band or orchestra, vocal ensemble, costumes, lighting, etc.

We have come to realize that the primary reason that the general public does not regularly attend operas is due to the high ticket price. To see a production of San Diego Opera, a family of four must spend \$1,000 for decent seats. With discounts, the same family of 4 would spend only \$160-320 to see our Fall 2022 production of Carmen. This is another reason we have many more young people in our audiences in comparison with any other major opera company.

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PLA's mission is to break this cycle and bring opera back to people in a way everyone can understand, enjoy, and appreciate, just as it was centuries ago when opera houses were sold out a year in advance and there were no empty seats.

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These tours excite and prepare kids to see and enjoy the final product of these preparations. It fascinates everyone to see how much work, skills, and talent is involved.

Many major opera companies worldwide are failing to expand their audiences because of their rigid way of presenting the material. It is forgotten by modern music directors, conductors and opera house managers that opera used to be entertainment, and every opera composer wants to be assured that their creation will be performed by the major opera houses around the globe. Our condensed, English-narrated and entertaining way to present operas are often criticized by snobs who refuse to see things from the composer's perspective. A simple question such as "would Guseppe Verdi prefer that we make few cuts and translate his libretto to English during the performance so that thousands of people can understand what he was writing about, and go back to see his other operas, or... would he say that we must play it as he wrote it, even if nobody comes to see his operas?" We believe the answer is YES, Verdi wouldn't mind a few adjustments to make sure his operas are alive and loved as they were before. Pacific Lyric Association's artistic team consists of professional musicians with Masters and Doctoral Degrees in music, combined with 20-30 years of experience in show business and the non-profit sector. The

combination of all three gives us a clear understanding of how to keep opera alive.

This tour includes:

#### 1. Attending first orchestra rehearsal

Seeing professional orchestra musicians working on their material gives our new audience members an understanding of how much work, talent, and skills are involved. They also hear the music that will be connected to the certain characters in the story later. This is the only time they have a chance to see the orchestra musicians, talk to them during the break, and look at the music instruments they will hear. During this rehearsal everyone meets the conductor. It seems to be quite entertaining for children and young adults to observe professional musicians making mistakes and fixing them as the rehearsal progresses.

#### 2. Attending a chorus rehearsal

Most of the people new to opera are surprised to hear the chorus practicing with piano. The truth is that chorus only practices with the orchestra two or three times before opening night, since hiring a full orchestra is quite costly. Our tour participants also learn that chorus has a conductor separate from the orchestra conductor, though the orchestra conductor is often present at chorus practices to observe the work of the chorus master.

#### 3. Attending leading singers' rehearsals

It is exciting for the tour participants to meet the "leads". Knowing every singer in person and watching them learning their parts is fun and has proved to be one of the favorite activities. Opera singers are very social and always welcome any extra attention. Often they establish friendships with families who take the tour, and stay in touch with them even after the show ends, and invite them to their other performances. We believe our local opera community benefits from these connections as a whole.

#### 4. People behind the scene

Meeting people backstage is fun for anyone. Who wouldn't like to come to the opera house and talk to and see the work of the costumer, makeup artist, hair stylist, stage manager, and set designer/builder?

#### 5. Attending a tech rehearsal

At the tech rehearsal our participants meet the light designer and visit her both. For three hours they can observe the work of the stage manager/crew, light designer/engineers, stage director, conductor, orchestra, and singers who are making adjustments in order for the show to go smoothly.

#### 6. Attending dress rehearsal

This is the very last stop for everyone on the tour. A Dress Rehearsal is a full run of the opera with costumes, lights, stage set, and other elements. It gives the director a final chance to make

sure thing nothing else needs to be fixed before Opening Night. On the rare occasion a show might stop for a few minutes, or one of the actors show up on stage in street clothes while his costume is being altered for him by the costumer backstage. the Dress Rehearsal is a last clean run of the production.

Our Opera Production Tours have proven to be very exciting and educational to all participants - adults and children. Audience members who have taken this tour become big PLA fans, and always come back for future productions.

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## **OPERA INTERNSHIP PROGRAM**

### **MISSION STATEMENT**

To provide young singers with the necessary classical training and experience to become professional opera performers.

### **DESCRIPTION**

Without properly trained singers, the art of opera will wither and die. A majority of young singers today gravitate toward pop styles or musical theater. San Diego is rich with musical theater training and performance opportunities, but the same cannot be said with regards to classical singing.

Pacific Lyric Association is addressing that need by offering internship programs to qualified, hard-working young singers. The following areas of Internship are currently available:

1. Major Role
2. Chorus Role
3. Conducting
4. Orchestra Musician
5. Directing
6. Crew (set building, costumes, props, stage hand, etc)

The program runs concurrent with our Summer/Fall rehearsal schedule. After successfully auditioning for the program and being cast into our opera chorus, or in some cases, small roles, we connect these young singers with experienced vocal coaches, who help them learn their parts. These young singers then have the opportunity to perform alongside seasoned professionals and accompanied by our full opera orchestra. The student is required to be actively taking voice lessons at the university level. PLA simply supplements that training and we work closely with the instructor to help prepare the singer for the production. We are careful not to take the place of regular instruction that a serious student should be pursuing.

We spend more time than the average opera company does on acting training. We are careful to cast singers who have the training (or for whom we can supply the training) to properly portray their character through singing AND acting. We believe this is the only way to keep opera alive, interesting, and relevant.

The cost for each singer is \$4500, which pays for:

- 1) Administrative expense (managing the Internship Program; advertising; contact with University professors)
- 2) Mentor Coaching (acting/singing, conducting, orchestra playing, directing, crew)
- 3) 6 weeks of rehearsals
- 4) Time with the orchestra
- 5) Costumes
- 6) other costs associated with mounting 4-6 performances of an opera.

We are actively seeking and establishing scholarships to help defray the costs of this program.

4 Interns participated in our 2021 production of Die Fledermaus. Each of them was granted time with the orchestra, including a conducting intern. It was a thrill for him to lead a portion of the Sitzprobe. Our seasoned musicians and singers were quite impressed with the way he helped put everything together. Other interns had small parts or understudied leading roles. A larger opera company would simply not be able to spend the time allowing understudies the chance to sing with the orchestra. And the conductor would never entertain the thought of handing the baton to a conducting student.

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## **PACIFIC LYRIC ASSOCIATION YOUTH SYMPHONY (PLAYS)**

Pacific Lyric Association recently performed the inaugural concert of its Youth Symphony on Friday, Feb 18th at 8:00 PM, at the California Center for the Arts Escondido. The program included Tchaikovsky's Overture Romeo and Juliet, and Rimsky-Korsakov's Scheherazade.

This ensemble welcomes graduate and post-graduate level college players ages 18 to 32. Each student receives a small stipend. Led by PLA's Artistic Director Alexandra Keegan, this orchestra brings young musicians from all Southern California together and prepares them for careers in major symphonies. Twelve experienced professional musicians, who are the PLAYS mentors, rehearse and perform side-by-side with our students.

Small stipends are available for players who successfully pass the audition and are invited to join

the orchestra.

As part of their training, the young musicians will have the opportunity to attend master classes taught by some of the top professional orchestra players in Southern California. Subjects will include conducting, percussion, strings, brass, and winds.

These young musicians spend a substantial part of their modest income on traveling to audition destinations, job applications, instrument repairs and maintenance, and other things we do not think about when we enjoy their performance. It takes a while to win an audition for a full-time position in a major symphony, and many of these extremely gifted and highly educated young professionals need help to continue looking for a permanent job. To support our Southern California talent we are seeking donations and will be grateful for any amount. Once we asked one of our students if \$10 is a big amount. He said "hah... big enough to buy a jumbo burrito that I can eat all day!"

There are many ways you can help us to sustain and expand our new youth orchestra and bring new young audiences to our concerts: 1) make a contribution to PLA, 2) pay for one of our mentors, 3) pay for one local child from low income family to attend the concert, or 4) add a monetary equivalent of five burritos to one of our student's basic stipend. Any help will be greatly appreciated.

"This Youth Symphony is a wonderful addition to our opera company. It will provide young players with professional experience, much needed financial support, and new connections. Escondido audiences will have a chance to enjoy the "Scheherazade", a unique masterpiece by N. Rimski-Korsakov, that was never performed in Escondido before." said Alexandra Keegan, the Artistic Director and conductor of PLA.

Mayor Paul McNamara said, "What a great addition to our city! One always wonders if their community has a future star in some area. But you'll never know if they don't have the opportunity to develop. PLA's initiative will help us discover and train those future stars. I can't wait for February 18th".

The artistic mission of the Pacific Lyric Association Youth Orchestra (PLAYS) is to present classical music in its original and traditional form, yet deliver it in an innovative manner that is appealing and entertaining to newcomers and young audiences. The concert admission for students under 16 and PLA donors is free. We welcome anyone who is interested in helping support young musicians in their professional career paths to become sponsors.

Our revenue is derived from corporate and private donors, as well as ticket sales.

Pacific Lyric Association is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization registered in the State of

California. EIN: 26-2629159. All contributions are tax deductible.

Our Guidestar profile:

<https://www.guidestar.org/profile/26-2629159>