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CLASSICAL NOTES

Merola Opera readies a rich summer concert

Aria Umezawa has a talent for bringing opera to life.

You can see it in every scene she directs. There's an immediate, richly imagined quality to her work that brings out the best in young artists and makes audiences sit up and lean in.

Opera lovers can experience her work this week when San Francisco's Merola Opera Program launches its 61st season with the annual Schwabacher Summer Concert. Umezawa directs singers from the acclaimed training academy in a program of scenes from Barber's "Vanessa," Puccini's "Il Tabarro," Bizet's "The Pearl Fishers" and Mozart's "Don Giovanni." Kathleen Kelly — another former Merola artist — conducts the concert in two performances at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and Stanford's Bing Hall.

Umezawa, a rising star who hails from Toronto, first arrived in the Bay Area as a Merola participant. Local audiences have seen her work in the 2016 Merola Grand Finale concert, which she directed with impressive dramatic impact. Since then, she's staged the 2017 Adler Fellows Concert, "Christmas with Sol3Mio," for San Francisco Opera and last summer's West Edge Opera production of Ambroise Thomas' "Hamlet."

In a conversation between rehearsals for the Schwabacher Concert, Umezawa said she's thrilled to be working with this year's "Merolini."

"I love working with young singers," she said.



Georgia Rowe
Columnist

"They're very open to exploration, and they're willing to take huge risks."

Merola is one of the premier training programs for singers, coach accompanists and directors, and Umezawa says its singers arrive already equipped with a wealth of talent and training. With this concert, "We're giving them a lot of space to explore their characters — dramatically, physically and musically. It's very exciting. We're getting beautiful color, really interesting vocal choices that are making these scenes feel very alive and fully realized."

The scenes cover a wide musical and emotional terrain, from the anxious psychological atmosphere of "Vanessa" to the dark drama of "Il Tabarro," the betrayal at the heart of "Pearl Fishers" to the nonstop intensity of "Don Giovanni." "We'll definitely have some surprises," says Umezawa. "A program like this gives us opportunities to see how these people are feeling, what their psychology is. For me, that's what makes it really interesting."

Umezawa benefited from an early exposure to opera. As a youngster, she joined school groups attending dress rehearsals at the Canadian Opera Company. Her best friend's mother, who was on the company's music staff, often let the girls observe from the supertitles booth. Umezawa's own mother took her to symphony performances and enrolled her in music lessons, where she studied Baroque recorder, piano, French horn and voice. Those experiences have informed her work as a director.



MEROLA OPERA

Director Aria Umezawa says her main focus for this year's Summer Schwabacher Concert is to make the selections from diverse operas flow and feel cohesive to the audience.

"I think directors should have a keen understanding of the text and what it means," Umezawa said. "Why does this aria end on a D major scale? Why are these words repeated over

and over, but modulating upwards? Having that musical background gives you another dimension to look at."

As a Merola participant, and now an Adler fellow,

she's worked closely with San Francisco Opera Center directors Sheri Greenawald and Mark Morash and says their guidance has been invaluable. "Everyone at the company has

SCHWABACHER SUMMER CONCERT

When and where: 7:30 p.m. today at San Francisco Conservatory of Music; 7:30 p.m. Saturday at Bing Hall, Stanford University
Tickets: \$30-\$55; 415-864-3330; merola.org.

given me opportunities to explore my own craft, to really take risks."

Umezawa's goal for this week's concert is to make it flow. "My number one priority is to make it feel cohesive, as if all the scenes belong together, no matter the time period or musical style."

And in everything she directs, she says that clarity is essential. To that end, she created Opera Cheats, a website that explains opera plots in funny, contemporary language. "The idea is to break down barriers for people who are unfamiliar with opera," she says. "People believe that opera is a very complicated art form, and there's a fear that they might not understand what's going on. But when you actually look at most operatic plots, they're pretty simple. My goal was to show that, hey, you might be worried about going to your first opera, but I can tell you everything you need to know in three minutes or less."

"One of the mottos I live by is that I take my work seriously, but I don't take myself very seriously. That's what Opera Cheats was meant to show — that opera takes the craft of opera seriously, but we can still laugh at ourselves, still laugh at some of the sillier traditions."

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