

OPERA SAN JOSÉ CLOSES 2025-26 SEASON WITH
RE-ENVISIONED PRODUCTION OF VERDI'S TIMELESS CLASSIC

LA TRAVIATA

Music by Giuseppe Verdi, libretto by Francesco Maria Piave
April 19 – May 3, 2026

SAN JOSÉ, CA (19 March 2026) — **Opera San José** closes its 2025-26 season devoted to exploring the question of “What is love?” with the quintessential operatic story of all-encompassing passion and profound loss. Offering one of opera’s most enduring love stories, Verdi’s *La Traviata* follows the glamorous courtesan Violetta as she falls deeply in love with Alfredo—for whom she sacrifices all. This newly envisioned production by director Tara Branham heightens the opera’s social critique, emphasizing the transactional nature of the world Violetta inhabits, where elegant women are bartered as commodities. Set in the fashionable salons of Paris’ demimonde, this production delves into the heart of glittering 1888 French society and an unacceptable affair that costs the heroine everything. Filled with iconic melodies, breathtaking duets, and high-stakes drama, *La Traviata* has enthralled audiences with its emotional depth and stunning music since its premiere 173 years ago.

Former Artist-in-Residence **Johannes Löhner** makes his OSJ principal conducting debut, while OSJ’s Inaugural Artist-in-Residence Director **Tara Branham** helms this production, that will include the sweeping grandeur of the era, with added elements such as Kathak-inspired South Asian choreography in Flora’s lavish Act II party. *La Traviata* will be performed in Italian with English and Spanish supertitles, **April 19 – May 3, 2026** (*performance dates/times below*) at the **California Theatre**, 345 South First Street, San José. For more information or to purchase tickets (\$58–\$215, plus \$3.50 fee per ticket), the public may visit operasj.org or call **408-437-4450** (open Monday through Friday, 11:00am–5:30pm).

Said Opera San José General Director & CEO **Shawna Lucey**, “Verdi’s thrilling masterpiece invites us into Violetta’s world—one of intoxicating love, profound courage, and devastating sacrifice. It is deeply intimate yet fills the theater with huge emotion and unforgettable music.” Lucey added, “Bringing *La Traviata* to life at the elegant California Theatre allows us to end this season on a high note of both grandeur and romanticism. We look forward to welcoming audiences for a closing production that is as emotionally shattering as it is magnificent.”

La Traviata will star soprano **Mikaya Sager**, who captivated audiences as Nedda in OSJ’s *Pagliacci*, as the glamorous, witty, and fiercely independent courtesan Violetta. She will be joined by former OSJ Artist-in-Residence tenor **WooYoung Yoon** as Alfredo, her young lover, following his acclaimed 2024 performances as Rodolfo in *La Bohème* and Tamino in *The Magic Flute* with OSJ. Baritone **Kidon Choi**, who impressed audiences as Alfio and Tonio in OSJ’s *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci*, will take on the role of Alfredo’s dignified and traditional father, Germont. OSJ Artist-in-Residence mezzo-soprano **Joanne Evans** will portray Violetta’s friend and fellow courtesan Flora, while OSJ Artist-in-Residence soprano **Nicole Koh** will play Annina, Violetta’s devoted maid and

confidante. Tenor **Benjamin Ruiz** will appear as the lively young nobleman Gastone (and Alfredo on March 3), and baritone **Robert Balonek** will portray Baron Douphol, the wealthy and possessive suitor who vies for Violetta's attention. The calm and compassionate Doctor Grenvil will be played by baritone **Joseph Calzada**. Rounding out the cast, baritone **Michael Jesse Kuo** will take on the role of Marquis d'Obigny, a member of Violetta's Parisian social circle, and tenor **Nicolas Vasquez-Gerst** will appear as Violetta's attendant Giuseppe (and Gastone on March 3).

The chorus ensemble is comprised of **Chris Abadia, Rachel Beninghof, Aro Cherry, Ethan Chu, Gabe Frank, Nicolas Vasquez-Gerst, Danielle Imai, Hana Jung, Brennah Kemmerly, Anicia Madali, Victoria McDowell, Pravesh Mehra, Eric Mellum, Nicholas Molle, Fallon Nunes, Joshua Porter, and Luis Tuyub**. The dancers and supernumeraries include **Suhani Arora, Antara Bhardwaj, Jim Ballard, Alaniz Barnill, Tracy Fuller, Laiy Joshi, Kaya Kaya, and Larry Kern**.

The creative team for *La Traviata* includes **Tara Branham** (Director), **Johannes Löhner** (Conductor), **Noah Lindquist** (Assistant Conductor & Chorus Master), **Mark Anthony Vallejo** (Assistant Director), **Eric Flatmo** (original Set Designer), **Mitchell Ost** (Lighting Designer), **Christina Martin** (Hair and Makeup), **Betty Poindexter** (original Costume Designer), **Antara Bhardwaj** (Choreographer) and **Dave Maier** (Fight Choreographer).

La Traviata, composed by Giuseppe Verdi, with libretto by Francesco Maria Piave based on Alexandre Dumas fils' novel *La Dame aux Camélias*, premiered on March 6, 1853, at Venice's Teatro La Fenice. Initially greeted with mixed reactions due to its contemporary setting and unconventional heroine, over time it became one of Verdi's most beloved works. Filled with memorable arias, emotional duets, and dramatic tension, the opera continues to captivate audiences worldwide and remains a staple of the operatic repertoire.

ARTIST BIOS:

Mikayla Sager (Violetta)

The *San Francisco Chronicle* hailed Canadian soprano **Mikayla Sager** as "extraordinarily gifted," praising her rendition of Desdemona's arias for their "intensity and hushed majesty." *Opera Canada* noted that Sager "demands attention" and described her rich soprano as "arresting." She has performed many roles with San Francisco Opera, including Inez (*Il Trovatore*) Giannetta (*L'Elisir d'Amore*) and covered Eliza (*Omar*). As an Adler Fellow, Sager was featured in San Francisco Opera's centennial season as the Guardian of the Temple (*Die Frau ohne Schatten*), Kate Pinkerton (*Madama Butterfly*), Image No. 1 (Gabriela Lena Frank's *El Último Sueno de Frida y Diego*), Sister Felicité (*Dialogues des Carmélites*), and covered both Violetta (*La Traviata*) and Donna Elvira (*Don Giovanni*). As the 2022 Maria Manetti-Shrem Prize winner, she appeared as Giannetta (*L'elisir d'Amore*). She has also appeared as Violetta (*La Traviata*), Fiordiligi (*Così Fan Tutte*), Vitellia (*La Clemenza di Tito*), Micaëla (*Carmen*), Norina (*Don Pasquale*), Donna Anna (*Don Giovanni*), Pamina (*Die Zauberflöte*), and The Fox (*The Cunning Little Vixen*). She has performed additional concerts with the San Francisco Opera Orchestra, including the "Future is Now" concert and "Eun Sun Kim Conducts Verdi." Other concert highlights include an appearance at Carnegie Hall and a performance at David Geffen Hall with the New York Philharmonic.

WooYoung Yoon (Alfredo)

Former Opera San José Artist-in-Residence tenor **WooYoung Yoon** has been praised for his “soaring high notes” and a voice that “conveys nobility” (*Opera News*). Previous engagements include leading roles such as Rodolfo (*La Bohème*) and Tamino (*The Magic Flute*) with OSJ, as well as a return to Carnegie Hall as a soloist in Hagenberg’s *Illuminare* and in Ramírez’s *Misa Criolla*. The 2025–26 season included his Sarasota Opera debut as Rodolfo (*La Bohème*) as well as a cover assignment in *The Monkey King* with San Francisco Opera. Yoon’s notable past performances include the Duke (*Rigoletto*), Benvolio and Romeo cover (*Romeo and Juliet*) with OSJ, Mozart’s *Requiem* with the Evansville Philharmonic, and the title role in *La damnation de Faust* with Maestro John Nelson and the Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional de Costa Rica. He made his role debut as Edgardo (*Lucia di Lammermoor*) with New York City Opera and has been featured in NYCO’s Carnegie Hall concert commemorating the heroism of Chiune Sugihara and in the production *All Is Calm*. A former Merola Opera Program young artist Yoon has also been recognized in major competitions including the Opera Index Awards, the Orpheus Competition Grand Prize, a Metropolitan Opera National Council Eastern Regional Finalist award, and several international vocal prizes.

Kidon Choi (Germont)

Baritone **Kidon Choi** was seen at both OSJ and San Diego Opera in the 2025–26 season as Tonio in *Pagliacci*. In January 2026, he made his concert stage debut with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra and Bravo! Vail as Bonze/Yamadori (*Madama Butterfly*). He has also been seen at Opera San José in *La Bohème* and *Tosca*, as well as with San Diego Opera (*Madama Butterfly*), The Cleveland Orchestra, Arizona Opera (*Aida*), Atlanta Opera (*La Bohème*), San Francisco Opera (*Madama Butterfly*, *Die Frau ohne Schatten*), and North Carolina Opera (*Pagliacci*). A former Lindemann Young Artist at The Metropolitan Opera, Choi has appeared with leading opera houses and orchestras worldwide and is a Sullivan Foundation Grant recipient and prizewinner in numerous international vocal competitions.

Joanne Evans (Flora)

Current Opera San José Artist-in-Residence **Joanne Evans**, a London-born mezzo-soprano recently seen as Dorabella (*Così Fan Tutte*) with OSJ, is a graduate of the 2023 Merola Opera Program and the 2024 Académie of the Festival d’Aix-en-Provence, where she received Le Prix des Amis for Voice. In the 2024–25 season, she joined the Ravinia Steans Music Institute as a fellow before she traveled to Aldeburgh to participate in the Britten Pears Young Artist Program for contemporary composition. She also attended the bel canto Voice Academy at Fondation des Treilles and performed the role of Flora (*La Traviata*) with both Annapolis Opera and Berkshire Opera Festival. A 2022 Vocal Fellow at the Music Academy of the West, Evans performed the role of Olga (*Eugene Onegin*) and won the Marilyn Horne Song Competition. That same year, she took first place in the Handel Aria Competition and was a Boston District winner in the Metropolitan Opera Laffont Competition. She is a recipient of a Career Bridges grant and has earned additional awards from the Gerda Lissner Foundation and the Premiere Opera Foundation. In addition to her performance work, Evans cofounded Loam Music, an artistic partnership with singer and conductor Micah Gleason that creates semi-immersive musical experiences.

Nicole Koh (Annina)

Current Opera San José Artist-in-Residence **Nicole Koh**, a soprano born in Daly City, California, appeared with the company last season as both the Queen of the Night and Papagena (*The Magic Flute*). She has also performed Gretel (*Hansel and Gretel*) with Chautauqua Opera and sang the title

role in Janáček's *The Cunning Little Vixen* with the Chautauqua Opera Conservatory. Her additional credits include covering the role of Winnie (*Sky on Swings*), performing the title role in *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, and singing Nella (*Gianni Schicchi*).

Benjamin Ruiz (Gastone, and Alfredo on March 3)

Described by *Bach Track* as “wonderfully intense” and “very well-voiced,” award-winning tenor **Benjamin Ruiz** began his operatic journey playing Young LBJ in the world premiere of *Lady Bird: The First Lady of the Land*. And in the year following, made his European Debut with Mittelsächsisches Theatre as Profesor Würchem (*Der Vogelhändler*). He has performed several principal roles in Manhattan School of Music's acclaimed Main Stage productions under the baton of Maestro's George Manahan and the Metropolitan Opera's Pierre Vallet. Outside of operatic performances, he has been invited to perform in master classes hosted by the Metropolitan Opera's Chorus Master, Donald Palumbo, as well as the Donizetti Festival in New York City for Javier Camarena. In concert, Ruiz joined Stars of Tomorrow as an emerging artist debuting in the 2022 Concert Series “Opera in the Park” and with the Grammy-Award winning Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra during Opera Theatre of Saint Louis' Center Stage Concert in 2024. Ruiz made his American and Lyric Opera of Kansas City Debut as Beppe (*Pagliacci*); and additionally performed Ollie (*Sketchbook for Ollie*) and Tybalt (*Romeo and Juliet*). Shortly afterwards he joined the prestigious Gerdine Young Artist Program at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, where he made his OTSL debut as Prune Man (*La Bohème*). In the 2025-26 season, Ruiz joined the world-renowned Apprentice Program for Singers at The Santa Fe Opera, where he study-covered the role of the Duke (*Rigoletto*) and performed in the Apprentice Scenes.

Robert Balonek (Baron Douphol)

American baritone **Robert Balonek** has a versatile voice, commanding stage presence, and wide-ranging repertoire across mainstream and contemporary opera. Balonek's operatic career spans leading roles, character parts, and world premieres with major regional companies throughout the United States. He has performed title roles such as *Rigoletto* and *Der fliegende Holländer*, and has appeared as Marcello (*La Bohème*), Figaro (*Il barbiere di Siviglia*), and Angelotti (*Tosca*). With Opera San José he's covered roles including Scarpia (*Tosca*), Ford (*Falstaff*), and Count Almaviva (*Le nozze di Figaro*), while also performing Father Capulet (*Romeo and Juliet*). A champion of contemporary music, Balonek has created roles in world premieres by composers such as Gerald Cohen (*Steal a Pencil for Me*), Ricky Ian Gordon (*The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*), and Raphaël Lucas (*Confession*). His recording credits include Prospero in Lee Hoiby's *The Tempest* and Father Francis in Lucas's *Confession* for Albany Records. In addition to opera, Balonek's concert and oratorio work features performances of Handel's *Saul*, Haydn's *Creation Mass*, Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, and Orff's *Carmina Burana*.

Joseph Calzada (Doctor Grenvil)

American-Greek bass-baritone **Joseph Calzada** first gained attention in 2019 as a standout performer with the Greek Opera Studio, captivating audiences across the island of Syros and in Athens. During that time, he made his professional debut with the Festival of the Aegean, performing the roles of Ein Lakai and covering Harlekin (*Ariadne auf Naxos*). In 2022, Calzada earned acclaim for his commanding portrayal of the title role in *Don Giovanni* at the Vienna Summer Music Festival. He has also performed with the St. Petersburg Opera Company in Florida. During the 2023–24 season, Calzada appeared as Captain Siegfried (King Cover) (*The Three Feathers*), Gianni Schicchi (*Gianni*

Schicchi), *Sodbuster (Proving Up)*, and *Elviro (Serse)*. He also joined the acclaimed San Francisco Symphony for performances of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*, *Messiah*, and *Gladiator*. In the 2024–25 season, Calzada joined Wolf Trap Opera as a Studio Artist, singing the British Major and chorus (*Silent Night*), covering Don Alfonso and performing in the chorus (*Così Fan Tutte*), and covering Colline while singing in the chorus (*La Bohème*). Additionally, he performed the Second Armoured Man and covered Papageno (*The Magic Flute*) with Opera San José and sang Masetto (*Don Giovanni*) with Livermore Valley Opera. Calzada has performed with an array of companies, including the San Francisco Symphony, the Festival of the Aegean, Savannah Opera, The Pan-European Philharmonia of Warsaw, Napa Valley Youth Symphony, Music on Site, Inc., Indiana University Opera Theater, San Francisco Conservatory of Music Opera Theatre, Russian Opera Workshop, Harrower Summer Opera Workshop, and the Vienna Summer Music Festival.

Michael Jesse Kuo (Marquis d'Obigny)

Taiwanese baritone **Michael Jesse Kuo**, known for his “bright and robust lyrical voice” and his “spirited stage presence” (*Opera Tattler*), has performed in both the United States and Europe. Kuo has worked with numerous companies such as San Francisco Opera, Opera San José, Lyric Opera Studio of Weimar, Pocket Opera, San Francisco Opera Guild, and West Edge Opera, singing roles such as Dulcamara (*L'elisir d'amore*), Schaunard and Marullo (*La Bohème*), Papageno and Second Priest (*The Magic Flute*), Officer (*The Barber of Seville*), and Marullo (*Rigoletto*).

Nicolas Vasquez-Gerst (Giuseppe, and Gastone on March 3)

A member of the Opera San José chorus since 2015, tenor **Nicolas Vasquez-Gerst** has appeared in over 30 productions. His credits include Tashtago (Jake Heggie's *Moby-Dick*), the Messenger (*Il trovatore*), and the chorus in the North American premiere of Alma Deutscher's *Cinderella*.

Vasquez-Gerst also portrayed Young Man in the world premiere of Vance Maverick's *At the Hawk's Well* with Bay Area Arts Alliance. In the 2024–25 season, he returned to Opera San José to perform Monostatos (*The Magic Flute*) and joined the San Francisco Opera Extra Chorus for Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, and Bizet's *Carmen*. He has been featured as a soloist with Magic Circle Opera and Bay Shore Lyric Opera, and as a member of the San Francisco Opera Extra Chorus in productions including Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, Beethoven's *Fidelio*, Verdi's *Il trovatore*, and Wagner's *Lohengrin*.

Tara Branham (Director)

Tara Branham is the inaugural artist-in-residence director at Opera San José and the National New Play Network producer-in-residence at Prop Thtr in Chicago. She served as assistant director for the world premiere of *Freedom Ride* under Tazewell Thompson at Chicago Opera Theatre and has a long-standing commitment to developing new work in theatre and opera. Branham assisted James Robinson on the world premiere of Terrance Blanchard's *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis and was also the assistant director for internationally renowned soprano Patricia Racette on her directing debut of *La Traviata* at OTSL. Her direction of the U.S. premiere of *OCTAGON*, starring Kiki Layne (*If Beale Street Could Talk*, *The Old Guard*) at Jackalope Theatre, earned a sold-out extension. This production culminated three years of collaboration with playwright Kristiana Rae Colón, including presentations at Polarity Ensemble's Dionysus Cup Festival—where it won—and a staged reading at the National New Play Network annual conference. Branham also directed and co-produced the world premiere of Colón's *GOOD FRIDAY* with Oracle Productions, submitting and directing it for Stage Left Theatre's developmental workshop Leapfest. The play

received an Honorable Mention on the Kilroys List and has since been produced at colleges across the U.S., highlighting the complex intersection of gun violence and rape culture. In recognition of her dedication to fostering underproduced work, Branham received the Puffin Ltd. Grant. She is also a teacher and the creator of *Unbridled Sound*, a physical-vocal technique for actors.

Johannes Löhner (Conductor)

Former Opera San José Artist-in-Residence Conductor **Johannes Löhner** is the music director of the Kammerorchester Regensburg and an adjunct professor of conducting at the Hochschule für Musik Nürnberg. A German American dual citizen, he has performed internationally with leading ensembles including the Orchestre de Paris, London Philharmonic, Zurich Chamber Orchestra, Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, and the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment. Löhner joined Opera San José in 2023, conducting productions such as *Roméo et Juliette*, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, *Rigoletto*, and *Florenzia en el Amazonas*, while also serving as assistant conductor and Chorus Master for all mainstage productions. He has led productions at Wolf Trap Opera and Livermore Valley Opera and appears regularly with the San Francisco Symphony. Since 2018, Löhner has directed the Kammerorchester Regensburg, guiding the ensemble through recordings, international tours, and community outreach initiatives. His leadership has earned critical acclaim and expanded audiences, including an open-air concert attended by over 14,000 listeners. Mentored by Sir Roger Norrington and Riccardo Muti, Löhner's expertise spans historical performance practice, opera, symphonic repertoire, and solo piano. He has conducted *Don Giovanni*, *Alcina*, *Tosca*, *La Fille du Régiment*, and *Attila*, and his upcoming live solo CD/DVD of Schubert's *Winterreise* is scheduled for release in March 2025.

ABOUT OPERA SAN JOSÉ

Opera San José (OSJ) is a flagship arts organization of Silicon Valley. Maintaining a resident company of artists, OSJ presents four mainstage productions annually in San José's beautifully restored, magnificent California Theatre. It also broadcasts digital productions from its state-of-the-art Heiman Digital Media Studio, and performs regularly in its community, providing access to the arts to audiences of all ages and backgrounds. OSJ specializes in role debuts, serving as an artistic incubator for established and emerging artists and administrators, producing world-class operatic performances for diverse audiences throughout the Bay Area and around the globe. More information is available at operasj.org.

Opera San José performs at the **California Theatre**, one of the most magnificent, best-preserved examples of 1920s-era lavish motion picture palaces. Lovingly restored at the turn of the 21st century, its opulently ornamented interiors were completely refurbished, including the elaborately stenciled entry foyer ceiling and magnificent gallery. With only 20 rows of seats in the orchestra section, five rows in the grand tier, and six in the mezzanine, every seat has an excellent view of the stage. With just over 1,100 seats, the California Theatre is comparable to England's Glyndebourne and Venice's historic Teatro La Fenice in the select ranks of the world's most intimate opera houses.

FOR CALENDAR EDITORS:

WHAT: **Opera San José** closes its 2025-26 season devoted to exploring the question of "What is love?" with the quintessential operatic story of all-encompassing passion and profound loss. Offering one of opera's most enduring love stories, Verdi's *La Traviata*

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WHEN: **April 19 – May 3, 2026**
2:00pm, Sunday, April 19 (*press opening*)
7:30pm, Friday, April 24
2:00pm, Sunday, April 26
7:30pm, Friday, May 1
2:00pm, Sunday, May 3

WHERE: **California Theatre**, 345 S 1st St, San José

TICKETS: **\$58–\$215** (*plus \$3.50 fee per ticket*)

INFO: For more information, the public can visit operasj.org or call 408-437-4450 (open Monday through Friday, 11:00am–5:30pm).

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MEDIA: Contact Paige D'Encarnacao, CBCO Public Relations & Marketing
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PHOTOS: Downloadable high-res photos will be available here:
cbpr.co/press/latraviata