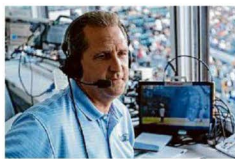


KUIPER'S FUTURE

Over a year after slur, former A's broadcaster still jobless.

SPORTING GREEN, B1



LAWS TAKE ON RETAIL THEFT

Newsom signs 10 bills, but more hard-line measure on ballot is gaining support.

BAY AREA & BUSINESS, A10



RETHINKING OPERAS

Female-directed program part of Merola summer fest.

DATEBOOK, B7

San Francisco Chronicle

SFCHRONICLE.COM • SATURDAY, AUGUST 17, 2024 • CONTAINS RECYCLED PAPER • \$3.00



Lea Suzuki/The Chronicle

Anna Theodosakis is one of the three female stage directors of Merola's Summer Festival.

Reworking Mozart to empower women

By Linda Liu

A group of female opera directors is rethinking women's representation in the male-dominated art form.

Since June, Merola Opera Program's Summer Festival has presented an all-female directed program, featuring singers performing selections from operas, traditionally dismissive of women, through a different lens. A scene from Mozart's "Cosi Fan Tutte," for instance, flipped the narrative to center on female growth and consent, while "Don Giovanni" was set in the 1950s with the eponymous sexual predator portrayed as a mob boss women use for physical protection.

"In my career, I've often been called upon to direct 'Cosi Fan Tutte' or 'Don Giovanni,' pieces that can sometimes have problematic storylines," said stage director Anna Theodosakis. "It's kind of my challenge and my call to action to bring in that

Merola continues on B10

Merola Grand Finale: 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 17. \$10-\$65. War Memorial Opera House, 301 Van Ness Ave., S.F. 415-936-2324. www.merola.org

MEROLA

From page B7

feminism and make sure that all of the female characters in the story have agency."

Theodosakis, 33, is one of the three female stage directors of Merola's Summer Festival and the only directing fellow in the opera training program's 2024 cohort. In collaboration with Merola alums Omer Ben Seadia and Grammy Award-winning Patricia Racette, she worked on the festival's earlier productions — the Schwabacher Summer Concert and "Don Giovanni" — and will be presenting the program's Grand Finale on Saturday, Aug. 17, at the War Memorial Opera House.

The unprecedented move for the annual festival is significant as women accounted for less than 20% of opera directing credits in the U.S. between 2005 and 2021, according to researchers at the University of Melbourne.

"It's my great hope that as more creative voices of powerful women are being heard and seen in our industry, this won't be a new story going forward," Carrie-Ann Matheson, artistic director of Merola and the San Francisco Opera Center, told the Chronicle.

Theodosakis and 28 singers and pianists were selected from nearly 1,400 applicants to be "Merolini," as the summer fellows are affectionately called. The Grand Finale, a culmination of their 11-week summer training before a handful advance to Merola's two-year Adler Fellowship, will feature selections from newer works such as San Francisco composer Jake Heggie's "Dead Man Walking"; famed jazz trumpeter and SFJazz Executive Artistic Director Terence Blanchard's "Fire Shut up in My Bones"; and English playwright and composer Noël Coward's "Bitter Sweet," the last tutti act of the night, in addition to classical pieces by Mozart, Rossini



Provided by Kristen Loken/Merola Opera Program

Justice Yates as Masetto, Moriah Berry as Zerlina, Donghoon Sang as Leporello, Viviana Aurelia Goodwin as Donna Elvira, Lydia Grindatto as Donna Anna and Michael John Butler as Don Ottavio in Merola Opera Program's "Don Giovanni."

and Bellini.

Classical opera repertoire is known for its portrayal of women as unfaithful beings or objects of desire. The aforementioned "Cosi Fan Tutte," whose duet "Ahimè! Che cosa avete? ... Il core vi dono" will be featured during the Grand Finale, pokes fun at female infidelity through a story that sees two men seducing each other's fiancées, a pair of sisters.

Dorabella, a woman initially indifferent when her sister's fiancé, Guglielmo, wooed her in disguise, eventually succumbs to his pursuit. Dorabella's fiancé eventually forgives her for the betrayal after accepting the fact that "cosi fan tutte," or "all women are like that." The opera culminates in a double wedding of each sister with her original beloved.

"It was important to me that Dorabella wasn't just a two-dimensional character, but that she really grows throughout the season and that she is making decisions," Theodosakis said.

Theodosakis also stressed the importance of consent while working with the Merolini on scenes that involved moments of physical intimacy, noted 24-year-old Viviana Aurelia Goodwin, who had to kiss her stage partner as part of Theo-

dosakis' choreography for a scene from Mascagni's "L'amico Fritz."

"I want to hear you both verbally say yes," Goodwin recalled the di-

rector saying before they proceeded with the choreography.

Working under the creative direction of Theodosakis, Racette and Ben Seadia was an enlightening experience for many Merolini.

"There was a bit of safety knowing that it was a team of women heading a show and talking so candidly about abuse, consent and claiming women's bodies," said Justice Yates, 23, who performed in "Don Giovanni" two weeks ago and portrays Guglielmo in the Grand Finale duet.

Over the course of the opera training program — which has launched the careers of star alums such as Leona Mitchell, Ailyn Pérez and Joyce DiDonato — the three directors forged strong connections. Ben Seadia and

Theodosakis particularly bonded, with the Israeli director introducing the Merolini to other female artistic directors, stage directors and designers as part of Merola's first-ever directing fellow mentorship initiative.

With what she has learned during Merola's Summer Festival, Theodosakis plans to direct "Cosi Fan Tutte" at the University of Toronto and vows to continue to find more interesting ways to approach classic operas.

"They were written by old white men a long time ago," Theodosakis said with a chuckle. "You don't even need to change the text or plot, but you can find what you want to highlight and focus more on the women."

Reach Linda Liu: linda.liu@sfbchronicle.com