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**Opera Naples** to pack season into one week

NEAPOLITAN, 1D

## NEAPOLITAN

+ LIFESTYLE &amp; CLASSIFIED



Mary Anne McKerrow, left, costume coordinator, helps Leah Partridge, who will play Violetta in Opera Naples' rendition of Verdi's *La Traviata*, get into costume at the Wang Opera Center in Naples on Thursday. Opera Naples' "Festival Under the Stars" will be held outdoors at Baker Park from March 10-13. ALEX DRIEHAUS/NAPLES DAILY NEWS/USA TODAY - FLORIDA NETWORK

# Opera Naples bundles season into one music-packed week

Harriet Howard Heithaus Naples Daily News USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

That glow you'll see over Baker Park beginning March 10 is not a meteor. Not a drone. Not fireflies off course from the Midwest.

It's **Opera Naples** flying without a net. The company, only the second to stage a full performance onstage at Baker Park, has bundled its season into one music-packed week, called the Festival Under the Stars.

This isn't strictly an opera festival. The music runs a wide, if still classically-driven, gamut:

- On March 10, a star concert with an international powerhouse tenor, Joseph Calleja, who moves with equal ease among arias, Broadway and Neapolitan classics.

- On March 11 and 13, the opera "*La Traviata*," Verdi's sumptuous blow for social justice, baring the hypocrisy of the privileged. Its gorgeous music didn't stop Italy from banning it in con-

temporary 1850s dress because it was too close to upper class behavior for comfort.

- On March 12, an enhanced vocal concert version of Leonard Bernstein's multigenre Broadway musical, "*West Side Story*." It has already sold out and seats were added last week to accommodate more people.

There's a history of classical outdoor music festivals in the U.S. that has made names such as Tanglewood, Ravinia, Spoleto and Santa Fe Opera familiar to music lovers. But those wrap around entire months of the summer, as does Sarasota Opera's Winter Festival during tourist season. The weeklong concept, fairly young in the U.S., seems to be percolating from the threat COVID-19 contagion poses to indoor performances.

Naples isn't the only opera that got the me-

mo. Palm Beach Opera finishes its first Outdoor Opera Festival Sunday, Feb. 28; Opera Tampa is taking a summer series to Straz Center's Riverwalk. The Portland (Oregon) Opera is headed outdoors for at least one production.

It is a concept Opera Naples Music Director Ramón Tebar has always had in the back of his mind, he said last November when the festival was announced. He had planned to ease into it, however.

"Besides performances in Artis—Naples I thought of adding another outdoor concert every year so we could, in effect, reach a festival format. We didn't think the pandemic would push us that fast," he said. "So here we are!"

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Leah Partridge, who will play Violetta in Opera Naples' rendition of Verdi's *La Traviata*, poses for a photo at the Wang Opera Center in Naples. ALEX DRIEHAUS/NAPLES DAILY NEWS/USA TODAY - FLORIDA NETWORK

# Opera

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## Challenges mount, melt away

That's not expected to be true in a literal sense until this weekend. Until last Thursday, the U.S. Embassy in Madrid hadn't issued Tebar permission to enter the U.S. He is from one of the European nations whose citizens are banned from U.S. travel without special authorization during the pandemic.

So Tebar had to miss the annual gala, and he's not here for the first week of concentrated preparation for a festival that has been his idea. While Robert Signom III, director of productions, was writing and rewriting schedules and delivering photos for the stage director's use — this look or that? which time works best for this rehearsal?

But Tebar was expected to arrive Saturday, Feb. 27, at which point Sondra Quinn, executive director of Opera Naples, will stop holding her breath.

"This has driven us all crazy," she said.

There are other critical challenges. One is how to handle a production set with no rear wall. Baker Park's concrete disc of a stage is friendlier to single-star shows than theater productions, as Naples Players, who are producing the musical "Footloose" there this week, will attest.

"You can't hide anything out there," declared Jeffrey Buchman, stage manager for "La Traviata." "All the logistics we normally work within — where are the bathrooms, where are the waiting rooms — totally shift."

So, he said, they're not hiding the shifts: "They're going to be highly choreographed and carefully handled as best we can so they become part of the storytelling."

Partitions, of necessity, will hide some backstage breathing space for singers who are not onstage for certain scenes. Buchman has chosen to let the chorus have distanced seats and make

entrances onto the stage from there. Lighting, use of projections and shapes that Buchman described as more "poetic" than literal, will serve as partitions and furnishings in some, but not all cases.

Without the directional assistance of an acoustic backdrop, this is a rare opera that will need a sound system as well. That may be the biggest challenge of all; sound director Dave Bullard must make microphoned singers not sound like microphoned singers.

Ironically, "La Traviata" is the only opera said to be written by Verdi that takes place entirely indoors. It hasn't fazed Buchman.

"We just embrace this wide open view of being outdoors and having this really touching story play in the midst of all of that, but not trying to create a proscenium theater," he said. "I don't think scenically we need to overpower the space. Hopefully that beautiful starry sky will just kind of envelop the story."

## Bernstein, Collier County, Barclays help

"West Side Story" is the closest production to self-starting. Isabel Leonard, a soprano with multiple Grammys and experience everywhere from Vienna to the Metropolitan Opera, stars as Maria. Alex McKissick, a veteran of al fresco starring roles at Wolf Trap and Aspen Music Festival, plays Tony in the tale of Romeo and Juliet transported to gritty 20th-century New York.

It doesn't use a full chorus. "West Side Story" uses small ensembles — the 'Shark' girls, the 'Shark' guys, the 'Jet' girls' that I'm treating more like soloists," explained Robin Frank, Opera Naples music administrator and chorus master. The groups blend Opera Naples Chorus members with FGCU and Ave Maria University students and some of the secondary characters from "Traviata."

Because of that soloist character and because the music is so well known,

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Frank said she “did have an initial rehearsal with them, gave them the material and said, ‘Go learn it.’” They’ve just recently return for rehearsals that are added at the end of “La Traviata” sessions.

“Traviata” was 180 degrees from that.

“We started rehearsing in late January, and we started with text because there’s a lot of text to learn for “Traviata,” she said of the Italian-language opera.

Then there were the singing parts: One song, a giddy farewell from the guests at the end of Violetta’s party in Act One, is in six parts.

“There’s a lot of Italian, and it’s rapid-fire,” she said. “And Ramón tends to like to go fast. So I prepare the chorus to be able to sing it quickly.”

The chorus has been pared down from the multitude generally seen in the opera’s party scenes to 21 people. They’ve been arranged in small-number or single-singer “pods” for safety. Under Opera Naples guidelines, choruses will perform with face coverings, although the principals won’t.

Buchman is no stranger to extreme staging difficulties from working with the Seattle Opera, Chautauqua and Florida Grand Opera among others, and he’s a former operatic tenor himself. So he’s is not worried about the ability to create safe spacing onstage.

The county has even come through for parking assistance. Its CAT transit buses will run a temporary route between Baker Park and the Fourth Street parking garage every 15 minutes from 6 to 11 p.m. during the performances of both the Naples Players’ “Footloose” and all productions of Opera Naples’ Under the Stars Festival.

That leaves one thing no one can control: The weather. March and April are two of Collier County’s driest months, but Opera Naples has already kept Sunday, March 14, as a potential rain date for one production.

Quinn will add her own talisman to the good vibrations for its weather. Tucked away in some bushes near the stage will be a capful of gin. Quinn said she learned from a South American acquaintance that a little cap-size offering would appease the rain gods.

“I used it every year I was involved with the Naples Garden Club’s house and garden tour. It worked,” she marveled.



**Leah Partridge poses for a photo at the Wang Opera Center.** ALEX DRIEHAUS/NAPLES DAILY NEWS/USA TODAY - FLORIDA NETWORK

## Festival Under the Stars

**What:** Opera Naples four-day opera and music festival with three different performances, from concert to musical to opera. March 10, Joseph Calleja in concert; March 11 and 13, “La Traviata”; March 12, “West Side Story,” vocals/concert version;

**Where:** Baker Park, 50 Riverside Circle, Naples; free parking at the park, and free CAT shuttles every 15 minutes between the city parking lot at 400 Eighth St. S.

**When:** Performances 7 p.m. March 10-13; seating areas open earlier

**Admission:** VIP ticketing, \$125, including preferred seating at reserved tables, with light alfresco meal; \$85, preferred individual seating in “Premium” section; \$65, seating in priority “Classic” section; \$45, seating in “Standard” section; \$25, reserved seating in “General” area. Three-day pass, 15 percent discount; two-day pass, 10 percent discount. Group discounts.

**To buy:** operanaples.org or 239-963-9050

**Something else:** Social distancing and COVID-19 safety measures will be required,

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