

Opera Naples al fresco: Here are 5 things you want to know

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Here's five things to know about **Opera Naples** this week under the stars at Cambier Park and inside at Wang Opera Center.

1. It's what's on stage that counts

The Sunday al fresco production of "Tosca" in Cambier Park would have been riveting whether I was in boots and parka or sundress. Those with tickets for the Tuesday, March 15, evening performance may be dressed less like Northerners than the Sunday audience was, but the thrills are promised to be equal, as they should be for Javier Camarena's bel canto tenor concert Wednesday, March 16.

"Tosca" is the opera-est of all operas. Its tale of sex, violence and politics with a surprise ending is easily the most compelling introduction to the art form you can have.

Fortified by a solid orchestra of around 25 and Artistic Director Ramón Tebar on the podium, these singers make it even easier to love the genre. Ann Toomey is a brilliant Floria Tosca, a passionate woman whose jealousy proves her undoing. Toomey's rich voice projects power that doesn't disintegrate under adversity.

And she gets plenty of it, having to wrestle her way out from underneath the amorous Scarpia any number of times. This is the most physical "Tosca" we've ever seen.

As her embattled lover, Mario Cavara-dossi, Ramon Vargas alternates between breezy, flirty personality of his artist and a to-the-wall determination. It's beautifully served by the open vulnerable character of his voice.

And on Sunday night, all of them benefited from the serenity of Cambier Park. At Baker Park last year, "La Traviata" suffered through the noise of nearly a dozen jets landing at the nearby Naples Airport.

As well as they sang, we'd let them all escape from this saga alive. That includes Mark Delavan, the wicked Scarpia, whose vocal expression makes our skin crawl when he leers at Floria Tosca, facing him

More Festival Under the Stars

● **7 p.m. Wednesday, March 16 — Javier Camarena:** Camarena, who has been cheered to encores in three different productions at the Met, is a tenor superstar who plays Puccini, Donizetti and Rossini with equal ease. With the Naples Festival Orchestra, Tebar conducting. \$28-\$93

● **7:30 p.m. Friday, March 18, and 2 pm. Sunday, March 20 — "Glory Denied":** At Wang Opera Center, 2480 Linwood Ave., Naples. The contemporary opera by Tom Cipullo, based on the Thomas Philpott book of the same name. It retells the story of the longest held American prisoner in the Vietnam War, Capt. Floyd James Thompson, his homecoming and his struggle to adjust to an America that had spun through nine full years in the meantime. With the Naples Festival Orchestra, Tebar conducting. \$39-\$102

● **7:30 p.m. Saturday, March 19 — Ramon Vargas:** At Wang Opera Center, 2480 Linwood Ave., Naples. The Mexico City-born tenor is not only in demand in opera houses but as a concert singer, with an extensive repertoire ranging from Italian classical songs, romantic German Lieder, and melodies by French, Mexican, and Spanish composers. With Tebar on piano. Cabaret style seating with tables for from two (\$200) to 10 (\$1,000) some general admission (\$60)

For reservations, see operanaples.org or call 239-963-9050.



Opera Naples production of "Tosca" at Cambier Park. HARRIET HOWARD HEITHAUS

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alone in his study, “I don’t sell myself to a lovely lady for money.”

Delavan, after shaking up the audience by surveying the church “Te Deum” as if it were for him, had his own shake-up. He took an audible tumble from the stage as Act I closed. That brings us to the next point.

2. This is easier for us than for performers

Strands of lights surrounded the seats and floods poured in from behind the food lighting around the seats at intermission. It was easy for the audience to wander and mingle. But to keep light from bleeding out from behind the stage, it was likely dark back there, which made it easier for Delavan to miss his step. To his credit, the baritone came back and performed an extensively physical second act.

Dressing rooms also are in short supply at municipal softball diamonds, so some of the ensemble had to find spots with good lighting around the park in which to finish their make-up. It was a treat to walk by some of the face painting that was going on at the pavilions and to watch an ersatz nun in a billowing habit stride among the buildings.

Yet another challenge: The musicians and conductor were working on one of the breeziest nights of the year so far. Tebar had a split protective Plexiglas box inside which his score nestled. Musicians’ security measures ranged from iPad Pro scores, with Bluetooth pedal operation, to a small bundle of clothespins that chomped down music stands and papers like hungry wooden birds.

3. Expect and embrace risks outdoors

With the forces of nature to contend with outdoors, Opera Naples threw standard chronology to the same winds that beat up on its plans for a tech rehearsal. Costuming here is community of “We Will Rock You” villagers in cat suits and sparkles versus the controlling Goth law enforcement. Tosca got bo-ho costuming, with trailing ribbons and glitter; Scarpia came as a distant relative of Alice Cooper in motorcycle leathers an eyeliner. We loved it.

We didn’t even mind that Tosca took a different route to the Pearly Gates than is in the original script; better by the knife than risking a jump on a stage with steps.

We didn’t mind that the singers wore mikes, generally not done in opera, because the acoustics and the wind would have sent their arias somewhere east of their audience otherwise. Actually, the audience should have been miked, too. The cast, who richly deserved that triple-bow standing ovation, could see us but not really hear us.

What we liked least about this production was its libretto. There are several translations of “Tosca” from Italian, but this one, we felt, had milked out some of the drama.

The denouement of the opera as “Scarpia, we go together to be judged by God” does not pack the dramatic wallop of “Scarpia! We meet before God!”

4. No dinner? No problem.

Besides wine and nonalcoholic beverages, Crave Culinare has been within the ball diamond area for Festival Under the Stars nights. Offerings range from an anti-pasto box or Caesar salad to cookies and a salted soft pretzel with mustard. Wines and other beverages, including water, are also available.

If you’re in the mood for food after the event, there are options after 10 p.m. on Fifth Avenue South. Among them: Aqua, South Avenue Bar, Bar Tulia and Vergina. It helps to call first, however, to make sure the kitchen is still open that particular night.

5. Bring walking shoes.

If you are there a bit before 6 p.m. for the 7 p.m. show you can likely park in one of the two garages on Eighth Street South. Otherwise, you may find yourself trudging yet another two blocks from Gulfview Middle School’s open lot.

Naples offers valet parking, too. For \$7, you can leave your car with valets across from Naples Art on Cambier Park Way, just around the corner from the entrance to the Festival site on Park Street.

Even close-in parking doesn’t mean your stilettos are home free. You’re walking in grass, and there’s rain forecast during the early afternoon several days this week that could make you a two-spike dethatching machine. Don’t do it.

Technically, it’s still winter, so boots can be considered fashionable. Or, just, how about safer.

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