

# SR Symphony presents Titans of Opera

By Diane Peterson

Wednesday, November 28, 2012



Soprano Christina Major will share the stage with tenor Christopher Bengochea, performing arias from “Nabucco,” “Il Trovatore,” “Aida” and “La Traviata.” (Soprano Major shown here with baritone Jason Detwiler).

Opera lovers, take note. Richard Wagner’s monumental opera, “The Ring” cycle, is coming to Rohnert Park.

When the Santa Rosa Symphony takes the stage for its third subscription concert set this weekend at the Green Music Center, the program will kick off with excerpts from Wagner’s “The Ring of Nibelungen,” a series of four epic operas usually performed over the course of 16hours, or one night and three days.

The convoluted plot — full of murder and incest, gods and semi-gods, humans and gnomes — reads like Homer’s “The Odyssey,” Tolkien’s “The Lord of the Rings” and HBO’s “Game of Thrones” rolled into one.

“For me, ‘The Ring’ represents the kernel of what Wagner is capable of doing, the theatrics and the imagination ... to invent those races of gods,” said Music Director Bruno Ferrandis. “So I created a mini-Ring, with extracts from ‘Das Reingold,’ ‘Die Walkure,’ ‘Siegfried,’ and ‘Gottterdammerung.’”

During the second half, the symphony will join with soprano Christina Major and tenor Christopher Bencochea to perform a dozen arias and choruses from Giuseppe Verdi's most famous operas: "Nabucco," "Il Trovatore," "Aida" and "La Traviata."

Ferrandis planned the program as a study in contrasts between the two titans of opera, who were both born in 1813, nearly 200 years ago.

"It's a clash between the two giants," Ferrandis said. "Look at the amount of money that opera companies, musicians and especially singers have made due to these two giants."

The Santa Rosa Symphony could not hire Wagnerian singers for the first half of the program because most of them are based in Europe.

"It is very hard to find Wagner singers without paying a huge price," Ferrandis said. "So I chose to do scenes."

Wagner's orchestration itself is so complex that the symphony musicians will be working extra hard to perfect their parts.

"The technical demands on the strings are gigantic," Ferrandis said. "The violins have runs after runs after runs, and it's non-stop."

Instead of leading back to a home key, however, Wagner's scales typically lead the listener away from tonality.

"You have scales up and down and up and down and up and down, and they don't resolve," he said. "Wagner made everyone else depart from chromaticism, eventually leading Mahler and Schoenberg to atonality."

Verdi, on the other hand, stayed squarely within the tonal tradition and used fewer notes to get his message across.

"The strength of Verdi is the melody," Ferrandis said. "Verdi is more economical. It's marvelous that he says incredibly strong things with incredibly economical means."

While Verdi wrote melodies only for the singer, Wagner's music is full of "leitmotifs," or themes, performed by both voices and instruments.

"There is a theme for everything — the sword, the fire, Wotan, Brunnhilde," he said. "The voice is not so much a melody as another instrument."

But the main difference between the two composers, Ferrandis concluded, is that Verdi's roots were purely musical while Wagner's evolved from theater.

"Verdi was really a pure musician," Ferrandis said. "Wagner's mind was turned toward theater, and because he was talented enough, he poured his theatrical imagination into music."



Christopher Bengochea

Guest soprano Major and tenor Bengochea have both sung as resident artists of Opera San Jose as well as with opera companies across the globe.

A native of Fort Worth, Texas, Major is known for her “Italianate sound,” a lush, warm timbre that makes her well suited to Verdi and Puccini roles.

“With Verdi, it’s the Italian style, but there’s a lot more movement in the voice,” she said. “It can be very virtuosic.” For example, the soprano will sing “Tacea la notte placida” from Verdi’s “Il Trovatore,” an aria that starts with a beautiful melody, then “starts going crazy.”

“You need a singer who is able to move the voice, even if the voice is large,” she said. “You have to be nimble.”

Major is looking forward to singing the “romantic spaghetti duets” from Verdi’s “La Traviata” with the Basque-American tenor, who has studied in Italy.

“When you’re singing face-to-face with two high voices, it’s always interesting how your sounds collide in front of you,” she said. “It’s almost staticky, and then it blends perfectly, and that’s all you can hear.”

*You can reach Staff Writer Diane Peterson at 521-5287 or [diane.peterson@pressdemocrat.com](mailto:diane.peterson@pressdemocrat.com).*

## **MUSIC WEEKEND**

**What:** The Santa Rosa Symphony under Music Director Bruno Ferrandis and The Santa Rosa Symphony Honor Choir under Jenny Bent with guest soprano Christina Major and tenor Christopher Bengochea perform “Titans of Opera,” a program of works by Wagner and Verdi.

**When:** 8 p.m. Saturday (12/1), and Monday (12/3); 3 p.m. Sunday (12/2). An open rehearsal is at 2 p.m. Saturday (12/1).

**Where:** Weill Hall, Green Music Center, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park.

**Tickets:** \$20-\$75, \$10 student rush a half hour prior to curtain. Parking is \$10 per car. Open rehearsal is \$12 adults, \$8 youth; parking is \$5 per car.

**Reservations:** 546-8742 or [santarosasympphony.com](http://santarosasympphony.com)