

Love. Tragedy. Honor. Betrayal.

**It's All Happening in
Sarasota Opera's New Season!**

By Christy Pessemier



Don Giovanni



(2012) Sarasota Opera Presents Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*.
Photo by Rod Millington.

Sarasota Opera *never* fails to wow its many fans and its 2023 winter season promises to deliver yet another impressive season of operas. With an exciting mix of popular operas, new works, and operas we haven't seen in a while, there's a lot to look forward to.

"We want to get back to where we were in the past," Sarasota Opera General Director Richard Russell said. "Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi is our brand, and since we finished our Verdi cycle in 2016, our focus is to bring back some of the works we did some time ago."

Launching Sarasota Opera's winter season is Giacomo Puccini's thrilling classic *Madama Butterfly*. According to Russell, it is one of the most anticipated and popular operas in their repertoire. Sarasota Opera features *Madama Butterfly* every six or seven years, with its last production in 2017.

"People love *Madama Butterfly*," Russell said. "It's a great story with beautiful and familiar music that people have heard. It's one of those stories that's incredibly passionate and moving. And for people who haven't experienced opera, it works well as their first exposure to it."

Another well-known and beloved opera in Sarasota Opera's winter season is *Don Giovanni*, a libretto by the gifted Lorenzo Da Ponte with music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart—his most famous opera.

"From where opera was at the time, Mozart really moved opera forward just by his brilliance," Russell said. "He was an incredible composer, and very forward thinking. It's tragic that he died in his thirties because he could have accomplished so much more if he had lived longer."

Both Richard Russell and Sarasota Opera Artistic Director, Maestro Victor DeRenzi, believe *Don Giovanni's* music, with its beautiful arias and ensembles, as well as its storyline are very compelling. Sometimes billed as the greatest opera ever composed, it's both a comedy and tragedy featuring the legendary and notorious character Don Juan. Set in 17th century Spain, audiences will be entertained with a thrilling plot that includes crime, betrayal, and justice.

The third opera in the winter season lineup is Giuseppe Verdi's *Ernani* last performed at Sarasota Opera in 1997. Russell is very excited about its return and believes audiences will love it.

"*Ernani* is one of Verdi's early pieces, and when it came out, it was a great success," he said. "While it is not often done, it features great arias and chorus music." According to Russell, the strength of Sarasota Opera's chorus adds to the appeal of each opera and makes the performances even more compelling.

The fourth opera of the season, *Thérèse*, by Jules Massenet, is a shorter work never performed at Sarasota Opera. The



Sarasota Opera Presents *Don Giovanni*.
Photo by Rod Millington.

last time it was performed professionally in the United States was in 1989 in Boston.

Thérèse premiered in Monte Carlo in 1907 and was very successful in performances around Europe. Soon after, music pieces from the performance were adapted for fans of the opera to play at home on the piano, a telltale sign of its success and popularity. Yet somehow, it fizzled and was forgotten—until now.

Russell is proud that the Sarasota Opera is the second professional company in the United States to perform it. "It's always been part of our yearly mission to try and do a piece that you can't see anywhere else," he said. "We've had great success resurrecting operas that were really popular at one time."

Thérèse is a love story that takes place during the French Revolution, and it is only an hour and a half with intermission. "No one has ever heard of it," said Russell, "but it's perfect for adventurous people who like to discover new things, expand their horizons, and learn about new operas."

Russell says rediscovering a great and unique work like *Thérèse* is exciting, and he's looking forward to seeing it performed. He anticipates that audiences will feel the same way.

"When you see a new opera, sometimes you forget about an old one," he said. "I think rediscovering these kinds of pieces is fascinating for people. *Thérèse* is an example of that, and it's going to be an interesting journey for a lot of people who like experiencing different operas."

As smooth and composed as the opera performances are, many are unaware of the intense work that goes into planning each season at Sarasota Opera. It's an arduous task that begins with considering every opera that's ever been written and whittling the list down to four or five selections. "It's quite challenging and similar to putting a puzzle together," said Russell.

The process begins with Russell and Maestro DeRenzi joining forces to come up with the framework for the season. They then consult with their leadership team including Artistic Administrator Marco Nisticò, Director



Sarasota Opera Presents Don Giovanni.
Photo by Rod Millington.

of Production Scott Keclik, as well as Director of Marketing Stephen Baker, and Costume Designer Howard Tsvi Kaplan. The youth opera is also usually a part of planning each season, although this winter season the children's chorus isn't a part of any of the selected operas.

"All of us are meeting together multiple times," Russell said. "There's a lot of discussion, crunching of numbers, and considering various scenarios. It rarely ends up being the season that we start out with."

Planning the winter season begins in April of each year, and at this time the 2023-2024 season is being finalized. Sarasota Opera still faces challenges with its planning due to changes it faced when it reopened after the Covid pandemic. "Some of our audience got used to not going out as much during Covid," he said. "We are still trying to figure out how to get them all to come back."

The good news is with new people moving here all the time, Sarasota Opera is gaining new patrons every season.

Sarasota Opera also faces challenges with procuring sets for some of the rarer performances. Because its stage is an



Rafael Davila and Asako Tamura in the 2012 Production of Madama Butterfly. Rod Millington



unusual size and is very shallow, using sets from other opera companies isn't an option. To cut costs, they commissioned award-winning set designer Steven Kemp to design sets for similar time periods. *Madama Butterfly* and *Don Giovanni* can use previously constructed sets because they take place during similar time periods in history, but *Thérèse* and *Ernani* require unique sets. So, they hired Kemp again to design sets for *Ernani*, which will be used in future productions as well.

Costume designer Howard Tsvi Kaplan is also an integral part of the season's planning and has a team that works with him to design, adapt, and resize costumes for the performers. At times, to show age, he paints the costumes, while making sure everything looks authentic to the time period of the piece.

"It's part of our aesthetic to stay authentic to the time period of each opera," Russell said. "That's what we're known for. We don't reimagine works. We keep things more traditional, and people appreciate that."

That authenticity, along with the massive amount of talent and hard work that goes into each season, is what draws passionate and sometimes fanatical fans both locally and from all over the world to experience performances at Sarasota Opera.

"Twenty-five percent of our audience is coming from outside Florida. We have people attending representing 47 to 48 of the 50 states, Europe, and the world," Russell said. "That's why we want a program you can't see anywhere else. We have a reputation for high-quality work."

For more information or to purchase tickets, please call 941-328-1300 or visit sarasotaopera.org.



Madama Butterfly
GIACOMO PUCCINI
February 18 – March 24

Don Giovanni
WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART
February 25 – March 25

Ernani
GIUSEPPE VERDI
March 11 – March 26

Thérèse
JULES MASSENET
March 17 – March 25