

MSU's talented singers offer 'La Boheme'

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The last time the Michigan State University Opera Theatre produced the beloved opera, "La Boheme" by Puccini was back in 2004. The company's director, Melanie Helton, was new on the job and had to hire a professional baritone to give her young cast some maturity and strength.

For this production, 10 years later, things have changed, Helton says.

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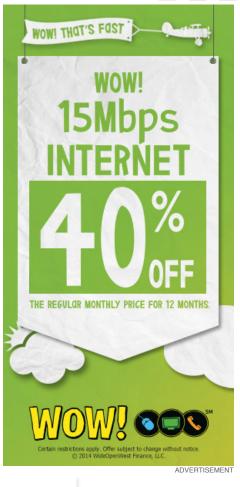
- "La Boheme"
- When: 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday at Fairchild Theatre. MSU Auditorium.
- Tickets: \$20 for adults, \$18 for seniors, and \$5 for students, at music.msu.edu or at the College of Music box office in person at the Music Building, Room 102, 333 W. Circle Drive, or (517) 353-5340. Also available at the door one hour before show.
- Preview: Melanie Helton, director of MSU's Opera Theater, will preview the show 45 minutes before each performance.

This is a banner year for the opera company. Last October they produced the most popular opera in the world, Mozart's "Magic Flute" to try out their brand new digs at the remodeled Fairchild Theatre and next weekend they'll be mounting the second most popular opera, "La Boheme."

Helton is giddy about the new hall.

"It's transformed the college of music and the opera theater. The sound is wonderful. Despite a 60-piece orchestra in the pit, everything fits beautifully."

For many folks in the audience, the conductor who directs the musicians in the pit is the invisible man. Most people don't



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see him when he's conducting, and catch only a glimpse of him during the cast-ofthousands curtain call.

But in reality. Daniel Beckwith, the visiting music director who will be wielding the baton for "Boheme," is totally in charge of all the music this weekend.

In addition to the rehearsals he's involved with now, he also was at MSU in January working with the singers.

Beckwith has an impressive resume, having conducted Chicago's Lyric Opera and making his Metropolitan Opera debut in 1995.

Beckwith was an assistant to James Levine, the legendary music director of the MET for six years. He worked individually with each singer, rehearsing all of the music, language and style. He also worked with the orchestra. During a rehearsal, he was told that Levine had an appointment and would be coming back late for the rehearsal — could he please begin the rehearsal for him.

Knowing the music very well, Beckwith took the baton and conducted the singers and orchestra for quite a while. Suddenly he saw Levine back stage watching him work with the musicians. The appointment story was a ruse — Levine just wanted to watch Beckwith as the boss.

After the rehearsal, Levine told him, "You'll be conducting 'Don Giovanni' next year."

Beckwith said, "I've never been so nervous and excited in my life. There I was standing on the podium, and the entire stage filled with singers and the MET orchestra was waiting for my downbeat. Nothing would start without me."

The conductor admits that some people see opera as stuffy; filled with a foreign language they don't know and with unfamiliar classical music.

But he says opera is far more accessible now. "Most opera companies now offer super titles (English translations projected above the singers) and Broadway has influenced the stage direction to be more energetic and the sets are beautiful. They say, we listen with our eyes," Beckwith said.

Although most Broadway shows are totally miked, Beckwith is proud to say that very few operas are amplified today.

Beckwith now divides his time between university opera companies and professionals. "I love to work with young singers," Beckwith

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said. "They have no bad habits. In this case, I was here two years ago to direct 'The Tales of Hoffman' and the two tenors I worked with are now graduate students and I'm working with them in 'La Boheme.' It's a joy to do that.

"Also, the singers have great voice teachers at MSU and Melanie had an international career before she came here, so she gives the students wonderful training on the stage."



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Written by Ken Glickman For the Lansing State Journal Apr. 1, 2014 |

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