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Photo: San Diego Opera

**Why is San Diego Opera the friendliest company around? Look to its singer-friendly general director, Ian Campbell.**

By Carol Jean Delmar

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For San Diego Opera's general director Ian Campbell, running the company has become a family affair. When he took over the helm in 1983, he hired Ann Spira of the Milwaukee Symphony to be his development director. "We married three years later because she begged me to marry her," he recently said jokingly by telephone. "When we decided to get married, some of the staff knew that we were dating even though we were very discrete about it. We invited the president and incoming president of our board of directors over for dinner, and I said, 'Look, I want you to know that Ann and I are going to get married, and I imagine that you don't want both of us working in the company.' They looked at me and said, 'Well, Ian, what will you do to earn a living?' which I

thought was very funny. Then they added: 'Look, we've got no problem if the staff has no worry,' and the staff didn't -- because, frankly, Ann is a genius at her job.'

That was 21 years ago, and Spira, now Ann Campbell, has since become the company's director of strategic planning, overseeing marketing and development. "She was always actively involved in all of the forward planning because everything is money. It's the money that allows you to get the artists you want and put on the productions. If there's no money, there's no company," Campbell said." The couple has two boys: Benjamin, 20, who flies in from UC Santa Cruz for every opening night; and David, 18, who formed an opera club at his high school.

### THE BEGINNING

Campbell, 61, was born in Brisbane, Australia. His family moved to Townsville in North Queensland and then to Sydney. "I grew up singing," he said. When he was in his final year of high school, the drama department staged Gilbert and Sullivan's "The Mikado," and Campbell was cast in the lead. "I had a very natural tenor voice," he added. Although he had no intentions of becoming a singer, his high school teacher suggested that he take singing lessons while attending university, and because his family wasn't wealthy, she offered to pay.

Campbell had just earned his bachelor's degree when he was asked to audition for the Australian Opera, since he had been performing in local musicals. "I did it just as a hoot," he said, because he'd been planning to study law. Needless to say, he never became a lawyer. The company, which later became known as Opera Australia, offered him a 28-week contract, and he stayed on for eight years. "I was a comprimario and had plenty of work," he said, "but I was becoming dissatisfied because I really wanted to be a Nicolai Gedda or Fritz Wunderlich, but I didn't have the instrument for that. I knew that if I continued in the secondary roles, I'd be frustrated eventually."

He accepted a position with the Australia Council for the Arts and then went on to head the State Opera of South Australia, which was on the verge of bankruptcy. He turned the company around and then became the artistic administrator at the Met, working on casting and scheduling. But he missed controlling a company. "The Met was a great experience for me because it threw me into the big world of singers that I hadn't known, and I made a lot of relationships," he said.

In 1983, he left the Met and became San Diego Opera's general and artistic director.

### AS SAN DIEGO OPERA'S DIRECTOR

"In most cases, the artistic director decides what operas will be performed and how they will be cast," Campbell explained. "The general director is more focused on the funding and running of the administration, and on the survival of the institution. There are lots of artistic directors who don't want to do fundraising or deal with the boards, but would rather just deal with the product. In my case, I would never have an artistic director separate from me or a general director separate from me because I love doing both."

The board hires and fires the general director and sometimes the artistic director, and the general director hires and fires everybody else. “Everyone on our board [of 40] is committed to the company by not only contributing but for helping to bring audiences in through their businesses and the friendships they have,” he said. San Diego Opera board members are subscribers and donors, attend the opening night gala, and are active in fundraising and participation. “Nobody comes in thinking that their job is just to be nice,” he said. “The average donor contributes more than \$25,000 annually.”

The San Diego Opera Board of Directors is a rotating board with each member allowed two two-year terms, but after a year off, the nominating committee can recommend that the board member return. “The board gets complete budget details from me four years in advance,” Campbell said. “We’ve balanced our budget for 22 consecutive years, and part of the reason is because we work on this four-year schedule. We always know where we’re heading and can be adaptive for that fifth year if we start to see things change.”

When Campbell became director in 1983, the annual budget was \$3 million. At that time, there was a Verdi Festival of two operas every summer that was draining the company’s resources. “Summer is not a time in San Diego when people want to go to the opera,” Campbell said. “I inherited a festival that had already been planned, but I said to the board that it would be the last, since we were not overly financially stable. Some of the donors were angry. I had to cut the company back from six operas to four per season, but now we’ve grown back to five.” The budget is currently \$17.5 million.

San Diego Opera isn’t a conservative company according to Campbell. Since 1999, it has staged André Previn’s “A Streetcar Named Desire,” Tobias Picker’s “Thérèse Raquin,” Samuel Barber’s “Vanessa,” and Carlisle Floyd’s “Cold Sassy Tree” and “Of Mice and Men.” This month, the company is premiering a new production of Alban Berg’s “Wozzeck,” directed by Tony Award-winner Des McAnuff. Yet Campbell acquiesced that it is the San Diego market that might be somewhat more conservative.

“When you have a conservative market, you must always deliver the ‘Aidas,’ ‘Bohèmes’ and ‘Carmens,’ and you have to work them [the audience] into certain things,” he said, adding that some of the company’s more modern, innovative operas have been disasters at the box office, including “A Streetcar Named Desire,” which played to 83 percent; “Cold Sassy Tree,” to 72 percent; and “Thérèse Raquin,” to 71 percent.

The question then arises: Is it wise to produce new contemporary operas knowing that they will most likely be unsuccessful at the box office?

“Absolutely,” Campbell said. “When you budget an opera they don’t know like ‘Wozzeck,’ we’ve budgeted that for 78 percent attendance. On the other hand, ‘Samson and Delilah’ [which was staged in February] was budgeted at 95 percent. In planning a season, we just know that we will not have the same audience for ‘Samson’ as we’re going to have for ‘Wozzeck.’ We have an obligation, I believe, to expose audiences to the newer operas; operas of a more contemporary or modern style that have not been heard, like ‘Wozzeck’; and operas that are part of the standard type of repertoire of which our

audience has no knowledge like, for example, Massenet's 'Don Quichotte,' which we have planned for 2009."

Campbell also doesn't shrug away from modernizing or updating traditional operas. "When It works, I think it's terrific," he said. "We did 'Cosi fan tutte,' here twice set at the Hotel del Coronado in 1913. We built the hotel on our stage. It [the action] took place on the beach. It all made sense, and the audience said, 'Oh, we know what that is.' It really worked."

But in a modernized production of "Carmen" last season, Campbell said, "We had Marina Domashenko appear in the first scene wearing a dress to the knees, a beautiful dress with frills. It was reddish and she had a flower in a garter on her thigh. I received letters from about 10 people who said that they left after Act 1 because she should be in a long red dress with a flower between her boobs. I answered each of them, and I wrote: 'Opera is not a fossil. Carmen can be dressed in anything. Just as you accept different interpretations when you go to see a play, you must do the same with opera. Did you hear the singer? It is the story and music that matter. Did you go to see 'Carmen' or to hear it? A few of the replies that came back said, 'Oh, I hadn't thought of it that way.'"

As for directors, Campbell looks for directors who respect the score and the artists. "I think it's silly to engage somebody who may be a great theater director but can't read a score and doesn't understand the nuances in the music," he said, adding that Lotfi Mansouri brought a great knowledge of tradition to "Samson and Delilah" this season.

On the other hand, he believes that Des McAnuff is the right choice for "Wozzeck." "I see it as a drama with music, and I wanted a fresh look," Campbell said. McAnuff, the longtime artistic director of La Jolla Playhouse, is leaving the post this month to steer the Stratford Festival in Ontario, Canada. "When I approached him, he told me that he had directed the play, seen the opera at the Met and thought that it was better," Campbell continued. "He has not directed opera singers, but he has directed singers, can read music and is a great guitarist, so I have somebody who has a familiarization with directing people who sing. He's a deliberate choice because I wanted to look at the work through a theatrical director's eyes."

Campbell likes to stay home in San Diego during the company's opera seasons from January to May, although he sometimes takes day trips to hear promising singers. In between seasons, he travels to Europe twice a year and to various companies within the United States. "Agents are always telling me whom I should hear. If I like a CD and want to hear a certain singer live, and the singer is singing in a certain place on a particular day, if I can get there, I try," he said. "There are also singers who write independently who don't have an agent. If somebody wants to audition for me and they've sent me a CD that I think is interesting, they can sing for me."

Campbell is known for engaging singers before they're well-known. "By the time they get here, they are established," he said, citing Renée Fleming who sang in San Diego Opera's production of "Eugene Onegin" and "Rusalka" in the mid-1990s. "When she sang

here in consecutive years, she was already starting to emerge, but those contracts were made about two years earlier.”

He has already cast the major roles in one opera for 2011, three out of the five operas for 2010, and everything prior to that. “I am competing with the Met, Paris, Chicago or whatever, so we have to get some of these singers early,” he said. “Then I like to repeat singers. If I hire someone, it’s usually because I think we can work together down the road. Richard Leech has been coming here for 15 years. Ferruccio Furlanetto has been singing here on and off for 23.

#### A FRIENDLY COMPANY

Agents say that their clients love to sing in San Diego because of the friendly, professional atmosphere. “I started as a singer,” Campbell said. “It all goes back to that. I’ve also been directing for years. I know the profession and I know that our fundamental job is to get the singer to the stage in a way that the singer can do his or her best. That’s why we exist. We don’t exist for our own egos. We exist for their talent. Without them, we don’t exist, so there is an expectation that I have of all staff that they should care about the artists and about what they do. We have great longevity in our staff. About two-thirds have been here more than 12 years. The singers are welcomed by everyone in this company, and they become friends of the company.

“Take Franz Hawlata, for example, who is singing *Wozzeck*,” Campbell continued. “When I met Franz to discuss the project in Vienna, we’d never met before. As we sat down, he said, ‘I don’t care what it is, I want to come to San Diego. I’ve heard such great things.’ And then I convinced him to sing *Wozzeck*, and at the last moment, I told him it would be in English, and he said, ‘I don’t sing in English,’ and I said, ‘That’s what will make it special.’ Then when I saw him in Paris, he’d learned the role in English and was committed.

“The word is out that if you come to San Diego, you feel welcome, and it is because I have good people who care.”

#### OPERA AMERICA

Campbell strongly believes in helping other companies develop a singer-friendly environment. He also believes that it is a necessity for companies to communicate with each other to learn and improve. While heading the State Opera of South Australia, he became the first foreigner to ever attend an Opera America conference. “They [the board of Opera America] changed the constitution to allow the State Opera to become a member,” he said. When he became San Diego Opera’s general director, he continued his involvement, spent approximately seven years on the board and was then elected chairman, a position he held until about three years ago.

Opera America is the leading service organization for professional opera companies in the United States. Based in New York, it promotes the presentation and appreciation of opera. “The focus is to help each other,” said Campbell. “It’s like a guild, so we exchange information, do annual reports and share data. The insitution assists smaller companies in

part to apply for grants. If they're having difficulty forming or managing a board, another general director or executive staff member of Opera America will go to help them. We can talk to each other readily at conferences and go through the Annual Survey of Finances. If you see that you are spending, for example, 50 percent on administration and another company is only spending 45 percent, that can encourage you to find out why. Everyone attends the general sessions at the conferences, but then there are special sessions for general directors, development directors, financial directors and marketing people." While he was chairman, Campbell worked with President and CEO Marc A. Scorca to help the European companies form Opera Europa.

Although still an active member of Opera America, Campbell is focusing more of his attention these days on the West Coast, San Diego Opera and his family.

He has no plans for retirement as long as he remains healthy. "I think the age of 93 sounds about right," he said. "For me, the future means continuing to keep the company stable, growing our endowment, growing the audience and convincing them to keep trying out what they don't know, and encouraging others to consider building an arts center to showcase the wonderful variety of arts in San Diego."