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[Domingo Discloses Season in Spite of LA Opera's Congestive Heart Failure.](#)

Los Angeles Opera's general director Plácido Domingo announced details of the company's 2010-11 season (Jan. 27) without the usual press conference and with no mention of the annual red-carpet opening week-end extravaganza bedecked with black-tie dinner gala and sumptuous luncheon on the grounds of the Music Center's Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. One could say it's the tide of the times that has necessitated the company to abandon all the glitz and glamour and reduce its productions from 10 a few years ago to six now, and from 75 performances to 42. In reality, it is the \$32 million "Ring" festival that has done the company in, forcing it to seek a \$14 million loan from the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors to stay afloat.

It looks like the season will be a worthy one, though, opening with the world premiere of composer Daniel Catán's "Il Postino," which was postponed this season so that LA Opera could produce its \$32 million "Ring." Based on the film of the same name and the 1985 novel "Ardiente Paciencia" by Antonio Skármeta, the opera about a young postman who finds inspiration and love from his encounters with a famous exiled poet will star tenors Domingo and Charles Castronovo, with soprano Cristina Gallardo-Domâs and baritone Vladimir Chernov.

Highlights of the season will include recitals performed by René Pape and Dmitri Hvorostovsky, and superstar heldentenor Ben Heppner will star in Richard Wagner's "Lohengrin."

Judging from the lineup, measures to cut the company's expenses seem to be in place. Many of the roles will be sung by lesser known young singers who are being given opportunity by the always generous Domingo who is capable of waving his baton in the pit of the Metropolitan Opera House one night and singing his newfound baritone lungs off as Simon Boccanegra the next.

Although music critics never cease to be amazed at the longevity of Domingo's vocal apparatus - he's 69 -- they are now quite critical of his management of Los Angeles Opera and Washington National Opera, which are both in financial disarray.

Washington Post music critic Anne Midgette recently wrote that Domingo hasn't shown "any particular ability to lead an organization." Daniel J. Wakin of The New York Times wrote that those close to him say that LA Opera and WNO lack "a firm local hand."

As an opera critic who lives in Los Angeles and writes about LA Opera, I would like to shed some light on the situation. First, Domingo is an asset to the Los Angeles landscape. He has elevated the LA cultural scene simply by his presence, and he has elevated LA Opera by attracting many great international stars to the West Coast. Yet as general director of LA Opera, he is definitely to blame for at least some of the company's financial woes, but other people have enabled its downward spiral, and that was avoidable.

When Domingo became LA Opera's general director in 2003, the board knew that most of his time would be spent singing and conducting, not administering. Edgar Baitzel was assigned to head the day-to-day operations, but after he died in 2007, he was never replaced. Financial problems escalated and instead of tightening the company's belt, Domingo, with the board's approval, decided to produce three of Wagner's "Ring" cycles to the tune of \$32 million.

Then Domingo proposed an arts festival to involve LA County in the endeavor. Ring Festival LA (from April 15 to June 30) was a marketing strategy to promote the "Ring" performances, increase tourism and sell tickets. The participating arts organizations would profit from the publicity as well.

Many members of the Jewish community were not enthralled when they discovered that LA Opera was sponsoring 100 events focused on Wagner and the "Ring" -- myself included. Richard Wagner was a rabid anti-Semite who documented his racism in his writings and librettos. Nevertheless, other powerful members of the community had a vested interest in maintaining the status of the company and their status in it, so they exerted their influence, and a motion proposed by Los Angeles County Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich to diversify the festival was defeated.

Stephen D. Rountree, president of the Music Center, was called upon to take a more active role in the operations of LA Opera last year, which was too late since in December, LA Opera ran back to the Board of Supervisors for a \$14 million loan.

The supervisors were put in a precarious position. If they allowed LA Opera to fail, they would no longer have an occupant to lease the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion since the county owns the Music Center. So they granted LA Opera the \$14 million loan by issuing bonds that were purchased by Banc of America Leasing & Capital LLC. LA Opera has three years to pay the loan back with interest going to the bank, but if the company does not raise the funds, county taxpayers will foot the bill.

LA County should not have been asked to bail out a nonprofit arts organization that had financial problems well before the recession. In essence, LA County is paying for half of the "Ring," which, by the way, is a controversial production. Each of the four operas in

the cycle will have been performed separately before the complete cycles are staged in May. So far the national press has not been as kind as the locals. New York Times critic Anthony Tommasini called the production weird, cheap and sloppy.

I personally believe that the three "Ring" cycles should be reduced to two and that an outside consultant should be hired to oversee LA Opera's finances.

Domingo needed to delegate to other people to manage LA Opera, but he didn't. Rountree has the entire Music Center on his mind. In order to develop repertoire that will attract ticket-buyers, the person at the helm must have a vast knowledge of opera, financial matters and the Los Angeles community.

Domingo is not entirely to blame for the company's failings. City and county leaders, LA Opera board members and donors, influential members of the Jewish community, and festival participants who have advocated Wagner-only programming are also at fault.

It is only natural for us normal mortals to want to be a part of Domingo's inner circle, for he is the greatest living tenor in the world, yet he is humble, charming, intelligent and approachable. Well-heeled patrons willing to pay the price have secured their position in the company, but they were not willing to sacrifice their status by being honest with Domingo to save it. Their egos would not allow them to listen to those who knew more than they did to avoid the outcome. All of them are more to blame than Domingo is. I hope the great tenor decides to stay in Los Angeles, has learned from this experience, and will entrust the on-site operation of LA Opera to the talented people waiting for and up to the challenge.

Next season's offerings show that LA Opera is acknowledging at least some of its failings. Let's hope that this is a sign the company is moving toward some fiscal responsibility and stability.

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