

# Opening on a high note



(Tom Daly / Special to The Daily Progress )

If you've never attended an opera before, "Don Giovanni" is an entertaining way to start. Ash Lawn provides supertitles at the Paramount.

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The word "opera" can trigger a mental image of a generously proportioned wo-man wearing a horned Viking helmet and singing forte forte in a foreign language.

The folks who have been snapping up tickets for Mozart's operatic masterpiece, "Don Giovanni," know better. At 7:30 p.m. Saturday, this much-lauded work will open the 2010 season of the Ash Lawn Opera Festival at the Paramount Theater.

This opera, first performed in 1787, serves as an ideal introduction to an art form that has been thrilling audiences for more than 400 years. French composer Charles Gounod, who gave the world "Ave Maria," said Mozart's "Don Giovanni" is "a work without blemish, of uninterrupted perfection."

Just the spine-tingling overture to "Don Giovanni" likely will transform many first-timers into immediate fans of the genre. And to help demystify opera for the uninitiated, and make the piece all the more enjoyable for seasoned listeners, an expert will offer a pre-performance lecture 45 minutes before the curtain rises.

"If you are already knowledgeable about opera, it [the lecture] will give you more information, and for those who are new to opera, it provides an entry point," said Michelle Krisel, the new general director of the Ash Lawn Opera Festival.

"We used to have a pre-performance lecture only one time a year, but I instituted it being done for every performance."

Krisel has dedicated her adult life to opera and has worked diligently to dispel the myth that it's just for the highbrow set. In fact, it's a constantly evolving art form that has generated some of the most compelling musical dramas and comedies ever written.

"In opera, you don't just get the singers," said Krisel, who in 1996 joined the Washington National Opera at the invitation of its general director, Placido Domingo. "You get the chorus, the orchestra, the set, the costumes, dancing, theater.

"So it's both bigger than life, and at the same time it's about the most minute details of life. I love opera, because I love laughing and crying. If I'm not moved to laugh or cry, then the company has done something wrong.

"You can say the name of an aria and I start getting goose bumps. I now start crying at the beginning of 'Madame Butterfly,' because I know what's going to happen."

During her career Krisel has worked as a pianist, vocal coach and assistant conductor with opera companies in the United States and Europe. Her resume includes stints with the Los Angeles Opera, San Francisco Opera, Santa Fe Opera and Opernhaus Graz in Austria.

While with the WNO, the mother of three directed its Young Artist Program and also was the director of its education and community programs. Part of her overall vision for the festival is to expand education programs, extend the season beyond the summer and build relationships with local groups and arts organizations.

Krisel recently gave up her home in Washington and moved to Albemarle County. She said she enjoyed the embassy dinners and visits to the White House, but is now even happier with her new place in the world.

"There were a lot of reasons I took this job, but first of all, Charlottesville is one of the most beautiful, gracious, livable, historic places to live," said Krisel, who has written numerous reviews and articles about music for major publications.

"The second reason is the fabulous board and guild, which is really a dynamic group. Another reason is the history of Ash Lawn Opera. When I was a vocal coach, I used to prepare singers for their auditions.

"When I ran a young artist program I would have my singers sing here. This has a real history of discovering and cultivating young talent.

"And then there's the real potential I see for growth here, and that's why I'm willing to make this, hopefully, the last part of my career."

The second production for this summer season is "Brigadoon," with music by Frederick Loewe and lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner. First produced on Broadway in 1947, it tells the story of an enchanted Scottish village that materializes for just one day every century.

"Both operas are very romantic in opposite ways," said Krisel, who for more than 20 years has participated as a panelist for the Metropolitan Opera's Saturday radio program "Quiz."

“In ‘Brigadoon,’ despite all odds, the miracle comes true and they get to go back to Brigadoon and live forever in happiness. ‘Don Giovanni’ is very cynical. He loves every woman and every woman loves him, but in the end, of course, he’s amoral and is taken to hell.

“Mozart has the chorus singing, ‘Isn’t it great they got the scoundrel and he’s gone to hell, goodie, goodie.’ But the audience really sides with Don Giovanni. I think he’s the first antihero.

“He’s the bad boy who we all love. A director once told me that his goal as a director was to make every man and woman in the audience love Don Giovanni.”

Opera started in Italy, and many of its most memorable works are written in Italian. “Don Giovanni” will be performed here for the first time in Italian.

An innovation called supertitles will be used so people can read in English what is being sung. This is accomplished by projecting the translation above the theater’s proscenium arch.

“I believe the introduction of supertitles was the crucial thing that changed opera from being seen as a sort of an elitist thing,” Krisel said.

“Every company has it now, and the Met actually puts it on a little screen behind the seat in front of you.

“Everybody is addicted now to wanting to know what every word means, as they should. I think music can subconsciously express feelings even more than words can.

“So to have the mixture of the words, text and music gives you a triple dose of emotion. But the important thing I want to get across is how much fun opera can be.”

Ash Lawn Opera Festival will present “Don Giovanni” at the Paramount Theater at 7:30 p.m. Saturday, with additional presentations on July 10, 16 and 30, as well as a 2 p.m. matinee Aug. 1.

“Brigadoon” will be performed at 7:30 p.m., July 17 and 31 and Aug. 7, with 2 p.m. performances on July 18 and Aug. 8.

Tickets for each are \$35 for level A, \$30 for level B, \$15 for students and \$10 for children age 16 and younger. Opening night for each show is an additional \$5 and includes an after-performance cast party with food provided and beer and wine for purchase.

Tickets are available online at <http://www.theparamount.net>, by calling 979-1333 or at the Paramount box office. Additional information is at <http://www.ashlawnopera.org>.