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Arts Theatre

**ARIA READY?
ANTICIPATION HIGH FOR
VERO BEACH OPERA SEASON**

Aria ready? Anticipation high for Vero Beach Opera season



Soprano Susan Neves at the Vero Beach Opera "Holiday" Parlor Concert. PHOTOS BY BRENDA AHEARN



Ian Campbell opens the Vero Beach Opera "Holiday" Parlor Concert.

'We have several Met Opera artists scheduled to perform in these Parlor Concerts, and I think our VBO membership will be thrilled with their performances.'
– Joan Ortega-Cowan

Despite the unusual circumstances, the consensus among attendees was a resounding "spectacular!" A VBO favorite, Neves has performed extensively in Europe, South America and the U.S., including several times in Vero Beach over the years, most recently in last January's production of "Barber of Seville." A two-time Grammy Award-winner and a native of New York City, Levine is known for her intense and impassioned performances; the San Francisco Chronicle calls her "a petite powerhouse, with technique to

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BY SAMANTHA ROHLFING BAITA | STAFF WRITER

The performing arts in all its many forms has taken a huge hit during this time of COVID. But out of the ashes of the innumerable canceled regular seasons has risen a Phoenix of determination and invention. Artists all around the world and across the

spectrum of performing arts genres have found new and inventive ways to share their talents, taking the adage of "the show must go on" to new levels of creativity. The highly respected Vero Beach Opera is among them. Like other performing arts entities, Vero Beach Opera depends heavily on audience attendance for their financial survival. However, myriad pandemic guidelines have compelled



Richard Vogel, Susan Neves and Ian Campbell.

the nonprofit group to modify its 2021 season in a fashion that will keep both performers and audiences safe.

The season has been reworked in a way that will do just that, while also maintaining the professionally driven level of quality local opera aficionados have come to expect.

Since 2006, VBO performances have taken place in Vero Beach High School's excellent 1,040-seat Performing Arts Center, fondly known as the PAC. Prior to that, VBO performances took place at St. Edward's School's Waxlax Center for the Performing Arts, and when Hurricanes Frances and Jean damaged that building, the VBO found a temporary home at the Community Church of Vero Beach.

When contemplating the 2021 season, while also recognizing that the raging pandemic was continuing to threaten and upend performing arts schedules across the country, Joan Ortega-Cowan, VBO president and executive director, contacted PAC director Karen Wiggins. It had become clear that coronavirus restrictions and stringent guidelines had rendered the wonderful venue impractical for the 2021 VBO season.

"The PAC will only accommodate 450 (socially distanced) patrons, and masks must be worn at all times inside the PAC," says Ortega-Cowan. "Onstage artists would need to be social distanced as best as possible, as

well as performers in the backstage area. This is a great challenge for our 'La Bohème' production in March."

As a result, the VBO board of directors made the difficult decision to cancel the full-scale productions at the PAC, and instead planned and scheduled four Parlor Concerts between December and March.

"Masks, social distancing and limited seating will be necessary, and doors will be open to the outside," she confirms. "We have several Met Opera artists scheduled to perform in these Parlor Concerts, and I think our VBO membership will be thrilled with their performances."

The venue itself, an elegant private residence in the gated island community The Shores, was graciously offered by a VBO patron for the Parlor Concerts. The gorgeous home, with its beautiful, wooded surroundings, possesses a spectacular interior that even includes a magnificent winding staircase, perfect for 'Grand Entrances.'

At the well-attended first concert – "The Holiday Parlor Concert" – this past Sunday, a properly distanced, masked and festively adorned audience thrilled to an afternoon performance by internationally acclaimed Metropolitan Opera dramatic soprano Susan Neves, accompanied by her impressively credentialed conductor and pianist Caren Levine.

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ARTS & THEATRE



Clockwise from top left: Robert and Maria Loewinger. Soprano Susan Neves doing a sound check before the start "Holiday" Parlor Concert. Sally and Dick Brickman. Paul and Sue Gauthier. Joseph and Carol Palowich.

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burn." Levine, on the Met roster as assistant conductor since 2003, is also VBO's music director and has conducted several VBO productions, including "Madama Butterfly" and "Carmen."

To the great delight of the audience this past Sunday, Neves' husband Ian Campbell, former San Diego Opera CEO, even got into the act, reading the classic "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus." Neves and Levine received armfuls of fragrant roses from VBO

board member Paul Gauthier, and Ortega-Cowan presented Neves with a Distinguished Achievement Award for her "outstanding operatic career."

The second in the Sunday Parlor series – the "Opera Showcase" concert – will take place Jan. 17. Performing will be Uruguayan couple, soprano Maria Antunez and tenor Martin Nusspaumer.

Vero audiences first experienced this exciting husband and wife duo during the 2018 season's brilliant production of Puccini's tragic opera favorite "Madama Butterfly." Antunez sang the title role, and Nusspaumer was her love interest, Lt. Pinkerton.

The Feb. 14 Parlor Concert, appropriately titled "The Love Concert," will bring some fresh, uber-talented new voices to the scene – members of the Florida Grand Opera Young Artist Studio.

An always popular combo, "Broadway Meets Opera" is the final Parlor Concert of the season, featuring another gifted pairing, soprano Katie Horn-Pershall and baritone David Pershall. The couple, who have staged "Broadway Meets Opera" to critical acclaim, will perform much-loved arias and Broadway tunes, producing a memorable afternoon of music, and drawing the series to an upbeat close.

Another highly anticipated aspect of the VBO season is their "Rising Stars Vocal Competition."

Happily, according to Ortega-Cowan, "we are going to proceed with our 2021 competition March 24 to 27, 2021 at the PAC," she says. "This will work, as we usually have a small audience, and singers will not be backstage or onstage all at once."

Rising Stars is a three-day, invi-

tation-only competition of aspiring young opera finalists and semi-finalists, with a panel of judges gleaned from some of the opera world's highest echelons.

Although the 2021 judges have not yet been finalized, legendary Met bass-baritone Justino Diaz (he opened The Met at Lincoln Center with the stellar Leontyne Price in "Anthony and Cleopatra" in 1966) was slated to serve as president of the 2020 competition's jury, before the coronavirus forced its cancellation.

And in 2019, Italian tenor Marcello Giordani, whose prominent career at the Met included hundreds of lead roles in many of opera's most famous works, was scheduled to head the Rising Stars jury, but was forced to cancel for health reasons. Tragically, Giordani, a dear, longtime friend of Joan and Román Ortega-Cowan, died in Italy about six months later following a heart attack. He was only 56.

That year, another popular Met diva and international favorite, dramatic soprano Deborah Voigt, stepped in for Giordani. Voigt has supported and performed for the VBO for several years and remains on its advisory board.

With talent, determination, creativity and the astoundingly strong, unwavering community support for the arts that has become a hallmark of Vero Beach, the Vero Beach Opera and the area's many other cultural and artistic entities, will make it through these crazy times stronger than ever.

For more information, visit vero-beachopera.org. ■

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