

Three opera stars debut in next year's May Festival

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Written by
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The 91st season of the Cincinnati May Festival will include Carl Orff's ever-popular "Carmina Burana," a rarely heard Requiem by French composer Maurice Duruflé, Brahms' exquisite "A German Requiem" and an evening of festival premieres by Tchaikovsky.

"It divides itself up into a Russian night, a French night, a German night, and the first night is sort of sacred and profane," said James Conlon, music director since 1979, by phone from Los Angeles, where he was opening the season last week as music director of the Los Angeles Opera.

The festival, which features the May Festival Chorus under its director of choruses Robert Porco, will include five concerts spanning two weekends, May 11-19.

Highlights include the festival debuts of three opera stars: Soprano Nicole Cabell, who impressed Cincinnati Opera audiences this summer as Pamina in "The Magic Flute"; mezzo-soprano Ronnita Nicole Miller, who is, said Conlon, "a major voice, a big, big talent"; and bass John Relyea, who has a big career from the Metropolitan Opera to Europe.

Returning soloists include sopranos Heidi Grant Murphy, Hana Park and Tatiana Pavlovskaya; mezzo-soprano Ekaterina Semenchuk; tenors John Aler (his 26th appearance) and Rodrick Dixon; and basses William McGraw, Stephen Powell and Yohan Yi.

For the programs, "we always want to have the May Festival Chorus front and center. But it started taking shape around these national profiles," Conlon said. "I was able to bring a lot of music we have never done. Even though Tchaikovsky is one of the most popular composers with general audiences, most of this is Tchaikovsky that they will not have heard."

The May Festival opens May 11 with two parts from Verdi's "Four Sacred Pieces," the Stabat Mater and Te Deum. The mood shifts to the profane, when the May Festival

Chorus, May Festival Youth Chorus and Cincinnati Boychoir join in the festival's eighth performance of Orff's lusty ode to spring, "Carmina Burana."

The second night is a French program, with the celebrated "Gloria" by Francis Poulenc and Duruflé's beautiful and profound Requiem, performed just one other time (in a version with organ) at the festival in 1987. Porco will conduct the orchestrated version.

The second weekend will open May 18 with "the three B's - Bach, Beethoven and Brahms." J.S. Bach's Cantata No. 192 (Now Thank We all our God) will receive its first festival performance.

The season will close on May 19 with an evening of festival premieres of the music of Tchaikovsky, ranging from the drama of opera to the serene quality of church liturgy. Although most music lovers are familiar with Tchaikovsky's ballets and symphonies, many of these pieces are never done outside of Russia, Conlon noted.

Getting tickets

Subscriptions (four concerts): \$70-\$390. Two-concert subscriptions: \$35-\$210. Festival passes of four flexible-use vouchers: \$170, \$220. Single tickets will go on sale in March. 513-381-3300; www.mayfestival.com.

Festival schedule

All concerts are 8 p.m. in Music Hall, except for May 13, which is 8 p.m. in the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, Covington. The Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra is the official orchestra of the May Festival.

May 11 - Verdi, Stabat Mater and Te Deum from "Four Sacred Pieces"; Orff, "Carmina Burana." James Conlon conducting; Heidi Grant Murphy, soprano; Rodrick Dixon, tenor; Stephen Powell, baritone; May Festival Chorus, Robert Porco, director; May Festival Youth Chorus, James Bagwell, director; Cincinnati Boychoir, Christopher Eanes, director

Pre-Concert Recital (7 p.m.): Ronnita Nicole Miller, mezzo-soprano

May 12 - Poulenc, "Gloria"; Duruflé, Requiem, Op. 9. Robert Porco conducting; Heidi Grant Murphy, soprano; Ronnita Nicole Miller, mezzo soprano; Yohan Yi, baritone; May Festival Chorus, Robert Porco, director

Pre-Concert Recital (7 p.m.): Yohan Yi, bass-baritone

May 13 (Basilica concert) - Music by Tallis, Schütz, Pärt and Duruflé (May Festival Youth Chorus); Verdi, Ave Maria and Laudi alla vergine Maria from "Four Sacred Pieces"; Carissimi, "Jephte" Oratorio. James Conlon and James Bagwell conducting; Heidi Grant Murphy, soprano; Hana Park, soprano; John Aler, tenor (Jephte); Yohan Yi, bass (Historicus); May Festival Chamber Choir; May Festival Youth Chorus; members of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra

May 18 - Bach, Cantata No. 192, (Now Thank We All Our God); Beethoven, "Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage"; Brahms "A German Requiem." Nicole Cabell, soprano; John Relyea, baritone; William McGraw, bass; James Conlon conducting; May Festival Chorus, Robert Porco, director

Pre-Concert Recital (7 p.m.): Ekaterina Semenchuk, mezzo-soprano

May 19 - Tchaikovsky, "Moscow Cantata"; "Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom"; "Romeo and Juliet" (duet); arias and choruses from the operas "Eugene Onegin"; "Iolanta": "The Queen of Spades" (Pique Dame); and "The Maid of Orleans." James Conlon conducting; Tatiana Pavlovskaya, soprano; Ekaterina Semenchuk, mezzo soprano; John Relyea, baritone; May Festival Chorus, Robert Porco, director.

Pre-Concert Recital (7 p.m.): John Aler, tenor