

MSU Opera Theater to give 'Xerxes' a Downton Abbey look

Ken Glickman, For the Lansing State Journal 9:05 a.m. EDT March 24, 2015



(Photo: Courtesy photo MSU Opera Theater)

In past seasons, Michigan State University opera director Melanie Helton has served up familiar opera standards mostly from the romantic repertoire.

The spring opera, playing Wednesday through Sunday, stretches us (and the performers) a bit. The MSU Opera Theater will be performing Handel's "Xerxes" (pronounced zerk – sies), a baroque opera, but Helton will present it with a twist. Helton has chosen to set the story in England and give it a Downton Abbey look.

Guest orchestra conductor Daniel Beckwith says, "It's a perfect choice. Xerxes is a comedy of errors and a comedy of manners, just like Downton Abbey."

Although Xerxes doesn't roll off the tongue like "Carmen" or "La Boheme" the opera begins with the beautiful largo aria "ombra mai fu" which Beckwith tells us is Handel's most famous melody after the "Hallelujah Chorus" from "Messiah". It is Handel's most famous opera, after "Julius Caesar".

Written about 100 years before Mozart, Xerxes is a typical baroque opera – direct singing style, not romantic, rhythmic and the aria's lyrics comment about the action rather than expressing them in the here and now.

Xerxes was not a big hit at its 1738 premier in London. Apparently the audiences didn't like the humor in it or the short arias – two reasons why modern audiences are making it much more popular.

Beckwith is enjoying working with the MSU music students to prepare the opera. "It's all so new to them. No one has even sung Handel before"

The orchestra is different, too. The pit will only have 21 musicians and the level of the pit will be almost level with the stage making the entire music making much more intimate.

It even includes an instrument few people have seen or heard before. "I am bringing in a musician from New York who plays the "theorbo", a lute/large mandolin-type instrument that rolls chords and strums, something like a harpsichord would do.

The opera will be sung in Italian with English supertitles being projected above the stage.

IF YOU GO

What: MSU Opera Theater's, "Xerxes" by George Frederic Handel, Daniel Beckwith, guest conductor; Melanie Helton, director

Where: Fairchild Theater in the MSU Auditorium

When: March 25, 27, 28, 29, 7:30 p.m., Wednesday; 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 3 p.m. Sunday

Reserved seating: \$5-\$20, Call (517) 353-5340 or music.msu.edu

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