

Opera in Baltimore is thriving with at least seven opera companies

By Anne Midgette
Washington Post Staff Writer
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This spring, the city of Baltimore got its own version of Mozart's "Die Zauberflöte": the "Bawlmer Magic Flute," set in present-day Charm City, courtesy of the small company Opera Vivente. Papageno, the bird-catcher, was an Orioles fan who made his living trading hard-to-find baseball memorabilia. His lady love, Papagena, had a bird connection as well: She was a Hooters waitress, her emblem the Hooters owl. Both sang in a dialect you won't find taught in most opera programs: Bawlmerese.

Opera in Baltimore is thriving. A year ago, that statement seemed nearly impossible. When the Baltimore Opera filed for bankruptcy in the middle of the 2008-09 season, ending a 58-year tradition, the city seemed destined for a nearly opera-less future. It's true that there were a couple of small local companies, but nobody imagined that a mere 18 months later Baltimore would have at least seven opera companies, maybe more.

These companies aren't your grandmother's opera. More than half of them started this season. Most of them are operating on a shoestring: \$275,000 for the relatively well-established Opera Vivente, which just finished its 12th season; \$10,000 to \$20,000 for the Chesapeake Concert Opera, which is recasting itself next season as the Chesapeake Chamber Opera thanks to the encouragement it got after its first six performances this spring.

They offer young local singers, nontraditional stagings and in some cases unusual repertory -- such as the stripped-down adaptation of "Madame Butterfly" for prepared piano and electric gamelan orchestra that American Opera Theater will present on a double bill with Messiaen's "Harawi" in 2010-11. And they are definitely playing to a new audience.

"The growth has been in unexpected areas," says Tim Nelson, who founded American Opera Theater in 2002. "Twenty-five-to-40-year-olds; people from less affluent, less educated backgrounds."

"We took a survey at our second-to-last show," says Beth Stewart, a soprano who founded Chesapeake Concert Opera, which performs in a church in Bolton Hill. "Tons of people said, 'We weren't really into opera before. Now we are.' "

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What makes Baltimore so opera-friendly? First, there's a ready talent pool: young singers who come to the city to study at the Peabody Institute, and don't want to leave after they graduate. Baltimore offers cheap rents and proximity to the major audition centers along the East Coast, such as New York and Philadelphia. But it didn't used to abound in performance opportunities.

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