

Calendar

Mean Streets Aria

Tijuana Street Opera Festival

The venue is a working-class neighborhood," says Maria Teresa Riqué, organizer of Tijuana's first Festival Ópera en la Calle. "That's because we didn't want to have it in a conventional place. We are doing it in the street. And that's the name of the festival in translation: 'Opera in the Street.'"

The street is in the Libertad neighborhood. It will be "transformed" into an Italian village for the occasion. (Two adjacent streets will be closed for use as parking lots.) Italian food will be sold, and an Italian ambience will be

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suggested by the strategic placement of small potted trees, benches, and "romantic"

street lamps, says Riqué. "We will also use three opera sets — from *The Barber of Seville*, *I Pagliacci*, and *Romeo and Juliet*." They'll be erected in front of the old Libertad theater.

The sets are the result of another opera first in Tijuana. Three years ago Riqué founded Ópera de Tijuana. The sets being used on Saturday were originally constructed for that company's performances. (The festival, part of the 115th anniversary of Tijuana celebrations, is also a continuation of the company's offerings — the last in this season's series.) The city has never had an opera company until now. In planning its inaugural, Riqué admits, "We were very afraid, not knowing how people would respond. It was wonderful to see sold-out performances and people who had never before attended an opera getting excited."



Serafina y Arcangela



Libertad neighborhood, Tijuana (Libertad theater on left)

Riqué guesses a majority on Saturday — 3000 people are expected — will be first-timers looking to sample opera for free. There are those who would pay money *not* to attend an opera, it is true. "Many people are afraid to attend an opera," Riqué says. "They feel it will be boring or they are not going to understand it. The purpose of the festival is to break those beliefs."

She also wants to prove something to opera elite everywhere. "We want them to realize that even in the street we can stage an opera. It's not only for a formal theater."

But there is no getting around one fact: the program, including excerpts from *Il Traviata* and *Carmen*, will be in languages that many people won't understand, namely Italian and French. "That's right," says Riqué. "They don't have to. As the saying goes, 'Music is a universal language.' You don't need to understand the lyrics to enjoy it."

Precautions are being taken, anyway: "The singers will act out beforehand what they are going to sing, and they will do it in Spanish, interpreting their roles."

There are, of course, Mexican operas in Spanish, both classical and contemporary. One

contemporary composer, 49-year-old Enrique González-Medina, is on Riqué's artistic board and described by her as very close to the project.

González-Medina, who lives in Sierra Madre, California, teaches piano at the Pasadena Conservatory of Music. "My parents were Mexican, but I was born at Mercy Hospital in San Diego," he says. "I grew up in Tijuana in the 1960s, and we just didn't have any opportunities to hear classical music. The first opera I attended was in San Diego — *The Barber of Seville* — when I was 14."

González-Medina can't be in Tijuana on Saturday; he will be at the wedding of a close friend instead. But he knows many of the 100 scheduled performers, and the number of them who live in Tijuana is another measure of opera's growth there, he says.

González-Medina is asked if he thinks works from the old Mexican canon should be produced for Tijuana audiences. He says no: "In 19th-century Mexico there were traveling companies from Europe who performed opera and many composers who wrote in the Italian style. Mexican music is just like American music in that you have to wait until the 20th Century to hear something that's not derivative." He doesn't mean to say those works shouldn't be studied — if you can find them. Recordings are rare. "But the best thing you can do for new audiences is

go for the very famous pieces, at least to start — the old workhorses. We have found that people really respond to them."

And what after that? González-Medina's own opera *Serafina y Arcangela*, based on *Las Muertas* by Mexican novelist Jorge Ibarguengoitia, was produced in Tijuana by Riqué a few weeks after its premiere in L.A. in 2001. He has also written an opera for children, *How Nanita Learned to Make Flan*, that Riqué says she will produce in Tijuana "very soon." The story of a Cinderella-like character kept as a captive house servant by a cruel ranchero and then helped to escape by a magic parrot was commissioned by the Cincinnati Opera and has already been performed over 20 times in the United States.

Meanwhile, for August, Riqué's opera company is preparing its seventh full-length production: Donizetti's *Don Pasquale*, to be staged at Centro Cultural Tijuana — CECUT for short.

— Jeanne Schinto

Festival Ópera en la Calle
Saturday, July 10
4:00 p.m. to midnight
5th Street and Aquiles Serdan
Avenue
Colonia Libertad
Tijuana
Free
Info: 01152-664-686-3280

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