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Opera director sounds off

By **Janelle Gelfand**
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Cincinnati Opera's new artistic director, Evans Mirageas, recently was singing the praises of his new home - including his new downtown loft apartment - as he revealed some of his thoughts and goals for the company.

Although his Cincinnati duties, which began in September, will be intense at times, he'll keep his second job as an independent artistic adviser to big stars, he says, sometimes combining "a bit of talent spotting" for Cincinnati in the process.

Because of his prior post - senior vice president of artists and repertoire for Decca Records - his conversation is sprinkled with name dropping: Renee Fleming, Yo-Yo Ma, Cecilia Bartoli, Itzhak Perlman, Frederica von Stade and industry insiders. A major player in opera circles, Mirageas will be heard on two upcoming Metropolitan Opera broadcasts, when he participates on intermission panels Feb. 25 and March 25.

The Ann Arbor, Mich., native chatted in his third-floor office at Music Hall, with a view of Over-the-Rhine rooftops.

Philosophy - Perhaps because of my Greek heritage, I'm a believer in making the connection between opera and ... the ancient Greek tradition of the theater, where you come together as a community to witness and participate in something that will emotionally change you. It may make you laugh or cry, but it will always make you think.

Planning opera seasons - One of the nice things about having been involved as a consultant is that a lot of what's in place for this season and 2007 I had a hand in. So I can stand wholeheartedly behind my very first season in residence and say I had a hand in putting the season together, from the casting, to the productions to the behind-the-scenes personnel.

Among first things I did - One of the things I wanted to bring to the party was my long experience with conductors, and to be on the lookout for exciting conductors. So we've got two U.S. opera debuts of conductors this summer.

What we're doing now - Completing auditions for young artists and the chorus (in January). We're in that final stage of crossing the t's of all the last small roles. It's an opportunity for some young interesting up-and-comer to step in and



ZOOM

Philip Groshong

Evans Mirageas is impressed with Music Hall as a home for opera.

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make their debut.

First goals - I want to recognize three incredible assets: the symphony, this amazing concert and opera house in which we live, and our chorus. These are the elements, I think, that are the envy of any other opera house around the country.

I also want to play on the tradition that took off in the (James) de Blasis era (1973-95), where we encourage emerging singers and continually engage them as an act of faith as they develop their careers. So that, when they become James Morris, they come back regularly, when they could be singing just about anywhere in the world.

Festival weekends - I'm looking at things that will make a more festival feeling. So if someone comes to town to see opera, they may also see a recital that is tied thematically to the opera. We've already had some initial conversations at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music about exploring ways in which we can collaborate. I intend to go to the museums in the next couple of months.

On commissioning another opera - It's important, because the success of "Margaret Garner" is going to resonate with this company for a long time to come. When you can come out of the box batting 1.000, it puts an incredible positive feeling in the company.

I think about what we can do to select a composer and a story that will be something our audience goes away from the theater thinking, "I'm changed. My life will never be the same after viewing this."

I also want them to leave the theater with a smile. The key for me is finding the right topic and the right composer. Commissioning is like going to Indiana and going to the casino. Sometimes you walk away with money in your pocket, and sometimes you cry because you lost it all.

On declining opera attendance nationwide - We're fortunate in that we don't seem to be following that trend. If anything, we seem to be coming off the most amazing season in history. From the initial figures, subscription renewals are going gangbusters.

The season in a nutshell - "Tosca" is about the perils of love. Tosca was duped and blinded by her love for Cavaradossi. She had the ultimate dirty trick played on her.

"L'Etoile" (The Star) is the perils of love in a funny way. There are quite a few chills and spills along the way.

"A Masked Ball" is the perfect example of doing the right thing and still paying the price, because jealousy is blind. We're taking (the production) back to Sweden.

"The Tales of Hoffmann" is how foolish you can be when you're trying to pursue love for all the wrong reasons.

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