



Sarasota's Opera House planted the seeds for cultural growth

Letter from Sarasota

By Karyl Charna Lynn

Don't be fooled by the fact that more than 700 cities in the USA have a bigger population than Sarasota. When it comes to cultural and artistic attractions and world-class entertainment, it ranks in the top 75 – a tiny cultural jewel shining brilliantly in the Florida sunshine.

Located on the west coast of Florida, with Sarasota Bay at along its shoreline, this is a region in flux. Before Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* inaugurated the Sarasota Opera House in January 1984, the area was a cultural desert downtown a wasteland. The Opera House planted the seeds for Sarasota to blossom into the cultural mecca it is today.

I have been covering the Sarasota Opera Winter Festival for more than a decade, and have witnessed the city's

extraordinary expansion bringing life to previously derelict areas. There are new hotels, condominiums, restaurants, shops and galleries for every taste and budget sprouting up as far as the eye can see, including a smart new hotel next to the Opera House.

Sarasota seems to be removed from many of the less edifying realities of today's America: Sarasota's residents are primarily wealthy retirees who have created a world of their own in which to enjoy their 'golden years' in peace and serenity. If you ever get claustrophobic, then you can cross the bridge over the Bay to visit the Keys (St Armands, Lido, Long Boat, and Siesta), where you will find miles and miles of the finest sandy beaches dotting the Gulf of Mexico shores.

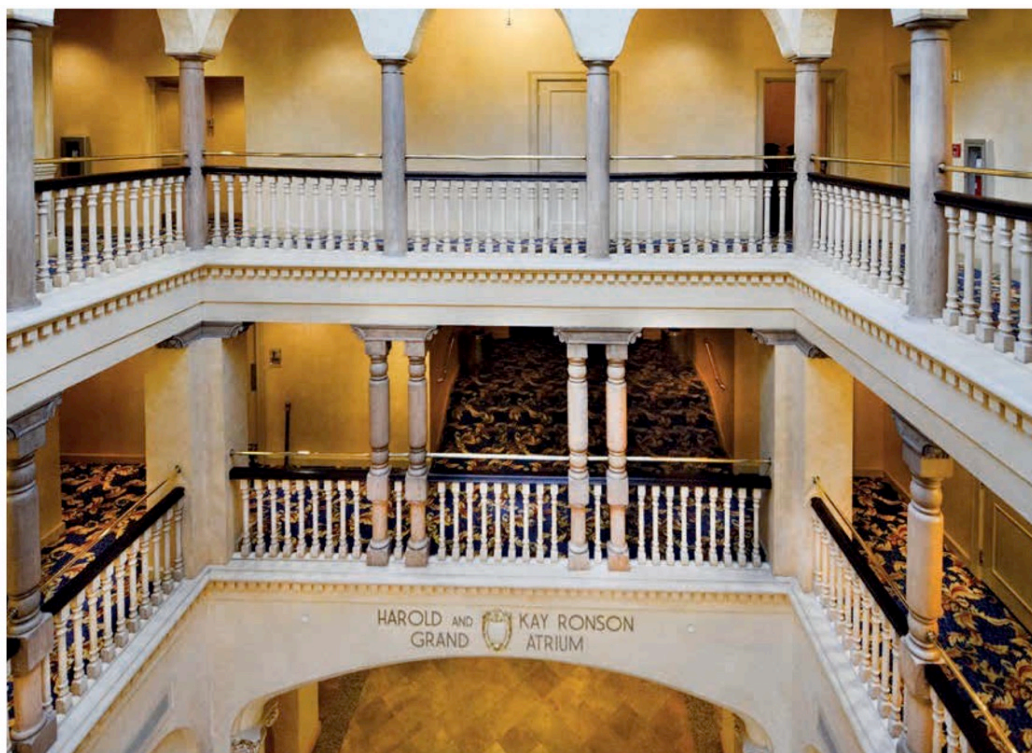
Opera in Sarasota dates back to December 1926, when San Carlo Opera staged *Carmen* and *Martha* in the Edwards Theater. New York Grand Opera followed with *Aida* in 1928. An opera drought then ensued until, in 1952, a tiny opera house was reconstructed inside the Ringling Museum. Named Asolo Theater, after the Italian town where it was originally built, it was inaugurated with an unusual double bill of Pergolesi's *La serva padrona* and Mozart's *Bastien und Bastienne* by the New York City Center Opera. After Asolo received its own building in 1957 the Turnau Opera Players, a traveling chamber opera troupe, began annual visits three years later. *Orfeo ed Euridice*, the first home-grown effort of The Asolo Opera, was staged

in 1974 followed by *La voix humaine* and *Così fan tutte*. The company adopted an 'opera as theatre' philosophy. Probably its most famous (notorious in the 1970s) production was Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, complete with rampant Roman orgies, creating a scandal but also making it the hottest ticket in town.

In 1979, the company purchased the Edwards Theater, renaming it the Sarasota Opera House, and spent the next five years renovating the building. Victor DeRenzi was hired as artistic director and transformed the Sarasota Opera into a professional regional company with the recently concluded Verdi Cycle pivotal to the company's growth, its budget soaring from US \$385,000 in 1984 to more than \$9m today.

What makes Sarasota Opera distinctive is DeRenzi's undying belief in the richness of tradition. He sees the company as an opera museum – frozen in time, taking you on an historic journey back to a bygone era. He bucked the trend when Regietheater became the dominating factor in opera production, continuing to stage operas just as they might have been a century or two ago, following as close as possible the composers' directions and intent. DeRenzi's philosophy is so successful because Sarasota is a popular retirement area with an aging population and conservative tastes. It's probably the only place in the USA where this type of company could thrive. Not that this means any lack of dramatic engagement. Although the repertoire concentrates on 19th- and early 20th-century repertoire, one of the most riveting and emotionally draining performances I've seen in Sarasota was Carlisle Floyd's 1969 opera *Of Mice and Men*.

The Sarasota Opera is only one of a dozen American companies that actually own their own venue, with the company completing a \$20m renovation in 2008 that both restored its historic beauty and enhanced its capabilities for the 21st century, including a much-needed expansion of the orchestra pit to allow them to perform Verdi's grander operas. As you enter the renovated theatre through a soaring, three-storey atrium lobby, framed by gilded Ionic columns, you can't help but marvel at its timeless beauty. The auditorium, saturated in a lush midnight blue, offers a striking contrast to the honey-hued plaster walls. The historic proscenium arch was recreated with engaged Doric



Timeless beauty: the Opera House's soaring atrium

columns and a gold-fringed deep blue valance. Newly graded orchestra seating along with staggered seats offer good sightlines.

In addition to being able to attend four different operas in three days during 'Opera Lovers Weeks,' for more time in the sun and sand, you have a wide choice of other activities for your evenings. You could take in the Sarasota Ballet, Sarasota Symphony or Broadway musical at the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall. There's also the Asolo Repertory Theater and Florida Studio Theater for theatre-lovers. A visit to the vast Ringling Museum of Art is a must. (Sarasota was once the winter home of the Ringling Brothers Circus).

Sarasota 2020 Winter Opera Festival runs from 8 February to 22 March 2020. In repertoire are Puccini's La bohème, Gounod's Roméo et Juliette, Donizetti's L'elisir d'amore and Catalani La Wally. www.sarasotaopera.org



Sarasota Opera's production of *L'elisir d'amore*, which returns for this year's winter season