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Classical Notes: Some starry, starry nights on tap in Philharmonia Baroque's new season

By Sue Gilmore
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They're calling it the "Season of Stars," and indeed, the 2009-10 lineup of programs announced this month by Nicholas McGegan and the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra does contain some notable guest artists, among them violinist Viktoria Mullova and conductor and viola da gamba virtuoso Jordi Savall. But you'd be hard-pressed not to acknowledge that the order of highest magnitude among the stellar celebs belongs to mezzo-soprano Susan Graham, who will take the lead female role in the orchestra's November performances of Henry Purcell's opera "Dido and Aeneas."

Opera fans lucky enough to catch Graham's lustrous turn in the title role of Handel's "Ariodante" for San Francisco Opera last June are doubtless licking their lips over the prospect of hearing her pour out the heartbroken Carthaginian queen's final lament in Purcell's 1689-vintage opera, based on Virgil's "Aeneid."

Baritone William Berger stars opposite Graham as her abandoning lover, the Trojan prince Aeneas. Singing the supporting roles are sopranos Christine Brandes and Celine Ricci, contralto Jill Grove and tenor Brian Thorsett. McGegan conducts the orchestra and Bruce Lamott's Philharmonia Chorale.

The performances, in honor of the 350th

anniversary of Purcell's birth, will open at 8 p.m. Nov. 5 at the Herbst Theatre in San Francisco and repeat Nov. 6-8 in Palo Alto and Berkeley before touring to Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles and the Mondavi Center in Davis.

Philharmonia Baroque's 29th season opens at 8 p.m. Sept. 10 at the Herbst, with an "Apotheosis of the Dance" program that marks the Haydn bicentennial. Celebrated cellist Steven Isserlis is the soloist for the composer's Concerto for Violincello in C major. The program also features his Symphony No. 101 in D Major, "The Clock," and Beethoven's Symphony No. 7 in A major. Repeat performances Sept. 11-15 take place in the Lafayette-Orinda Presbyterian Church, Berkeley's First Congregational Church and Palo Alto's First United Methodist Church.

The October programs feature violinist Elizabeth Wallfisch performing and leading the orchestra in music by Telemann, Muffat and Schmelzer and serving as soloist for the Bach Violin Concerto No. 2 in E major. They take place in five performances Oct. 9-17 in Palo Alto, Berkeley, San Francisco and Lafayette.

The December 4-11 concerts in the same venues showcase Philharmonia Chorale director Lamott and violinist and leader Elizabeth Blumenstock in the "Winter" section of Vivaldi's "Four Seasons," Torelli's "Christmas Concerto" and other music by Vivaldi and Sammartini.

Violinist Mullova is the guest soloist for the Brahms Concerto in D major that highlights the Feb. 11-14 programs in San Francisco, Palo Alto and Berkeley. Those concerts, conducted by McGegan, also include the Brahms Serenade No. 1 in D major.

Savall conducts and is soloist for the Telemann Suite for Viola da Gamba and Strings in D major on the March 5-13 concert programs in Palo Alto,

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Berkeley, San Francisco and Lafayette. Handel's famous "Water Music Suite" and works by Lully and Dumanoir round out the program.

Philharmonia closes out its season in April 2010 with a concert version of Handel's opera "Orlando," with another lineup of exceptional singers: sopranos Dominique Labelle and Susanne Ryden, mezzo-soprano Diana Moore, countertenor William Towers and bass-baritone Wolf Matthias Friedrich. McGegan conducts this same cast from his International Handel Festival Gottingen's 2008 production in performances that open at the Herbst Theatre at April 8 and repeat April 10-13 in Berkeley and Palo Alto.

Subscriptions to the 2009-10 season go on sale Wednesday and range in price from \$85-\$475. Call 415-252-1288 or visit www.philharmonia.org. Single tickets will go on sale Aug. 1.

MORE FROM MEROLA: San Francisco Opera's Merola Program, the proving ground that paved pathways for reigning opera greats such as Thomas Hampson, Anna Netrebko, Deborah Voigt and the above-mentioned Susan Graham, is grooming a new crop of opera star wannabes, and you can hear from them in four events this summer.

Their Schwabacher concerts feature extended scenes from operas by Wagner, Gluck, Menotti, Rossini and Puccini, performed first at the Herbst Theatre at 7:30 p.m. July 10 and repeated in a free outdoor performance at 2 p.m. July 12 in Yerba Buena Gardens.

A production of Pietro Mascagni's "L'Amico Fritz" takes place at the Cowell Theater at Fort Mason at 8 p.m. July 24 and 2 p.m. July 26; Mozart's beguiling "Cosi fan Tutte" is on tap for the 7 p.m. Aug. 7 and 2 p.m. Aug. 9 programs in the same venue.

Their 11-week training program winds up, as it always does, with all the Merola participants — usually numbering about 30 — lined up on stage in various solo and ensemble arrangements for an evening of opera highlights. That takes place at 7:30 p.m. Aug. 22 at War Memorial Opera House.

Ticketed events for the Merola programs range from \$25-\$40. They go on sale to the general public Wednesday. Call 415-864-3330 or visit www.sfopera.com.

Tuned In appears every other Friday in Weekend Preview. Reach Sue Gilmore at sgilmore@bayareanewsgroup.com or 925-977-8482.

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