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TRIBUNE PUBLISHING

Columbia Chorale brings Verdi opera to life

By **SETH ASHLEY** of the Tribune's staff

Published Thursday, March 16, 2006

Alex Innecco fell in love with "La Traviata," the famous opera by Giuseppe Verdi, because of a Disney cartoon. Willy the Whale was an animated fish who liked to sing opera, and as a child, Innecco listened over and over to his Willy the Whale record and became fascinated with one of the songs. Only much later in life did Innecco learn that Willy was singing the main love theme from "La Traviata." Now Innecco is preparing to conduct the opera here in Columbia for the first time.

"Since I was a kid, this has been very strong for me," said Innecco, the Italian-Brazilian conductor who serves as artistic director for the Columbia Chorale, a community vocal group that features 70 local singers.

As leader of the choir, Innecco wanted to make "La Traviata" a centerpiece of the group's concert season this year. After months of rehearsals, the choir will perform its concert version of the opera Saturday at the Missouri Theatre along with a full orchestra and guest soloists.

Innecco last conducted "La Traviata" a year ago after he was invited to lead a full production at the Bellview Opera in Seattle. He had friends in that opera company who contacted him when the original conductor became ill. It was Innecco's first time to lead the opera, and he jumped at the chance despite his uncertainty.

"I didn't know what I was getting into," he said. "I had never conducted a full opera before. I knew 'Traviata' like the back of my hand because I had sung it so many times, but I had no idea what it took to conduct it. After I agreed, I went and bought the score and started studying it, and two months later, I was conducting it."

Innecco first performed in the opera in Columbia 15 years ago as a soloist at the Missouri Theatre under the direction of Hugo Vianello, who founded the Missouri Symphony Society. Now Vianello, who plays the viola, is performing in Innecco's production.

"I told him that he makes me very nervous just by being in the orchestra because he knows so much," Innecco said, "but it's great to have the cycle closed like this."



G.J. McCarthy photo

Columbia Chorale member Emelie Atkins sings as Alex Innecco, artistic director of the group, conducts during a rehearsal Monday for a performance of the Giuseppe Verdi opera "La Traviata" on Saturday at the Missouri Theatre.

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Innecco isn't the only one who is nervous. The members of the choir were a little intimidated when Innecco told them they would have to memorize the opera, which is sung in Italian. Despite their initial trepidation, the singers have it down at this point, Innecco said.

"I'm so happy with them for how far they've gone," he said. "They see it coming together, and they become passionate about it."

Still, there are obstacles when mounting a production such as this one. First, Innecco had to assemble an orchestra. He handpicked the best local players he could find. He chose 35 musicians, many of whom come from the music school at the University of Missouri-Columbia and the Columbia Civic Orchestra. But because most of the orchestra members are paid, Innecco only gets to work with the players at three rehearsals. But that's a reality of the concert world that Innecco got used to when he first conducted the opera in Seattle.

Besides the expense of hiring an orchestra, Innecco also had to find money to pay for the musical score for the opera. Innecco largely relied on donations from his own volunteer group to pay the necessary costs.

In addition to the orchestra, "La Traviata" also requires talented professional soloists who can tackle the lead roles. For those parts, Innecco contacted his old friends from the Seattle opera company. Those three friends - Tracy Rhodus, soprano; Stuart Lutzenhiser, tenor; and Glenn Guhr, baritone - agreed to come to Columbia for the performance. But because they will arrive only two days before the concert, Innecco will have little time to put all three pieces - the choir, the orchestra and the soloists - together and to make sure they are a perfect fit.

"That's the biggest difference when you're rehearsing for opera," Innecco said. "You don't have the soloists there until the last minute. It's really a challenge, and the choir is doing great with it. For me, it's really wonderful to be doing this, and it's great that the choir agreed to do it because it's a lot of work to put it together."

First performed in 1851, the opera centers on the character of Violetta, the ailing courtesan who is redeemed by Alfredo's love. The two are blissfully happy until Alfredo's father warns Violetta that her scandalous past threatens his son's future and asks her to abandon her lover. A tormented Violetta returns to her old ways and falls mortally ill. Alfredo's father informs his son of her sacrifice just in time for an exhilarating deathbed duet. The story took a different turn when it served as the foundation for the 2001 Baz Luhrmann film "Moulin Rouge!"

For the Columbia Chorale production Saturday, the opera will be presented in "concert form" because the budget simply does not allow for a full production, which would include sets, lighting and costumes. The concert will feature simple staging and a suggestion of costumes, Innecco said.

"We'll get there a few years down the road, but for now it's impossible," he said. "I hope in a couple of years we'll be able to do something like that. But then we're talking tens of thousands of dollars more."

For now, Innecco is pleased with the work of his community group, which he strives to delight with his own enthusiasm and diligence.

"I think my biggest asset is not music," Innecco said. "I think I understand the nature of a community group; if I don't make it fun for them, they're not going to come back. So my main concern is that they are having fun, they are involved in the process and they are growing as friends and human beings and being able to offer more. I'm aware people are busy, people are tired by the end of the day,

and the last thing they need is a screaming conductor telling them what's wrong. I think they need to have fun, and they need to leave the rehearsal with a higher level of energy than when they arrive. Also because I couldn't do it if I didn't have fun, either. I think it's a way of life. For some reason, I prefer having fun than not."

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LA TRAVIATA

When: 7 p.m. Saturday

Where: Missouri Theatre, 203 S. Ninth St.

How much: \$10

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