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Andrew Adler | Focused schedule aids Opera

By Andrew Adler

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When David Roth first told me several years ago that Kentucky Opera would present its entire season in a two-month span, beginning in September and ending in November, I probably threw the company's general director more than one worried look.

It struck me as a dangerous notion, given the history and attitudes of patrons accustomed to traditional subscription models.

No staged opera for 10 months? Nothing in the winter or spring? Surely that would prompt memories to fade and momentum to slacken. All the other major performing arts groups would continue on through May or June, while the opera would not be seen or heard. Even a promised annual spring collaboration between Kentucky Opera and the Louisville Orchestra seemed little more than a gesture.

Well, Kentucky Opera's 2009 season ended Nov. 22 with a performance of "Hansel and Gretel," and you know what? Roth's strategy is holding up. In fact, I'll go as far as to say that he was absolutely, positively spot-on in his thinking. The company has a focus and purpose that can carry it forward, even amid the uncertain times everyone is confronting.

Because it has only three main stage productions to offer each season, Kentucky Opera faces unusual challenges. Tricking out your schedule over eight months — say, with performances in September, January and April — makes it difficult to gain vital artistic momentum. The orchestra, Louisville Ballet and Actors Theatre of Louisville have many more performances and productions to offer. They can build and sustain demand throughout the calendar year.

Kentucky Opera doesn't have that luxury. So Roth decided to adopt a quasi-festival format, not terribly different from what Cincinnati Opera does with its early summer lineup. By programming its three productions in quick succession, Kentucky Opera can concentrate and consolidate precious resources in service to its art form.

The company had the advantage of opening 2009 with soprano Elizabeth Futral singing the title role in Verdi's "La Traviata," the sort of star turn a company this level seldom can afford. Then came the utterly contrasting treatment of Carlisle Floyd's "Of Mice and Men," one of the strongest efforts Kentucky Opera has mounted in recent memory.

I can't say "Hansel and Gretel" achieved that degree of success. Yet on its own terms this final production, intended to embrace a family audience at the start of the holiday period, was an appropriate finale. And like its predecessors, the work fit very well inside the Brown Theatre, the company's home for the foreseeable future.

Budget constraints mean there will be no spring concert-opera production in 2010. We will have to wait until September for Kentucky Opera to return to the Brown. Meanwhile, in this season of thanksgiving, we can be grateful that this bedrock organization understands how to keep on keeping on.

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