

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WSJ.com

MAY 19, 2011

Alto-cation at City Opera

Singers and Staff Blame Empty Seats on Lack of Popular Productions, Marketing

By

Singers and production staff of the troubled New York City Opera are urging the board to take the company in a "different direction," arguing in a letter this week that by avoiding popular classics, the company has failed to entice audiences.

"We are very frustrated that NYCO has now become an opera company that does not do opera," said the letter, a copy of which was reviewed by The Wall Street Journal.



Carol Rosegg

New York City Opera's 'Séance on a Wet Afternoon' has been a critical disappointment and failed to lure audiences.

The missive comes on the eve of a critical board meeting, set for Thursday and widely expected to determine the fate of the company's fall season.

The opera's board last month began an exhaustive review of its finances, saying it wouldn't announce future programming until it had a balanced budget. At the time, its projected deficit for the season was \$5 million.

The company's chairman, Charles Wall, said in an April interview with the Journal that he expected the review to be completed by mid-May.

"There is no line item that's sacrosanct," Mr. Wall said.

Beset by years of financial turmoil that crippled its endowment and forced it to go dark for a season, City Opera hired Artistic Director and General Manager George Steel in January 2009 to restore its cultural vibrancy and help revive its financial health. Under his watch, the company's revenue rebounded during the 2010 fiscal year to \$26.2 million— from a low of \$6 million during its dark season—but its endowment is depleted, standing at \$9 million as recently as April.

The performers and staff say in the letter that they are willing "to find new and creative ways to work with smaller budgets and fewer resources than we ever have in the past."

They fault the company for failing—either through programming or marketing initiatives—to coax operagoers into the seats of the David H. Koch Theater. "Management repeatedly tells us

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.
MOBILE READER

Download free for BlackBerry® for a limited time only.

Download free for iPhone™ for a limited time only.

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WSJ.com

that audiences are not attending arts performances anymore, but when we sit out on the plaza that feels like home, we watch patrons continue to pour into the other theaters at Lincoln Center," the letter says.

"[W]e are confused and troubled by the way management is programming the seasons."

Under Mr. Steel's leadership, City Opera has pursued experimental programming such as "Monodramas," a triple bill of one-act operas, but has also performed work rooted in more orthodox fare, including Jonathan Miller's production of Donizetti's "The Elixir of Love," which it performed in March and April.

Maggie McKeon, a spokeswoman for City Opera, said in a statement: "City Opera was founded over 60 years ago with the express purpose of presenting new, different repertoire to a new and different audience, not just veteran operagoers. As always, the company's seasons seek a balance of innovation and tradition, discovery and rediscovery."

The singers and staff argue, though, that the company has curtailed programming warhorses such as "Carmen," "La Boheme" and "La Traviata," even though such productions are part of its repertory. "[W]e could perform any of these on any given night with minimal rehearsal—but these shows don't make it onto the schedules anymore," the letter says.

And while they were "immensely proud" of a highly anticipated production of Stephen Schwartz's "Seance on a Wet Afternoon," that critically panned show failed to deliver on its association with the writer of the Broadway hit "Wicked"—in part because of the company's marketing choices, they said.

Those choices, which have also included relying heavily on the work of contemporary visual artists including Kehinde Wiley and Isaac Julien, have undercut the potential appeal of its productions, they argue.

An image by Mr. Julien used to promote "The Elixir of Love," for example, shows a clenched fist,

its fingers adorned with heavy gold rings that spell out the word "love."

"The images chosen for NYCO's artwork are confusing at best and off-putting at worst, and we do not feel like they accurately represent the work we are doing," the letter says.

Write to Erica Orden at erica.orden@wsj.com