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## Santa Fe Opera

Lucas Harbour, a bass who now performs in Germany and Italy, got his start with the Sacramento Opera while a Sacramento State student.

### More Information

- ELIXIR OF LOVE

**What:** Sacramento Opera production

**When:** 8 p.m. Nov. 20, 2 p.m. Nov. 22, and 7:30 p.m. Nov. 24

**Where:** Community Center Theater, 1301 L St., Sacramento

**Tickets:** \$18-\$130

**Information:** (916) 737-1000 or [www.sacopera.org](http://www.sacopera.org)

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# Students sing praises of Sac Opera influence

By Edward Ortiz

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Want to find some of the most promising young voices that our region has to offer the world? Let Timm Rolek be your guide.

Rolek, the conductor of the Sacramento Opera, has for years been plucking promising, eager vocal students from Sacramento State's music program and giving them a platform to launch their careers.

Take baritone Eugene Chan. The California State University, Sacramento, grad landed a residency with Theatre Basel in Switzerland. Rolek personally mentored him.

"Maestro Rolek, who had originally hired me as part of the chorus for Rossini's 'La Cenerentola,' instead gave me the wonderful opportunity to sing Prince Yamadori," said Chan. "This role served as my company debut. I'm fortunate to have received such a wonderful introductory education."

Similar stories abound. Soprano Antoni Mendezona, now a resident with a New York City opera company, credits Rolek and chorus master Ming Luke with helping her learn how to sing like a pro.

And then there is Lucas Harbour, a bass who performs in Italy and Germany. Rolek cast him as Montano in "Othello" in just his second Sacramento Opera production.

"Budding singers need opportunities," he said. "While many opera companies want to hire stars in lead roles, most operas have roles that do not need to be filled by a veteran."

Rolek has found a willing accomplice in his effort to showcase young voices: Robin Fisher, CSUS associate professor of voice and interim opera coordinator.

"Our students are able to have mentors among professionals," said Fisher, who sat down with Rolek in 2005 to formulate the plan.

The Sacramento Opera and CSUS are now working on a more formal agreement. It is being modeled after two similar collaborations that already exist between the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music and the Cincinnati Opera and between the University of Tennessee and the Knoxville Opera.

"We think it is important to have something in writing to make sure there is a professional understanding between the two entities to clarify leadership and financial commitment issues," said Fisher.

Roughly 20 percent of the Sacramento Opera's chorus now come from the ranks of CSUS students. Casting a chorus is much easier when you can tap into the diverse palette of singers that a university program offers, said Luke, the chorus master.

"Oftentimes these university programs will have an even distribution between men and women," he said, but that's rare in the professional opera world.

Of the 40 students who have sung with the opera, Chan is the most successful product of the collaboration so far. The young baritone began his professional career singing as a chorister in the [sacbee.com/.../students-sing-praises-of-...](http://sacbee.com/.../students-sing-praises-of-...)

## Sacramento Opera's 2005 production of "Madama Butterfly."

His time with Sacramento Opera, he said, led him to a two-year residency in the competitive Seattle Opera Young Artists Program. Chan applied many of the things he learned in Sacramento to his approach to auditions and performances for the West Bay Opera and the San Francisco Opera Center.

Rolek recalls the first time he heard Chan's voice: "I could tell ... he had a very special instrument, so I wanted to encourage him as much as possible by offering him work outside of our chorus."

Because the company doesn't have a resident ensemble, Rolek said, it was limited in its capacity to stage outreach performances at locations such as schools. It also limited the opera's ability to cast small roles and chorus roles.

"One of the things that we wanted to develop out of our relationship with CSUS is a way for students to work for us while they're getting their degrees," said Rolek.

Soprano Ellen Presley, a 21-year-old senior, is now juggling school with work at the Sacramento Opera. She will sing with the chorus in the company's upcoming production of "Elixir of Love" in November and in "La Traviata" next year. Chorus members are paid \$360 per production, more for larger roles.

"This is a huge education ... to be exposed to this repertoire and to see how professional opera companies work," said Presley. "I get to watch principal singers with established careers as well as work with fantastic directors."

It is tricky serving two masters, she said.

"It demands a lot of time. ... School keeps us busy because a lot of us have a heavy unit load in the music major," Presley said.

As an 18-year-old at CSUS, Mendezona sang the role of Flora in the Sacramento Opera's production of "Turn of the Screw" in 2007.

"Working with the Sacramento Opera has opened doors for me," said Mendezona, who lives in New York City and takes in opera auditions while participating as a resident in the DiCapo Opera Artist program. That company is one of only two in New York to present an entire season of opera productions, musical theater and family concerts in its own facility. The other, of course, is the Metropolitan Opera.

"As a young singer, I was nurtured by my peers who had more experience than I, as chorus singers," she said. "Timm Rolek and chorus master Ming Luke – they were extremely supportive of my endeavors, giving me time off for competitions, suggesting other performance opportunities, and advising on repertoire."

Mendezona said that the rigors of singing for a professional company are deeper than what's demanded for on-campus productions.

"Students are at school to learn, and figure out their own progression. But when you work in a professional setting ... you have to be ready, with music learned, and you have to know exactly what you're singing, especially if it's in another language."

Harbour, who sang with the opera for three seasons, now performs with the Deutsche Opera of Berlin and the Teatro Regio of Torino, Italy.

He said the opera's flexibility with its student singers gave him the opportunity to sing in campus productions as well. All of this has created a great loyalty to the Sacramento Opera from its former singers.

"No matter where my career takes me, I have a desire to come back and sing with my home team opera company," Harbour said.

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**flipper48** wrote on 10/25/2009 09:23:50 PM:

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