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Open Opera at Orinda Community Park

By Andrea A. Firth



On Sunday, October 11th Orindans and their neighbors will be able to broaden their musical horizons beyond the folk, rock, and pop bands of the summer concert series, and hear opera sung by the artists from Open Opera—a new Bay Area company that brings free opera by professional-quality singers to the parks.

"Open Opera is really a marriage of the parks and art," states Ellen St. Thomas, an opera singer who started the nonprofit arts organization with colleagues Olivia Stapp and Elizabeth Baker in 2008 with the goal of producing opera in free outdoor venues as a means of building community and expanding and diversifying opera audiences. "Opera-goers love the casual nature of the outdoor concerts, and newcomers to opera get a great introduction to it," adds St. Thomas, who has also worked with several youth choruses in the area including the chorus at Campolindo High School. Started with a couple of grants and further supported through fundraising, Open Opera has presented four concerts in the past year including a full-scale production of *The Marriage of Figaro* in Berkeley's John Hinkel Park that was attended by over 700 spectators. The Orinda concert will feature classics and favorites from a variety of operas. "This concert will be more like opera's greatest hits," states St. Thomas. "The songs will be crowd pleasers

Open Opera in the park. Photos Ron Fujie

such as [Verdi's] *Rigoletto* quartet. The crowd always loves [the format]."

Among the 11 performers slated for the Orinda Open Opera concert are two local singers: Orinda resident Lisa van der Ploeg and Campolindo High School senior Erika Henningsen.

Van der Ploeg is a mezzo-soprano with a long resume of opera performance credits throughout the United States. One of her most recent performances occurred when she was asked to spontaneously sing at the Rotary Field Days held at her children's school, Wagner Ranch Elementary. "I thought 'this is crazy,' as they handed me the microphone," says van der Ploeg who quickly chose to sing a piece from *Carmen*, an opera in which she has toured playing the title role. "This hush went over the crowd, and the children just marched toward me. The magic of the music was so amazing," she adds. "I'm looking forward to bringing opera to my neighbors and other people I know. It's great to be able to have opera in the park."

Erika Henningsen, this year's Orinda Idol winner in the high school age group, will also perform at the Open Opera concert. "It's interesting to sing outside," says Henningsen, who has performed at a number of festivals in outdoor venues. "I like being able to see the audience...to see their energy and their reactions." Already a seasoned veteran of musical theater, Henningsen, who played the role of Belle in Campolindo's performance of the musical *Beauty and the Beast* this past spring, will sing *Life of the Party*—the song that clinched her Idol win.

The Open Opera concert is sponsored by the Orinda Rotary Club. This family-friendly and free concert will be at the Orinda Community Park on Sunday, October 11th starting at 4:30.



Photos provided

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