

# Opera group belts it out for free in the name of art

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## Document Text

Because of a reporter's error, the time for today's performance by Cascadia Concert Opera was incorrect. The concert will begin at 7 p.m. at Our Savior's Lutheran Church.

At a time when traditional opera companies struggle to pay for guest soloists, orchestras, sets and costumes, some Willamette Valley upstarts are performing opera for free.

It helps that members of Cascadia Concert Opera take no pay for a month of rehearsal and a month of performances between Portland and Eugene. They rely on posters and social networking to draw audiences. They sing in retirement centers, churches and other venues that cost them little or nothing.

"We're passionate about the art form, and this gives us an opportunity to perform," said board member Kevin Helppie, a music professor at Western Oregon University. He plays four villains in this season's show, "The Tales of Hoffman."

The Eugene-based company already has performed at a Summer Soiree for Salem Chamber Orchestra; two more Salem performances are planned.

Jacques Offenbach's opera fit the company's requirements because its music is familiar to the public, especially the famous "Barcarolle."

"The plot is farcical, but the music is grand and eloquent at times," Helppie said.

Also, the 31/2-hour opera could be trimmed to two-hour and one-hour versions to meet the needs of diverse audiences, he said.

Nine singers, wearing minimal costumes, play the principal characters. They cluster around four music stands in front of an audience. An eight-member chorus, including Tori Helppie, Kevin's daughter, stands wherever there's room. During a recent performance at the Atrium in Eugene, the chorus sang from the third floor, looking down on the soloists.

The group had planned a \$5,000 budget for this second season, with the money coming mostly from grants and sponsorships. In fact, it has made do on even less.

Tori Helppie, a Sprague grad who now studies music at the University of Oregon, said she and other students used Facebook to spread the word about performances.

"A lot of the interest in opera comes from people already in the music program," she said. "If we find ways to communicate with people who aren't in music, we let them know what's going on."

Kevin Helppie, who performs frequently as a soloist in the Northwest, said the troupe hopes to go into public schools next year to build awareness of opera. It's possible that student performers could join the company during the following summer.

Eventually, he said, the company hopes to pay its key members. But for now, the singers are proud to bring great music to all kinds of places.

"Our main goal is to enrich the community," he said. "Some of our venues have a grand piano, and some we have to bring our own keyboard to.

"We kind of like that about ourselves. We're not arrogant."

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