

Capitola

# Setting the stage for opera



Electrician Pierre Andre helps get the Capitola Theater ready. Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Capitola-1990  
Group turns theater into new venue

By ERIN K. QUIRK  
Sentinel staff writer

CAPITOLA — He is a 92-year-old maestro who has conducted choirs in the Sistine Chapel. She is a San Francisco Bay Area soprano who brought down the house at the Rome Opera Festival.

One week from today, the two and a band of others will formally introduce the Bay Shore Lyric Opera Company to Santa Cruz County.

"If we go the right way and slowly, we can make Capitola the capital of the performing arts," said Maestro Salvatore D'Aura, who serves as the company's artistic director.

The opera company's name has adorned the Capitola Theater marquee for several weeks, and many have heard the name Der Torossian mentioned around town. But some locals are still mystified about what exactly is going to happen with the theater they have known and loved for the last 48 years.

The Der Torossian family isn't hard to meet.

Mother and project mastermind, Claire Der Torossian, can be seen inside the theater with a paintbrush or bringing coffee to the volunteer contractors building a new stage. Daughter and concert soprano Jennifer Der Torossian can be found regularly scrubbing dirt off the old theater walls with her sister Jill Fries. D'Aura can also be found working out last-minute changes for the upcoming concert.

Over a few cups of tea at Mr. Toots Coffee House, the Der Torossian women spoke of their plans for ongoing musical, children's and repertory theater in Capitola. All three of the women sighed deeply.

"Do you think we're dreamers?" Claire Der Torossian asked.

Dreamers or not, this is the heart of the non-profit Bay Shore Lyric Opera Company.

Claire and her husband, Papken Der Torossian of Saratoga, bought the theater property nine months ago with the intention of



Jennifer Der Torossian tries out her voice and the new hall in rehearsal for the concert next Sunday. Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

The Der Torossians plan to discover if a strong desire for a permanent performing arts center exists in Capitola and throughout the county.

building a hotel/condominium complex. Claire said the couple are not developers but purchased the property because they have visited Capitola for many years and love it.

"We've always been enchanted with Capitola," she said. "It's so quaint and reminds me of New England with its tiny, little artistic communities."

But the family says development is at least 18 months away, and rather than let the beloved theater lie fallow, they have engaged in a grand experiment. The Der Torossians plan to discover if a strong desire for a permanent performing arts center exists in Capitola and through-

out the county.

"I think we're the missing link," Claire said. "Because you have so many wonderful galleries and shops, all you need is the performing arts to complete the picture."

The Der Torossians bought the property from a development group that had proposed a 60-room hotel and retail complex last year. Many thought the complex was too large for the village, and the project eventually stalled. The Der Torossians still plan a hotel/condominium complex, but Claire said they plan only about 40 rooms. Furthermore, if locals respond to the

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Claire Der Torossian, Jill Fries, Jennifer Der Torossian and Salvatore D'Aura. Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

# Opera

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current concert series, she said, the family may include a permanent 300-350 seat performing arts center in the plan.

"We need to keep it (the current theater) busy," Claire said.

And the Der Torossians, who have a long history in Santa Clara County performing arts, plan to do that. They have scheduled at least three shows and have promised more if the interest is there. They will also rent the theater to various community theater groups and schools needing a venue.

"A lot of talented performers can't, because they have nowhere to perform," D'Aura said.

Claire Der Torossian doesn't believe their venture will compete with the Henry J. Mello Center for the Performing Arts in Watsonville, simply because that center is much larger. She said smaller theaters are better psychologically for community theater and their opera company, which was recently revamped. Many members of the company were formerly parts of the Santa Clara Musical Theatre, which lost steam a few years ago. After the purchase of the theater, the members regrouped and became the Bay Shore Lyric Opera Company.

The first production hosted by the Company will be Sunday, Dec. 15.

Titled simply "In Concert," the performance will feature four vocalists performing selections from Puccini, Verdi, Rossi-

ni and Mozart. Jennifer Der Torossian is the soprano in the performance.

The second will be a performance of Puccini's *La Boheme*. For both shows the company has auditioned local musicians and singers and will do the same for their June production of *Abduction of Seraglio* by Mozart.

D'Aura is looking forward to conducting *La Boheme* because he has a personal connection with the opera and its composer, Giacomo Puccini.

D'Aura was born in French North Africa, and as a young man earned a scholarship to Santa Cecilia — a world-famous conservatory in Rome. At one performance, Puccini sat in the audience. He was impressed with D'Aura's rendition of the first act of his opera and invited D'Aura to help teach his students.

D'Aura calls his teaching method *Bel Canto*.

"Human beings must transcend body and mind to sing *Bel Canto*. Jennifer (Der Torossian) has attained that."

Claire, who has worked with Santa Clara Musical Theater for more than 10 years and hosted musical concerts at her home, laughs aloud when she talks about her daughter's operatic beginnings.

"When Jennifer was 7 or 8 years old she had ... very powerful vocal chords. She used to scream a lot," she said. "I would say 'what pipes,' and once I sat her down at the piano."

Jennifer's sister, Jill Fries, chimed in with the rest of the story, explaining that at that time, Willie Nelson was at the

height of his career. Fries said her sister loved to sing country tunes but they were too low for her soprano voice — so she began learning opera. She later became a student of D'Aura's.

The company has also tapped into the local talent pool for musicians, singers and dancers. D'Aura and others within the company have said they are impressed with the level of ability found locally. They've also found a lot of talented stage hands, electricians and volunteers — although they say they need more.

In between filling out their orchestra pit and rehearsing for a concert that hits the stage in less than a week, they have also spent hours scrubbing walls, pulling up carpet and repainting.

McLarney Construction of San Jose volunteered to build a brand new stage and to make other minor renovations necessary for the company's upcoming performances. With all the improvements, the interior of the theater looks much different now than it did in September.

Ellie and Frank Jordan, who own Panache in Capitola Village, have also offered to sell tickets to the Dec. 15 concert in their store.

"We're really excited to get some cultural activity down here in Capitola," Ellie Jordan said.

The Der Torossians are excited as well.

"It takes a community to make a theater," Claire said.

*Very few tickets are still available for the Dec. 15 show. Tickets are on sale daily at Panache in Capitola Village or at the box office today and next weekend.*