Skagit Opera Is Proud to Present *Norma*

Skagit Opera has been performing to glowing reviews from attendees and critics alike, attracting audience members from Olympia to Vancouver, BC. Their next production is *Norma*, opening April 8 at McIntyre Hall in Mount Vernon.







At left: German native Christina Kowalski-Holien is known for the unique dark timbre of her voice, and her "glowing heights and warm depths" excite audiences in the U.S.A. as well as in Europe. She has been an affiliate artist faculty member at the University of Puget Sound since 2005. *Middle:* Recently praised by *Opera News* for his clear and sweet lyrical tone and brave, vocally assured portrayals (*The New York Times*), Todd Wilander is quickly emerging as one of the most sought-after leading tenors on American and European stages. *At right:* Clinton Smith, Music Director of Orchestra Seattle and the Seattle Chamber Singers will be the conductor for Skagit Opera's production of *Norma*.

Whoever heard of an opera called *Norma*? Well for one, Dr. Banner, a.k.a. "the Hulk" who listens to *Norma* in the latest Avengers movie. Another is the great German romantic composer Richard Wagner who, after conducting it in 1837, said he considered *Norma* "the most perfect example of a musical tragedy" and "If we weep from emotion on hearing it, it is nothing to be ashamed of." Written in 1831 by Vincenzo Bellini, one of the three great composers of the "bel canto" — literally, "beautiful singing"— style, it will be performed in its original Italian with English supertitles projected over the proscenium.

The plot of *Norma* is a Druid version of *Aida*: two women, one powerful and the other her devoted servant, discover they are in love with the same man. With its ferocious vocal and dramatic demands, the female lead is one of the most difficult roles in opera: it was one of Maria Callas' favorite and most famous roles, requiring immense range, technical virtuosity, and enough stamina to appear in almost every scene. The soprano who takes it on must be able to produce floating pianissimos, sudden dramatic swells, a fusillade of coloratura effects including rapid runs, fluttering trills, delicate turns, and declamatory outbursts. It is the supreme test for a fiercely intense, formidable soprano.

Skagit Opera is very fortunate to have Christina Kowalski, one of the premier singers in the Pacific Northwest, to sing the title role. She was spectacular in a number of Skagit Opera performances including *Tosca, Madame Butterfly*, and most recently *Cosi Fan Tutte*. One reviewer said of her performance of *Tosca*: "She burned the house down. If Maria Callas was half as good as Kowalski then she deserved her reputation."

In the lead tenor role, making his Skagit Opera debut, will be Todd Wilander, an up-and-coming young tenor who was a winner of the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions and has already sung eleven roles at the Metropolitan Opera as well as other major opera houses, including the Berlin Opera and the San Francisco Opera.

Another Skagit Opera newcomer will be stage director Tanya Kane-Parry, the first woman to stage an opera for the company. Mitchell Kahn, general director, said that he wanted a woman to direct *Norma* because the title character represents the archetypical struggle for women, the sometimes-conflicting roles of mother, lover, wife, and demanding day job (in this case, as high priestess). Kane-Parry has worked on productions at the Los Angeles Opera, Barcelona Opera, Houston Grand Opera, L'Opera National de Bordeaux and Washington National Opera as both a director and choreographer.

Returning to conduct will be Clinton Smith who led the wonderful *Hansel and Gretel* production in November. Smith has conducted at the Santa Fe Opera, Minnesota Opera, and Juilliard Center for Opera, and is currently the music director of Orchestra Seattle.

Performances of *Norma* are Friday nights April 8 and 15 at 7:30pm and Sunday afternoons April 10 and 17 at 3pm in Mount Vernon's lovely McIntyre Hall. The great acoustics and sight lines make it an ideal place to see live opera. Each performance is preceded by a lecture about the opera, providing historical context as well as insights into the composer, his work, and opera as an art form. Opening night features a gala dinner. Tickets can be purchased at www.McIntyreHall.org or 360-416-7727.

