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25-May-2021

Opera returns to San Francisco area with assist from IP-rated Elation lighting

Design team turns to state-of-the-art rig for drive-in performances of San Francisco Opera's "The Barber of Seville" and Adler concerts

Live opera returned to the San Francisco Bay area this spring with a series of Covid guidance compliant outdoor performances by the San Francisco Opera of "The Barber of Seville" with an assist from Elation IP-rated luminaires. With Covid restrictions on indoor gatherings in place, the opera company secured the Marin Center Drive-in in San Rafael, where opera fans gathered in their cars to watch the Rossini classic.



The 90-minute adaptation by director Matthew Ozawa, which finds singers returning to the opera house after a pandemic to bring opera back to life, ran from April 23 to May 15. Guests could view the performance from either a live opera lot with a direct view of the performance or from a simulcast lot with a view to a drive-in screen. Car capacity for each show was 300+.

Lighting team

Resident Lighting Director for the San Francisco Opera (SFO) is Justin Partier while JAX Messenger, once on staff at SFO, served as lighting designer for "The Barber" production. As the outdoor set was also used on off-days for concerts by SFO's resident artists, the Adler Fellows, the two designers, friends since working as associates on Broadway, made lighting decisions together.

Fidelio to Barber

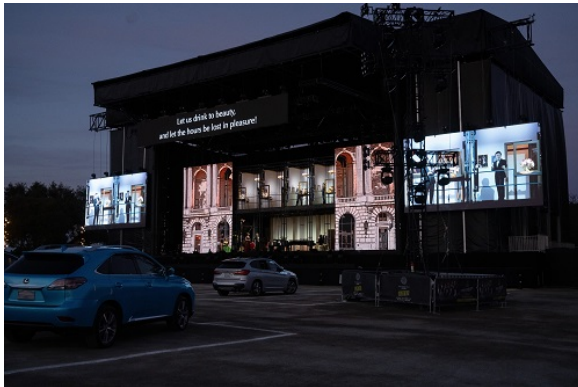
The opera's fast-moving action takes place on an adapted version of a set originally intended for San Francisco Opera's new production of Beethoven's Fidelio, which was postponed due to the pandemic. Messenger, who was on the creative team for Fidelio, says elements of the flexible set transitioned to the

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Barber production. “SFO still built the set and when they had the idea to do a drive-in Barber they hired us to re-invent a way to use our ideas for that project,” he said. “We took the tools they had already built and adapted it to Barber with Fidelio’s more aggressive elements,” harsh fluorescent lighting as an example, “toned down.”

Proteus Maximus

The Barber production and the Adler shows took place on a 120’-wide festival stage erected on site for the performances. Four sliding video screens were an integral part of the set with two additional large video screens on either side of the stage serving as IMAG. Messenger says that Barber required a bright moving light while the need to adapt to an outdoor venue and the rain-or-shine performances necessitated the use of weatherproof lighting. Elation’s 50,000-lumen [Proteus Maximus™](#) fit the bill with 56 fixtures working from FOH and over stage trusses, as well as from audience towers where the throw to the stage deck was 90 feet. “From an artistic standpoint I like things bright. I’d rather sit at the control desk knowing that each cue has some teeth,” Messenger states. “Maybe I’m just getting old but conventional equipment just doesn’t look like much to me anymore.”



His first time using the Maximus, Partier confirms that the fixture’s power was key. “The intensity was really important,” he said. “We were hoping to do some Moving Light Preset and focusing during the day to keep up with the crazy opera schedule and although it was not always possible due to the bright California sun, we were able to do it a good portion of the time in the afternoons under the roof with the Maximus.” He adds that the brightness was also crucial for the IMAG video as some of the cars were so far away.

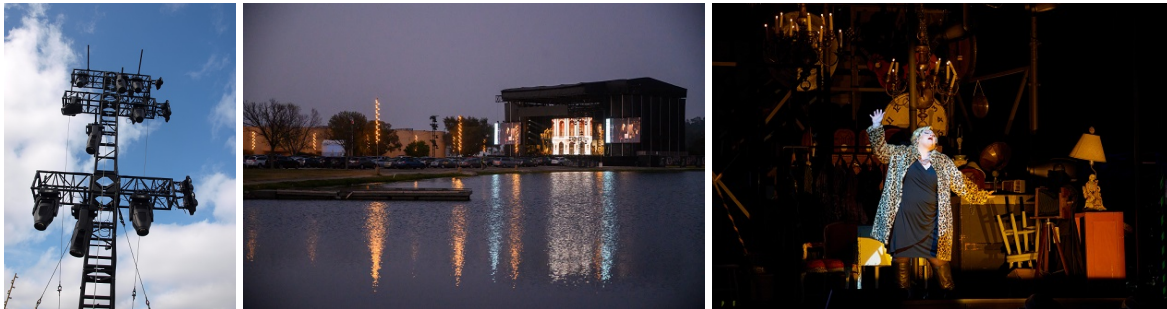
Another reason behind the choice of the Proteus Maximus was its all-weather IP65 rating. “We needed the IP rating but it just felt like we were making no compromises and that was great,” says Messenger. “Whatever I needed to do for Barber worked out well and what Justin needed to do with the concerts also worked out because we had such an intense level of flexibility.”

Color

In opera, according to Partier, high color rendering and color temperature adjustment are important, two features the Maximus boasts and something he says they used a lot. Because interaction between the singers was limited due to Covid restrictions, media content on the video walls played a greater role. It was media that LD Messenger knew he’d have to color coordinate or color contrast with. “I wanted the

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variety in color and the color rendering to be high because I wanted to be able to go over the top when it was a love moment, and extra over the top when it was a comedy moment,” he explains. “The power and the color from the Maximus gave us that flexibility and I was happy with the color we were able to achieve. They gave us some nice greens and nice golds, and were very useful.”



With multiple LED luminaires in the spec plus two layers of live capture to contend with – live video embedded in the architecture of the set and live capture on a giant screen in the simulcast lot – the director of photography had the added challenge of white balancing, Messenger says, “but the fixtures delivered.”

“Sharp edges and a good zoom were also important,” Partier adds. “They were great for the interior scenes as front and fill light, as well as upper level backlight for the Stage Left and Stage Right upper anterior spaces.”

SixBar flexibility

Another workhorse light in the spec were 92 [SixBar 1000 IPTM](#) lights, Elation’s meter-long six-color LED batten, which were employed in a couple of ways. Partier explains: “They were the key light in all the rooms, mounted around the sides and top on the upper level, and along the top on the lower level. We also used two rows to light the lower level translucent panels as two ground rows. A few fixtures were mounted between doorways and masking flats to light the latter.” The SixBars were also used as soft footlights downstage to create an old-fashioned front light source. “They delivered some light pinks and natural low-temperature ambers that were really beautiful,” Messenger said. The designers also used the fixtures to mix highly saturated colors for more theatrical moments.

Other Elation gear in the SFO drive-in rig included 33 Fuze PAR Z120 IPTM units as door backlights and run lights, while 26 DTW Blinder 350 IPTM 2-lites and 20 DTW Blinder 700 IPTM 4-lites worked as house and work lights. Felix Lighting’s Brisbane office in Northern California supplied all of the lighting. Lighting technicians and stagehands were all from IATSE Local 16.

A triumph

Opera’s return to the San Francisco area, the Company’s first live performances in 16 months, was a grand success with critics praising Ozawa’s shortened ‘best of’ adaptation and not least the effort to put it on under Covid restrictive guidelines. “I think the show was a triumph,” concludes Messenger, who said the project had an excitement-before-opening-night feel to it. “It was beautiful, the audience loved it, it was fun and everyone seemed to enjoy the approach we took, but the real triumph lies with the SFO administration. They took on a laundry list of Covid challenges and made it all work.”



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Credits:

Jax Messenger: Lighting Designer "The Barber of Seville"

Matthew Ozawa: Stage Director

Alexander V. Nichols: Scenic and Projection Designer

Jessica Jahn: Costume Designer

Justin Partier: Resident Lighting Director, San Francisco Opera

Nathan Scheuer: Assistant Lighting Designer

Rachael Blackwell: Gilbert Hemsley Lighting Intern

Stephanie Lasater: San Francisco Opera Intern

Leon Parsons: Head Electrician

Michael Anderson: Assistant Head Electrician

Russ Adamson: Lighting Systems Administrator

Anna McGriff: Lighting Programmer

Erik Walstad: Technical and Safety Director

Ryan O'Steen: Production Manager

Chris Largent: Associate Technical Director

Chung Kuo: Technical Producer (Rittle Dragon Productions)

Matthew Shilvock: General Director

Jennifer Good: Managing Director - Production

Jenny Harber: Project Manager

Darin Burnett: Production Stage Manager

Jeremy Patfield: Production Finance Director

Celine Strouts: Production Associate

Local union labor:

IATSE Local 16

IATSE Local 706

IATSE Local 784

IATSE Local 800

IATSE Local 829

IATSE B18

AGMA

AFM

Felix Lighting: Kim Martin (agent), Greg Kunit (onsite agent)

Elation gear:

56 x Proteus Maximus

92 x SixBar 1000 IP

33 x Fuze PAR Z120 IP

26 x DTW Blinder 350IP

20 x DTW Blinder 700IP



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About Elation Professional

Based in California with facilities in Florida and Mexico City, as well as European offices in The Netherlands, Elation designs and manufactures a comprehensive range of innovative lighting products known for its superior performance, excellent efficiency, and outstanding price: value ratio, all backed by a hard-earned reputation for Total Support. Elation also offers an advanced line of lighting control products through Obsidian Control Systems, as well as a full range of dependable specialty effects called Magmatic. Our mission has always been simple: to provide best-in-class products and service while offering the best value: performance ratio in the industry. Elation products continue to be a part of the industry's most exciting projects across the globe. We invite you to take a closer look at www.elationlighting.com

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