

Sacramento Opera experiments with lower ticket prices

eortiz@sacbee.com

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The Sacramento Opera, whose top ticket prices are among the highest for any arts event in the city, is lowering some of its prices for the upcoming production of "La Traviata."

The price of a seat has been reduced by as much as \$36, depending on its location in the Community Center Theater.

There are plans to institute a substantial change in the opera's pricing structure for the 2010-11 season, said Rod Gideons, executive director of the Sacramento Opera.

"We're aware of the fact that we are at the top in terms of the most expensive ticket in town," Gideons said.

The top ticket for a Grand Tier box for a Sacramento Opera production at the Community Center Theater is \$130. An orchestra seat is priced at \$97. The company has reduced prices for certain rows of orchestra seats in the theater – from \$97 to \$61 for Friday and Sunday performances, and from \$85 to \$53 for Tuesday shows.

"If anything, we've learned that more of our patrons are people who have state jobs, and many are on forced furloughs," Gideons said.

Gideons said the move is meant to entice younger audiences as well.

The company has already moved in that direction with a long-standing but little-known rush ticket price offer for students. Students can buy tickets for \$10, provided they pay cash and buy the tickets one hour before showtime.

The new ticket pricing is a response to the opera's recent online survey, in which nearly a quarter of the 195 respondents felt that single-ticket prices were too expensive.

Bringing in new audiences is no small matter for the Sacramento Opera, which earns 60 percent of its income from ticket sales.

Neither is the issue a small one for arts organizations overall. A recent study by Americans for the Arts found that attendance at mainstream nonprofit arts events is in decline. In that report, the percentage of the population attending museums decreased by 13 percent, and performing arts events, such as symphonic music, dance, opera and theater, saw a 17 percent drop from 2003 to 2008.

To counteract that trend, many arts organizations are taking a close look at ticket prices.

"Ticket price is one of the greatest barriers to attendance," said Marc A. Scorca, president

and CEO of Opera America, the advocacy organization for opera companies nationwide. "When ticket prices are significantly lower, we do see an increase in demand, particularly among younger audiences. Incrementally lower prices generally do not have an immediate impact."

Some leaders of classical music organizations feel that adjusting ticket prices is part of a larger paradigm that needs to change to bring in new audiences.

"There is a perception that the 'arts' are expensive and inaccessible to the public at large, and that if we all just lower our ticket prices we would get more people attending our performances," said Marc Feldman, executive director of the Sacramento Philharmonic.

"There is some truth to that; however, the problem for the arts runs much deeper than ticket prices – even in a recession. If people don't want to attend, even free tickets won't help."

For Gideons, dispelling the notion that opera, once a populist art form, is an elitist pursuit will be key to developing new audiences. And he believes that lowering ticket prices is a good start.

"The perception with opera is that you have to have the right income, you have to drive the right car, eat at the right places, and on and on," said Gideons. "That artificial perception was fostered for a long time by some large opera companies."

"If they (new audiences) can get beyond that, they will see that opera is an art form that is simply about stories – the same stories that affect all of our lives," Gideons said.

Call Bee arts critic Edward Ortiz, (916) 321-1071.