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From the Los Angeles Times

'The Magic Flute' joins Hamilton High School musicians and L.A. Opera singers

The orchestra's students work hard, excited to do justice to the Mozart fairy tale and the professional chorus. Performances are Jan. 23 and 24.

By Yvonne Villarreal

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The brick walls in the music room at [Hamilton High School](#) were coated in lavender paint. Fliers announcing upcoming performances cluttered the bulletin board near the door. And musical instrument cases littered the carpet alongside scuffed amps.

On this recent Monday afternoon, it was practice time at the music academy at Hamilton, a humanities magnet school on the Westside of Los Angeles. But this was no ordinary rehearsal for the group of about 80 student musicians.

At the center of the room was a cluster of music stands, each holding worn sheets from the score of Mozart's operatic fairy tale "The Magic Flute." Some pages had penciled notations along the edges; others had sections highlighted in hot pink or yellow.

As the conductor, Vance Miller, assumed his place in front of the orchestra, the muffled sound of students preparing their instruments could be heard. Then silence. Miller raised his hands.

It was time to perform.

A series of haunting chords drifted across the room. As the melody progressed, the now unrestrained musical notes spiraled and looped, until they reached a crescendo against the emotional soprano of the Pamina character, who at this point in the story is contemplating suicide because the man she loves won't speak to her.

At this rehearsal and others, Hamilton's students were working hard to make their [rendition](#) of the classic opera sound as graceful as that of any professional musicians.

That's at least partly because for two nights this month, the group of teenage musicians will perform "The Magic Flute" with professional singers from the Los Angeles Opera chorus. The performances will be held at the school Jan. 23 and 24.

"It's super cool," said Jeffery Crawford, 17, who, in addition to attending the orchestra's four-day-a-week, 90-minute practices, has given up watching "The Simpsons" and other TV favorites to hone his violin skills before the big showcase.

"I've never seen all of us get so excited about something," he said. "It's not every day we get to

work with professional talent."

Maybe not. But it isn't the first time the school's symphony orchestra has partnered with L.A. Opera.

In 2007, the students joined with the opera's orchestra for a performance of Handel's "Judas Maccabaeus." And in 2006, the high school's entire string section joined the opera's orchestra for a performance of Benjamin Britten's "Noye's Fludde" (Noah's Flood); the musicians are slated to return for the company's spring production.

"They know that high schoolers don't do this," said Miller, who teaches at the Hamilton music academy. "They know this is special; an adult thing to do."

But the partnership this time goes beyond those earlier ones. The pressure is on.

Still, the young musicians say they welcome the challenge.

"I told [Miller], 'We've been here this long, but we've never tackled a serious Mozart piece,' " said Daniel Alley, 17, who plays the violin. "It's hard. It's challenging. But it gives us something to work toward. When we perform in January, it will be a culmination of all our hard work."

And the very opera company they are partnering with will also be their competition: L.A. Opera's own production of Mozart's lavish tale comes to the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion at the Music Center for a nine-day run this month.

But that's hardly a problem, those involved said.

"If you had a 'Magic Flute' going on every single day, it still wouldn't be enough," said Stacy Brightman, the opera company's director of education and community programs.

"We are thrilled the students are presenting their own rendition of it. They are an incredibly talented group of high school students who are not settling for anything easy. They're challenging themselves. It's very impressive. We're happy they've invited us to be a part of it."

The student production, which will be held at the school's Norman J. Pattiz Concert Hall, will span about 2 1/2 hours and will feature supertitles, or translated lyrics and dialogue projected onto a screen above the stage.

The setting may not be as elaborate as that of a professional presentation, but Karen Vuong, a freelance soprano who plays the role of Pamina, says the student-produced opera will be just as exciting.

"With these students, you get a sense of excitement and awe at the idea of performing this grand opera," said Vuong, who graduated from Hamilton in 2002 and was part of L.A. Opera's Domingo-Thornton Young Artist Program. "They're not bored with the experience yet. It's not just another performance. It's *the* performance."

As the recent practice wrapped up, the students loaded the instruments into their cases. But that didn't mean the music stopped.

Many of the young musicians hummed bits of the opera as they gathered their belongings and left

the room; some even tapped out the beats against their notebooks.

"There's no time to waste," Crawford said. "We have to be perfect."

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