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## Hong Kong's Opera Evangelist

*How will Hong Kong cultivate interest among the public so that the singers aren't serenading empty seats?*

By **GERRIE LIM**

If you build it, will they come? Hong Kong is planning a massive new complex of concert halls, the West Kowloon Cultural District, which will include a world-class opera venue on a par with the Grand National Theater in Beijing and the Shanghai Opera House. But then it will share with those cities a conundrum: how to cultivate interest among the public so that the singers aren't serenading empty seats.

Opera represents the pinnacle of prestige among the performing arts, but the high-brow reputation intimidates audiences who have grown up with raucous Chinese opera and don't know that the Western variety is equally fun to watch. As a result Hong Kong's opera scene is tiny, with a small local company and several visiting productions every year. It's a big leap from that to filling an opera house expected to have around 2,000 seats.

Cue Hong Kong's most active opera evangelist, Laurence Scofield. He thinks he has the elixir of love that will draw in new fans: high-definition videos from New York's Metropolitan Opera. Since February, his Foundation for the Arts and Music in Asia has been showing recorded Met performances at the 125-seat Wellcome Theatre, a former chapel now run by Hong Kong's Academy for Performing Arts. And that's just the beginning.

"The No. 1 objective is to build the audience," Mr. Scofield explains. He recently met a local couple who just had their first exposure to opera watching one of his showings of "Les Contes d'Hoffman." "They were so keyed up they couldn't sleep. They immediately bought tickets to see it again."

The "Live in HD" broadcasts are having a similar effect on American audiences since they first debuted in 2006, thanks to Peter Gelb, the Met's entrepreneurial new general manager. For the cost of a movie, the audience gets a bit of the thrill of live performance by world-class singers—and a better view of the action than you would enjoy in the opera house.

So far the performances in Hong Kong are not live; instead of a satellite feed, the performance is couriered from the U.S. on a hard drive holding more than 100 gigabytes of data per opera. But the electricity in the theater as the curtain goes up is undiminished.

The first performance was a natural crowd-pleaser for a Chinese audience: the Met's famously lavish Franco Zeffirelli production of Puccini's "Turandot." Early screenings of Verdi's "Aida" and Offenbach's "Hoffmann" also quickly sold out.

That had local cinema operators, who initially wouldn't return Mr. Scofield's calls, knocking on his

door to secure the rights to screen the operas across the territory. They want not only to explore the commercial possibilities, but also to gain recognition for helping the arts. "It needs some effort to bring it all together, because technically every cinema is different," Mr. Scofield says. But starting later this month, a "Summer Opera" season will kick off in commercial theaters. The next season will feature two parts of Wagner's "Ring Cycle," "Das Rheingold" and "Die Walkiere."

The foundation, which also gives scholarships to Academy for Performing Arts students to study opera, isn't stopping there. "We are planning to go to public areas, like the open-air amphitheatre area in Stanley, and do some free concerts," Mr. Scofield explains. "We'll provide leaflets for free concerts and have young local singers from Hong Kong there, singing some famous arias from 'Live in HD' season."

Mr. Scofield, American-born but a Chinese citizen since 2006, has been supporting opera for decades. A serial entrepreneur, he has lived in Hong Kong since 1977 and is the founder and publisher of the Shipping Gazette. He became an opera fanatic while growing up in Chicago and as a copy boy at the Chicago Daily News; he learned about opera not by going to performances but by borrowing recordings from the Chicago Public Library. He has since sung with the Hong Kong Philharmonic Chorus and serves on the board of Opera Hong Kong.

There's another aspect to broadening the appeal of opera through broadcast performances. Hong Kong's future singers may be watching and taking inspiration to make opera their life's work. If one day Hong Kong's opera house rivals the Met in the quality of its performances and ardency of its fans, it may be down to Mr. Scofield's evangelism.

*Mr. Lim is a writer based in Hong Kong.*

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