

MUSIC

CLASSICAL & OPERA



STRIKE A POSE The women of OperaModa (from left, Stacy Ratner, Genevieve Thiers, Anna Binneweg, Mary Lutz and Natalie Lyons) work it.

American women

The female-led company OperaModa makes its mark with Mark Adamo's *Little Women* **By Marc Geelhoed**

You gotta have a hook. If a music organization wants to survive today, it has to find a niche where it can perform music that no one else will. (If it can do it better than anyone else, it's an added benefit.) Competition for consumers' dollars is intense and the marketing byword *branding* gets tossed about with good reason.

Since 2003, OperaModa has been producing American operas using young area singers, often drawn from the various universities' music schools. The company was formed by a group of Northwestern grads who saw a chance both to get onstage themselves and give that opportunity to Chicago singers.

"We are really excited about modern American operas, and the larger companies just aren't," says Genevieve Thiers, OperaModa's executive director. Larger companies often don't focus on American works, but they aren't ignored, either. Lyric Opera usually does one per season and has commissioned many, and Chicago Opera Theater is mounting John Adams's *Nixon in China* later this season. It's not that the city is starved for American operas, but

in making American opera its *raison d'être*, OperaModa is unique.

OperaModa is also unique in that it's an all-woman show on the administrative side. While opera isn't necessarily a testosterone bastion—Lyric Opera was made into what it is today by Ardis Krainik, and the San Francisco Opera has been helmed admirably since 2001 by Pamela Rosenberg, who steps down after this year—most companies tend to be run by men.

"I believe it's possible to learn to love opera because I did."

It's a company for everyone, not just opera aficionados. "I believe it's possible to learn to love opera because I learned to love opera," says producer Natalie Lyons, who handles much of the book-keeping and marketing. She was involved with musical theater and developed a taste for the opera house later. "We don't want to put something up there [onstage] that the audience won't associate with completely," Thiers says. "We aim for something that's young and hip and fresh."

But not to the point of tearing down the history of the form,

according to Lyons. "How do you keep this art form alive?" she asks. "How do you stay true to it" and draw in new audiences to nurture the next generation of listeners? OperaModa's answer is to find American operas based on familiar stories. Since it only has the means to produce a single staged opera a year, the staff has to choose carefully.

OperaModa's staff saw Mark Adamo's *Little Women* as a perfect fit; it goes up Friday 21. "We thought to do *Little Women* since we are a company of women," Thiers says. The 1999 opera has become the gold standard of recent American operas, having been produced more than 30 times since its premiere at the Houston Grand Opera. Audiences already know the story, or at least the outline, which was a selling point for OperaModa. Not to mention, "it's a little funky and at the same [time] accessible," Lyons says.

Adamo's musical language is a pastiche of neo-Romanticism and a little bit of Broadway. But the recitatives—those talky bits meant to advance the plot rather than give someone the chance to pour out some emotion—are written in the supposedly forbidding style of Schoenberg's serialism. Adamo likes to point out that his serialism sits easily on the ear. He's right—the whole opera makes few demands on its audience.

It's not the longest opera, either. "We have a two-and-a-half-hour cutoff" of works they consider producing, Thiers says. While recognizing that, as Lyons puts it, "there's a huge opera audience in Chicago," the staff at OperaModa also knows that some younger customers are turned off by some operas' length. They don't cut works to fit that time limit, but instead seek out works that are able to tell their stories the way their writers intended them to quickly.

OperaModa specifically caters to a younger audience: Children under 12 are let in to the Athenaeum Theatre for free. "[Opera] needs to change or it won't survive," Thiers says. In her opinion, if you have to let kids in for free, so be it. They'll probably come back.

Little Women plays at the Athenaeum Theatre beginning Friday 21. See listings.