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## New maestro takes over for Opera Tampa

By Colette Bancroft, Times Staff Writer

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## **TAMPA**

As a photographer clicks away on a stage at the Straz Center, two lights on tripods flash and beep. ¶ "C sharp, D," says the subject. ¶ Daniel Lipton has spent a lifetime in music and hears even those electronic signals as notes. ¶ He will bring that well-tuned ear and a supply of creative energy to his new position as artistic director and conductor of Opera Tampa, the resident opera company of the Straz Center. ¶ Lipton will be only the second director in Opera Tampa's 17-year history, stepping onto the podium long dominated by Anton Coppola, who is retiring at age 95. ¶ "I have always admired Maestro Coppola," Lipton says, "and I found out by chance he was leaving." He called the Straz Center's chief executive officer, Judith Lisi, to see if it was true. "She said my name had come up, and we began to talk.

"I believe in these things. I don't think anything happens by chance. I go by feelings, and the feeling here is very, very positive."

Lipton says this almost halfway through a 12-day visit to Tampa to become acquainted with the organization and the people he will be working with as director. Tall and charismatic, with a slight resemblance to actor Alan Rickman, he exudes energy even well into a day filled with meetings.

"We've been rehearsing Aida, too," Lisi says of the Verdi opera that was Coppola's finale on Sunday. "It's been some 18-hour days."

Lipton wasn't involved in the production, but, he says, "I'm a theater person. I couldn't stay away" from watching.

Lipton comes to Tampa after 20 years as artistic director of Opera Ontario in Canada; for the last four years of that position, he was also music director and chief conductor of the Anhaltische Philharmonie and general director of the opera company in Dessau, Germany. "I was one month in Canada, one month in Germany, one month in Canada," he says. As an opera and orchestra conductor, he has held positions in Bogota, Colombia; Zurich, Switzerland; Bologna and Florence, Italy; and, in the United States, in Houston and Denver.

He also has founded a number of choruses, opera and ballet companies, and symphony orchestras. He says he "absolutely" hopes to continue to found such organizations. "It's a matter of time and money, of course, but the possibility of creating them is very exciting."

Lisi, who founded Opera Tampa in 1995 and calls opera "my true passion," sees those experiences as some of Lipton's greatest strengths. "He's run companies before, and he knows how hard it is to build audiences. He has great marketing ideas, ideas about how to relate to boards, to young audiences, to established audiences."

Opera Tampa, she says, is in good financial shape. "We have no debt here at Straz Center. I believe in living in the black, and within our means." She and Lipton are still planning the 2012-13 season's productions and hope to announce them in the next few weeks. Lipton says he looks forward to presenting "operas never performed here, not necessarily unknown, but works that have an extraordinary power to entice audiences."

Lisi acknowledges that seeing Coppola retire is "bittersweet." He has been her only partner in producing operas, at the Straz and before that at the Shubert Theater in New Haven, Conn. "We don't even have to think about how we do things."

But, she says, she is excited about working with a new director. "I keep them for a long time," she says. "I adore Maestro Coppola, but I also love Daniel's openness to everything that's possible. I sense we're in such good hands."

Lipton says he plans to conduct most or all of the company's productions, "especially at the beginning. It's important to establish yourself with the community, and you need to form the orchestra and the chorus. Every conductor has an individual sound."

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Lipton has appeared as a guest conductor all over the world, and he will continue to do so. "But I don't want to do anything that would conflict with my responsibilities here, especially when you're starting out. Everything starts from that seed."

Born in France and raised in New York City, Lipton was educated at the Juilliard School, Mannes College of the New School for Music and the Manhattan School of Music.

One of his first positions as a young conductor was with the American Ballet Theatre. "Three months on the road, by bus," he says. "The longest stop we had was four nights in Akron, Ohio.

"I've worked backstage, I've brought in the rifle, I've hanged Billy Budd. I've paid my dues."

A career highlight for Lipton was conducting the world premiere of Gian Carlo Menotti's last opera, *Il Giorno da Nozz*e, in Seoul, South Korea, with the Metropolitan Opera.

Among his most harrowing experiences was being asked to conduct *La Cenerentola* at the Liceo in Barcelona, Spain, on 24 hours notice. "They asked me, 'Do you know *La Cenerentola*?' I said, sure, it's Rossini. They said, 'So you know it.' I said, no, I've heard of it, but I've never heard it."

But the scheduled conductor had left in a huff, and Lipton was persuaded to step in.

"When I first walked out, the musicians looked at me like, 'Who are you?' " One of them, he says, asked him, "Maestro, do you know how to pray?"

But the performance went well enough that he was invited back to the Liceo for four years afterward.

Lipton hopes to keep the drama on stage in Tampa. "I adore to share the beauty of music, and I believe there is such fruitful ground here."

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