

NOISE MAKERS

Will opera, symphony effort, NEA follow predictions to the letter?

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For some reason, my Ouija-board planchette kept pointing at the letters S-Y-M-P-H-O-N-Y when asked, "What will be the top arts news story in 1997?"

To be honest, the full message was "Symphony," followed by the rebuke, S-T-U-P-I-D.

Obviously the spirits knew it doesn't take a genius to predict that efforts to form a new orchestra will take center stage this year.

Still, being a glutton for abuse and threatened by my editors with banishment to Death Valley unless I name five people or organizations who will make headlines in 1997, I

a r t s n e w s

pushed on.

"What else?" I demanded.

This time the pointer was typically cryptic: H-I-D-D-E-N O-P-S, R-I-S-K-Y B-U-S-I-N-E-S-S, I-N-S-I-G-H-T-F-U-L N-E-S-S and A-B-O-L-I-T-I-O-N.

Hmmm. Is some arts administrator going to have major surgery? Will an institution be exposed as a front for a bawdy house? Will the airport art installations reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of San Diego? Will my job be eliminated?

N-O, arts aficionados. Dream on. The responses could only mean:

■ A new symphony orchestra will depend on people with lots of money, the motivation of musicians

and community leaders, and public support. On Dec. 19, musicians went to bankruptcy court with a plan to convert the symphony's Chapter 7 liquidation to a Chapter 11 reorganization. La Jolla businessman-philanthropist Larry Robinson will contribute \$2 million to wipe out some symphony debts and avoid a sale of the orchestra's assets, the plan said. A judge will rule Jan. 27 on the conversion request. There hasn't been a San Diego Symphony since May 31, when the orchestra's board filed Chapter 7 liquidation. The organization owes \$5 million in debts to musicians, administrative staffers, banks, businesses and concert subscribers.

■ The president and director of programming for the **California Center for the Arts, Escondido**,

Robert Freedman, has his hands full running the facility whose ownership was transferred last summer to the city of Escondido. The center's staff was cut this year from 60 to 50 full-time employees, axing most educational-outreach programs and on-site event producing. Oleg Lobanov, Freedman's predecessor, also quit. The Wolf Organization of Massachusetts is making recommendations about what the future operational structure of the center should be and what the future relationship should be between the city and the center.

■ With no symphony around, the **San Diego Opera** reigns supreme as the city's principal musical institution. Come March 1, the opera will stage the world premiere of San Diegan Myron Fink's "The Conquistador." The production is SDO's second premiere this decade — coming on the heels of the first U.S. performance of Daniel Catan's "La Hija de Rappaccini (Rappaccini's Daughter)" in 1994. The Fink work should further quiet critics who say San Diego Opera never takes any risks, relying too much on bread-and-butter repertoire.

■ Remember inSITE94, an installation and site-specific art project in San Diego and Baja California? Well, inSITE97 begins in September and runs through the end of November. This time, 26

nonprofit cultural institutions in San Diego and Tijuana will participate, showing the works of 50 artists. As administered by Installation Gallery (which now calls itself just Installation), the inSITE97 budget is \$1.5 million — \$700,000 being raised in Mexico and the rest here.

■ The still-Republican-controlled Congress may take action to ensure that the **National Endowment for the Arts** is abolished by 1998. The 104th Congress that was swept into office in the midterm 1994 election slashed the endowment's budget to about \$100 million for 1996-97, but it failed —

thanks to pro-NEA forces in the Senate — to set a specific date for elimination of the agency. Now, it's the turn of the 105th Congress, elected in November, to do its part — either set the date or cut the agency budget even more. Rep. Brian Bilbray, R-San Diego, is among about 30 moderate Republicans who are NEA-friendly and whose attitudes toward the agency will be watched by the arts community. Agency chairwoman Jane Alexander's four-year term ends in October, at which time she is expected to be reappointed by President Clinton.