

Entr'acte

The Opera
Supers of
Iowa City
Newsletter

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Letter from the Editor

The holiday season is over and the preparations for the Spring 1996 University of Iowa Opera Theater production of Puccini's *La Bohème* are already underway. Future issues of the newsletter will be devoted to the opera, the composer and his other works. Watch for them. Any contributions, i.e. material to be included in Entr'Acte, from readers are most welcome. Surely there must be an Opera Super out there (besides Mel Sunshine, Betty McCollister or Mary Wall--not to exclude any of them, by the way) who has an idea, an experience, or a viewpoint to share with us. You now know what the space limitations are vis-à-vis the format and size of type I use for the newsletter. Anything from 10 to 1,000 words would be suitable. In the meantime, I shall borrow an idea from other newsletters and report on an interview I conducted with an Opera Super you all know, but maybe you don't really know, namely, your editor. —Arthur Canter

Report of Meetings and Activities

The meeting of Monday September 25, 1995 was a very short one. Many of the regulars were unable to attend and the agenda for the meeting had to be curtailed. William Hatcher was able to meet with the group to give details of the forthcoming Kantorei Benefit Concert.

The next meeting was held on Monday November 6, 1995. Reminders were given about the November 18 performance of the Chamber Singers of Iowa City which would feature the Beethoven Fantasia for Piano and Chorus. Jodie Falconer had tickets for sale. Attention was called to other future events including the Bach *Magnificat*, scheduled for February and *Carmina Burana* for May 1996. Volunteers were sought to assist in the NATS auditions next weekend. Professor Glass indicated a need for a "singing actor" for the role of Benoit in *La Bohème*. It is likely that there will be a need for two Supers in non-singing roles, possibly more. The budget is very tight this year. This led to a discussion about opera ticket prices everywhere and meeting costs.

The Supers will be helping our Hancher colleagues with publicity for *Orpheus*.

Mona Shaw revealed that there is activity underway that will lead to repairing and correcting the seats and some of the carpeting in Clapp Hall. We will not hold our breaths.

Your editor asks that readers who have not done so to keep the pressure on the University administration to do something about the seating and the run-down condition of Clapp Hall. Send your missives (missiles?) to David Nelson. He will know they are not aimed at him personally.

Knowing your Opera Supers; Your Editor Interviews Himself

Ed: I know you are used to talking to yourself. What should the Supers call you: Art or Arthur? I have heard both used. Do you have a preference?

A: Well, as a child I was called "Ahchie" and "Ahtuh" among other names which I will not go into for personal reasons. I should explain that. I'm from Boston and we skipped over the medial "r" sounds but would add the "r" to some words ending in "a" (remember Kennedy's "Cuber"). A Bostonian would sound my name as "Ahtuh Cantuh" (Anna Stranieri does this). You can call me Art or Arthur. Personal friends call me Arthur. I don't like being called Archie but it was a common appellation for the Arthurs of my generation. Years ago, some friends, after I got known for my music interests, called me "Ahturo Cantahnini". That was in my shadow-conducting days, when I would substitute for Toscanini and others in front of the radio (a Zenith console, by the way). My long time Hungarian friend and former colleague, Martin Gal, calls me "Artur". I like the way it sounds coming from him.

Ed: When did you develop your interest in music? Was it parental influence? Lots of music in the household? Did you learn to play an instrument?

A: One question at a time. No, there was very little music taking place in my family other than Yiddish songs sung by my mother and the occasionally played old recordings of Cantor Rosenblatt and Caruso. An older brother and one of my sisters (I had six siblings) took piano lessons but they didn't stick with it. I would try to imitate the piano playing of my brother but this was not recognized as a sign that I should take lessons. I never asked for lessons. Thus I never learned to play an instrument. You might say that I developed a serious interest in serious, i.e. classical, music all on my own.

Ed: When was that?

A: One day, or night, in the early 1930s, I can't remember the circumstances, but I happened to listen to a local radio program called "His Master's Voice"—I've learned since the title referred to RCA. I became entranced, or hooked by what I heard. I listened as frequently as I could.

Ed: Did you attend live concerts?

A: I couldn't afford tickets to the regular Boston Symphony concerts. By the time I entered a polytechnic high school (age 14) located in the Back Bay area of Boston, I already knew about Arthur Fielder and the Boston "Pops" concerts. These took place in Symphony Hall in the spring after the end of the regular symphony schedule. I started to attend "Pops" concerts whenever I saved enough lunch money for tickets. During summer vacation periods I could attend the free concerts on the Charles River Esplanade. "Pops", by the way, did not refer to "popular concerts" in those days—it got that name from the popping sound of wine bottles being opened at the tables on the main floor. Regular seating was in back and up in the boxes and balcony sections. That's where I sat.

Ed: How did you get interested in opera?

A: I started to listen to the Saturday matinee Met Opera broadcasts while I was still in junior high school. Live opera, what little there was of it, and recitals by operatic singers were just out of my reach, but I was a regular listener to the Saturday Met broadcasts..

Ed: What was your first experience with live opera?

A: In May, 1938, while I was in my senior year at high school, a notice went around my school indicating that any student in good academic standing could purchase a ticket at a reduced price and be excused from class to attend a matinee performance of the visiting Metropolitan Opera. I needed no prompting. I saved enough from my lunch money allowance to pay for the ticket and got excused from school on the performance day (a Wednesday or Friday). I only had to walk five blocks to the Boston Opera House. There I saw the Met production of *Faust*. The cast included Ezio Pinza as Mephistopheles, Richard Crooks as Faust, and Lucille Browning as Siebel. I think, but am not sure, Helen Jepson sang Marguerite and for the life of me I cannot remember who sang Valentin. I was the only boy out of the 600 plus who attended my high school who took advantage of the offer.

Ed: I take it, that did you in, so-to-speak?

A: Yes, it sure did. While subsequent opportunities to attend live opera varied quite a bit, depending upon income, accessibility, and the like, I became a confirmed opera enthusiast ever since that experience.

Ed: Many people know you have a large collection of opera on records. When did that start? Do you collect recordings of other kinds of music?

A: You are putting me on. You know I do. But how did it all start? We have to go back to mid 1930s days. In Boston at that time, during the Great Depression-period, the Hearst newspaper, *The Boston American*, offered coupons to save and exchange for various premiums, as they called them, including records (then the old 78 rpm shellacs). My next older sister, who revealed to me her interest in music, and I got some of these premiums. I remember the first one was a recording of Wagner's *Rienzi* overture. The next one was Mendelssohn's *Fingal's Cave* (*Hebrides*). You know, I played them so many times that I never lost the orchestral sound of those pieces from my inner head. Those premiums were the beginning of my fascination with having my own collection of classical music performances. Remember, I had started my musical tastes with the wide range of material on local radio and it was only natural that I maintained a broad interest in classical music. My collecting opera recordings started after World War II when I got married, returned to school and we had some money from the GI Bill and graduate assistantships For a while I bought shellac 78 rpm records of Pinza, Bjoerning, Merrill, Warren,

Melchior, Baccaloni, Steber, Tourel, Swarthout, and so on—you name them. How was I to know that the LP was to come out in 1948! After that I was able to buy complete operas, symphonies, and chamber works on LP. In the ensuing years, with the appropriate hi-fi equipment, I added recordings on open reel tape and cassette tape from LPs and FM broadcasts. More recently. I have acquired a collection of CDs and video tapes (mostly operas).

Ed: Would you venture a guess as to how many recordings you have accumulated ?

A: No. It's a lot. After all, I have been collecting for almost fifty years. I can tell you that I have recordings of over 300 *different* operas and operettas. I am not counting the ones in which I have different casts or versions. I have an extensive collection of chamber music, symphonic music, soloists (instrumental and vocal) on all formats. Now I am starting to give some of them away.

Ed: Which brings me to this question. Do you go for other types of music, jazz, pop, rock, or whatever?

A: I was expecting that. Let me put it this way. I will usually listen to any type of music, new or old, that does not cause me physical pain (i.e. hurt my ears) before rejecting or accepting it. After all, I have propounded the need to give "new" music a hearing. But I do have my likes and dislikes and some of them include categories of music as well as individual pieces. I do not like most Country-Western. That dislike started when I lived in Nashville and could hear little else but "Grand Ole Opry" music on the radio. I can't stand most hard and "metal" rock, or whatever it is called, because of the intensity of sound—it hurts me to listen. Besides, I think the music is over-amplified. The resulting distortion masks the quality of instrumental performance. I can't tell a poor instrumentalist from a good one under those circumstances. And the singing is also overmiked. True, the performance may excite the senses—any stimulus that intense would. I like jazz, but only when it remains "acoustic", i.e. not amplified electronically. I particularly like jazz piano. I am not fond of "minimalist" music as it is often dragged out interminably, but some of it is O.K. Similarly I am not an enthusiast of *raga* and drone-accompanied music.

Ed: You admit you are no musician, but how did you get involved in writing program notes for Hancher?

A: A classical music *maven*, (look it up) has some advantages over a professional musician when it comes to informing lay audiences about composers and the works they are about to hear. The technical details don't get in the way. As a "professional listener" and avid reader of biographies of composers, record liner notes, and other sources I get a sense of what should or should not be included to help another person to *listen* to and not necessarily prejudge the music. I try to tell the listener who this person is who wrote the music, if they don't already know, what may have motivated the composer to write it, and any relevant historical context—my interest in psycho-history. Then, after I listen to the work over and over again, I try to indicate, briefly, what to listen for in the music. I started doing this in some pre-performance lectures for the Cedar Rapids Symphony programs, the years I was on their Board of Directors. When I created *Entr'Acte*, 11 years ago, if you'll remember, the first issues dealt with material about Mussorgsky, the man and his work, and the background to *Boris Godunov*. Later I graduated to the Hancher notes as a challenge and it seems to have worked well. Besides, I am a retired faculty member who decided late in life that he was still a student who can learn new and different things. So why not in the field of music?

Ed: That's a good place to end. Thank you. Maybe others will be inspired to be interviewed.

Miscellaneous Notes and Reminders

Looking ahead to Gluck in the Spring of 1996:

Early in April 1996, Hancher Auditorium will present the première of a new production of Gluck's opera *Orfeo ed Euridice* with choreographer Mark Morris directing and Christopher Hogwood conducting the Orchestra and Chorus of the Boston Handel and Haydn Society.

In order to enhance audience understanding and enjoyment of this opera, which is to be sung in Italian, an original short play based on the Orpheus theme will be presented by University of Iowa Theater students before different groups during the month of March.

If readers want information about arranging a performance for a particular group, call Michelle Coleman, Hancher Auditorium, 335-0009.

The Opera Supers will sponsor one of the performances of the play on **Wednesday, March 6, 1996 at 1:00 PM at the home of Betty Sims, 404 Linder Rd.** The Music Study Club of Iowa City has been invited to attend. Opera Supers and their friends are also invited to the performance.

Please call Miriam Canter (338-1217), by February 26th and let her know if you will attend the play and how many guests you will bring. The need to know by this date is to help in the planning for seating and refreshments. Also, if you are willing to provide cookies/fruit toward the refreshments, let Miriam know when you call.

The next meeting of the Supers will be on Monday, January 22, at 7:00 PM.

Tidbits from grade school children writing about classical music and opera:

Music sung by two people at the same time is called a duel.

Agnus Dei was a woman composer famous for her church music.

Caruso was first an Italian. Then someone heard his voice and said he would go a long way. So he went to America.

Handel was half German, half Italian, and half English. He was rather large.

In the last scene of Pagliacci, Canio stabs Nedda who is the one he really loves. Pretty soon Silvio gets stabbed also and they live happily ever after.

An opera is a song of bigly size.

— from Indiana University Annuitants Association *Newswatch*.

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