

Entr'acte

The Opera
Supers of
Iowa City
Newsletter

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Letter from the Editor

The newsletter is off to a late start. Usually the first issue is in the fall, when classes begin. Last summer's flooding and its aftermath took its toll not only of the University's buildings, classes, functions and schedules but also of your Editor's energy and commitments. I have reviewed my physical status, personal feelings, motivations, goals, etc. --sort of a self-searching, self-directed psychological analysis, without Prozac. Despite all the positive reinforcements I get from doing **Entr'Acte**, I feel that it is time I turn the responsibility for this newsletter over to someone else. In the next meeting, which may take place before you receive this issue, the matter will be placed on the agenda.

The summer opera, The Jacobin, was an artistic success despite the handicaps and limitations imposed by the flood. Too bad the videotape (played over the local access cable channel) does not match the quality of the performance but it too was done under very limiting conditions. We can regard the recording as having "archival" value and thus give it a place in our collections.

The spring opera for 1994 will be Massenet's Herodiade, a rarely performed work that is unlikely to be revived in full staging by any professional company for a number of reasons that may become evident as background information about the opera is presented in **Entr'Acte**. I certainly hope Professor Glass does not get a camel for his production. As a supernumerary, I don't mind being on stage with a horse, mule, donkey, goat, dog, cat, or lamb. I like children, even those prompted to kick me as part of a performance. But I do draw the line at camels.

--- Arthur Canter

Report of Activities

The July meeting of the Supers had to be cancelled because of the flooding of Clapp Hall. They were able to hold their meetings on September 27, October 19 and November 29. . The potluck originally planned for August 7th was postponed to October 23d where it took place at the home of Don Vandyke.

Patrick Nefzger was the official photographer for the contingent of Dvorak family and associates both in this country and on their return to Europe during summer and fall of 1993. The group attended the local production of The Jacobin.

Many Supers attended the benefit recital by pianist Daniel Shapiro (to help defray flood damage costs) given on October 31st.

The Clapp Hall Green Room was finally made presentable and decorated by the University after all and was visited by the Supers during their November meeting. Additional furnishings, posters and pictures will be added by Supers.

Ruth Muir and Helen Wenger have assumed responsibilities for arranging for the refreshments following Supers meetings. All contributions have been enjoyed.

The Opera Theater presented the world premiere of Jiri Labourda's one act opera, Red Tape and Rival Divas along with a performance of Mozart's Impressario in the Opera Studio on Sunday, October 17. The works were well received by an SRO audience. There also was a full house audience for the Opera Workshop Class Recital on December 5th. The attending Supers were most appreciative of the student performances and held a reception in the Music Building Lounge following the recital.

The Spring 1994 opera, Massenet's Herodiade, is to be done in two acts in an English translation by Beaumont Glass. The Summer 1994 opera will feature two Purcell works: Saul and the Witch of Endor and Dido and Aeneas. The summer operas will take place in Clapp Hall (assuming no repeat of the floods) as Hancher is to finally undergo refurbishing.

Supers attending the meetings learned about the latest accomplishments of former students, including Michele Crider, Kerri Burkhardt, Kimm Julian and Wayne Neuzil.

During the meetings a number of issues were discussed having to do with future methods of supporting student benefit recitals, financial responsibility, and roles in these matters that the Supers can take on behalf of the group or as individuals.

Notes and Comments On Herodiade

Gustave Flaubert's novelette Herodias (1877) was the source for the libretto of Herodiade written by Milliet and Gremont. The title difference has significance in that Herodiade should refer to the daughter of Herodias, Salome, an issue in the plot. However the names are often inappropriately interchanged in transcriptions of the libretto. Massenet completed the opera in 1881. The story differs from that used by Richard Strauss in his opera based on Oscar Wilde's 1893 tragedy, Salome. In the Massenet opera, John the Baptist admits his love for Salome, who stabs herself after the jealous Herod has had him killed.

Massenet's opera had its premiere on December 19, 1881 at the Theatre de la Monnaie, Brussels. It was produced in Paris at the Theatre Italien on February 1, 1884, with Jean and Eduard de Reszke, Maurel, Tremelli and Devries in the cast. The Paris production was noteworthy as it featured Jean de Reske as a tenor. Prior to this De Reske sang as a baritone but was urged to study as a tenor by his brother, the famous Polish bass Eduard. Jean had little success earlier as a tenor in the title role of Meyerbeer's Robert le Diable. Despite this, Victor Maurel, the well known French baritone, persuaded Jean to sing the tenor role of John the Baptist for the Paris production of Herodiade. The performance was so successful that it inspired Massenet to complete his opera Le Cid for Jean De Reske to sing the title role. Jean De Reske subsequently became famous

as a "heldentenor" and sang at the Metropolitan Opera from 1891 to 1901 in a number of Wagnerian roles. Herodiade disappeared from the Paris stage until revived at the Theatre de la Gaité in 1903 with Emma Calvé as Salomé. The first London production was in 1904 under the title Salomé, with Calvé, Louise Kirkby Lunn, Charles Dalmores and Maurice Renaud in the cast. These are names that were famous in the Golden Age of Opera at the turn of the century. In opera. The London production had the locale of the opera changed to Ethiopia on orders of the British censor.

The first American production was at the New Orleans Opera in 1892. Later it was produced by Oscar Hammerstein for the Manhattan Opera House, in New York, on November 8, 1909, with Lina Cavalieri featured as the Salomé. Dalmores sang the role of John the Baptist, and Renaud was Herod. The opera was revived for a performance in February 1914 by the then existing Philadelphia-Chicago Opera Company which served both cities from 1910-1915. As far as I have been able to determine, Massenet's Herodiade was never put on by the Metropolitan Opera.

Many of the Supers will be familiar with at least two of the arias from the opera: Salomé's (soprano) aria from Act I: "He is kind, he is good" (Il est doux, il est bon). Herod's (baritone) aria in Act II, Scene 1: "Fleeting vision" (Vision fugitive). There is an aria that has been popular with bass singers: Phanael's aria, in Act III, Scene 1, "Oh Shining Stars". (The forgoing locations are in the original multi-act version). How many times have you heard Salomé's and Herod's arias sung in competitions and workshops? One of my prize possessions is "Vision Fugitive" sung by Robert Merrill on a 78 rpm disc (since transferred to tape).

Despite the beauty of his music, Massenet's operas, with the possible exception of Werther, have not been held in high favor by opera aficionados in England and in America. The attitudes expressed by David Groover and C.C. Conner in their irreverent book Skeletons from the Opera Closet (1986) are typical: "Pick one (any act by Massenet), any one, in any order, it doesn't matter. They all sound the same, and somebody's going to die at the end,....Thais loves Le Cid, who is having an affair with Sapho, the illegitimate daughter of Werther, who is, in disguise, Le Roi de Lahore, whose second cousins, Esclarmonde and Herodiade, have eloped with Le Jongleur de Notre Dame. Listening to such sweet music for over three hours is hazardous to one's health." (That is a list that covers all the recordings of Massenet operas, except for Sapho, that I own!--Ed.)

Ethan Morden writes in Opera Anecdotes (1985): "Jules Massenet stands out in this company of composers for his subservience as an artist and unctuous politesse as a man." Then, referring to a Massenet Revival supported by Bonyngé and Sutherland: "...today's critics are as irritated by the revivals as those of Massenet's time were enchanted when the operas were new." Morden goes on further to quote Leon Daudet's impression of Massenet operating "on the principle that people love sweets and must be filled with sugar to the bursting point".

Apparently the Brussels premiere of Herodiade saw trainloads of Parisians attending the event who upon their debarking in Brussels were chanting "Down with Vaucourbeil " (he was the director of the Paris Opera who had refused to put on Massenet's version of the Salome story). When the groups returned to Paris they marched from the train station into the city humming, en masse, "Il est doux" and "Vision fugitive". Glorifying the Biblical scandal of Salome had its problems in being passed by censors or accepted by Church-supported authorities not only for Massenet but also for Richard Strauss when he came out with his operatic version in 1905.

Noteworthy

The Opera Theater Costume Shop recently rented out Kimm Julian's Escamilio costume to Opera Northern Ireland for his Belfast appearance in that role. Kimm had asked ONI to do this, for the costume they were to provide him was "atrocious". He has decided to follow this procedure wherever he does Escamilio. The shop also met a request for renting out 18th century underwear (corsets, etc.) to the Ring Theater in Sarasota, Florida. Who knows, they may be asked to rent out my "oboe", Mel Sunshine's "clarinet", and our servant costumes! Great work, Costume Shop, you deserve the recognition.

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