

Entr'acte

The Opera
Supers of
Iowa City
Newsletter

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Editor: Arthur Canter, 30 Brookfield Dr., Iowa City, IA 52245

Letter from the Editor

This issue of *Entre'Acte* comes to you later than I had intended. For a number of reasons I have found it difficult to get on track with a report on the background of the opera *Carmen*, and now the opera is about to be presented. "Better late than never?"

Those of you who were unable to attend the recent concert by the University Symphony, combined choruses and soloists of Honegger's dramatic oratorio *Joan of Arc at the Stake*, conducted by William Hatcher, missed a truly landmark event. It was an exciting performance of a piece of music that rarely gets heard. The event points up the advantage we have in living in a community where such fine ensembles from the University School of Music are able to give us the opportunity to see and hear unusual works of music as well as the standard repertoire at such low costs. Can it be any lower than free? Would you have paid a modest fee to attend the Honegger concert? How about having to buy a ticket to attend one of the University Symphony concerts or a performance by the Stradivari Quartet in Clapp Hall? Many of the Supers paid to see *Fidelio* put on by the Cedar Rapids Symphony Orchestra, a fine organization, many of whose members are also in the University Symphony. I am very much interested in your reactions to the notion of paying to attend the now free University concerts and faculty recitals.

My latest information is that ticket sales for *Carmen* are going well. If we fill the house for both performances of *Carmen* at reasonable ticket prices, will we clear enough money over costs of production and hall rental to go toward producing other events?

How about the ability to bear the costs to produce and stage a yet unknown opera by the yet unknown composer Arturo Cantera, which you can attend free of charge?

Incidentally, the program notes for the Honegger concert were lucid, relevant and helped the concert-goer to have some understanding of the origins of the piece, who the composer is, and what was about to take place on the concert stage. The notes were prepared by Professor Richard Bloesch of the Music Department. I mention all this because the topic of

program notes for University presentations has been a subject of discussion among people I know during intermissions at recent concerts. It appears that many audience members do read program notes even though (1) they spend most of the pre-concert time socializing, or (2) they get to the performance barely in time to be seated before it starts. Having written some notes for two Hancher events myself the past few years, I am sensitive to the problems in the preparation and purposes program notes are supposed to serve. As long as you are going to write to me regarding your reactions to the idea of ticket charges for University concerts, why not include your views about concert program notes: What would you like to see in them? What function should they serve? etc. You are going to write me, aren't you? The first fifty replies will earn my thanks and inspire me to keep preparing newsletters. The second fifty replies will be combined with the first fifty, forming a large enough group for me to analyze statistically. From this material I can prepare a position paper. Better still, I can turn it over to a student for a thesis paper or dissertation. I can see it now: "Opinions on the Role and Function of Program Notes for Concert Audiences and Their Relationship to Ticket Pricing: A Statistical Analysis." Is that title long enough to qualify for a doctoral dissertation?

February 20, 1989, Meeting Report

The twenty-four Supers attending the meeting heard a report on the marketing and promotion efforts for *Carmen*. Posters should be ready soon. Whether or not there will be T-shirts or sweat shirts designed for *Carmen* had yet to be determined. Details about the promotion-reception to be held at Iowa State Bank & Trust were reviewed. The invitations for the downtown business people to attend on March 10 were reported to be ready for addressing and mailing. Several Supers volunteered to assist in getting them out. Other matters regarding promotional activities were discussed. The next meeting was scheduled for Monday, April 3.

April 3, 1989, Meeting Report

Twenty-five members attended, including new member Natalie Moline, who was introduced to the group. Announcements were made regarding the Music School events for the rest of the semester. It was reported that ticket sales for *Carmen* are going very nicely, especially for the Friday night performance, even though the advertising campaign has not begun. The Iowa State Bank & Trust reception of March 10 was an artistic and culinary-wine success but failed to draw many persons from the downtown businesses, the target of the reception. The desirability of such targeted receptions in the future will have to be reviewed. Hope Solomons announced that Mrs. Winbigler has decided to donate her collection of costumes to The University of Iowa instead of to museums on the west coast. Some of the costumes have been on display at Hancher for several weeks. Details for providing the food and beverages for the *Carmen* strike party were reviewed.

The rest of the meeting was devoted to a discussion of the need for raising money for the School of Music Opportunity Fund. Options considered were benefit concerts and charging for admission to University Symphony concerts and Music School performances other than student recitals, or some combination of both. Whatever plans are developed and accepted by the School of Music, there will be a need for volunteers from the Supers to assist in the endeavors.

Some Background Notes on the Origins of Bizet's *Carmen*

The story of the opera *Carmen* is familiar to almost all opera goers. However, the original short novel by Merimée from which the opera was adapted is less well-known.

The story is presented as a firsthand report of an expedition to Andalusia to make an "archaeological" study. In this way the author is able to give rather dispassionate descriptions of the characters, the customs and the country as we travel with him and have a number of encounters with the various individuals in the story. In the first part of the novel we meet the notorious bandit, Don Jose Navarro, whom the author befriends and warns of impending capture, enabling him to escape. We also meet the gypsy, Carmencita, who is described in sufficient detail to paint a portrait of her. We experience an episode between the *gitana* and Jose that bespeaks of a stormy relationship that will be revealed later.

The second part of the novel is the story told to Merimée by the now jailed Don Jose who faces

execution for his murder of Carmen. Don Jose relates how he was transformed from a simple and honorable soldier to a notorious and murderous bandit by his infatuation and love for the gypsy Carmen.

It is revealed that he not only killed Carmen, but also her husband, Garcia le Borgue, a despicable villain, and the lieutenant who was his commander. Neither event is included in the opera. In the novel, Carmen is a thief and a pathological liar, characteristics that were toned down in the opera. In both the novel and the opera she is portrayed as unscrupulous, freedom-loving, courageous and fascinating. The characters of Micaela and Escamilio were inventions of the librettists Meilhac and Halévy. While the Merimée story now seems to us to be an obvious choice for operatic treatment, at the time of Bizet it would hardly have seemed an appropriate story for an opera comique staging. (It would also make a great R-rated movie if the script were to follow the original story very closely.)

The Paris Opéra Comique had a reputation as a place where the most proper of engaged couples could meet for entertainment and have their parents rely on its being safe, if not innocuous. Founded in 1715, the Comique was state-subsidized, growing out of state-sponsored spectacles for bourgeois families. The difference between "grand" opera and "comic" opera was primarily the substitution of spoken dialogue for recitative and an inevitable happy resolution of plot. Bizet himself chose the Merimée novel for his librettists to use in preparing the text for his opera. He apparently did so to meet the challenge he received when given the commission from Camille du Locle, then director of Opéra Comique, to "change the genre of opéra-comique." There had already been two successes in opéra-comique drawn from heavy Goethe text—Gounod's *Faust* and Thomas's *Mignon*, so the fact that Bizet chose to get away from the traditional light-weight material was not out of line.

Bizet wanted to write a serious *Carmen* although he did include melodramatic elements, parody, laughter, and scenes with street urchins. However, he wanted to stick close to the original story while his librettists did not. Meilhac and Halévy were already famous for their collaboration in Offenbach's triumphs, *La Belle Hélène* and *La Grande Duchesse de Gerolstein* among others. They foresaw a scandal in staging a tale such as that of *Carmen*, with murders, hints of prostitution, and the killing of the main character. They tried to soften aspects of the original story which might cause offense. The result was a published text that differed considerably from what Bizet set to music.

There were problems throughout the rehearsals. One of the directors of the Opéra Comique resigned even before the rehearsal began because the opera

ended with a murder. On the eve of the premiere, Ludovic Halévy was claimed to have stated "the thing (referring to *Carmen*) had little importance for Meilhac and me." Now, more than a century later, the opera is judged to have one of the best texts ever written and a box office appeal that is hard to match.

What the Reviewers Said about *Carmen* in the 1870s

"... *Carmen* is neither scenic nor dramatic. One cannot express musically the savagery and the caprices of Mlle. Carmen with orchestral details. Nourished by the succulent harmonies of the experimenters of the music of the future, Bizet opened his soul to the doctrine that kills the heart."

—Oscar Comettant, *Le Siecle*, Paris, March 1875

"... [*Carmen*] is another *Traviata*, with the redeeming features which may be discovered in that libretto carefully eliminated."

—*Music Trade Review*, London, June 15, 1878

"The only personage in *Carmen* who excites any interest is Don Jose, and that which he does excite he destroys by the brutal and foolish crime which is the climax and end of the work. . . . [*Carmen*] is little more than a collocation of couplets and chansons . . . and musically, is really not much above the works of Offenbach. . ."

—*New York Times*, October 24, 1878.

The above quotations were furnished by Betty McCollister, who dug them out of Slonimsky's *Lexicon of Musical Invective*.

What a Contemporary Composer Said

Contrast the foregoing with the reaction by Tchaikowsky, who attended a performance of *Carmen* only a month after Bizet's death. Tchaikowsky, in a letter to Mme. von Meck, wrote: "*Carmen* is a masterpiece in every sense of the word; that is to say, one of those rare creations which expresses the efforts of a whole musical epoch. . . . Bizet is not only a composer essentially of our time, but he is also an artist who feels deeply, a master. . . . I am convinced that in ten years *Carmen* will be the most popular opera in the whole world."

News of the Binding Project

Two people responded to the Music Library's advertised need for music binders—Opera Super Pam Stewart and her friend Mary Kane. We are grateful to both for their faithful and very competent assistance, thanks to which we are at least—I think—not getting any *further* behind. However, neither are we catching up with the considerable backlog. Would more people like to share in this project? One circumstance has changed that might make things easier for any of you who considered it earlier—namely, that since we were finally permitted to fill the vacant second-shift position and restore our evening hours, volunteers may now work at night or on Sunday during whatever hours the library is open (currently 1:00-10:00 p.m. Sunday, 9:00 a.m.-10:00 p.m. Monday–Thursday, 8:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m. Friday).

As Pam and Mary can tell you, the end result of the binders' work will be the permanent enhancement of the Music Library collection from the standpoint of both aesthetics and durability. We have library-bound volumes on our shelves dating from the 1920s; most of the current ones should still be here in the middle of the 21st century—a long time to have one's handiwork endure.

Anyone interested in joining the binding brigade should call Bill Sayre in the University Library administrative office, 335-5867, or drop by and see me at the music library during "business hours."

—Joan Falconer, Music Librarian.

Miscellaneous Notes, News, Reminders

Thank-you Notes

Our special thanks to the following persons who generously supported the *Carmen* promotion-reception held at the Iowa State Bank on March 10: Bill Nusser, Jr., of Hands Jewelers; Erik Rosenquist of Claret & Friends and Evans Distributing Company; Kristin Summerwill of Iowa State Bank. Thanks are also extended to the individual Supers and members of the Iowa State Bank staff for their assistance in carrying out the event.

Margaret Wenk expresses her thanks to the Supers who have donated the time, energy, and skill to assist in the scene and costume shops for *Carmen*.

(Misc. cont.)

Post-Performance Potluck

Remember, the *Carmen* post-performance potluck supper will be on Monday, April 24, 6:00 p.m. at the home of Mary Wall, 1658 Ridge Road. Bring a Spanish, or any other, dish to share. Call Miriam Canter (338-1217) to confirm. Please come. It is always fun.

The Opera Forum

The Opera Forum, part of an Alumni Center presentation on UI Opera, has issued a complimentary invitation to all Supers and will be on Saturday, April 22, from 10:30 a.m. to noon, in Harper Hall, Music Building. It will feature Professors Somville, Gammon, Glass and your editor. Call Diane Baker-Cruwell, 335-3294, the Alumni Center, for more information or if you plan to attend.

Next Meeting of the Supers

Monday, 7:00 p.m., June 5 in the Lounge, Music Building. The meeting formerly scheduled on May 22, has been cancelled. Come with ideas for Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Gondoliers*.

Important Numbers

Arthur Canter, newsletter, 338-1217
Miriam Canter, hospitality, 338-1217
Shirley Harrison, costumes, 337-5729
Linda Behrendt, publicity, 337-5342
Mary Wall, scenery, 338-2618

Marilyn Somville,
Director of the School of Music, 335-1601
Beaumont Glass, Director of Opera Theater, 335-1669
Mona Shaw, Public Relations Coordinator, 335-1667
Dwight Sump, Opera Production Manager, 335-1153
Margaret Wenk, Opera Designer, 335-2899

The University of Iowa
School of Music
Iowa City, Iowa 52242



Arthur and Miriam Canter
30 Brookfield Dr.
Iowa City, IA 52245

