

OPERA SUPERS OF IOWA CITY NEWSLETTER

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REMINDER: Next scheduled meeting is Tuesday, October 14, 1986 at 7:00 p.m. in the lounge of the Music Building. (Note the change from a Monday evening meeting is for this month only.)

Letter from the Editor

Last July in the Newsletter of that month I referred to my intention to indulge in sort of a brief essay of my views on aspects of what I called the *language of music*. Now is my opportunity to do so. Perhaps I can provoke some reactions. If I ramble a bit, forgive me, my thoughts often go this way and I am not writing a formal paper.

I have often reflected on what makes opera such a vital experience for me. True, opera is a show in the sense of it's being theater. It has drama, color, costumes and dance, all embraced by music. Live opera, at least in the last two centuries, is a visual as well as aural experience. However, since the advent of radio broadcasting and the development of the recording industry, the fact of the matter is that most of us listen to more opera than we see or can ever hope to see. Admittedly, television may turn things around, but we are fundamentally *listeners* of opera, much as we are of symphonies. It is obvious that we can enjoy the latter with our eyes closed, even during a live performance, but how about opera? We can listen to the vocal line, melody, tonality, or atonality and the patterning of sound that has been designed by the composer to blend with whatever theatrical aspects there may be to the opera. The singers may as well be the instruments of the orchestra but they sing words which add to the dimension of my experiencing the drama intended by the composer.

Suppose no words were sung, but instead the singers only vocalized, what would our reactions be? Imagine a Verdi opera with vocalise comprising the output of the singers! Would the cries of anguish, love, despair and revenge be communicated as well? After all, without a libretto and without knowledge of Italian, how am I to know what emotion, hope, fear or resolve is being ex-

pressed? Yet that is what I am faced with when I listen to an opera broadcast or an opera recording without a libretto and no understanding of the language. The fact is that I may even know the language and still not understand the words. Think of some high tessitura. Joan Sutherland comes to mind. Whether the articulation is good or bad the point is that the words are often lost to us. However, the sounds of the language used still have a musical impact which, within the context of an opera, may be inseparable from that of the orchestral texture.

Somewhere in this blend lies the basis for my preference for opera sung in the language of its composition and the disjointed feeling I get hearing it in translation, particularly one that is not a good musical fit. Spoken language has a pattern to it that helps define its origin, whether it is Russian, French, or Chinese. Even among the different Slavic languages, for example, there are unique patterns that distinguish one from another including the subsets of language we call dialects. To the listener not familiar with the specific language, after the experience of many hearings, it is ordinarily possible to identify that language without understanding it. I can usually identify Russian as such even though I cannot speak or understand Russian except for a few words. This pattern of recognition extends to music as well as to the sung language.

But in modern times the nationalistic character of music tends to break down. Western music, for example, takes on more of a universal nature. However, the musical language of each composer may have a patterning that uniquely identifies that composer, or the style of the composer. Thus after the experience of listening it becomes possible to identify what one hears as Beethoven, Mozart, Wagner, Mahler and others without necessarily knowing the specific piece or even ever having heard it before.

When I was attending the rehearsal of *Boris Godunov* and heard the orchestra and the chorus singing the opening act, I was struck by a sense of discordance. There was that very Russian sound in the music, but the words did not always fit the

texture I was used to hearing. Part of my problem was my familiarity with the opera sung in Russian and I had built-in expectations of sung phrases and words in the meter of the music. But the dramatical impact of the opera was definitely enhanced by understanding the English words even though I was familiar with the Russian libretto and the meaning of the arias when sung in Russian. Is there a Mussorgsky sound? The problem here and with his other operas is that there has been intrusion of his musical language by others. At least we can say there is a Russian sound in Mussorgsky's works.

Is there a Puccini sound? I say there is. It is both Italianate and Puccini even when the composer attempted to interweave Japanese melodic lines with his own as in *Madame Butterfly*. If you hear *Madame Butterfly* a number of times before you ever hear another Puccini opera, the moment you do hear one you will know it's Puccini. In fact you may think that what you are hearing is from *Butterfly* and mistakenly identify the portion you hear as the composer's "orientalizing" his music (I am not referring to *Turandot*.) Just listen to *Girl of the Golden West* or *Manon Lescaut*. If I hear a piece by Mahler I can identify it usually after only a few bars, whether at the beginning, the middle or the end stages of the piece. I can do this only because Mahler has his own musical language and I became familiar with it by repeated listening.

How many of you saw and heard Hoiby's *The Tempest* put on by Des Moines Metro this last summer? Do you think that after repeated listenings you would be able to recognize a different composition by Hoiby as his, if you never heard it before? I dare say that you would not because Hoiby, in my view, has not yet developed his own musical language in the way I am describing this phenomenon and perhaps never will. When I first heard *The Tempest* I found myself hearing a bit of Sibelius, Richard Strauss and Shostakovich or Mahler. I am not sure what I remember now, but I did enjoy the opera and wanted to hear it again.

I suspect that much of contemporary opera will fail to have this structural pattern of a language unique to its composer, or even to a school of composition. Why this should be, I am not sure. Perhaps it has to do with a different frame of reference in the process of communication in our time. We experiment more with abstract ways of communicating and expressing ourselves whether it be by words, pictorial and graphic art, music, or "non-verbal" communication. This prevents us

from feeling comfortable with much of what passes as modern or contemporary opera. I think it has less to do with atonality than with the disjuncture of music as a language and singing as a form of the same language that is appearing in contemporary opera. We are in the position of the person who is in the company of others who speak with one another in a language that is not only foreign but is also not identifiable to that person as to what kind of language it may be. There is no sense of flow or process to help orient us. If the music itself doesn't carry us we feel isolated and unable to listen. As the Romans may have once said, "it is Greek to me." We will have to learn how to listen and let what patterning there is emerge with experience.

This has been a long "letter" and I am most interested in your reactions.

Report of the Opera Supers Meeting of September 21, 1986:

Opera Supers met for a brief business meeting at 3:30 p.m. in the lounge of the Music Building prior to the reception for new faculty. There was a good turnout of over twenty members who were welcomed by Mona Shaw. The members introduced themselves and the structure of the Opera Supers was reviewed. The functions of the various committees were described and the decision was to continue with this structure until new goals and needs call for changes. Members are asked to provide views on these matters. Your input is needed.

We are looking ahead to the production of *Don Giovanni* in the spring of 1987. The members discussed a number of proposals for events and receptions for the near future. The meeting was adjourned early enough to allow preparation for the reception planned for 4:00 to 6:00 p.m.

The reception was well received by those music faculty, new and old, who were able to attend. The food and refreshments, of which there were plenty, were outstanding. There was good conversation. Opera Supers and faculty were able to learn more about each other and the time was well spent. Our intentions were not only to make newcomers feel welcome, but also to be able to express our appreciation to the Music School faculty for the pleasure, cultural outlets and intellectual stimulation they provide to the community

with their endeavors. We do not wish the faculty to feel, as is so commonly expressed in academia, that they get more recognition outside the institution than they do within.

Don Giovanni Trivia

(The first of these. There will be more in future issues unless you react negatively.)

Did you know that the famous Zinka Milanov sang only one role in all of Mozart operas, namely that of Donna Anna in *Don Giovanni*?

While Beverly Sills may have made her formal debut at the Met in Rossini's *The Siege of Corinth* in 1975, she sang the role of Donna Anna in *Don Giovanni* for the Met in a summer performance at Manhattan's Lewisohn Stadium in 1966.

Elizabeth Schwarzkopf sang Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni* for her farewell performance at the Met also in 1966, but during the regular season in the "house". The following year, in 1967, Jan Peerce made his farewell appearance at the Met in the role of Don Ottavio.

I dare say that many a performer has come and gone in *Don Giovanni*, which after all is one of the most popular operas of all time.

Lorenzo Da Ponte, LIBRETTIST AND ?

Start preparing yourself to enjoy and understand *Don Giovanni* by looking into Mozart's librettist for this opera. What do you know about Da Ponte? What other libretti did he write for Mozart, and for others? Was he a musician or composer of opera in his own right, as for example was Boito? He was a poet, was he not? But how respected a poet was he, and did he ever get into trouble with his writings? How original was his libretto for *Don Giovanni*? Do you know that he had to leave first Vienna and then England (which brought him to America)? Do you know why? He came to America in 1805 and held a chair in Italian at Columbia University from 1826-37. What did he accomplish there? Curious? The above does not mean I am about to embark on a *Don Giovanni* Quiz, but I may answer some of these questions for you in future Newsletters. Are any of the readers familiar with Da Ponte's

memoirs or portions of them? If you are, send me tidbits that I can include in the Newsletter.

Announcements and Notes

Opera Supers will be hosting a reception to honor **James Dixon** and the **UI Symphony Orchestra** immediately following their concert on **October 22nd**. The reception will be held in Opera Studio in the Music Building. Opera Supers will be contacted in the next few days for help with refreshments and hosting.

Arthur Greene, piano faculty and recent winner of the prestigious Kappell competition, will be giving a recital on Monday, Nov. 13 at 8:00 p.m. in Clapp Hall. Those of you who enjoyed his magnificent interpretation of the Brahms's piece won't want to miss hearing him play again.

Tamara Brooks, new choral conductor, will be giving her University debut with a **Kantorei** concert on Sunday, **November 16th** in Clapp at 8:00 p.m. (Not on Oct. 26th as some publications indicate.) It was a delight to meet Dr. Brooks and her family at our reception last month and we look forward to hearing her work.

Opera Theater will present a **one-act opera** and **selected scenes** from other operas on **Oct. 31st** at 8:00 p.m. and **Nov. 2nd** at 3:00 p.m. in Opera Studio. Professor **Robert Eckert** is directing.

Opera Super, Hope Solomons suggests that the opera Supers "jot down ideas for *Don Giovanni*, Mozart, Vienna, etc." on index cards. These could be for "publicity, poster, parties, costumes, food, stone statues, dogs." Bring the index card with you to meetings or send them to Mona Shaw.

NEXT MEETING: TUESDAY, OCTOBER 14TH, 7 P.M. MUSIC LOUNGE (ROOM 1028)

IMPORTANT NUMBERS:

Arthur Canter, 338-1217, Newsletter

Miriam Canter, 338-1217, Hospitality

Dwight Sump, 353-5626, Opera Production Manager

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