

OPERA SUPERS OF IOWA CITY NEWSLETTER

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NOVEMBER 1986

EDITOR: ARTHUR CANTOR

30 BROOKFIELD DR. IOWA CITY, IOWA 52240

Letter from the Editor

A number of supers have spoken to me about the "essay" in my last letter. Their reactions were positive, but surely there must be some challenging or expanding, if not oppositional, comments to be made. Write me. I did not exhaust the topic nor did I cover all the points I would like to have made because of lack of space.

I will turn most of my attention to Mozart and Da Ponte in future Newsletters but I reserve the right to digress to miscellaneous topics, some relevant, some not. I have begun to delve into the Don Juan material that existed before Da Ponte. There was great literature and popular folklore on the subject already in existence when Da Ponte began to prepare the libretto. Would not some of you like to join in that search and contribute your findings to the Newsletter? I can add a Letter to the Editor section or "guest" column as in this issue.

I know I repeat myself and will continue to do so in making this point: the more you learn about the background of the opera, its sources, its development, its composer and its early fate, the more you will get out of seeing and hearing its performance. You may listen differently. You become aware of the purpose in what was included and what may have been excluded. The style and language (musical and otherwise) of the opera may become more apparent and understandable.

You may even be able to appreciate some private jokes, musical commentaries, political slams, and other personal notes the composer intended and to which audiences at the time of its composition may well have been attuned. What is now "dated" reference in the music or libretto may have brought laughs or gasps originally but is now lost to present audiences, or laughed at for the wrong reasons. A slapstick sequence, for example, may draw laughs from now until eternity, but originally there may

have been a barb embedded in it that was understood by the original audience. You think not? Consider stand up comics and satirists. Some of Tom Lehrer's "dark" humor was appropos to the time when he was at his zenith, as was Mort Sahl's. Think ahead another fifty years to someone hearing a playback of one of their acts. What will be funny and what will just slide by the future audience?

I am implying that Mozart and Verdi, for example, used their librettists and aimed at the audiences of their times. Would it not be more accurate to understand the Don Juan story and its ramifications when considered in the context of the time it was written in and turned into an opera than in a contemporary context? Someone composing a Don Juan opera in the 20th century would be most tempted to be influenced by the psychoanalytic conceptualizations of the Don Juan legend. These would not have been understood by the composers and audiences of *Don Giovanni* in the 18th century. Yet I can imagine that somewhere, some director has or will put on a Mozart *Don Giovanni* trying to impart the new psychology into the interpretation, much as has been done with *Carmen* and *Rigoletto*, to name just two. Do you know why Othello had to be a man with a black "complexion" (thus the Moor) in order to make sense to Shakespeare's audience for Othello's seemingly extreme behavior? You can find the answers in the popular "psychological" treatises of Shakespeare's times. Ask me about sources.

Alas, I have digressed enough. I give you food for thought, but choke not upon it.

Report on the Supers Meeting of October 14, 1986

A number of members were unable to attend, it being a Tuesday evening, but we had a good turnout. Mona Shaw reported on Michele Crider's performance in Des Moines. Michele received rave reviews and tremendous audience acclaim.

There have been many changes in faculty recital dates. Those of you attending are advised to check with Mona on these changes.

The details for the reception honoring the University Symphony Orchestra members and the School of Music faculty for Wednesday, October 22 -- after the concert -- were gone over by Miriam Canter and discussed by the group. A reception following the Opera Workshop performance on Sunday, November 2 was also decided upon and discussed. This will be a simple affair.

The Newsletter situation received attention. Considerations about expanding mailing to reach bulk mail were explored. This would require earlier mailing because of Post Office delays in their handling of bulk mail. Win some, lose some, but economic factors ultimately may decide. A number of members would like to see the Newsletter sent to other groups.

The problem of press coverage by the *Press Citizen* and the *Daily Iowan* was discussed. Complaints have been mounting as it appears there has been slippage in coverage by both papers. We need Supers and friends of the performing arts to write to the *Press Citizen* complaining about this state of affairs. A Press Party may help smooth things out but will be deferred until early 1987.

The next meeting will be Monday, November 10, at the usual time. The meetings are productive and we do interact informally and comfortably. Please feel free to attend Supers meeting for a short time even if you have other commitments on that evening. Some of our members have regular conflicts but often come in for a little while. Whatever input you offer is most welcome.

Telecasts on Iowa Public Television of "Great Performances" for November

The Newsletter offers you a new service. In case some of you don't realize it, most PBS telecasts of "Great Performances" are shown in Iowa on a later date than the live telecast -- usually on the Sunday afternoon following the original Friday telecast.

For November there are three such presentations that may interest Opera Supers. The first will be a "Live from Lincoln Center" performance of Bernstein's *Candide* with David Eisler, tenor, in the title role. It will be telecast over Iowa PBS from the New York City Opera Wednesday, November 12, at 7:00 p.m., CST.

On Sunday, November 23 at 1:30 p.m. Iowa PBS will telecast the Great Performances "Gian Carlo Menotti, The Musical Magician." This presentation marks the composer's 75th birthday with an "unusual documentary portrait" of the composer, including his own observations, interviews with friends and colleagues and performance footage of scenes from his operas.

On Sunday, November 30 at 1:30 p.m. Iowa PBS will present Menotti's *Goya* in its premiere performance with Placido Domingo in the title role. This will be a Washington Opera production conducted by Rafael Fruhbeck de Burgos. Domingo apparently suggested the topic and inspired Menotti to write the opera for him.

Letters to the Editor

Open Letter to Opera Supers:

Many thanks to all of you who provided refreshments, paper goods and physical help with the reception honoring the members of the University Symphony Orchestra following their very fine performance on Wednesday, October 22. Well over 100 musicians, faculty members and Supers attended and expressions of appreciation flowed like the lemonade. We hope more Supers will attend such events in the future.

Miriam Canter
Hospitality Chairperson

To the Editor:

As a former translator of multiple languages, a would-be artist, and music enjoyer, I find myself with ambivalent reactions to your October Letter from the Editor concerning the language of music. I am a "visual" person, a seer of opera as well as a listener. It is quite true that each language has its own rhythms, accents, and flavors. Italian, for instance, is a very musical language. Each word ends with a vowel sound which allows an easy lyrical flow to the next word. French has a nasal intonation which does not translate readily. And yet many ideas, innuendos and subtleties are lost if one is not thoroughly versed in the language of a particular performance. *Die Fledermaus*, for example has many verbal as well as visual jokes. A libretto cannot provide the same enjoyment as understanding the words can, even though every single sung phrase might not be totally perceptible. A good translator with an appreciation of the accents and rhythms of the music can do a lot to overcome the obstacles of a translation. Subtitles on a television performance are not only visually distracting, but are usually necessarily too abbreviated for a detailed appreciation of an opera.

On the other hand, at a recent Hancher performance of *Daniel and the Lions*, I couldn't help wondering if much of the flavor might be lost without the original Latin in this re-created Medieval mystery play.

I'm even on shakier ground with respect to modern musicians. It is often very difficult to identify an isolated painting by a contemporary artist. But artists have the benefit of retrospective exhibits during which the viewer can come to appreciate the artist's development. Seeing a very early Picasso would not enable a person to identify a later Picasso unless possibly there had been that experience of exposure to his developing style. Perhaps there is a similar situation with modern composers. Time will weed out some of the "cacaphony" and help put musical

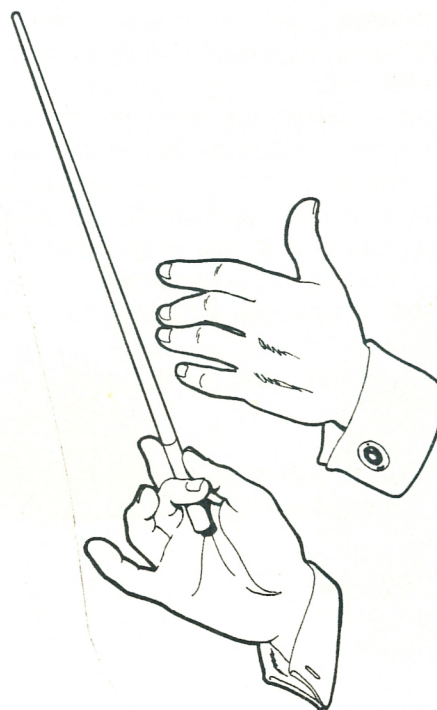
development into some kind of perspective.

All in all, despite my own language background, I think I infinitely prefer opera sung in my native language.

Mary W. Wall
1658 Ridge Road

EDITOR: Thank you for your comments. I hope this will inspire more Letters to the Editor and other offerings to be included in the Newsletter. I can always cut back in my letter and trivia notes to make space, if necessary.

What about memorable experiences Supers have had with *Don Giovanni*? This could be a live performance by world-renowned singers, seeing bloopers, having something happen in association with a performance that you'll never forget, etc. I hope to include some of these in future newsletters.



NEXT MEETING: MONDAY, NOVEMBER 10TH, 7 P.M. MUSIC LOUNGE (ROOM 1028)

IMPORTANT NUMBERS:

Arthur Canter, 338-1217, Newsletter

Miriam Canter, 338-1217, Hospitality

Dwight Sump, 353-7428, Opera Production Manager

Mona Shaw, 353-5626, Promotions Coordinator

The University of Iowa

School of Music

Iowa City, Iowa 52242



Arthur and Miriam Canter
30 Brookfield Dr.
Iowa City, IA 52240



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