

OPERA SUPERS OF IOWA CITY NEWSLETTER

VOLUME TWO, NUMBER 7

JUNE 1987

EDITOR: ARTHUR CANTER

30 BROOKFIELD DR. IOWA CITY, IOWA 52240

Next Meeting: Monday, June 8, at 7:00 p.m. in the lounge of the Music Building.

Letter from the Editor

We can look back at our efforts for the promotion and production of *Don Giovanni* with pride. The performances went off well despite some glitches and was enthusiastically received by the audiences. Being backstage I did not get the chance to see the dramatic, but unintentional lighting effect of the shadow of James Dixon cast upon the wall of the auditorium as he directed the performance. As the silent but eloquent oboist upon the stage, I had to focus upon the baton of the maestro, as did Mel Sunshine, the equally silent and eloquent clarinetist. Before leaving the topic of the *Don Giovanni* performance, I must relate a behind-the-scenes story that involved only us Supers.

The four "dry" musicians playing wooden instruments during two scenes needed to look as if they were really playing music. To help this illusion along, I had the bright idea of duplicating the sections from the score involving us to turn pages as if we were truly playing. Thus I made a set for each of us and marked where in the action (cue words from the singers lines) we should turn the page. All well and good until dress rehearsal on stage. Mel and I are quite near sighted and had to remove our glasses before the curtain went up. Lo and behold! Neither of us could see what was on the sheets of music! So, we had to do it by memory, listening to the music, and watching the action and/or Dixon the best we could, after all. Still, it was a good idea.

We now shift our attention from the story of a lecher to that of the last days of a "fallen woman," *La Traviata*, the summer opera. I assume that most of you are familiar to some extent with the story of the lady of the camellias even if you have never seen a production of Verdi's *La Traviata*. There have been movies made of the story including a recent one of the opera starring Ilena Cotrubas and Placido Domingo. I remember the old movie, *Camille*, with Greta Garbo in the title role and Robert Taylor as

her young lover. In the present time, viewing the old or even the original plays runs the risk of producing yawns and amusement. Reading the synopsis of the *Traviata* libretto makes the story sound melodramatic and even corny. After all, what is so remarkable about a young woman having many lovers or living with one she has to support in this day of the "jet set," biographies of movie stars and the *Enquirer*? We have to remind ourselves that the original Dumas novel, which he turned into a play, that provided the basis for the Verdi opera was considered scandalous in the 1850's.

Also in that era, and for some years after, tuberculosis, or consumption, was no matter for amusement. Its ravages were well known to the public. Puccini's heroine, Mimi, in *La Boheme*, suffered the same fate as Verdi's Violetta. What saves the opera in this enlightened and sophisticated day and age is its music. Verdi's music for *La Traviata* matches the poignancy, sense of tragedy, the ambivalence, and the expression of love that are inherent in the story. I will be including material on the background of the original Dumas story and the Verdi opera in forthcoming newsletters. Also under preparation is an informational packet containing the background material and a synopsis of the opera for the active supers.

Do you have a favorite Violetta either from a live performance or from a recording you have heard? Let me know your choices and maybe we can report later on the most popular Violettas. Also if you have a *Traviata* story that you would like to share with us, send it to me within the next few weeks.

Report of April 7th meeting

New members were introduced: Winona Lyons, Bobby Akre, and Laurence Vittes. We were brought up-to-date on the promotional activities for the progress of the *Don Giovanni* production. The potluck supper after the opera was set for Saturday, May 8th at Mary Wall's. The needs for the strike party were discussed. The Supers were asked to have enough food and supplies for 50 people. Marie Knapp and Ann Tanna will co-chair arrangements.

Letter from the Editor cont.

Your newsletter editor announced the winners of the *Don Giovanni* Quiz. The grand winner was Mel Sunshine whose entry was submitted well before he accepted a role as supernumerary in the opera production. Runners-up were: Steve Slezak and Marlene Stanford (whose entry just made the deadline). Mel was awarded his prize at the meeting (an audio cassette of Mozart arias and a Mozart key chain). The others were not present and will receive their audio cassettes at a later date. The meeting adjourned for a tour of the costume and scene shops conducted by Margaret Wenk. Refreshments were served in the lounge at the end of the tour.

Report of May 11th meeting

We learned at this meeting that the *Don Giovanni* performances were a financial success. It was obvious they had been artistic successes. Our promotional activities seem to have had a positive effect. The casts for *La Traviata*, the summer opera were announced. Inasmuch as costumes and scenery will be rented, there will be little need for help, if any, from the Supers for the scene and costume shops. Mel Sunshine agreed to take responsibility for the the IC Public Library opera displays in the future. Hope Solomons will continue as potluck-supper-recipe-researcher and liaison to Joanna Beers regarding recipe submission for the *Press Citizen*. Other committee chairpersons agreed to continue in their roles. The strike party went well and Marie Knapp has prepared an outline of procedures for Supers to follow for future strike party assistance. Promos for *La Traviata* were discussed. It was decided to have a "barbecue" picnic for Supers, faculty, staff and cast. It will be Sunday, June 28th in Hickory Hill Park South from 3-8 p.m. The meeting adjourned on a high note.

Notable Quotes about Verdi

We can get impressions of the impact, favorable and unfavorable, that Verdi made on some of his musical contemporaries from statements they have made in letters or interviews. The budding composers among you shall take heed.

What Bizet has to say:

Verdi is a man of great talent who lacks the essential quality which makes the great masters: style. But he had bursts of marvelous passion...I do not understand the fanatics or the detractors he has excited. In my opinion, he merits neither the one nor the other.

Rossini on Verdi:

If the name of the composer had been kept hidden from me, I should have wagered that he could only be an artillery colonel.

Donizetti:

My heyday is over, and another must take my place. The world wants something new. ...I am more than happy to give mine to people of talent like Verdi. ...even though his success may not measure up to the complete hopes of his friends, that will not prevent Verdi from occupying shortly one of the most honorable places in the galaxy of composers.

Mussorgsky:

But Maestro "Senatore" Verdi is quite another matter! This one pushes ahead on a grand scale, this innovator doesn't feel shy.

(Ed. The above quotations are taken from *Skeletons from the Opera Closet*, D. Groover & C.C. Conner, St. Martins Press, 1986.)

Verdi's friend Marc Monnier had this to say:

...Is there any point in stating that Verdi was an artist in his actions as well as his creative works? ...it is never unprofitable to reveal a great soul. Verdi, the musician, is also capable of love--and his friends adore him...Verdi is as modest as he is proud--these two virtues do go together, as do vanity and servility, their opposing vices.

(Ed. This is quoted in *Interviews and Encounters with Verdi*, M. Conati, 1984.)

Verdi on arrangement of the orchestra in opera

In a letter to Ricordi, dated 10 July 1871, Verdi had this to say:

...the arrangement of the instruments of the orchestra is much more important than is usually believed (for instrumental coloring, sonority and effect). ...These small improvements will open the way to to other innovations (referring to his own ideas as to how the violas, cellos, for example should be arranged--Ed.) that one day will certainly come. One of these will be the removal of audience boxes from the stage, thus enabling the curtain to reach the footlights. Another would be to make the orchestra invisible. This is not my idea, but Wagner's, and it is excellent.

In a later letter (1893) to Mascheroni:

For the orchestra...to play in the middle of an applauding or hissing audience, is the most ridiculous thing in the world. The enormous advantage of an invisible orchestra would more than compensate for the inevitable lack of power and sonority...

Verdi was referring to the visibility of the orchestra and its conductor waving "his arms about like a windmill" to the audience and not to any concern about the ability of the singers on stage being able to see the conductor. How much development of the orchestra "pit" dropping the musicians below the floor of the auditorium had taken place by the time Verdi wrote these remarks is not known to me. The 1880 plans for the first Metropolitan Opera House were based on La Scala and showed a pit, partly under the stage in the manner of the Bayreuth Theater built for Wagner's operas. As we see from Verdi's remarks, Wagner wanted the orchestra to be "invisible." Can someone among the readers enlighten me as to when the so-called pit was first used for an opera house?

La Traviata Trivia

Robert Merrill made his debut in 1945 as Giorgio Germont. He apparently never got over his nervousness and throughout his thirty-year Met career frequently forgot some of Germont's words. The Violetta at that time, by the way, was Licia Albanese--one of my favorites for that role.

In the last act of *Traviata*, the dying Violetta listens to offstage revelry which instigates her to ask her maid to distribute money to the poor. The time was Carnival, the pre-Lenten celebration. I could have used that as a quiz question.

La Traviata was considered very raunchy stuff in the 1870's. Clara Louise Kellogg, one of the first American opera stars, often sang Violetta using an English translation. However she tried to protect her American audiences from the details of the courtesan's life. Whenever she thought the English libretto was becoming too provocative she switched to the Italian text. Remember what I wrote in an earlier newsletter about "private jokes" and innuendos going unnoticed if the audience did not understand the language being sung?

Notes and announcements

Our next meeting is June 8, at 7:00 p.m. in the lounge of the Music Building (room 1028).

The Opera Supers Summer Barbecue will be Sunday, June 28th from 3-8 p.m. in Hickory Hill Park South. Call Miriam Canter, 338-1217 or Mona Shaw, 335-1667 to tell if you're coming or if you want more details. Please call by June 24th.

The Cast for LA TRAVIATA

Violetta.....Costanza Cuccaro(7/23, 25)
.....Michele Crider(7/26)
Flora.....Rosemary Lack
Annina.....Mary Day
Alfredo.....Dennis Petersen(7/23, 25)
.....Rob Eckert(7/26)
Germont.....David Hamilton(7/23, 25)
.....Wayne Neuzil(7/26)
Gaston.....Joseph Spann
Baron Douphol.....Steven Lentzkow
Marquis D'Obigny.....Brian Burkhardt
Doctor Grenvil.....Jeffrey Hook
Joseph (Giuseppe).....Philip Rose
Messenger.....John Stam

UI Symphony Conductor..Tamara Brooks
Stage Director.....Beaumont Glass
The opera will be sung in English.
English translation by Beaumont Glass.

Performance dates are July 23 & 25 at 8:00 p.m. and July 26 at 2:00 p.m. in Hancher Auditorium.

NEXT MEETING: MONADAY, JUNE 8TH. 7 P.M. MUSIC LOUNGE (ROOM 1028)

IMPORTANT NUMBERS:

Arthur Canter, 338-1217, Newsletter

Miriam Canter, 338-1217, Hospitality

Shirley Harrison, 337-5729, Costumes

Mary Wall, 338-2618, Scenery

Dwight Sump, 335-1153, Opera Production Manager

Mona Shaw, 335-1667, Public Relations Coordinator

Margaret Wenk, 335-2988, Opera Designer

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