

Entr'acte

The Opera
Supers of
Iowa City
Newsletter

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Letter from the Editor

By this time, readers of *Entr'acte*, even those out of town, are aware of the temporary shut-down of the Music School Building because of repairs to the heating/cooling water line system and related matters. They say that it will take about three months from the middle of May to mid-August to accomplish the repairs. So "they" say. My own experience with estimates of times for opening or reopening buildings after construction or remodeling leads me to doubt the authorities. The whole affair brings to mind the perennial question: can these failures in the buildings on this campus, whether it be leaking roofs, equipment failure, water pipes corroding, air conditioning systems not working, etc., be prevented by better design, better engineering, and modification of construction bid procedures?

There have been too many problems with buildings constructed over the past thirty years. I can think of a number of fiascos in the construction of buildings on the medical campus. It seems inconceivable to me that the University would not include a percentage of the original building costs to include money for maintenance and repair, at the least. Perhaps more attention should be given to quality of construction rather than cheapness. But then quality in construction appears to be a thing of the past, and one can't tell from costs what the quality may be. I know where I would put the blame, and I am sure many of you have your own ideas on the matter. Governments in the political division sense are not the only institutions plagued by bureaucratically engendered incompetence. We have the same problems in state universities.

As the Music School faculty offices and facilities get scattered around the campus this summer, it may become difficult to get some things done, but they will get done despite it all. There will be a summer opera. How and where will create problems, but there will be one.

If the Opera Supers of Iowa City can be of help to make things easier, the powers that be should let it be known and just ask. In this regard, it may be that the Music Library will need some volunteer help with moving books around to different shelf space, etc. Joan Falconer, Music Librarian (335-3086) is the one to contact if you can offer your help.

To those of you who were unable to find standing room, let alone seats, at the March 10 performance of *Gianni Schicchi*, I can only say that it was a most unfortunate situation, one that deserves an apology. I don't know if it was simply a matter of a mistake in estimate of the likely audience size or the inability to arrange for a space that would seat more and offer adequate stage space for the production. I have been asked why the one-act opera was not presented in Clapp Hall, Macbride Hall, Harper Hall, et cetera—you name it. I have no answer. I do know that for the amount of stage scenery and space for the cast on stage plus space needed for piano and conductor, any one of these other places would have worked. Without knowledge of the contingencies involved, spaces considered and rejected, I can only repeat that I am sorry we could not accommodate everybody who wanted to see the show. You did miss a great performance, and I hope in the future no one will have to be turned away. I do admit that it may be better to have to turn people away for lack of seating space than to have many empty seats.

At this time there are plenty of seats available for *Tosca*. Help make it a sellout. I would love to see Hancher have to sell standing room for a Spring Opera production.

February 13 Meeting Report

Several announcements were made. There will be a senior citizen section of seats at the Spring Opera. Discounts will be arranged through the Senior Citizen Center. The "Summer Evening of Arias" scheduled for Friday, June 22 in Macbride Auditorium will need ushers from among the Supers for the event. The Iowa City Public Library will be the site for a *Tosca* promo on March 30. It will be videotaped for later showings on the ICPL channel on cable TV.

The Iowa Cultural Caucus will be held in Des Moines at the State Historical Building, March 18-20. It would help to have as many people as possible attending, particularly on Monday, March 19.

There will be a low-income category for tickets for the opera. Ten percent of one performance will be so

(Continued on next page.)

designated. Tickets will be given free to low-income family members available on a first-come, first-served basis from Mona Shaw. Particulars will be issued later. A number of Supers offered to help transport such ticket holders to the hall.

A number of ideas for promo parties for *Tosca* were explored, but the time remaining appears to be too short for any involved plans.

The meeting adjourned at 8:00 p.m. for a brief social and refreshment time before going to Harper Hall for a short but delightful presentation of opera arias sung by several student members of the Opera Theater.

March 12 Meeting Report

The meeting took place in the Opera Rehearsal Room, as the usual lounge was not available. We opened with announcements and an explanation of the moving of office space and facilities of the School of Music later this spring (see "Letter from the Editor," this issue of *Entr'acte*). It is likely that the administrative offices will be located in the Mayflower Building. The effect of the temporary move upon meetings of the Supers was discussed. For one thing, we will need to find places where the group can hold its meetings.

Volunteers are needed for poster distributions and assistance with the Iowa Festival.

The Strike Party committee co-chairpersons will be calling upon Supers for food, etc., for the usual Spring Opera strike day.

Some discussion was held about future directions and activities of the Opera Supers and what effect a change in administration of the School of Music, should that come about, would have upon the group. The notion of a "Supers Scrapbook" was proposed as one continuing project. The matter of Supers managing a reception for patrons of the Spring Opera rather than putting it in the hands of Iowa Foundation was taken up. An advantage of Supers doing this is the saving of money of the gift portion of patron tickets--all the food and service we would provide would come from volunteers. The place and time for such a reception would have to be worked out.

The post-performance potluck supper was reaffirmed to be held on Monday, April 30 from 6:00 p.m. at Mary Wall's.

The meeting adjourned for social time and refreshments followed by the presentation of a scene from *Traviata* by student members of Opera Theater.

Next meeting: Monday, April 2.

Puccini's *Tosca*: Conceived by Conspiracy?

Puccini first thought of using Sardou's drama *La Tosca* (1887) for an opera shortly after the premiere of his second opera *Edgar* (1889). In a letter to his publisher Ricordi, Puccini asked that the necessary steps be taken to obtain Sardou's permission to use the play as the basis of an opera, noting, "In this *Tosca*, I see the opera which exactly suits me, one without excessive proportions, one which is a decorative spectacle, and one which gives opportunity for an abundance of music" It is not known whether Sardou refused permission or Puccini changed his mind. In any event, the matter was dropped, and the issue of using *Tosca* for an opera did not come up again until six years later.

In October, 1895 Puccini went to Florence specifically to see a production of the play with Sarah Bernhardt in the title role. In the 1890s realistic opera (*verismo*) was becoming the vogue in France as well as in Italy, where its chief proponents were Mascagni and Leoncavallo. In 1896 Giordano met with great success with *Andrea Chenier*, the plot of which strongly resembles Sardou's *Tosca* in a number of its parts. It was apparent that *Tosca* had all the essential ingredients for a veristic opera, and the play was enjoying exceptional popularity all over Europe wherever it was put on with Sarah Bernhardt, for whom Sardou wrote the play.

In this context two events took place that finally impelled Puccini to get down to the task of working on a *Tosca* opera. In 1893 or thereabouts, Alberto Franchetti (1860-1942), a contemporary of Puccini and a former fellow student sharing the same teachers, signed an agreement with Ricordi to write a *Tosca* opera. Ricordi was receptive because he felt he was being put off by Puccini. Franchetti chose Illica as his librettist, and the two went to Paris in 1894 to discuss the matter with Sardou. They met at Sardou's home where, coincidentally, Verdi, then eighty-one years of age, was visiting along with a small group invited by Sardou. Verdi was well acquainted with Sardou and was in Paris at the time for the opening of the French production of *Otello*. While Illica was reading his libretto at the session, Verdi became profoundly aroused by the material and grabbed it from Illica to read for himself. He expressed the wish that he would like to set the verses to music if Sardou would allow him to change the last act. However, he felt he was too old for the task. Word of Verdi's reaction at this meeting at Sardou's got back to Puccini. This event, plus the knowledge that his rival Franchetti was in the process of preparing a *Tosca* for an opera, finally pushed Puccini into action.

The problem facing Puccini was how to get the

composing rights away from Franchetti. After some possible skulduggery, Ricordi, with the consent and knowledge of Puccini and an agreement with Illica, the librettist, arranged a meeting with Franchetti at which they engaged in what Mosco Carner, Puccini's biographer, described as "psychological warfare." Ricordi and Illica convinced Franchetti that *Tosca* was after all "a most unsuitable subject for an opera." They pointed to the brutality of the plot, Scarpia's attempted rape of Tosca followed by her murdering him. This, they argued, would be too risqué for the theater and would alienate the public's sympathy for the heroine. Thus, they undermined the confidence of what must have been a naive Franchetti, and he agreed to tear up his contract. The very next day (some say, the same day) Puccini was signed up by Ricordi for *Tosca*! Thus was the opera *Tosca* conceived out of a conspiracy. Its birth was to be labored and its early infancy troublesome, but these are other stories.

Whether a Franchetti *Tosca* would have achieved the eventual fame and accolades of the Puccini opera is a matter of conjecture. However, how many opera houses around the world resound with the music of a Franchetti opera, and how many from a Puccini opera, aside from *Tosca*?

A Note About Sardou

Victorien Sardou (1831-1908), the French dramatist, wrote a number of plays for Sarah Bernhardt, including *Tosca*. He first made his name writing comedies and then shifted to historical dramas with dark, passionate stories set against the background of war, political intrigue and conflict. Sardou plays were very popular in the late nineteenth century, extending into the early part of the twentieth century, but it has been a long time since one of his dramas has been performed on the American stage. One is more likely to see an opera based on his works, for 18 of them have been developed into operas. Among them are Puccini's *Tosca*, Millöcker's *Der Bettelstudent* (1882) based on Sardou's *Les Noces de Fernandes* (1878), and J. Strauss II's *Karneval in Rom* (1873) based on *Piccolino* (1861). Verdi had contemplated writing an opera based on the Sardou play *Patrie!* (1869). Giordano used two Sardou plays for operas—*Fedóra* and *Madame Sans-Gêne*. Sardou wrote the libretto for Saint Saëns's *Les Barbares* (1901). Earlier he wrote one for Offenbach, *Le Roi Carotte* (1872). The many composers who favored his works for opera plots apparently were stimulated by the strong situations, vivid characterizations, and lavishly developed scenes in Sardou's dramas.

Reminders, Notes, and Miscellany

- Despite previous information to the contrary (and perhaps because of more than a few phone calls from Opera Supers), Iowa Public Television (IPT) *will* be broadcasting the new Metropolitan Opera Production of Wagner's *The Ring*. A spokesperson at Iowa Public Television directed callers to future issues of IPT's *Advance* for dates and times of these broadcasts. For programming questions or suggestions (We understand the friendliness with which inquiries are received can vary.), the contact person at IPT is Daniel K. Miller, Iowa Public Television, 6450 Corporate Drive, Johnston, Iowa, 50131, or call 1-800-532-1290.

- The Music Building will be completely sealed off from May 12 until August 8 (approximate dates) for the asbestos abatement required to install a new heating system. Hancher back-stage areas and the Music Library will only be closed for two to three weeks during this period (roughly May 14—June 8) and will then reopen. Call the School of Music Main Office (335-1604) later in May for exact reopening dates. Music administrative offices (including Music Public Relations) and most faculty studios (except piano, percussion and jazz) will be moved to Mayflower Residence hall. All telephone numbers will remain the same. Any mail addressed to the School of Music will be forwarded to the Mayflower during the time the building is closed.

- The Summer opera, Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, will be held as scheduled July 27 at 8:00 p.m. and July 29 at 2:00 p.m. in Hancher Auditorium.

- The following summer events are free, and no tickets are required.

- The Summer Symphony Orchestra Concert will be Friday, July 6 at 8:00 p.m. in Hancher.

- UI Opera Theater's "A Summer Evening of Arias" will be Friday, June 22 at 8:00 p.m. in Macbride Auditorium. (Macbride is air-conditioned.)

- The Wendt-King Duo, with violoncellists Charles Wendt, UI faculty, and Terry King, UNI faculty will be Friday, May 11 at 8:00 p.m. in Macbride Auditorium.

- A special alumni concert will be performed by a group of the School of Music's best student solo artists on Thursday, May 31 at 5:30 p.m. in the Sculpture Court of the Museum of Art.

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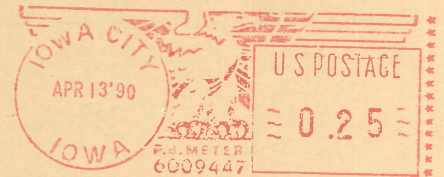
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IMPORTANT NUMBERS

**Next Meeting:
Tuesday, June 5th at
7:00 p.m. (Location to
be announced, call
Miriam or Mona.)**

ARTHUR CANTER (newsletter) 338-1217
MIRIAM CANTER (hospitality) 338-1217
LINDA BEHRENDT (publicity) 336-5342
MARY WALL (scenery) 338-2618
MARLENE STANFORD (costumes)
354-0600
MARILYN SOMVILLE (School of Music
director) 335-1601
BEAUMONT GLASS, Opera Theater director,
335-1669
MONA SHAW, P.R. coordinator, 335-1667
MARGARET WENK, opera designer, 335-2899
DWIGHT SUMP, opera production manager,
335-1153

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