
OPERA SUPERS OF IOWA CITY NEWSLETTER

VOLUME THREE, NUMBER 1

SEPTEMBER 1987

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Next Meeting: Tuesday, September 22 at 6:45(sharp) p.m. in the Lounge (Room 1028) of the Music Building

Letter from the Editor

We begin the third year for the Newsletter with the same general goals of past issues. There will be notes, news and trivia on the world of opera. Specific emphasis will be given to background material on the major opera productions of the University of Iowa Opera Theater, but matters of concern to friends and supporters of the School of Music will be featured from time to time. Other than the frequent personal contacts and the telephone "brigade" efforts, the Newsletter is the principal means by which the Opera Supers can keep abreast of activities. Your input to the Newsletter is valued. Toward this end I give you a brief overview of the mechanics of producing the Newsletter.

The editor prepares almost all copy from his notes, research and information given him by interested persons. The copy occupies about seven pages of double-spaced typewritten material which is submitted to Mona Shaw. She usually adds an announcement or two and lists names and phone numbers of key contact persons. She then types the copy into a word processor, formats it and lays it out for the printer. It is then printed, folded, addressed, stamped and mailed in time to reach you before the next scheduled meeting of the Supers. If we can manage to issue seven to eight numbers for the volume-year (September to August) we are doing very well. Your editor has the time to do his part for the Newsletter since he has gone on emeritus status, but it must be remembered that Mona Shaw has many other duties in her position. The fact that she has devoted so much of her own time to the Newsletter is a tribute to her belief that the venture is worthwhile. She may get a few laughs and a little education from some of the copy, but the chief proofreader (Miriam) of the original manuscript gets most of the laughs from typos and grammatical errors.

Perhaps we can have a section called "Views from the Guest Conductor's Podium" (or some such catchy title) in which to put your contributions of anecdotes, new items, opinions, *brief* essays, or anything of interest to the Opera Supers. Your editor reserves the right to refuse to print anything offensive or not in good taste.

A Note about the Spring Opera

We thought we knew what the choice for the 1988 Spring Opera would be but as of the time of preparation of this copy, there was some indecision. Thus no preliminary notes about the opera are included in this issue. By the time our September meeting is held the matter should be cleared and the needs for opera discussed at the meeting. Future issues of the Newsletter will, of course, focus upon matters of the Spring opera, learning more about the opera itself and its composer and the Opera Supers involvement in its production and promotion.

Popular Sources for Opera Libretti

If you were to compose an opera would you write your own libretto, base it upon an existing piece of literature, or commission someone else to prepare one for you on a topic of your choosing or that person's choice? Several years ago Dr. Somville spoke of commissioning an opera based on the life of Abraham Lincoln. I have fantasied about how I would rise to that challenge if I were capable of doing the task. My immediate thought was to turn to sections of Stephen Vincent Benet's epic poem *John Brown's Body*. Someone else might turn to Carl Sandburg's work. How would you choose a topic and what source would you use for a new opera? Would you use a play, a poem, a novel or short story, or, as is possible nowadays, a television special? Maybe you would prefer to write something original. I have done a little research into the matter of the origins for opera libretti. The plays of Shakespeare, as you might guess, are by far the most popular sources for opera. Twenty-eight of his plays have inspired operas, while eight of his plays have none based on them, as far as I can determine. Would any of you care to guess the eight? (Maybe I'll give the answer to this in the next Newsletter.) Which of the Shakespeare plays have been the most popular for opera libretti? Would you have chosen *The Tempest*? It has been the source for about 42 different operas. *Romeo and Juliet*, which would have been my guess, is second. *King Lear*, interestingly enough, inspired about eleven operas. However none of these ever achieved prominence. Most recently, Reimann had his *Lear* staged, but it remains to be seen whether this will be considered a masterwork. There is something about King Lear that has

eluded the great composers although they had ambitions to produce an opera on the topic to match their other successes (Verdi and Puccini, for example). Other literary greats whose works inspired operas include: Sir Walter Scott with nineteen of his works used as the source of libretti (Donizetti was partial to Scott); Pushkin with 34 of his works inspiring operas; Goethe: 25; Dante: 20 operas based on the Francesca da Rimini episode of *L'Inferno*. Other popular sources for operas are the works of: Tolstoi, 20; Voltaire, 48; Molière, 17; Dumas, père, 28. Of Victorien Sardou, French dramatist (1831-1908) there are 25 operas based on the works including *La Tosca* and *Fedora*. How about a Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale for your opera? At least 53 operas are based on his stories, fifteen of them on the *Emperor's New Clothes!* You can add to the lists yourselves, but which *single* literary work in Western Civilization has provided the source for the greatest number of operas? This could be a worthwhile Quiz question. Is it among the works of the literary figure already mentioned? Is it the heroine of Charles Perrault's *Cendrillon*? Is it a work of Pierre Corneille (1606-1684), or of Dostoyevski? Why keep you in suspense? The most popular single source for operas to date has been Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. There are at least 95 different operas based on the man from La Mancha in its original context! If you add to the list operas based on the characters in a new context, there are at least nine more operas and recent opera-like musical *Man of La Mancha*. Yet how many of the *Don Quixote* operas have you seen or heard? How many have been staged in the last fifty years? Maybe you can be the composer in modern times to write a Don Quixote opera that will become widely acclaimed and endure through time surpassing Massenet's *Don Quichotte*.

Some New Operas in 1987-88

On the matter of sources for operas, would you have considered Richard Nixon a more suitable topic than John F. Kennedy? Well, watch for the fuss made over the world premiere of *Nixon in China*, an avant-garde opera, music by John Adams, the American minimalist composer, words by the English poet Alice Goodman. It will open October 22nd in Houston and will travel in December to New York at the Brooklyn Academy of Music as part their "Next Wave Festival." From New York it will go to Washington's Kennedy Center sometime in March 1988 and in June 1988 to the Netherlands. Is it the topic or the anticipated music that is already attracting attention?

Beating Dick Nixon to the punch will be a Dick Tracy opera, *Where's Dick* by Stuart Wallace and Michael Corrie which will have its premiere on September 24th (just a few weeks hence) at Opera Omaha. The other minimalist, Philip Glass, will have his new chamber opera, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, get its first airing at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge Massachusetts in May 1988. From Cambridge it goes to the Kentucky Opera in Louisville in June. If you missed Hoiby's *Tempest* last year, you have the chance to see it at the Kansas City Lyric Opera April 13-18, 1988. Just be sure to return in time to see UI Opera Theater's offering later that month.

I Have a Dream

For the past year I have had a fantasy about forming a local opera company that would be independent of the University. By joining efforts with Cedar Rapids, we could call it the "Crandic Piccolo Opera Company (CPOC)," if the Crandic RR line does not have exclusive rights to the Cedar Rapids and Iowa City acronym. We would hire local singing talent, once in a while featuring some up-and-coming professional talent, rent space in a small suitable theater (seating no more than a few hundred), and employ a chamber-sized orchestra, much as was the custom in Mozart's day. Who would direct, stage, etc.? Those are just details that admittedly have to be worked out, but it is the concept of a small regional opera company. Could it work? Seeing the favorable reactions to *The Magic Flute* done last year on the Cedar Rapids Symphony stage encouraged me to think along these lines. It is a matter of working on a "shoe-string" budget, the simplest of sets and focussing on chamber opera until it takes hold, if it ever does. A Crandic Piccolo Opera could serve as an out-of-school training laboratory for young singers of Eastern Iowa. Pushing the fantasy to the utmost, we could apply for a grant from a foundation or regional arts funding agency to help support the project. I do not see something like this as competition to the UI Opera Theater any more than do I see the Cedar Rapids Symphony program, or the programs in the Quad-Cities as competition to the University Symphony and Hancher events. One feeds the other as interest in performing arts grows. There are many things that can be done in a chamber opera set-up that will not be done in the University because of the limitations imposed by the academic nature of the institution and its teaching goals. A professionally oriented "piccolo" could provide an outlet for the talents of a number of non-university opera persons in the Iowa City/Cedar Rapids region. I am interested in your reactions.

Wait for Opera on Compact Discs

To those of you who have not invested much in LP and audio cassettes, that would be my advice. Would that I didn't have such a large library in the LP and open reel format or were just starting out. If you do not have a CD player, sooner or later you must get one. The CD is an opera listener's delight, not only for the improvement in sound that is potential (lack of background noise and increased dynamics) but the accessibility the format give you for locating individual arias, numbers, scenes, etc. On the LP you have to guess the position on the record and be careful in placing the stylus back in the groove, usually overshooting or being too far ahead. On tape it is even more of a chore unless you indexed the parts out carefully on your machine but even this never works out satisfactorily. But on the CD, if you are not already familiar with this, the location of the separate numbers, arias, scene changes, etc. are programmed for you and all you need to do is to punch in the program number and you can hear that section right on the nose of the very first try. I hope that the effort to lower the price of the CD does not result in the loss of that feature (money could be saved on the packaging instead). What is on CD in the way of opera? Relatively few are available to date, but the selection is growing by leaps and bounds. What is even more important are the reissues on CD formats and improved sound of some of the great opera albums of the recent past. For example there are the Bjoerling/De Los Angeles *La Boheme*, the Bjoerling/Nilsson *Turandot*, the Callas/Gobbi *Tosca*, Callas' *Norma*, Del Monaco/Tebaldi *Otello*; there are many others. Too bad for me, I have these on older LP's and I can't afford to replace them all. Some things to watch out for: You may need magnifying glasses to read the CD libretto. Also, when buying a CD by Denon (a Japanese company), make sure the libretto has a language you can follow. I recently bought Dvorak's *Rusalka*. It has a Czech cast, is sung wonderfully in Czech, but the libretto is printed only in Japanese and Czech. I can't read the former and can follow the latter a bit although without understanding. Fortunately my Kobbé has a detailed synopsis.

Recent Events and Updates

The provision of food for the strike party following *La Traviata* went very well. Our thanks to Irene Simon and Linda Behrendt for masterminding the arrangements.

The post-performance *Traviata* party held at Betty McCollister's was also a great success. This is the third year for such an event and will become a classic affair. There was plenty of food and drink, all well prepared by the Supers attending. Everyone had a good time. We enjoyed startling Michele Crider with the unannounced recording of a Florence Foster Jenkins recital (you don't know who she is?—you have to be too young).

Michele Crider is currently in Zurich already engaged in her singing studies and work. Before she flew off to Zurich she left word with us expressing her deep appreciation and pleasure for the help the Supers provided at the reception following her benefit recital at the First Presbyterian Church in Iowa City. We all enjoyed hearing her then despite the deficiency in the sound of the piano.

Tom Besgrove will be Mona Shaw's new assistant in the Music Public Relations Office for the coming year. Tom has a B.F.A. in art and is an amateur photographer and promises to be a welcome addition to the P.R. staff.

Your editor was elected to the Board of Directors of the Cedar Rapids Symphony.

Reminders

Please try to attend the first meeting of the year, Tuesday, September 22nd at 6:45 p.m. (sharp). The meeting is on a Tuesday rather than Monday because of the Yo Yo Ma concert in Hancher. The early starting time is because of the last minute scheduling of a piano recital in Clapp Recital at 8:00 p.m. that evening. Consequently the meeting will also end at 7:45 sharp for those attending the recital. The recital will feature renowned Russian pianist Natasha Ivanina. Ms. Ivanina won practically every recognition available in the USSR before immigrating to the U.S. this past year. The recital is free.

This meeting will be an important one in which the plans for the year will be made and activities detailed. This is the time to volunteer for work in the various committees and to assume some leadership in them by offering yourself for such a role. You will meet other Supers, new and old, staff of the Opera Theater and get some first hand information about the plans for the Spring opera.

NEXT MEETING: TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 22ND, 6:45 PM MUSIC LOUNGE (ROOM 1028)

IMPORTANT NUMBERS

Arthur Canter, 338-1217, Newsletter

Miriam Canter, 338-1217, Hospitality

Shirley Harrison, 337-5729, Costumes

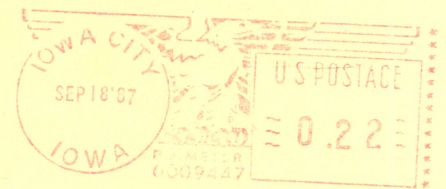
Mary Wall, 338-2618, Scenery

Dwight Sump, 335-1153, Opera Production Manager

Mona Shaw, 335-1667, Public Relation-School of Music

Margaret Wenk, 335-2988, Opera Designer

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