

Entr'acte

The Opera
Supers of
Iowa City
Newsletter

Volume VI, Number 4

July 1991

Editor: Arthur Canter, 30 Brookfield Dr., Iowa City, IA 52245

Next Meeting: 7:00 p.m., July 2, 1991, Room 1028 (Lounge), Music Building

Letter from the Editor:

The summer production of Verdi's *Il Trovatore* will be a fund-raising occasion. There will be various levels of patron ticket seating. The portion of the patron ticket price above the regular price will go into the School of Music Opportunity Fund and thus is tax-deductible. Hopefully, there will be enough tickets sold altogether at the regular price to meet the costs of production and then some.

Readers are reminded that costs of Performing Arts Units of the University are not covered by budgets of the various academic departments involved (music, theater, dance, fine arts). Consider the situation for the School of Music. Most of its performances do not require tickets, and expenses must be met by the Department. If you think the University Symphony gets to use Hancher Auditorium free just because it is one University unit using another, you are living in a dream world. The expenses have to be budgeted or earned. In some universities, there are ticket charges for performances by their school orchestra, faculty recitals, etc. Budgets are limited. Donations, gifts, bequests and grants can make up the differences.

To get talented music students who will be the performers, there is a need to be able to offer financial assistance to meet competition from other schools. The Athletic Department has scholarships available in order to attract talent. That money comes from donations and earnings. You don't get into Iowa football and basketball games free.

The University Hospitals meet much of the need for all their endeavors through earnings, grants and gifts. No one gets free medical care. Even the case of the so-called "state papers" indigent patient, the county of origin or some state agency pays the bill.

How do we get the money to meet expenses beyond budget for the School of Music? Charge for tickets? Third-party payment? (Now, there is an idea—get a prescription for the healing effect of attending a musical performance and let Blue Cross reimburse the ticket price!) Enlist the aid of the University of Iowa Foundation? That is being done now that Alsatia Mellecker

is Director of Development for the College of Liberal Arts.

What's my point? It is simply this: Give to the local performing arts. Help support the musical offerings of the University. It is a matter of priority, isn't it?

For less than the price (including tips) of dinner for two at a fine restaurant you can make a worthwhile donation. How many times do you go out for dinner and leave tips? Add up the tips. Would that seem to be worth your while as a donation? Would the cost of one night's stay in a big city hotel be a worthwhile donation? Would the price of one visit to a hairdresser be a worthy donation? Would the cost of one six-pack of soft drinks per month for a year add up to a worthy contribution? Only you can answer these questions.

Keep some perspective on what is being asked of you. To repeat, it's a matter of priorities. I know what mine are, you know what yours are, but I will say that I am not impressed by complaints that some people make about being asked to contribute to this or to that.

You like opera? You enjoy music produced here at Iowa? Then, pitch in and help pay for them.

Report of the Meeting of March 11, 1991

Mary Louis Plautz brought us up-to-date on the plans for the "festival" for high school students attending the Shakespeare play and a special performance of the spring opera. Volunteers will be needed to assist the activities. Professor Glass reported on remaining needs for the spring opera. The Strike Party arrangement will proceed under direction of Anna Stranieri. The post-opera potluck will be held at Mary Wall's home Monday, April 22 at 6:00 p.m. Next meeting scheduled for April 8.

Report of the Meeting of April 8, 1991

We were brought up-to-date on the progress with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. A problem that may be created by the new Hancher brochure including next year's opera in its listing was discussed. This has to do with the possibility of choice seats being taken early.

The summer opera will be *Il Trovatore* featuring Michele Crider. Discussion followed on making this

(Continued on next page.)

event a fund-raiser and on possible promotional activities. Mona Shaw is to meet with the new director for fund-raising for the College of Liberal Arts, Alsatia Mellecker. Next meeting set for May 6.

Report of Meeting of May 6, 1991

Much of the meeting focussed upon the University of Iowa Foundation's policies and procedures regarding charges for services for fund-raising help. The rest of the meeting was devoted to *Il Trovatore* ticketing, promotion, brochures, etc. and the role of volunteers from Supers in executing various activities. The meeting adjourned to permit a recital by Missy Brodsky and Kristor Husted, Opera Theater students. They presented a scene from *Rigoletto*. Next meeting was scheduled for June 3.

Report of Meeting of June 3, 1991

We had a large turnout raising the idea of arranging for additional chairs in the Lounge before meeting times. The *Il Trovatore* brochure is ready and copies distributed. Supers will help getting these out to various display locations around the region. Promo activities for *Il Trovatore* were described and discussed. The various gigs by cast members were indicated. The Strike Party will be managed by Anna Stranieri as usual. The potluck will be held on the Saturday between performances, July 27 at 6:00 p.m. at Linda Behrendt's. The next meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, July 2.

The Art (and Mel) of Supernumeraryship, or Always the Twain Shall Meet

There has come to be a tradition in the Spring operas produced by The University of Iowa Opera Theater. Mel Sunshine and Art Canter, active members of Opera supers actually perform on stage. Supernumeraries in our operas come and go. Their numbers vary, but there seems always to be room for at least these two. It has been said by more than one local opera goer, "It can't be a real opera unless Mel and Art are in it."

Do the Super twins sponsor a clique who will wait for their appearance on stage and cheer wildly? No, the truth of the matter is that supernumeraries support the morale of the singers. Supers can form a nucleus which not only gives them a sense of identity but does the same for the chorus and the individual singer.

It all started with the production of *Boris Godunov* when there were a "mighty five" of the Supers who could help thread the different scenes with shifts in as many as four different roles for each. Then came *Così fan Tutte* and *Don Giovanni*, each requiring the services

of those two inimitable "dry musicians," Mel on clarinet and Art on oboe, admonished by Maestro Dixon to "B flat." No sense in advising "C sharp"—neither "musician" could do that without his eyeglasses. Then there was *Carmen* and its need for vendors, gypsies to carry loot, a guide to stumble backstage and advise about the "Village Inn," and gendarmes to follow horses on stage. Who else to make sure the path was clear enough to step on? *Tosca* made its demands upon police agents, assistants for torture and a firing squad to clean things up. Lastly, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* needed its "coneheads" to get the last act through its paces.

Verily, it takes courage, patience and a sense of humor to be a supernumerary in the major opera productions, particularly so if one cannot see well without glasses—backstage darkness creates a condition of near blindness—or one has arthritic joints and must move as if coordinated. Wearing slipper shoes and stubbing a toe backstage before an entry takes courage. Getting an acute foot cramp while kneeling over a "body" on stage and staying put is deserving of a bronze star, a purple heart, or an Oscar for best actor. Will there be roles for the Super twins in *Il Trovatore*? Do you want it to be a real opera?

Parent-child Relationships in Verdi's Operas

In more than half of Verdi's 26 operas, the parent-child relationship plays an important part in the major plot or in a subplot of the drama. In most of these it is the father-daughter theme that provides a key dramatic element. The themes of filial love, hate, loyalty, rejection or jealousy resulting in disastrous consequences are common elements in opera. After all, these are the passions that have commanded the attention of theater audiences since the days of the classical Greek tragedies.

However, it is unusual to find a singularly intense focus upon a disastrous father-daughter relationship in so many operas of one composer. The theme is found in three of Verdi's first four operas. After a hiatus of several years, the theme reappears in seven of the next eleven operas. *Il Trovatore* is the one Verdi opera that turns to the other filial relationship—mother-son. But does it? Mauricio turns out to be a foster child, not the true son of the gypsy mother, Azucena. There is no father-daughter relationship exploited here. Perhaps an unconscious sibling rivalry here, but no father-daughter, or father-son.

Why are there so few intense mother-son relationship themes in opera plots? (I used this as a question for the Met Opera Quiz contest, but it never got accepted.) Except for operas based on the oedipal

relationship, it is hard to find a disastrous mother-son relationship until *Il Trovatore*, and as noted, that turns out to take a special turn away from the theme. Consider, too, that Verdi had an almost obsessive preoccupation with trying to complete an opera based on Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Was this, the epitome of calamity resulting from father-daughter relationships, too much for Verdi to cope with?

How should we explain Verdi's fascination with the father-daughter theme? While Verdi opera analysts make note of the prevalence of the father-daughter theme and its representation by baritone-soprano duets in his operas, there appears to be little in the way of any analysis or explanation of his predilection for the theme. I came across an interesting attempt to explain the matter by a psychoanalyst, Eric A. Plaut, in his published paper, "Father and Daughter in Verdi's Operas," which appeared in *Medical Problems of Performing Artists* in March 1986. While admitting that "psychobiography is a treacherous business," Plaut does offer a rather penetrating and reasonable analysis (if you accept some psychoanalytic premises) of factors in Verdi's life that may account for his apparent preoccupation with fatal consequences of father-daughter relationships. However, the problem in developing a "psychobiography" of Verdi is the paucity of facts about Verdi's childhood and relationship with his parents. Verdi was known to be quite guarded about his childhood except to indicate "it was very hard." The many letters preserved by Verdi contain little reference to his early years. While there have grown many stories about his childhood, these lack documentation and appear to be apocryphal. Plaut takes all this to indicate that Verdi consciously protected his privacy but also repressed his childhood memories. He argues from the facts known about Verdi's family tragedies such as the death of Verdi's sister, the deaths of his two children and his wife in a short span of time early in his career. His mother died when he was 38 (a year before the libretto for *Il Trovatore* was completed). That he had had disputes with his father over the years also appears to be true. However, the role these experiences played in the context of his own deficiencies in sensitizing Verdi to the concept of a "flawed" father remains a matter of conjecture.

Then what about the sources and determinants of the libretti which contain the development in parent-child themes used by Verdi? It does seem that he was the master in choosing his libretto, if not always the librettist. Choices may have been shaped in some part by availability of voices for the parts desired, for Verdi was known to favor specific singers for certain roles. Also, is there something about the low male voice (usually baritone) and high female (soprano) combination that inspired Verdi to father-daughter duets? Mother-son duets could be mezzo soprano-tenor

duets, but were they not as attractive to Verdi? Verdi's special use of the baritone voice in all his operas in itself has been a topic for study. Just as there is a Wagnerian tenor, there is a Verdi baritone. His operas are rich with baritone-tenor duets, but these are commonly favored combinations in all grand opera. With all the foregoing factors, we still would be hard pressed to explain Verdi's predilection for father-daughter disasters.

The Verdi baritone—this brings us back to *Il Trovatore*. There is a major baritone role in the opera, the Count di Luna, but take a closer look at the "mother" role—the gypsy Azucena, sung by a mezzo. Azucena is central to the opera. In fact, Verdi had considered retitling the work Azucena. As I listen to the opera over and over again I find it easy to imagine the Azucena role being reworked into a typical Verdi baritone singing the same arias but now the foster father! Perhaps Verdi was being consistent after all. He did not completely depart from the father-daughter relationship in *Il Trovatore*. He merely used the mezzo and tenor roles to give us a sort of reversed gender equivalent of the father-daughter relationship that was to end in disaster for both.

We will have to wait for someone to compose an opera to a libretto based on Hitchcock's film *Psycho* to fit the mother-son disaster theme.

New Director at School of Music

Music educator, violinist, and conductor, David Nelson will take the helm as director of the U.I. School of Music on July 1. Nelson is coming to Iowa from the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Music where he has been director. He received Bachelor's and Master's degrees from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the doctorate in music education from the University of Texas at Austin.

As a performer, Nelson has played with the Omaha Symphony Orchestra, the Nashville and Owensboro (Ky.) symphonies, the Des Moines Summer Opera Orchestra, and the Madison (Wis.) Symphony Orchestra. He has played chamber music with the Pro Arte Quartet, L'Ensemble Music Arte in Montreal, and the Murray State University Piano Trio. Nelson has conducted the University of Wisconsin String Orchestra, the Madison Symphony Orchestra, and the Wisconsin Youth Symphony Orchestras. Nelson's first performance appearance at the U.I. will be as violinist with the U.I. Symphony Orchestra in U.I. Opera Theater's *Il Trovatore*.

Nelson replaces interim director John Hill. Marilyn Somville left the post in June 1990 to become dean of the Mason Gross School of Fine Arts, Rutgers University, New Jersey.

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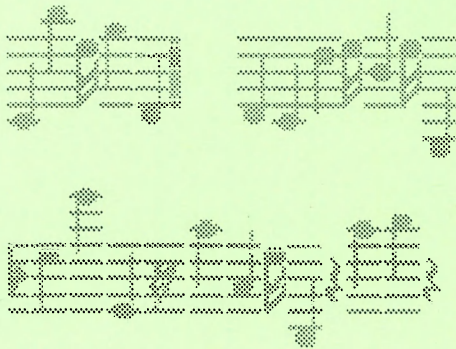
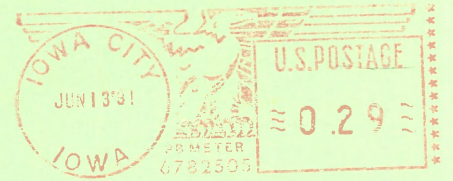
IMPORTANT NUMBERS

Next Meeting:

Tuesday, July 2nd at
7:00 p.m. in the Lounge
(Room 1028) of the Mu-
sic Building.

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
DAVID NELSON (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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