

# Entr'acte

The Opera  
Supers of  
Iowa City  
Newsletter

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## Letter from the Editor

It has been a long time since the last issue of the newsletter and I feel compelled to let you know what is going on. This is not in the way of a confession nor an apology but it is a personal matter that has nothing to do with the School of Music and the support given to the newsletter. All I can tell you is that I have been caught up in a number of things that have diverted my attention. There have been changes in me and events outside of me that have contributed to my concern about continuing as editor of *Entr'acte*. I brought up the question of someone else taking over the newsletter at least two years ago.

It has been twelve years since I took on this role. When I started I was full of ideas. I had the interest and the time. I was enthusiastic about the challenges offered by the task. However, I have reached a stage when I no longer have the same degree of enthusiasm and lack the drive for this venture. Therefore it is time for a change and for the Supers to have a new voice for *Entr'acte*, if the newsletter is continued. I can contribute articles or material from time to time, as can any Super.

During my tenure as editor I have strayed widely from the typical *newsletter*-type of format in most of the issues and perhaps this approach may have deterred someone else from stepping forward to take on the role. A new editor should not try to duplicate what I have done, but rather to follow whatever path is suited to that person and meets the interests of the Supers.

—Arthur Canter

## Reflections on the Past and Current Issues

The recent opera performances of Puccini's *Suor Angelica* and *Gianni Schicci* were artistically successful but played to audiences that barely took up half the main floor of Hancher Auditorium (about 500 to 600 for each performance). How many times have I made some remark like this following the Spring opera? But, we can look at it this way: if a total of 1,000 people from around Iowa City attended the opera (both days combined), this meant that it drew approximately 2% of the adult population in the area, despite limited publicity (dictated by limited budgetary resources). Do you think that the big cities, the metropolises, that have big opera houses putting on performances by professionals, and all the hoopla and publicity they can afford to spend to draw attention to their seasons, attract more than 2% of the adult population in their catchment areas? (Hint, 2% of 1 million is 20,000).

Opera is just not a popular form of entertainment except with opera mavens or aficionados like the Supers. It never was popular with the general public in this country, even in the past when there was less competition from other entertaining arts. But, here in Iowa City, of all places, you would say, it should be appealing to more people. After all, is this not a community that has a high proportion of scholars, artists of all kinds, and college students, all of whom are eager to get an education and broaden their horizons?—Forgive the sarcasm.

Looking back one can probably detect a pattern in audience attendance at the university operas. When the opera was one of the "war horses", (*Tosca*, *Butterfly* or *La Bohème*) or had children and animals (*Carmen*, *Cunning Little Vixen*) we got larger audiences. However, we never

had full houses for opera put on in Hancher even after considerable publicity. *Boris Godunov*, which was widely touted and advertised to feature Simon Estes, did not fill Hancher for the three performances. However, it drew well, even though Estes canceled out shortly before the first performance. It did have a huge cast, including children and members of the community as supernumeraries, all of whom had relatives and friends who came to see them perform.

As I pointed out above, why should we expect to draw enough people to fill Hancher for an opera? Consider the size of this community and the fact that opera is *not* a popular event, especially with persons under the age of 50 — college students, faculty and all. What would draw more people? The "three tenors" (perhaps one of them?), or a cast featuring other prominent singers known to the lay public because of appearances on television (other than in opera), or write-ups in the popular press? This problem is analogous to the one that faces Wally Chappell when he books classical music soloists (instrumental or voice) or classical music ensembles for Hancher. The lesser known artists, no matter how accomplished musicians they may be, just do not draw large audiences in this community. It's not only opera that Iowa City audiences are staying away from, it is also classical music events and of course, the students, on the whole, avoid both as if they were plagues.

One solution to the empty-hall syndrome is to stage the operas in a smaller hall such as Clapp. Then we'll get capacity or near capacity audiences. That is the way it was when our University Opera Theater performances were put on in Macbride Hall before the creation of Hancher Auditorium. The point is that much of so-called "grand opera" does not need a grand auditorium, unless it involves putting on a spectacle as the Triumphal March scene in *Aida* or some magnificent ballroom scene that will not go over well if scaled down. Such spectacles are also *very* expensive. *Boris Godunov* put us in debt for several years. A community cannot maintain a professional quality grand opera program without considerable resources of money that have to come from subsidies, grants, donations, etc. Ticket sales never support such ventures. So how is a university in a small city, in a low population state with only few major corporations going to support opera? Colleagues call attention to Indiana University as a model, but fail to remind themselves, if they know, that Indiana University is in a larger city than Iowa City, near a major metropolis (Indianapolis) with much corporate wealth. Also, Indiana University has been fortunate to have a multi-million endowment for its College of Music (under its own Dean). The interest alone from such an endowment would help pay the costs of several fully staged and costumed operas.

Let us look closer to home. Des Moines Metro puts its operas on in a small house located on the Simpson College campus (The Blank Theater). Its size fails to deter them from putting on almost any opera. However, Metro is a *professional* company, not a component of Simpson College., even though its director is on the Simpson faculty. Des Moines Metro Opera has an endowment and a list of subscribers, donors and guarantors from corporations, and individuals around the greater Des Moines area. It has to or it would go broke. Do you know what? Despite the high quality of performances and productions they do not consistently have full houses. The attendance may vary according to the specific opera offered but here we are referring to a repertory of three operas generally attended by the same ticket holder to all three. So actual attendance has to be figured by the number of rounds of the three opera performances. Let us say they put on five rounds, i.e. five performances of each opera. The Blank theater seats about 500 (it is about the size of Mabie Theater) Let us be liberal and say that 400 of the audience are season ticket holders, i.e. they attend all three operas of the repertory. Thus for five rounds there are 2000 ticket holders, and for the total of 15 performances we have 100 new admissions each time, giving us 1500 more persons. This gives us an estimate of the total number of individuals attending a summer season of Des Moines Metro to be around 3500! The count here is an estimate of individuals not tickets sold because some individuals buy into more than one performance—in statistics we call this independence of events. So, using this liberal figure, I am sure it is an overestimate, I estimate that Des Moines Metro opera performs before 3500 different

persons each summer. Let me be even bolder and estimate that 4500 different persons get to attend Metro performances. In a catchment area that includes Polk, Story and Warren counties and draws from Iowa City and Cedar Rapids, of at least 300,000 adults, the suggestion is that less than 2% of the entertainment-going population in mid-Iowa are likely to attend a well-balanced, well-organized, well-endowed and well-performed professional opera season in an easily accessible, modern theater. The cost of the tickets would be considered moderate and comparable to the price of most current professional theater productions in this part of the country. So what is new? Do you know what? I have not observed many students in the audiences of the Metro opera that I have attended.

As most everywhere, the population attending fine-arts music events (classical and operatic) is aging. Where do we go from here?

### **Report of Activities**

Since last summer there have been five or six meetings, each attended by less than 20 members. Generally there is a core of about 10 persons who attend almost every meeting. The lower overall attendance reflects a number of things. For one, it is difficult not to conflict with meeting times of the choral groups to which a number of Supers belong. For another there seems to have been an increase in other types of competing events and situations that interfered with attendance. Then there was the problem late in the year to find a suitable meeting room as the Lounge has been undergoing conversion into a computer center. The usual activities of planning for and carrying out the "Strike Party" and the Supers Potluck, and reports on who is singing what and where, have taken place. However, there is little to report on activities having direct bearing on the involvement of Supers in the operas put on by the University Opera Theater.

### **The Forthcoming Meeting of the Supers**

The situations described above and the fact that there are some changes that will affect activities and responsibilities of Supers makes it mandatory that our next meeting on **Monday, June 16** be devoted to a discussion of the future of Opera Supers. For example, the usual Strike Party, a call for food for the students who have to remain to take down the sets after the last opera performance will have to change. Why? The take-down (strikes) of stage settings are to be carried out by paid workers. It appears that this new policy will be applied to both Hancher and Clapp staged events. There seems to be less demand for Supers to be involved in activities surrounding opera staging and performances. At the same time there is the opportunity for members of our group who are interested to expand support activities for School of Music functions other than opera. For example some of us have assisted with book and record sales to benefit the Rita Benton Music Library in the past and this will be coming up again this year. In the past some of us have assisted in receptions for various Music School functions. Then there is the perennial problem of what kinds of assistance we can appropriately offer in publicizing events such as opera, student recitals, Opera Workshop, etc. Some say we need new blood. We always do, but not to bleed over but rather to be productive. Can we get students and other young members of the community involved in Supers? What should we do about a newsletter? There are problems and questions. An agenda will be set in this context. The important thing is for many of you to come to the meeting. We need more than the usual core of 12-16 members who usually attend the majority of meetings.

### **Reminders**

The next meeting of the Opera Supers is scheduled for **Monday, June 16 at 7:00 P.M.** Please note that the meeting will be held in a new location: **Room 1083** (replaces the old student lounge) in the Voxman Music Building. Please come. This is an important meeting for all.

*The Mikado* will be the summer offering by the University Opera Theater. Dates of performances are: **Friday night, July 25** and **Sunday matinee, July 27, in Clapp Recital Hall.**

**Take Note:**

**Next meeting: June 16, 7:00 P.M., Room 1083, Voxman Music Building**

**Summer opera: *The Mikado*. July 25 and July 27.**

**Supers Potluck: July 26**

**The University of Iowa  
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