



Entr'acte

The Opera
Supers of
Iowa City
Newsletter

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Letter from the Editor

This *Entr'acte* contains material provided by two of our Supers. One is a commentary from Betty McCollister who picks up on the topic of diminishing attendance at concert events, especially the inability to get replacements from the younger generations. The other is a report from Mary Wall on her attending Michele Crider's debut at La Scala. I hope they will inspire other Supers to submit material for *Entr'acte*. I can't promise to always include everything and I may feel compelled to edit the material. But in the case of Betty and Mary, I thought it best to let you enjoy the unedited flavor of their distinctive styles (except for paragraphination, to save space). The titles are theirs. Also, the two reports are timely and in effect give me a vacation from researching and writing material for *Entr'acte*. Thank you Betty and Mary.

—Arthur Canter

Report of Meetings and Activities

There have been two meetings of the Supers since the last report in *Entr'acte*. The meeting of Monday March 27 was in room 1027 instead of the Lounge of the Music Building. Business centered on the forthcoming potluck and the strike-party. Supers will assist in the reception following the Honors Convocation, May 2nd. The major portion of the meeting was turned over to Mary Wall who in her own inimitable way reported on the trip to Italy to attend Michele Crider's debut at La Scala. The essence of her report is included in this issue of *Entr'acte*. The meeting of April 17 also took place in room 1027 as the Lounge had to be used for other purposes. The disadvantage to the Supers in meeting in a classroom is the loss of intimacy and atmosphere for socializing at the end of the meeting that is afforded by the Lounge. During the meeting the Supers were advised of M.L. Huit's recovery from by-pass surgery and all signed a card wishing him well. Details of the Pot Luck and the Honors Convocation events brought up in the March meeting were discussed in more detail. The reception for the latter will take place in the lobby of Clapp Hall. Professor Glass provided information about the program of the May 7 recital to be given by four students from the Opera Scenes class. The remainder of the meeting was taken up with discussion of the ever-present concerns about the lack of attention given to serious music events by the *Daily Iowan* and the reasons for this. Attention is called to the letter from Betty McCollister that follows. The next meeting was set for Tuesday June 13.

What's The Answer to Poor Attendance? Is There One?

Art Canter's comments in the September 1994 *Entr'acte*, and his follow-ups in the next issue, on poor attendance at the university's musical events prompted me furiously to think about the problem myself and to discuss it with friends on the east and west coasts.

As Art said, this phenomenon is not limited to Iowa City, nor to campus events. George Dreyfus, long-time violinist with the Philadelphia Orchestra, reports the same thing there. The Friday afternoon concerts have for years been attended mostly by elderly ladies from the Main Line. Audiences at Saratoga, where the orchestra performs every August, are aging.

Same out west. In Los Angeles last month, my sister and brother-in-law and I went to a chamber music concert. This particular hall, not terribly large, was pretty well filled with people. But Ann recognized many of them as fellow chamber musicians, and most heads of hair were either white or dyed. That same week, a promising and highly acclaimed young singer from (I think) Germany appeared at a facility which seats about 400. To the consternation of all, no more than 100 turned out for a recital that should have had SRO.

Can "hooks" undo this spreading lack of interest? Maybe, to a degree, but not necessarily. We may have to look at other possibilities. Tastes change. How many *lieder* recitals are there in America nowadays? And how popular are they?

Ways of life change as well. They have changed drastically in my lifetime, not least because women who hold down jobs must play catch-up on weekends, which leaves little time for leisure activity. And people change. Some of us have poor night vision in our declining years. Some of us wake up early and therefore hit the sack early. I personally find it difficult to be at any kind of assembly after nine p.m.

Tastes change, too. I'd make quite an effort for any of my favorites (Meistersinger, Boris Godunov, anything by Mozart, Puccini's best) but not much for, say, Donizetti or Massenet.

Here's a big point: opera is in general an acquired taste, and it demands considerable initiative from its fans. You really should be able to read musical scores and several languages. I already knew German and some French when my enthusiasm arose, and I took the trouble to pick up some Italian and even learned the Russian alphabet so I could follow my Chaliapin records. I've followed Saturday afternoon performances on the vocal scores, memorized great swatches of my favorites, and studied orchestral scores--and done lots of reading. To an opera buff, the time and effort this sort of thing requires are amply rewarded. But opera is not really a spectator sport. It should not be heard passively.

That raises the question of whether the constant assault of wallpaper music, which has to be tuned out, and the ubiquitous noise our technology generates have deadened us. When we so habitually, in self-defense, armor ourselves against noise, might this numb receptivity when it's needed?

Can we raise a new generation? That calls for study. Let's hope so. But despite fine music programs in the schools, primarily instrumental, and despite regular appearances by local opera troupes in schools where they stage abridged, English-language versions of opera, the interest doesn't seem to be there.

So far, I have no answers, only questions. Art touched on the shorter attention spans and some naivete about opera etiquette, which should be factored in. One suggestion: the concert versions that the Cedar Rapids Symphony has offered from time to time have worked well and drawn good-sized and enthusiastic audiences. Is this something to consider?

In the end, opera will survive somehow. It's too richly alive not to. But we do need to find ways to ensure its survival. —Betty McCollister

How Do You Describe a Trip to a Dream, Unique, Wondrous and Ecstatic?

After five fabulous days in Rome David and Jean Funk, Patrick Nefzger and I took a train to Milan Monday February 27, 1995. That evening we awaited Michele Crider and her Zurich friend, Yvonne Gamsrizgler, at the Galleria. Michele approached, elegant and exuberant in a black coat with black fur around the neckline. There was no trace of nervousness in this lovely midwestern lady about to make her debut at the toughest opera house in the world. We hugged, talked, laughed, and ate pizza until half-past midnight. I was flying. We arranged to meet Yvonne the next evening, opening night, in front of the Teatro alla Scala, where we would all go backstage afterwards, and then to dinner. I told Yvonne I would be the one in the purple dress.

Tuesday afternoon at a flower kiosk Jean and I bought a gorgeous double bouquet of purple, yellow, hot-pink and white freesias to take to Michele from the Opera Supers. Yvonne had told me not to have flowers sent since it would be terribly expensive and unreliable, but to take them instead. So back at our hotel I put the bouquet in water temporarily, in a plastic "Burghy" cup I had purloined for the purpose. We bathed, showered and polished. I wore my long purple gown with the elasticized rows of gold sequins at the neck and the wrists. Patrick looked debonair in his tuxedo.

In the crowd outside La Scala a lady came up to me asking how to get a ticket and offering to pay "almost anything". I don't know how to get tickets to La Scala. I went through plans A, B, C, D, E and finally got to plan M--Michele--which worked. And I was not going to offer the lady my ticket, for there was no price in the entire universe adequate to wrest it from me!

Three large chandeliers gave a magnificence to the gilt on the tall ivory-colored fluted columns in the lobby of La Scala. Yvonne introduced us to Tony Kay, Michele's manager, and another couple, Michael and Veronica, who had come down from Zurich to hear Michele sing. Those three, along with Dave, Jean and Patrick were all sharing a box on the fourth tier near the center, while, wonder of wonders, Yvonne and I were to be in the Royal Box. But in the lobby Yvonne turned to me and said, "You're not wearing purple, are you? You can't wear purple to La

Yvonne turned to me and said, "You're not wearing purple, are you? You can't wear purple to La Scala." "Why not?" "It's bad luck." It seemed to me to be worse luck to take off my purple dress and just wear my long black slip, so I decided to be happy in purple.

The Prologue began with a very grand chorus in silver rows, each member with a large silver X shoulder to hips. There was a huge background circle of lights with central projections of clouds, light motion and space travel. The beautiful singing was effectively offset by Mefistofele's discomfort with the angels.

Michele's first appearance was in Act II, Scene 1 which had an awkward set of three ceiling-high circles across the stage near the front. Faust and Margherita (Michele) sing while coming through the left circle, walk in front of the middle circle and retreat through the right circle as the chaperone and Mefistofele come forward on the left, repeating the cycle. On the first pass-through Michele's long dress caught on the circle but she gracefully freed herself. The audience was not pleased with this scene and when the curtain came down there were some boos. Michele did not take a curtain call with the other three singers. Worried, Yvonne turned to me and said "Should we go backstage to see her?" "Are we allowed to?" "I'm worried about her." "So am I. Let's go." So we raced down winding steps, along corridors, under pipes, around and up some steps. I vaguely wondered if other cast members perceived my purple as unlucky but I didn't have time to chase the thought. And there we were at Dressing Room Number One, temporary home to dressing, pacing, waiting divas throughout La Scala history. Michele was sitting on the piano bench, composed and delighted to see us. Maestro Muti paged her, inquiring why she did not take a curtain call. Somewhat surprised and very calm, Michele replied that they had not rehearsed it and she had simply changed costumes for the next scene. And as Michele warmed up we retraced our trail down, under, through and back up to our box.

The rest of the opera went splendidly. During one intermission we went into La Scala Museum whose highlights to me were three of Verdi's pianos, a death mask of Verdi and one of Wagner, some Maria Callas memorabilia, portraits and costumes. The museum was full of musical mementos, awesome and numerous. The connecting upstairs lounge off the third floor echoes the elegance of the downstairs lobby: chandeliers, gilt columns, red carpets, space and glory.

How many curtain calls? Maybe ten. Long-stemmed carnations tumbled to the stage from the top tiers as people stood and applauded. It was truly thrilling.

We all met and tramped off into the turning steps and corridors of the backstage structure to Michele's wood-paneled dressing room: a piano, a wardrobe, a back room with sink and dressing table and a corridor with two lavatory compartments. Michele had an unopened bouquet of white lilies, another of smaller white flowers, but none of the curtain-call carnations. I gave her the colorful Opera Supers flowers with the card I had bought in Hancher Showcase on which I wrote "We are so very proud of you. Congratulations and love, Opera Supers." Michele was extremely touched by this, and sends her love to all the Opera Supers.

Yvonne and I helped her change into "civilian" clothes while the others waited outside in the corridor which had about six chairs. And when we came out there were people waiting for her autograph, her photograph, and to praise her with great good wishes.

Finally, we trailed single file carrying her bouquets through more corridors and passageways behind scenery to the performers' exit where there were more people waiting with congratulations, cameras and ball point pens.

At half-past midnight we arrived at the restaurant near the Galleria. Upon Michele's entrance the patrons and staff stood and applauded. During dinner there were more congratulations and autographs. Michele led us in singing "Happy Birthday" to Patrick. We dined, we rejoiced, we were sublime, and I decided purple is definitely not unlucky.

The next day I met Michele and Yvonne. We went to a cafe behind the glorious drip-castle-like Gothic Milan Duomo. We drank cafe-latte on the second floor looking out over the crowd, laughing, talking, enjoying. Michele is gracious, warm and caring.

Alas, I had to leave for Florence and the next part of our trip. We said loving good-byes. I was filled with joy and awe about having lived a dream unique, wondrous and ecstatic.

—Mary W. Wall

Miscellaneous Notes and Reminders

In future issues of *Entr'acte* watch for synopses of one of the following infamous operas: *Hydrox et Oreo* by Christoph Willibald von Gummybear; *Das Volkswagen* by Richard Sauerkraut; *Un ballo in mascara*, by Giuseppe Calzone; *Alexander Pesky* by Modest Stolichnaya; *Filet Mignon* by Jules Bassinet. Mel Sunshine has researched them for us.

Opera on KSUI: If you missed the semi-staged performances of Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio* put on by the Cedar Rapids Symphony Orchestra in March you can hear the CRSO production on KSUI, **May 21**, beginning at 7:00 P.M.

June 10. KSUI will put on Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*, featuring Hadley, Ramey, and Ruth Svenson. The broadcast begins at 12:30 P.M.

June 24. Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, with Samuel Ramey in the title role, will be presented in the 1st version of the opera (1868-69). This version has no "Polish Scene" thus no Marina nor Rangoni. This broadcast also begins at 12:30 P.M.

Like to travel? If you miss the broadcast of the *Abduction* and want to see a live performance you can go to Istanbul, Turkey for a performance of the opera by the Scottish Chamber Orchestra and soloists at the International Istanbul Music Festival, June 22 and 24, 1995. On the other hand you can take in opera premieres in June (you don't even have to go to Europe): The Spoleto Festival in Charleston, S.C. is going to put on the American premiere of Henze's *The Prince of Homburg* early in the month. Closer to home you can see the world premiere of Stephen Paulus' *The Woman at Otowi Crossing* put on by the Opera Theater of St. Louis during the third week of June.

Don't forget the summer opera. It will be Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, in English, as usual, but semi-staged (in Mabie Theater) on Friday and Saturday evenings, July 28, 29, and Sunday matinee, July 30.

—Arthur Canter

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