

Entr'acte

The Opera
Supers of
Iowa City
Newsletter

Volume IV, Number 4

February 1989

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

Letter from the Editor

The brief survey, "University of Iowa Opera before 1981," that appeared in the last issue of *Entr'acte* provoked reactions from some of the readers, as I had hoped it would. What with my faulty memory and my dependence upon a single bibliographical source that only indirectly was concerned with opera productions at Iowa, I knew there were omissions in my list. Now I have heard about a number of them as well as about the "old days" of opera in MacBride Hall auditorium. I do remember what it was like then—the limitations in space, facilities, monies, etc. Since the survey, I have learned of a set of archival material on opera at Iowa that was easily accessible had I known about it, or even asked. I failed to go back before 1951, not trusting my memory. Anyway, the purpose of my survey was to remind the readers that the University of Iowa opera performances do have a history before 1981 and go back before Hancher Auditorium and Clapp Recital Hall were built. Remember the visits by the touring Boris Goldowsky ensembles in the Iowa Memorial Union? Looking over the list that I presented in *Entr'acte* should remind us that we have had a tradition in providing the opportunity for "world premiere" performances of operas by local and regional composers, as well as producing the less familiar and little-known works of the past. It would be a shame if we were to be deterred by fears of not filling such a large house as Hancher Auditorium, or the costs of staging in that hall, and break this tradition. If Clapp Recital Hall lacks the facilities for a full stage production, it still can serve for "semi-staged" or concert performances of an opera. It does have a pit and, despite *DI* student reviewers, Clapp is not *dank*—bleak maybe, but not *dank*! ■

January 16 Meeting Report

There was a large turnout for the meeting, which was quite gratifying considering the date and time conflict with other demands upon many members. It is noted that the Supers are a remarkable group in that so many will call in to advise us of their inability to attend a specific meeting. That is dedication! The

meeting was taken up with details about planning for promotional events for *Carmen*. Beaumont Glass told the group about aspects of the production, needs for chorus, especially children, and supernumeraries. He also announced the cast for the performances, and invited the Supers who want to hear Philip Koffron, who is the understudy for Dennis Peterson as Don Jose, to attend the Thursday, April 20th dress rehearsal. Chairpersons volunteering to direct the Strike Party food operations are Nadine Hardy, Doris Eckert and Ann Tanna. The post-performance Pot Luck will be Monday, April 24th, at 6:00 p.m. at Mary Wall's, 1658 Ridge Road. Sales volunteers for both opera performances will be needed. Several Supers volunteered to assist Mona Shaw in the mailing of the School of Music calendar. The meeting adjourned at 8:30 p.m. ■

Georges Bizet, a Biographical Sketch

What do Purcell, von Weber, Mozart, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Chopin, and Gershwin have in common with Bizet? They all failed to reach their 40th birthday. If you were to ask what major musical work each is remembered for, probably you would receive a variety of responses for all but Bizet. In his case the most likely answer would be his opera *Carmen*. Yet, in his short life Bizet began work on at least 28 operas, many never completed, and of those completed, only a few published. He also wrote three symphonies, incidental music to a play (*L'Arlésienne*), some other orchestral pieces, more than 18 pieces for keyboard, 42 songs other than for parts of dramatic works, a number of cantatas, and other vocal or choral works, half of which were never finished, let alone published. He had received the Prix de Rome for several of his works which also were never published. What kind of man was this who failed to complete many of his works, did not push for publication of others, and is remembered chiefly for an opera that shocked and even alienated much of the Parisian public when it was premiered in 1875, three months before the composer's death?

(Continued on next page.)

(Bizet, cont.)

Georges Bizet was born in Paris on October 25, 1838. His parents were musicians—his father a singing teacher and his mother a gifted pianist. He showed his musical talent early and was admitted to the Conservatory before his eleventh birthday. His counterpoint class was often taught by Charles Gounod, the son-in-law of its aged regular teacher, Zimmerman. Later he moved into Fromental Halévy's composition class. Bizet proved to be a brilliant piano student and began composing songs and piano pieces at an early age. He wrote his Symphony in C major before he was seventeen, a piece only discovered and performed for the first time in 1935!

In 1865 Bizet tried for the Prix de Rome, the highest honor France conferred on young artists, with his cantata, *David*, and won second prize. A year later he was the first-place winner of the Prix de Rome for a cantata, *Clovis et Clotilde*, which gave him a five-year annual stipend. This prize required him to submit at least one work each year to the music section of the Academie des Beaux-Arts in Paris. In Bizet's time the first-place winners of the Prix de Rome tended to use the five-year stipend for two years in Rome, followed by one year in Germany and two in Paris. However, Bizet spent the first *three* years in Rome, which were probably the happiest of his life despite his acknowledged contempt for Italians. It was in Rome that Bizet met Ernest Guiraud, the 1859 Prix de Rome winner. The two became lifelong friends.

The most important of Bizet's Roman compositions was the opera *Don Procopio*, an Italian comedy along the lines of Donizetti's *Don Pasquale*. It was about this time that he began to feel guilty and dissatisfied with himself for writing what he considered light-hearted music with such ease and communicated his concerns in a letter to Gounod. He was determined to try to follow the example of Gounod in his composition and started and abandoned many musical compositions, apparently unable to meet his own expectations. He left Rome in 1860 and with Guiraud toured through Northern Italy to Venice where he received news of his mother's illness and hurried home to Paris. (Does this make you think of Don Jose having to hurry back to his ill mother?) His mother died a year later.

Bizet remained in and around Paris working on a number of compositions and assisting Gounod. In April, 1863, as a Prix de Rome winner, he contracted to compose a three-act opera to the libretto for *The Pearl Fishers* (originally entitled *Leila*) and had it ready for its first performance in September of that year. The work was considered a moderate success and has been noted to resemble the works of

Gounod, Verdi, and even Mendelssohn in some of its passages. His time began to be taken up by "hack-work" for publishers and piano lessons, which he found financially but not musically rewarding.

The Theater Lyrique commissioned him for an opera to a libretto based on Walter Scott's *The Fair Maid of Perth*, which had its first performance on December 26, 1867. It was well received except for a scathing criticism in *Le Temps* with which, interestingly enough, Bizet was inclined to agree. He wrote the critic, pledging himself to abandon henceforth "the school of *flonflons*, trills and falsehood." He was now thirty years of age and had not achieved what he wanted, nor had he accomplished anything that would be recognized convincingly as meeting the bright potential suggested by his early successes. He had been pressed to earn a living, he had no coherent philosophy of life, and he repeatedly abandoned work on projects which initially filled him with enthusiasm. His letters to his friend and pupil, Edmond Galabert, the son of the publisher Galabert, reveal his self-doubts, his self-questioning and philosophical speculation. The letters give the impression of a cynical Bizet whose romantic inclinations made him feel guilty.

A change in Bizet's personal life came about when he married Geneviève Halévy, daughter of his old composition master, on June 3, 1869. After his marriage he settled with his wife in a house shared with some of her relatives, including Ludovic Halévy, the librettist well-known for his collaborations with Henri Meilhac for the operettas of Offenbach. He worked on libretti given him by the Opera Comique, one of which, *Djamileh*, was performed. It failed miserably, although Saint-Saens noted that its music was highly original. The score of *Djamileh* as a piece of music was favored later by Mahler.

By 1871 Bizet expressed confidence in a letter to Galabert "of the absolute certainty of having found my path." He announced in this same letter that he had a new commission from the Opera Comique for a three-act opera to a libretto by Halévy and Meilhac, noting that the work would be "with a gaiety that permits style." He was referring to *Carmen*.

Bizet's son, Jacques, was born on the 19th of July, 1872. In October of the same year Daudet's play, *L'Arlésienne*, with incidental music by Bizet was produced at the Vaudville. The theatrical performance of the music was a dismal failure, but Bizet rescored selections of the music into an orchestral suite which became an immediate success only six weeks later. He needed only a single, successful large-scale work to establish himself as a leading composer in France. *Carmen* was to be the work he was counting on. It was finally produced on the 3rd of March, 1875, after

many revisions and disagreements with his librettists who attempted to modify the realism of Merimée's story to suit Parisian tastes.

At the end of March, Bizet became seriously ill with an acute flare-up of the chronic throat ailment he had suffered since an infection acquired as a student in Rome. He developed high fever, pain, depressed mood, episodic attacks of rheumatism, but had partial recovery. However, he suffered a severe heart attack on June 1. He seemed to have recovered symptomatically, but on the 3rd of June, 1875, he had a second heart attack of equal severity, and by the time the doctor arrived he lost consciousness and died.

The day before his death Bizet had signed a contract for a production of *Carmen* at Vienna. This took place on the 23rd of October in a version for which his friend from student days in Rome, Guiraud, replaced the spoken dialogue of the Opera Comique version with recitatives. The popularity of *Carmen* dates from this Vienna production. ■

Advice to Would-be Composers and Musicians from Bizet

"Let yourself go, aim at the emotions, avoid dryness, don't turn up your nose at the sensuousness... Let us have fantasy, boldness, unexpectedness, enchantment--above all, tenderness, morbidezza!"

[From a letter to Edmond Galabert as part of lessons given by correspondence, 1865--harbinger of *Carmen*?]

Bizet urged his pupil to study Mozart's and von Weber's operas and to aim at emotional expressiveness, sacrificing the strict principles of harmony and counterpoint if necessary.

"...never attach too much importance to the judgment of musicians, even the best. They identify themselves with the work; they see it from a special point of view. They are prejudiced without knowing it and it blinds them."

[1866, from a letter to Antony Choudens.]

In the next issue of *Entr'acte* I shall report on how others regarded Bizet and his work, with particular reference to *Carmen*. These will reflect both negative and positive views. Betty McCollister already has provided me with some of these, and I would appreciate hearing from other readers. ■

CARMEN

April 21, 1989 at 8:00 p.m.

April 23, 1989 at 2:00 p.m.

Order tickets today!

Costume appeal from Shirley Harrison

Have you come across lengths of material you bought for some unknown reason? ...fancy shirts mistakenly bought in Hawaii? ...old hair pieces fashionable in the 60's? ...boots that no longer fit? ...costume jewelry (especially some with bangles or dangling things) that you no longer like? Do you have old curtains, mattress pads, or other bits of household equipment ready to be discarded? Will you be having time in late March, early April to help with final sewing? Now, then, is the time to keep the Opera Workshop's costume department in mind. That clever lady, Eleanore Bowers, can do surprising things with materials which seem to have no future. Do keep us in mind. Call either Eleanore Bowers at 335-1680 or Shirley Harrison at 337-5729. ■

Next Meeting: Monday, April 3, 1989, at 7:00 p.m. in the lounge of the Music Building.

You're invited!

You and your guest are invited to a special reception celebrating the University of Iowa School of Music

Opera Theater's production

CARMEN

on Friday, March tenth, 1989

from four-thirty to six o'clock p.m.

in the main lobby of Iowa State Bank

Clinton and Washington Streets, Iowa City.

A short program will begin at five-fifteen p.m.

R.S.V.P. by March sixth, 335-1667

This reception is sponsored by Claret & Friends Fine Wines, Evans Distributing Company, William Nusser, Jr. of Hands Jewelers, Iowa State Bank, and Opera Supers of Iowa City.

NOTE: If you are available to help with the event above, please contact Linda Behrendt at 337-5342. You are invited in any case, please respect the R.S.V.P. in the invitation.

Important Numbers

Arthur Canter, newsletter, 338-1217
Miriam Canter, hospitality, 338-1217
Shirley Harrison, costumes, 337-5729
Linda Behrendt, publicity, 337-5342
Mary Wall, scenery, 338-2618

Marilyn Somville, Director of the School of Music, 335-1601
Beaumont Glass, Director of Opera Theater, 335-1669
Mona Shaw, Public Relations Coordinator, 335-1667
Dwight Sump, Opera Production Manager, 335-1153
Margaret Wenk, Opera Designer, 335-2988

Next Meeting: Monday, April 3, 1989, 7:00 p.m. in the lounge

The University of Iowa
School of Music
Iowa City, Iowa 52242



Arthur and Miriam Canter
30 Brookfield Dr.
Iowa City, IA 52245

