

# OPERA SUPERS OF IOWA CITY NEWSLETTER

Volume IV, Number 1, September 1988

Editor: Arthur Canter, 30 Brookfield Drive, Iowa City, Iowa 52245

Next meeting: Tuesday, October 18, 1988, 7:00 P.M., Lounge, Music Building

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## Letter from the Editor

It is hard for me to realize that I begin the fourth year of a newsletter for the Opera Supers of Iowa City. When I started I had no idea how long I could go on with the task nor how well it would be received. I am grateful to all of you who have encouraged me to continue the Newsletter despite the limitations inherent in this kind of undertaking on such an informal arrangement. I wish I had the resources and the capabilities to do a professional job, but whatever we have managed to issue appears to meet our needs. I shall keep pressing you for more feedback and for material to include in future issues. I have been remiss in attending to some matters of interest or importance to some of you and I have received censure on that score. As an editor and the chief writer for a newsletter, albeit an amateur venture, I should expect criticism and misunderstandings from readers and "glitches" in the production of the Newsletter itself. In my old age I have not developed a thicker skin, but I still heal fast, so if there are barbs any of you want to cast my way, have at me.

This summer has been hard to take weather-wise, but it has seen the fine and successful production of a delightful opera and the fun participation of many Supers in its promotion and celebration. We can look forward to your participation in and support for a number of events during the 1988-89 season. The big Spring 1989 event will be Bizet's *Carmen*, and we shall begin to orient ourselves to that production. Before that there will be recitals, smaller productions, receptions, etc. to occupy us. As in the past, watch for information in the Newsletter. By the way, have you noticed the proliferation of "newsletters"? You can't just treat these as junk mail circulars if you want to keep abreast of events in Iowa City. Blame it on word processors which make desk-top

publishing available to anyone who has the equipment. I do not own a word processor but have access them. Thus I compose my newsletter the old-fashioned way and hope it gets printed the new-fashioned way. What with newsletters from the School of Music, Keyboard Society, and various University departments, agencies, the Foundation, and most recently the Hancher Guild, perhaps we ought to get busy and choose a unique title for our newsletter after all. I had proposed that we do this and several months ago asked for titles. I have already received some suggestions and hope to make a decision in time for the next issue.

## Report on Recent Supers Activities

The July 16 Promotional was an artistic success. Those readers who were unable to see and hear this event which was held on one of the real hot days of July in the Old Capitol Center missed the fun. It takes dedication and commitment to the cause of opera when Supers get dressed up in heavy costumes, are herded in a crowded van to go from the Music Building to the shopping center, and once there, parade around hoping some uncostumed friend will keep you supplied with cooling beverages, encourage you to keep at it, and have your picture taken. That is what a group of Supers did. They were dressed in costumes from a variety of the operas performed here in the recent past. Thus we had a bearded lady Boris Godunov, eyeglassed feathered owl, some gallants and ladies of the 18th century, etc. Margaret Wenk and Eleanor Bowers had fun picking out costumes to suit the different volunteers. Tom Besgrove and Don Walker have photographs of the costumed Supers. Ask to see them.

The Strike Party workers were well supplied with food and beverage by Supers and thanks again to the committee in charge of that operation.

The post-performance party held at the Behrendts was an outstanding success, well attended by Supers, performers, staff, and faculty. The varieties of Italian foods and wines (including a bottle of Elixir) made a magnificent table. It was a relaxing event topping off a successful summer opera.

### Report of the Meeting of August 30

The group met to hear about forthcoming events and prepare for Supers participation and support activities. The group learned about the three new faculty members of the School of Music--William Hatcher, choral director; Mark Weiger in oboe,; and Uriel Tsachor, visiting professor in piano. Professors Somville and Glass provided details about programs and plans for the future that would involve Supers.

There will be an opera "one-act" on November 19 and 20 (Saturday and Sunday) featuring a program of Viennese operetta (by Lehar, Strauss, Kalman, etc.).

The group received a letter of thanks from Rosemary Lack, who expressed her appreciation for the help given by Supers for the reception following her recent recital.

Larry Eckholt reported on the status of the Estes benefit recital to raise monies for the School of Music Opportunity Fund. Notices regarding this recital and events associated with it will be issued by the University Foundation. The Supers have been hearing about the confusion as to the origins and basis for the Estes recital. Apparently some people in the community have regarded it as a select concert for the few rather than a means of raising funds. Mr. Eckholt helped clarify some of the issues of concern. Volunteers from the Supers will act as greeters for pre- and post-performance events held for patrons and guests.

The group decided to hold a reception honoring new faculty and members of the University Symphony following the concert of September 28. It will be held in Opera Rehearsal Hall, and all Supers are invited.

### Costumes in Operatic Scenes

The history of the use of costumes for opera probably goes back to the development of costume for drama and dance, and it is not my intention to go into this history. In any case, the presentation of operatic

performances with singers in costume was well established by the 17th century and by the late 18th century, costume design and manufacture were a thriving industry for specialized workshops. In fact, many of the owners of the shops that made the scenery and costumes became impresari of dance and opera and played important roles in the organization of an opera season. There was emphasis on the need for "splendor." Everything possible had to be new in the foremost theaters. The leading singers had to be costumed in silk and velvet. It was not unknown for the head of a costume workshop to press for the staging of a particular opera because it would suit what he had available. Before the rise of the *verismo* movement, operas were usually set in times and places that were far removed from the time and place of the audiences. They were mythical dramas, historical events, and reconstructions of classical plays. If a composer dealt with a current theme, he was still likely to present it as occurring in a far-off place or another time period. In many instances this was to placate the censors of the Church or the ruling powers. It was also what the audiences demanded. Given the extravagant nature of much of the emotion and action portrayed in opera, whether serious or comic, it is not surprising that the effect is maintained and enhanced by extravagance and exaggeration in costume. The effect would be lost if the singers were to appear on stage in formal or nondescript as is often done in the modern "concert" performance of opera. Except for the difference in the feel of live sound and its dynamic range, to attend an uncostumed concert performance is like listening to opera on radio or recordings. Present-day opera lovers are used to this, but I wonder how much more attractive to the potential new opera goer it would be to have the first experience not only be an live performance but a **costumed** one. Opera is more than symphony. It is more than cantata or oratorio--none of these must be visual to be enjoyed. Opera is a visual musical art and as such makes its impact or fails in that respect because of costumes and scenery. It would be like attending a properly staged performance, closing your eyes, and listening only to the music (not to sounds of action). Sure, the music is wonderful but that is not

what the total impact of opera is all about. You want to change *Carmen*? You can do it without altering the music or dialogue simply by changing the costumes and/or the setting. That has been done with varying audience responsiveness. It has been done with Wagner's *Ring*. The changes are not always to one's liking, but it is not the music that has been changed. If it is only the music and the vocal lines that matter, why be upset or more pleased because of changes in scenery, setting and/or costume? How would you place the action of the opera in time except by costume? You can get across the idea of **timelessness**, if that is your intent, by the use of costumes that cannot be dated or are from a variety of times. I saw a setting of Shaw's drama on Joan of Arc which had the characters in such a mixture of time-period military costumes that the audience was immediately aware that this could take place in any era and anywhere on earth. We can do these things now and command the attention of audiences when hardly more than a century ago, presenting an opera in contemporary dress was a risk few composers wanted to take. Remember what happened to Verdi's attempt to stage *La Traviata* as a contemporary story in contemporary costume?

However, I venture to say that costume even without scenery can enhance. In recent years it has become common to revive "forgotten" operas in concert form. The economics of production make a fully staged performance impossible. Thus these operas are often put on without scenery but with costumes and gestures. Even popular operas are effectively performed in this "semistaged" form as was done with the *Magic Flute* in Cedar Rapids a few years back.

### Early Innovations in Opera Staging

The 17th century saw a number of innovations by the stage designers of Venice which increased the attractiveness of opera and dramatic presentations. In painting their scenery they made use of the mathematical basis for perspective that had been discovered during the Renaissance. Thus the flat architecture and surfaces of the Roman stage could be deepened by illusion without three-dimensional constructions. They discovered that the illusion could be

heightened by the use of dim lighting by candle and oil lamps on the stage. They made use of large revolving posts painted on three sides to change scenic effects quickly. By painting on large pieces of canvas stretched on wooden substructures they were able to create "flats" that could be stored in the wings on top of the stage and out of sight. These required small curtains that could be dropped quickly in front of the stage to hide set changes. Next they developed stage "machinery" to move sets and to raise and lower curtains and backdrops. To hide all this machinery the proscenium arch was created, augmented by a permanent curtain positioned in front of the setting and immediately behind the arch. Trap doors under the stage became the vogue. These permitted sudden introduction of the magical or apparitions that were part of many popular operas. By the late 17th century, stagecraft was so successful that many audiences attended opera to enjoy the wonderful stage effects.

The Venetian opera houses of the 17th century were the first real opera houses. They were designed to fit the needs and power structure of a society rich enough to build and use them. They featured a rising row of boxes with a royal box generally placed in the center of the first row. The wealthy families rented boxes for the entire season. The lower the rank, the higher the row of boxes. Commoners sat in the cheaper seats which were both on the ground level and the highest level. This design became the prototype for other Italian and European opera houses up to the time of Wagner.

Wagner made his contributions to the staging of opera with his design for his festival theater in Bayreuth where he could hold performances of his operas in the way he desired. He introduced the idea of dimming the lights in the auditorium (the "house lights") during the performance. This was a revolutionary idea that did not go over well with some audiences. They were accustomed to chatter during a performance and, more than that, to see and visit friends in other boxes, eye the latest fashions in dress, and glimpse the current female companion of various gentlemen. Wagner wanted primary attention focussed on his opera and even went so far as to demand silence from his audience! He also placed the orchestra in a

pit below the stage in his new theater, reasoning that the audience then would not be distracted by movements of orchestra members or motions of the conductor.

### Speaking of Costumes

In light of the foregoing it is apparent that we owe much to the creative staff of the University of Iowa Opera Theater Costume Shop. You can help by contributing the discards, the unneeded, the yesterday wear that you are going to throw away. Shirley Harrison, Supers liaison to the Costume Shop, reminds us that when you houseclean, pick out old furs, "jewels," mattress pads (to form underlayments for costumes, etc.), boots, hairpieces, cloth materials--you name it--pass them on to the Costume Shop. The staff will use these things in most ingenious ways. Who knows, you may be able to feel proprietary pride in *Carmen* knowing that something of yours adorns the set or is worn by a member of the cast.

### Notable Quotes and Comments on Opera

"Opera occupies a unique position in our culture: a form of high art distinctly more lofty in its modes of expression than the other forms that attract serious attention; a form whose adherents . . . insist on treating it as a historically closed book, with no new chapters to be added. The operas we have canonized enjoy the status of hallowed texts, unbending in the demands they make upon the uninitiated yet enticing for the exotic distance in time and style they offer their prospective beholders. It is no wonder that they constantly demand mediation in the form of guidebooks, program and record-album notes, and introductory lectures. It may well be that more verbiage is expended on certain famed operas these days than on the great literary texts such as *Hamlet* and *Don Quixote* that have less need for mediation."--Herbert Lindenberger in *Opera: The Extravagant Art*.

"No good opera plot can be sensible, for people do not sing when they are feeling sensible."--W.H. Auden

### Eckerts Gain Recognition

Bob and Doris Eckert have recently been awarded the Alumni Achievement Awards for 1988 by the Midland Lutheran College of Fremont, Nebraska. The awards

are in recognition of outstanding professional achievements and personal accomplishments in the field of music. Doris, well-known to us as a regularly attending Super, has been active as a voice teacher for many years in college and public school settings. Bob, better known as "Roberto" to your Editor (who is in turn greeted as "Arturo" in our exchanges), is a long-time member of our Music School faculty. Congratulations to both.

### Thank-You Note

Anna Stranieri, Jean Kern and Jean Walker thank the Supers who provided food for the strike parties of the Spring and Summer operas and Eleanor Bowers who saw to it that all the food was stored properly (including refrigeration). We thank them in return. The food-for-strike-party function seems to go so well, maybe the coordinators ought to write a manual for other organizations.

### Reception

Supers will hold a reception for the University Symphony and new School of Music Faculty following the concert on September 28 in the Opera Rehearsal Hall, MB. Some of you will be called to help provide refreshments. All Supers, University Symphony Orchestra members and Music faculty are invited. Plan to attend both the concert and reception. Both will give you great pleasure.

### Next Meeting

The next scheduled meeting of Supers will be on Tuesday evening at 7:00 p.m., October 18, in the Lounge of the Music Building. Meetings must be on a Tuesday night for this semester because of conflicts in Mona Shaw's schedule.

### "Workdays" for Supers

New office arrangements for Mona Shaw offer some small space for Supers who do clerical and similar work supporting Supers functions. Preferred time for this is Wednesday. Call Mona at 335-1667 any Wednesday you are available to find out what there is for you to do.