

OPERA SUPERS OF IOWA CITY NEWSLETTER

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30 BROOKFIELD DR. IOWA CITY, IOWA 52240

Next Meeting: Monday, July 13th at 7:00 p.m.
in the lounge of the Music Building.

Letter from the Editor

This will be the last newsletter of the 1986-87 academic year. It is time to reflect upon our accomplishments and failures and to remind ourselves what the Opera Supers is all about. Our activities in support of last spring's production of *Don Giovanni* and what we have done to date for the forthcoming *La Traviata* add up on the positive side of the ledger. If we had failings they have been kept quiet. We have even grown this past year, judging from the increase in attendance at our meetings. The devotion our active members have toward the group is manifested by the communication of regrets when absence from a scheduled meeting is anticipated and the offers to contribute effort to support activities even when unable to attend meetings. Our morale is high and our esprit de corps enviable. The experience with the Opera Supers of Iowa City has been and continues to be one of the most gratifying one I have had since moving to Iowa City 27 years ago.

I believe that much of our success is due to two factors: (1) the leadership of Mona Shaw as our direct contact point with the School of Music; and (2) the informal nature of our group with its flexibility and orientation toward action. Thus far it has not been necessary to develop a formal structure, with officers and by-laws. We do not set rules and regulations to govern our actions--just using the implicit rules of courtesy and respect for each other. We are not jockeying for power, position or status within our group--we volunteer to do what we can and agree among ourselves as to the details, who can do what, when and how. We have no membership "qualifications"--if you like opera, want to support the Opera Theater, and have the time for some effort, you "qualify."

As our influence is felt, more requests may come in for our support for activities and needs beyond those of the Opera Theater. This has already happened and we have responded with

whatever we felt was reasonable for a group of volunteers such as ours to do. Opera, after all, is not independent of the other musical performance arts. The common base is the School of Music, thus we have felt it reasonable to provide support services to other facets of the School. If we can help cement relationships, all the better. It is not our intent to be in competition with other groups. I, like many others of the Supers, belong to the Hancher Guild. I do not consider my role in both as conflicting. I enjoy the Supers because it lacks the formal structure (that I helped develop, by the way) of the Guild. I hope we never go that way, but that is a personal feeling. If the Supers find it necessary to get involved in fiscal matters where we, *in the name of our organization*, hold funds or collect dues, it will become necessary to organize with a formal structure to qualify as a tax-exempt non-profit organization. It is prudent to keep these things in mind and know where certain actions will lead us if requests for our support involve money. This past year we were able to assist in the solicitation for funds for the Friends of Music. We should be able to continue this type of activity in the future without jeopardizing our informal nature.

The packet of materials on *La Traviata* will be completed soon. The first part, notes on the opera's background is already printed and was distributed to members at our last meeting. The remaining part, the synopsis of the opera, will be available, hopefully at the next meeting. Your comments and detection of "holes" in my presentations will be appreciated.

Report of the June 8th Meeting

There was a good turnout. New members were introduced. Beaumont Glass announced cast changes for *Traviata*. Discussion was held on the matter of local movie houses showing opera films (eg. the Zeffereilli *Otello*) with such low key advertising that few Supers become aware of the event. We need to develop some mechanisms for alerting members to anticipated showings and ways to bring more of these films to Iowa City.

Report of June 8th Meeting Cont.

The major focus of the meeting was directed toward a perennial problem. Is there a way the Supers can assist voice students who want to hold benefit recitals to raise funds to help them get started when they leave for New York, Europe, etc.? Many different ideas were expressed. As time was running short (our meetings generally last only one hour) it was decided to hold a special meeting of the Supers on June 22.

Report of the June 22nd Meeting

There was a large turnout which was gratifying considering the short time from the last meeting. We had a special guest, Randy Schilling, a University of Iowa Opera Theater graduate who has been singing and studying in Austria and elsewhere in Europe the past several years. Randy was able to help the Supers understand the problems, costs, etc. that face students seeking professional opportunities in New York and abroad. We know that at least one voice student, Michele Crider, will be leaving for Europe this autumn and will be holding a benefit recital to raise funds. There will be others in the future. It was decided by the group that the Supers could assist in a reception following a benefit recital held outside the Music School environs. Rather than making this an automatic procedure, our assistance would be contingent upon a request from the student who reaches that point in his or her career and is about to leave the university. The matter of donations that are part of any benefit performance would be left up to individuals as it normally is.

The post-performance "French Potluck" was set for Saturday August 1st at Betty McCollister's, 314 Woodridge Ave. at 5:00 p.m.

(Note: The editor wishes to call your attention to the fact that the foregoing reports of meetings as in previous newsletters are not to be taken as "Minutes" of the meetings. They are intended to inform the readers about the nature and scope of the Supers activities and to keep active members who are unable to attend any meeting up-to-date. As implied in the opening letter, the informal nature of the meetings preclude motions, formal votes, etc. What may be a consensus for an action one time may be just as consensually withdrawn after reflection or change of orientation another time. This is flexibility!)

VIVA V.E.R.D.I.

I ended the brief biographical sketch of Verdi in the background notes with the slogan, "Viva Verdi!" It was deliberate and repeats the cry that greeted the composer wherever he appeared in Italy during the late 1850's. The interesting thing is that "Viva Verdi" came to imply 'Viva-Vittoria Emanuele Re D'Italia,' a rallying cry for the Italians wanting unification of their country. Those were times when such unification was being sought under Vittoria Emanuele as the war between the Italian states and Austria was taking place. The audiences at Verdi opera were thus able to express their political and emotional sentiments vociferously. They could hail a composer who known to be an Italian patriot championing the cause of unification as well as a king whom they hoped would help to achieve the goal. The fact that it took a Garibaldi to do the job did not lessen the cry, "Viva Verdi," for the composer was also an ardent supporter of Garibaldi. Can you imagine theater artists and an analogous political cause today that would bring an audience to its feet shouting, "Viva _____," as a rallying cry?

What kind of soprano should sing Violetta?

Verdi worried about the selection of the soprano for the premiere for both versions of *Traviata*. The opera is well established now and experience over the years has indicated that the role of Violetta may be handled by almost every kind of soprano voice. How much the physical characteristics of the singer may affect audience response is hard to predict. I think that in the recent past non-Italian audiences hearing the opera sung in Italian were more interested in the vocal than the specifics of the drama and its dialogue. Different soprano voices may suit the role of Violetta because of the different facets of her character. The extremes in characterization are such that no one voice may be able to the role complete justice without adjustments, as, for example, transposing it down a tone in the first act.

Robert Rushmore in *The Singing Voice* (second edition, 1984) indicates that the frailness, shallowness and gaiety of Violetta may be expressed by a light soprano (*leggerio*) such as has been done by Melba, Tetrazzini, Galli-Curci, and Bidu Sayao with great effect in the past. Violetta's warmth, femininity and loveliness fit the lyric soprano voice

as represented by Lucrezi Bori, Licia Albanese and more recently, Mirella Freni. The role also calls for a woman who has a certain grandness of character as demonstrated by her sacrifice in giving up Alfredo and her fight against disease. Thus the larger-voiced *spinto* (literally, "pushed or urged on") soprano, which is a step below the dramatic, is suited to the role. Claudio Muzio, Rosa Ponselle, Renata Tebaldi and Maria Callas have all been effective Violettas. The fact is that most great sopranos have attempted the role, but only the very heavy dramatic voices are considered unsuited to it.

If we look at the list of sopranos who have recorded Violetta, complete or selected arias only, we find: Melba, Farrar, Maria Balvany, Lilla Lehman (1907), Tetrizzini, Bori, Galli-Curci, Alma Gluck, Fieda Hempel, and Maria Michailowa (sung in Russian) among the "golden age" sopranos. More recent Violettas on records include: Albanese, Callas, Tebaldi, Shumskaya (in Russian), Carteri, Stella, De Los Angeles, Moffo, Scotto, Sutherland, Caballe, Lorengar, Sills, Freni, Cotrubas, Stracts, Steber, Cebotari (in German), Mado Robin (in French), Micheau (in French), Streich (German), Gueden (German), Rothenberger (German). I am sure there are sopranos who have recorded it in Czech, Hungarian, Swedish and other languages, but I do not have them on my lists. Maybe I missed one of your favorites. Schwarzkopf sang in it in 1948, but I do not know if she recorded it. My favorite on records is Licia Albanese in the Toscanini conducted performance of 1946 reissued on LP in 1951 (Jan Peerce sings Alfredo and Robert Merrill was Germont).

Traviata Trivia

Renata Tebaldi in an interview granted in 1979, complained that Maurice Béjart staged *La Traviata* with Violetta as a sculptress, Germont singing 'Di Provenza' surrounded by his family, Violetta arriving at Flora's reception in a coffin "and so forth and so on." Only in Europe could that have been done, but Verdi, Piave, and Dumas must have turned over in their graves!

Lucrezia Bori, in *Traviata*, wore fresh camelias with every costume and in the last act Doctor Grenvil brought her a bouquet of these flowers which he handed wordlessly over to Annina the maid who placed them in an empty vase. Then, as Violetta pulls herself up from the chaise lounge, Bori would grab the camelias from the vase only to

get go of them to spread all around her as she drops lifeless to the stage. Bori had worked out this stage effect after several attempts to find a romantic manner of ending the opera. In those days the stage director had less to say about scene matters than the prima donna.

Callas sang Violetta on the stage 58 times. She told friends that *Traviata* and *Norma* were her favorite operas because she could identify herself totally with these two characters. However, she never acquainted herself with the original Dumas *filis* play from which the opera was adapted. She always sang Violetta in the original key and did not attempt the role after 1958 when her voice was no longer up to it.

Announcements, needs, etc.

Linda Behrendt and Irene Simon (committee chairs for the *Traviata* strike party) will likely soon (if they haven't already) be calling you to donate food to be enjoyed by the cast and crew who dismantle the set. Cast and crew member strike the entire set immediately after the final performance of each production. (In this case, Sunday, July 26th.) This is one of the most appreciated contributions that the Supers make in connection with each production. Call Linda Behrendt (337-5342) if you aren't called and would still like to contribute.

Michele Crider (Violetta, July 23 and 26) will give a benefit recital on **Saturday, August 8 at 8:00 p.m. in the First Presbyterian Church** in Iowa City. Call Mona Shaw (335-1667) or Miriam Canter (338-1217) if you would like to help with the reception following it or anything else.

Please come to our **French Potluck on Saturday, August 1st at 5:00 p.m. at Betty McCollister's**, 314 Woodridge Ave. Call Mona or Miriam (numbers above) if you need more information. **Johanna Beers** will feature this party in her column on July 15 in the *Iowa City Press Citizen* along with suggested French recipes provided by Opera Super Hope Solomons.

VIVA
VERDI!

NEXT MEETING: MONDAY, JULY 13TH. 7 P.M. MUSIC LOUNGE (ROOM 1028)

IMPORTANT NUMBERS:

Arthur Canter, 338-1217, Newsletter

Miriam Canter, 338-1217, Hospitality

Shirley Harrison, 337-5729, Costumes

Mary Wall, 338-2618, Scenery

Dwight Sump, 335-1153, Opera Production Manager

Mona Shaw, 335-1667, Public Relations Coordinator

Margaret Wenk, 335-2988, Opera Designer

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