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ENTR'ACTE

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30 Brookfield Drive
Iowa City, IA 52245

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From the Editor

As you know by now, changes in the administration of the School of Music and in the faculty structure are taking place. Meanwhile, we shall continue our support and related activities for the Opera Theater, the School of Music faculty and students. Recently one of the graduate students in voice, in an attempt to describe Opera Supers to her friends, called us her "Iowa City parents." What better recognition can we ask?

Report of Meeting of April 2, 1990

After some announcements to a group of about twenty Supers, last-minute details for our involvement for the spring offering of *Tosca* were taken up. Also, there were reminders about the closing of the Music Building beginning May 14 and what that meant for getting in touch with key people, use of library, etc. Volunteers were sought for *Tosca* poster distribution and for ushers for the June 22 "Evening of Arias" to be held at Macbride Hall. The matter of a reception for *Tosca* patron ticket-holders required attention. It was obvious that alternate plans would have to be made because of the move in offices, closing down of needed space, and shortness of time for other arrangements. It was decided to cancel the reception and to hold one for the patrons at a later date after the fall semester opens. Mona Shaw will send a letter of explanation to the patrons. Beaumont Glass brought up his concern about the apparent ambivalence of IPTV to televise the Wagner *Ring* Cycle to be presented by the Met Opera late in June. The members present decided to make personal contact to the office of the director of programming of IPTV to let their concerns be known. [Ed. note: The *Ring* will be telecast on succeeding nights by IPTV as they are aired by the Met. What role our calls played in the decision, if at all, is not known, but it is certain that the IPTV office was provoked at least into acute awareness of the existence of opera lovers in Eastern Iowa!] The group was brought up to date by Mona Shaw as to what transpired at the recent meeting in Des Moines of the Iowa Arts Council. The next meeting of the Supers was set for Tuesday, June 5, at a place to be determined.

Report of Meeting of June 5, 1990

There was a large turnout for the meeting at Phyllis Evans' home. The occasion served as a farewell reception for Professor Somville who will be leaving Iowa City in mid-summer to take on her new position as Dean of the College of Fine Arts at Rutgers University. There was a short business meeting. Anna Stranieri, Jean Kern, and Patrick Nefzger volunteered to be Strike Party chairpersons. The next meeting will be on Monday, July 2, place, again, to be determined. The rest of the time was spent in expressing our best wishes to Dr. Somville and enjoying the variety of desserts provided by the members in attendance.

Origins of *Dialogues of the Carmélites* Considered

Peter Alexander has an informative and well-written account of the UI Opera Theater's summer presentation of Poulenc's *Dialogues* in the Summer, 1990 issue of *Arts Iowa* which is sent to season ticket holders, contributors, and others. I suggest you get a copy (from the Hancher box office) if you did not receive one and read this fine article. What follows goes a bit beneath the material in *Arts Iowa* into the background of how and why the opera was written. However, if you want to know more about what you will see on stage, read Peter's article or wait for a synopsis in the playbill.

The story of the Carmelites, briefly put, is about an order of 16 nuns who were executed by guillotine on July 17, 1794, during the Terror period of the French Revolution. This historical event inspired the well-known German Catholic writer of the 1920's, Gertrud von Le Fort, to write a novella *Die Letzte am Schaffort* (*The Last on the Scaffold*) in 1931. She was fearful of her fate under the rising power of the Nazis and sought to join a convent for her own protection. In the

novella, Le Fort created a 17th nun, Blanche de la Force, who voluntarily joins in death her sister nuns from whom she had become separated out of fear. The parallel between the names Le Fort and la Force is quite obvious, and the similarities in the motivation and decisions of Blanche and Gertrud seem inescapable. Thus, it has been interpreted in recent years that Le Fort's novella in a strong sense is a story about the author herself and her own fears. In 1947 a French priest-polemicist, Father Bruckberger, and Philippe Agostini wrote a movie scenario based on the novella. They added one major character, the Chevalier de la Force, as the doting brother of Blanche. Georges Bernanos was enlisted by Bruckberger and Agostini to write the finished screenplay. He completed it in 1948 but died of cancer three months later. The film version was never shown, but a stage version was successfully performed in 1952 under the title *Dialogues des Carmélites* (so named by Bernanos' literary agent). Le Fort was never happy with the film or the stage version. As it stood, the play was thus the joint effort of three devout Catholics: Le Fort, a Protestant of Huguenot descent who converted early to Catholicism; Father Bruckberger, the priest who had written about "the internal logic of a radical-social democracy" that would lead inevitably to a Hitler or Stalin; and Bernanos, a professed monarchist and long-time member of the extreme right group, Action Française.

Poulenc's opera *Dialogues des Carmélites* arose out of a commission for a ballet. In 1953 M. Valcarengi, director of the Ricordi publishing house, wanted Poulenc to write a ballet for La Scala of Milan on the life of Saint Marguerita of Cortona. Poulenc indicated that he would prefer to work on an opera libretto if one were available. Valcarengi responded with the suggestion that Poulenc use the text of Georges Bernanos' play on the Carmelites for an opera. Poulenc began work on the opera in August, 1955, and by June, 1956, Poulenc finished the opera including its orchestration. He followed Bernanos' text very closely, cutting only minor details. The Poulenc opera remains essentially as its writer conceived it. Bernanos' confidant (and confessor), the Abbe Daniel Pezeril, in a letter to Poulenc wrote:

Bernanos would say to you, thank you for having understood in music the meaning of his words and for having invented in another way the same mystery of Blanche's ascent. Right from the beginning you found the way into the heart of the *Dialogues* and met Bernanos in his share of silence-- a meeting of souls if there ever was one.

The opera *Dialogues des Carmélites* was first produced in Italian on January 26, 1957, at La Scala in Milan. It was a memorable triumph that was followed on June 21 by the original French version for the Theatre Nationale de l'Opera in Paris. The French version may be found on a recording made in 1958 with the original French cast. This recording has been reissued recently by EMI Angel on a CD which your editor has managed to get.

Having brought up the fact that La Scala was the site for the premiere of *Dialogues*, let us turn to a report by Mel Sunshine.

All Scalla--It Only Took Eight Years, by Mel Sunshine

At a small, international scientific meeting held in 1982 in Berkeley, California, I jokingly told an Italian friend from Milano that he should organize the next meeting in Milano during opera season so that I could go to the opera. "Sure," he said with a smile on his face, not knowing that I wouldn't give up. At the next meeting of this group in 1987 in Richmond, Virginia, I suggested again that the next meeting be held in Milano (during opera season, of course) in 1990. This time I persuaded some European colleagues to endorse the idea of a European meeting, since the first two had been held in the U.S. After all, it wasn't fair that they should always have to pay transatlantic fares. The idea was accepted, but the people from Oslo suggested that they, too, could host the 1990 meeting.

What to do? At that time I knew nothing about opera in Oslo, but I knew that I had to get the Italian contingent to commit themselves definitely. It took only a few more entreaties on my part (and others also) until the Italians finally said yes. And so the next meeting was scheduled for Milano sometime during 1990. This turned out to be a good choice because I had gone to Oslo for

seven weeks in 1988 and had a terrible experience with the Oslo Opera. Some of you will remember my article about walking out of the Oslo Opera's production of *Eugene Onegin*.

My friend, Gianni, wrote about two months ago that *Madama Butterfly* was being performed during the week of the meeting, and was I interested in going if, and it was a big if, he could get tickets. What do you think I said? To make a long story a little shorter, when I arrived in Milano, Gianni told me that he was able to get four tickets for the opera that evening and asked if I was still interested. Silly question!

Wednesday, May 16, 1990. *Madama Butterfly* with Caterina Malfitano as Cio-cio-san and a young American tenor, Richard Leech, as Pinkerton. Vocally they were both superb. Visually it was totally Japanese: "Regia di, Scene di, Costumi di, Luce di, e Danztrice e coreografi di" various Japanese artists. Dramatically, along with the superb singing and visual beauty, this production negated any production of *Butterfly* that I had ever seen or heard.

I realized that this was becoming a new experience for me just before *Butterfly*'s suicide scene. This production used Kurombo, the "invisible people" as in the Bunraku Puppet Theater or Grand Kabuki Theater. They had placed a white mat in the middle of the stage for the white-kimonoed *Butterfly* to kneel on. As she prepared herself, she spied her son "Trouble" walking onto the stage. She rose, ran to him, and in one gesture picked him up, hugging him to her as she started singing "Addio piccolo iddio." This finished, she pushed him off stage, returned to her white mat, and kneeling down took her family's dagger and plunged it into her chest. Off stage, Pinkerton could be heard singing the poignant "Butterfly, Butterfly." Dying as she hears him, her hand pulls out the dagger which turns into a slowly opening and fluttering red fan, fluttering its last throes of life as a dying butterfly might, while the Kurombo caused the white mat to turn red, first in the center, and then spreading slowly to the edges.

Down, curtain. . . . WOW!

Miscellaneous Notes and Reminders

Many of the Supers expressed interest in the dishes concocted for the *Tosca* potluck. Here goes: Tosta Salad, Salmon Bocconegra (mousse), Spaghetti spinacio con formaggio, Chicken Marengo, Wild Rice and Turkey Salad, Chicken Tosca a la Rosemary, Rosemary Chicken--Lacks Nothing, Violetta's Torte (or Tosca Torta), Humper Pumperdink Bread, Cherubeany Salad, Luscious di Lammermoor, Ping de Turandot Cake, I Puritani Pasta Pavarotti, Jeannie Schicchi Cake, Chicken Rosemary with Vegetables Julian, Cavalleria Rhu-sticana Crisp, Ring Cycle Rhubarb, Tossed-ca Salad, Mary--lam--Nated Art of Choke, Di-ced Mel-Lon.

Special Thanks to Supers Assisting Relocating Library Materials

The following Supers are to be recognized for their assistance to the Music Library during the first week of May: Ruth and Charles Severson, Betty Mitchell, George Cain, Howard Wenger, and Marie Von Behren.

Reminders

The opera *Dialogues of the Carmelites* will be given on Friday evening, July 27, and Sunday matinee, July 29. The post-performance potluck will be on the Saturday evening between performance dates, July 28, at the Behrendts' home. Details will be in a separate mailing in July.

Important phone numbers remain the same (see earlier issues of *Entr'acte*).

Next meeting: Monday, July 2, 1990, 7:00 p.m. Place to be determined: is the home of Jane and Huey Huit, 626 Brookland Park Dr., Iowa City.