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Entr'acte: the Opera Supers of Iowa City

6-1-1996

Entr'acte: the Opera Supers of Iowa City, June, 1996

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Entr'acte

The Opera Supers of Iowa City Newsletter

Vol. XI, No.4 June 1996 Editor: Arthur Canter, 30 Brookf ield Dr. Iowa City, IA 52245

Letter from the Editor

The University Oper a Theater's production o f *La Bohème* hascome and gone. It was an artistichit and, relative towhat we usually drawlocally for an opera, was fairly wellattended despite the impoverished pu blicity (a very limited budget and theusuallack of atte ntion by the press sawto that). Would wehave drawn a larger audience had we called theoperaa "musical"?. The 1996 Tony Award went to the "rock musical" *Rent* which is based on *La Bohème.* Its title, by theway, shows you the importance of thesetting of thefirst actof the original opera. Anyhow, thestory isset in contemporary New York City, dealswith AIDS instead of tuberculosis, andwiththe problems of ill-fated lovers as wasdonein Puccini'sopera. Even party ing during Christmas Eve calls for a big scene in *Rent* as is true in *Bohème.* What if its producers had offered *Rent* asa "rock opera", would it have succeeded? The key word here may be "rock", not "opera". I suspect that nomatterwhat any musical theater work is calledthese days, if it isin keepingwith the current generation'smusical preferences, it will get a hearing. However, atitle suggestiveof the old forms i.e. "symphony", "opera", "string quartet", "sonata", etc. will be disdained, especially by students(on almost all college campuses, not just Iowa). How to overcome whatseemsto be a semantic block perpetuated by lack of familiarity and negative expectations? Itisas if the prevailingattitude were "if your parents and, in particular, y our grandparents liked thiskind of music, it must be wrong for y ou!"

Perhapswe need more *concert* performancesof opera without costume, scenery and theatrical action. I don't know. There are operas and scenes from operas that lend themselves to this requiring only a chamber size orchestraand good singers. We have both availa blein Iowa City. These eventswould be added to what isnow done by the University Opera Theater and Opera Workshop, notreplace them.Weoughtto be encouragingexperimentalchamber opera as well. Years ago, in one of my first issues ofthe newsletter, I proposed the creation of a community-basedchamber opera society to provide opportunities forlocal singers, would-be producers, composers, directors, in-and-out of theuniversity setting, todo these things. It was not possi ble to follow through onsuch a proposal atthe time.It stillmay not be possible, but we need to take advantage of the talent we have in this community in some cooperative efforts. Expandour horizons! If the Iowa City Chamber Singers can put onsuch a remarkableand successful concert in Clapp Hall, featuring *Carmina Burana* and vocal ensembles from a few operas, why can't we havea concert opera puton by anIowa City Cham ber Opera Society? In the meantime, while wethinkof ways to solve these pro blems, come out forthe University's summeropera, *The Daughter of the Regiment.* You will be greatly entertained. Betteryet, bring someone whohas never been to an opera. Call it amusical comedy. —Arthur Canter

Report of Meetings and Activities

The Supersmet on March 25 and April 29, 1996. The Marchmeetingwasdevotedto review of thedetails involving the Supers f or the performance of *La Bohème* to takeplacein April, such as strike food, the potluck, role of Supers in the opera itself, etc. Professor Glass spoke a bout future plans forspecial events, and reported on the Des Moines concert appearance by Simon Estesand Leslie Morgan. The auditions forthe summer opera have already started. The meeting in April, comingafterthe spring opera performances, ena bled thegroup to review reactions tothe performances and learn about backstage crisesand eventsthat wouldnot be known to the audiences. Most of the meetingwas centered onthe summeropera *Daughter of the Regiment*. Thenext meetingwas scheduled for Monday, June 17.

The Supers Potluck was successfullyheld Saturday May 4 at the homeofthe Macfarlanes. The foodwas good, thecompany charming and theevent permitted one of the

Supers to demonstrate slight skill at repairing a door latch even if not up to the skill of a waiter's rolein the opera. A num ber of the Supers were able to attendthe Opera Workshop in which students presented scenes from various operas in the Opera Studio (in VMB) on the very next day, Sunday, May 5 5.

A number of Supers provided foodand assistedin theset-up and clean-upfor the receptionon May 2 for the retiring Music facultyand the reception honoring Charles Wendt following his May 8 recital. All honorees were verygratefuland appreclated ourefforts. **Thank you, Supers.**

An Open Letter from Anna Stranieri

We wish toextend a BIG thankyouto those Opera Supers who responded toourcallsto provide food (or a monetary donation topurchasefood and/orsupplies)for another successful "Strike Party" for the stage crew and cast of the spring opera, La Bohème. We can't begin to tell you howmuch this is appreciated by them. YOU make it happen!

As youknow, there are no duesor other financial obligations to be a member ofOpera Supers. The ONLY obligation is to provide FOOD at least ONCE a year for STRIKE for the springand summer operas.

Approximately 35-40 people are needed each time to provide food. For thespringopera, 40 mem bers participated, ofthese forty, only one was a "no-show". We try to call on everyone onlyonce a year; sometimes, we may have tocallupon you twice.For those who sign upeach time when the sign-up sheet is passed around for "strike food" a t the meeting, we are grateful. It is necessary tomake 60-75 phone calls each time in order to reach the numberof people needed.

Letus know if it is a problemto transport your food to Hancher backstage. Arrangemen ts can be made to establish a drop-off point which would be mutually agreeable, or food can be picked at your home, depending on the circumstances.

(Anna, in case some of you have forgotten, is the Super who has served for many years as chairperson and coordinator for the "strike party" food, and we are truly beholden to her for this task.— Ed.)

Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848) and The Daughter of the Regiment

Your editor was unabletomake good enough contact with Donizetti's spirit to report any first-hand conversations with the composer as was done with Puccini. What follows is derived from the usual bibliographical sources.

Guido Zavadini, in his *Donizetti: Vita-Musiche-Epistolario* (Bergamo, 1948) lists 70 operas by the composer. Two had never been performed asthey were notfully comple ted, and two others never performed forunknown reasons. Add tothis list 16 other operas, projectedor only sketchily worked out, alarge number of religious vo cal works, some cantatasandhymns, manyinstrumental works for orchestra (mostly sinfonias), 19 string quartets, dozens of piano pieces, and hundreds of songs, and you begin to realize how prolific a composer Donizetti was during his short life time (he died at age 53 from thedeteriorating effects of neurosyphilis).

For a while there circulated a fancifulstory that Donizetti's grandfather wasa Scottish soldier named Donald or Don Izett whodrifted to Italyand Italianized his name! This storycame from George T. Ferris in his book, *The Great Italian and French Composers* (1878). Ferris had all his "facts" wrong, misdated events and seemed to be motiva ted by an attemptto account for Donizetti's fascination with libretti based on English and Scottish history andthe composer's supposedly "Highland lilt" insome of themusic in *Don Pasquale* as well as *Lucia di Lammermoor*. As Ashbrook, biographerof Donizetti, pointedout, Ferris'sreasoning would belike arguing that Puccini had Orientals in his background because ofthemusicin *Butterfly* and *Turandot*!

Donizetti was born in Bergamo, acityin the northern Italian province of Lombardy. His father was a tradesman who had to work in a pawnshop when Gaetano was about 11. The Donizettis hadsix children, ofwhom Gaetano and his elder brother Giuseppe were theonlyones to take up musical careers. Giuseppe eventually became a bandmasterin Napoleon's armyand lived outhis lifeas "Donizetti Pasha", Chiefof Musictothe Ottoman Armies. Theyoung Gaetano

studied at the local Musical Institute in Bergamo. His first teacher was the distinguished composer Johann Simon Mayr, a Bavarian, who had composed anumber of highly successful Italianoperas. Donizetti advanced inhis studies rapid ly and was sent to complete themin Bologna under Stanislao Mattei, a well-knowncomposerofchurch music. Atage 20, Donizetti returned to Bergamo and, instead of taking up an academiccareer whichhis father pressed him to do, turned tocomposingmusicfor local societies, usually amateur ones. Duringthisperiod he wrotemany of his string quartets and instrumentalpieces. He received his first operatic commission in1818, at ageof 21,from a visitingimpresario who wanted the work forthe coming seasonat the Teatro San Luca in Venice. Theopera Donizetti wrote to a libretto written for him by afellowstudent, Bartolomeo Merelli, was *Enrico di Borgogna.* Whileit was nogreat success, the opera wasappreciated by audiences enough to gain additionalcommissions for other works. Oneof these, *Zoraide di Granata* (1822), a big hit with Roman audiences, launched Donizettias a professional full-timeoperatic composer. From thenon he earned accolades forhis fluent melodic gift, kno wledge of orchestration and forhismanner of handlinghis ensembles. Hisname became kno wn throughout Italy and a flood of commissions began to pour in. Forthe remaind er of his active life he produced anywhere fromtwo tofour operas ayear, for Naples, Rome, Milan, Palermo, Florence, Venice, and in due course Vienna and Paris. It was not until 1830, and 26 operas after *Zoraide,* that Donizetti wrote a work that has remained familiar to modern aud iences. This was *Anna Bolena,* toa libretto about Henry VIII, Anne Boley nand Jane Seymour. It was thisopera that made Donizetti internationally famous. Many others followed, including *L'elisir d'amore* (1832), *Maria Stuarda* (1834), *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835), *La Fille du régiment* (1840), *La favorite* (1840), *Linda di Chamounix* (1842), and *Don Pasquale* (1843).

La Fille du régiment, was his first completely new Frenchopera (he had ad apted two otherof hisoperas for Frenchproduction). It wasequally successfulin Italy, as *La figlia del reggimento,* and in England and America with minorvariations inplot and staging, as *The Daughter of the Regiment.*

The Daughter of the Regiment isan enchanting, light-hearted comedy thatbeen popular with thepublic wherever it has been shown despite the attackmade upon it onits openingnight on February 11, 1840.The Frenchcomposers and their supporters atthetime tried to sabotage the performance—Berlioz tookup their cause with a sneering review ofthe premiere. Theopera does not suffer muchin translation nor does it fail to please even whenthe aud ience cannd understand the words as happens inthe high tessituraof the coloratura soprano arias. Jenny Lind sang the role of Marie (the regiment's "daughter") in its London premiere on May 27, 1847. Some famous Maries include: Pauline Lucca, Adeline Patti and Luisa Tetrazzini. In modern times, the rolehasbeen associated with Lily Pons, Mirella Freni, Joan Sutherland, Anna Moffo, Beverly Sillls, and Lucianna Serra.My personal favorite remains Lily Pons.

The basic story of the opera, briefly put is about Marie, a foundling, brought upby the sergeant, Sulpice, of the "21st" French regimentof Napoleon's army stationed in the Tyrol. Marie is in love with a young Ty rolean, Tonio whosaved her life. When it is announced that Marie is really theniece of a Countess shehasto leavethe regiment and is to be taughtthe ways of a noblewoman to prepare her tomarry afoppish y oung Duke. The sold iers ofthe 21sthelpto reunite Marie and Tonioand d etermine the truthof Marie's parentage. (Why should I give away allthe plot—see the opera). The University of Iowa Opera Theater will puton the Des Moines Metroversionof the opera in English. If my memory serves me correctly, I believe Jennifer Ringo sangthetitlerolein the D.M. Metro production thatI saw someyearsago.

Miscellaneous Notes and News

Followers among the Supers of the career of **Michele Crider** willhave learned by this time that she had a remarkably successful debutas *Aida* for the San Diego Operain May. Sheis sched uled tomake her debut withthe San Francisco Opera in *Aida* on February 23, 1997 and in *Madama Butterfly* for the Metropolitan Opera during theearly part ofApril, 1997. From now until herreturnto the USA she willbe giving performances as *Aida* (Florence), Leonora in *La forza del destino* (Orange, France), inVerdi's *Requiem* (Copenhagen), as *Butterfly* (in Hamburg and then in Japan), Ameliain *Un ballo in maschera* successively for Berlin, Vienna, and Dortmund during

the fall 1996, andthen ending the year as Leonorain *Il Trovatore* forBerlin. Betweenthe San Francisco and Met performances, she will reprise her role in *Il Trovatore* for Vienna. I may have misseda fe w. She is goingto be one busy lady.—(Ed. note: Too bad Michele will not bemaking herdebutas Leonora for a Met *Trovatore*. Ifthat weretotake place I would insist on doingthe super'sroleas turnkey inthe castle/prison to wer scene that I did for the U I Operaproductionof the opera with Michele. I remem ber saying to her afterwards that if she were to do Leonora at the Met, toask for me todo the super's role there!)
Michele's recording of *Un ballo in maschera*, a Teldec CD album, is alreadyout. The Supers have purchased it and will donatethe album tothe Rita Benton Music Library. Her recording of the Verdi *Requiem*, for Chandos, isscheduled to be releasedvery soon We'll get thattoo forthe Music Library.

Kimm Julian will be doing the title role in Verdi's *Macbeth* for Metro this summer. Several of us aregoing in for theopening night performance on June 22. *Macbeth* should havespecial significancefor Kimm ashis doctoral paper wason comparing the Verdiopera with the Shakespeare playand evaluating thedemandsmade upon Verdi baritones for therole.

Reminders: The summer opera performances will be in Clapp Recital Hall on the evening of **July 19** (Friday) and theaftemoon of **July 21** (Sunday). Thetickets will be general admission" insteadof reserved. Thus to avoid getting a brokenseat, comeearly. It ishoped that the broken-do wn seats in Clapp Hall will berepaired/replaced bynext season.

Strike food and donations will be sought as usual. If you have not been called before, expect to be asked for a contribution.

The details for thesupers potluck supper have yet to be worked out. You will benotified when and where in time to make plans, butmean whilemark off July 20th, as themost likely date. The food theme is "Tyrol" (Austrian butnot Viennese).

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