

Entr'acte

The Opera
Supers of
Iowa City
Newsletter

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Letter from the Editor

The University Opera Theater's production of *La Bohème* has come and gone. It was an artistic hit and, relative to what we usually draw locally for an opera, was fairly well attended despite the impoverished publicity (a very limited budget and the usual lack of attention by the press saw to that). Would we have drawn a larger audience had we called the opera a "musical"? The 1996 Tony Award went to the "rock musical" *Rent* which is based on *La Bohème*. Its title, by the way, shows you the importance of the setting of the first act of the original opera. Anyhow, the story is set in contemporary New York City, deals with AIDS instead of tuberculosis, and with the problems of ill-fated lovers as was done in Puccini's opera. Even partying during Christmas Eve calls for a big scene in *Rent* as is true in *Bohème*. What if its producers had offered *Rent* as a "rock opera", would it have succeeded? The key word here may be "rock", not "opera". I suspect that no matter what any musical theater work is called these days, if it is keeping with the current generation's musical preferences, it will get a hearing. However, at the suggestive of 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 what seems to be a semantic block perpetuated by lack of familiarity and negative expectations? It is as if the prevailing attitude were "if your parents and, in particular, your grandparents liked this kind of music, it must be wrong for you!"

Perhaps we need more concert performances of 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 orchestra and good singers. We have both available in Iowa City. These events would be added to what is now done by the University Opera Theater and Opera Workshop, not replace them. We ought to be encouraging experimental chamber opera as well. Years ago, in one of my first issues of the newsletter, I proposed the creation of a community-based chamber opera society to provide opportunities for local singers, would-be producers, composers, directors, in and out of the university setting, to do these things. It was not possible to follow through on such a proposal at the time. It still may not be possible, but we need to take advantage of the talent we have in this community in some cooperative efforts. Expand our horizons! If the Iowa City Chamber Singers can put on such a remarkable and successful concert in Clapp Hall, featuring Carmina Burana and vocal ensembles from a few operas, why can't we have concert opera put on by an Iowa City Chamber Opera Society? In the meantime, while we think of ways to solve these problems, come out for the University's summer operas, *The Daughter of the Regiment*. You will be greatly entertained. Better yet, bring someone who has never been to an opera. Call it a musical comedy. —Arthur Canter

Report of Meetings and Activities

The Supers met on March 25 and April 29, 1996. The March meeting was devoted to review of the details involving the Supers for the performance of *La Bohème* to take place in April, such as strike food, the potluck, role of Supers in the opera itself, etc. Professor Glass spoke about future plans for special events, and reported on the Des Moines concert appearance by Simon Estes and Leslie Morgan. The auditions for the summer opera have already started. The meeting in April, coming after the spring opera performances, enabled the group to review reactions to the performances and learn about backstage crises and events that would not be known to the audiences. Most of the meeting was centered on the summer opera *Daughter of the Regiment*. The next meeting was scheduled for Monday, June 17.

The Supers Potluck was successfully held Saturday May 4 at the home of the Macfarlanes. The food was good, the company charming and the event 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 role in the opera. A number of the Supers were able to attend the Opera Workshop in which students presented scenes from various operas in the Opera Studio (in VMB) on the very next day, Sunday, May 5.

A number of Supers provided food and assisted in the set-up and clean-up for the reception on May 2 for the retiring Music faculty and the reception honoring Charles Wendt following his May 8 recital. All honorees were very grateful and appreciated our efforts.

Thank you, Supers.

An Open Letter from Anna Stranieri

We wish to extend a BIG thank you to those Opera Supers who responded to our call to provide food (or a monetary donation to purchase food and/or supplies) for another successful "Strike Party" for the stage crew and cast of the spring opera, *La Bohème*. We can't begin to tell you how much this is appreciated by them. YOU make it happen!

As you know, there are no dues or other financial obligations to be a member of Opera Supers. The ONLY obligation is to provide FOOD at least ONCE a year for STRIKE for the spring and summer operas.

Approximately 35-40 people are needed each time to provide food. For the spring opera, 40 members participated, of these forty, only one was a "no-show". We try to call on everyone only once a year, sometimes, we may have to call upon you twice. For those who sign up each time when the sign-up sheet is passed around for "strike food" at the meeting, we are grateful. It is necessary to make 60-75 phone calls each time in order to reach the number of people needed.

Let us know if it is a problem to transport your food to Hancher backstage. Arrangements 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 unable to make 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 as they were not fully completed, and two others never performed for unknown reasons. Add to this list 16 other operas, projected or only sketchily worked out, a large number of religious vocal works, some cantatas and hymns, many instrumental works for orchestra (mostly symphonies), 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 the deteriorating effects of neurosyphilis).

For a while there circulated a fanciful story that Donizetti's grandfather was a Scottish soldier named Donald or Don Izelt who drifted to Italy and Italianized his name! This story came 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 motivated by an attempt to account for Donizetti's fascination with libretti based on English and Scottish history and the composer's supposedly "Highland lilt" in some of the music in *Don Pasquale* as well as *Lucia di Lammermoor*. As Ashbrook, biographer of Donizetti, pointed out, Ferris's reasoning would belittle the fact that Puccini had Orientals in his background because of the music in *Butterfly* and *Turandot*.

Donizetti was born in Bergamo, a city in 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 had six children, of whom Gaetano and his elder brother Giuseppe were the only ones to take up musical careers. Giuseppe eventually became a bandmaster in Napoleon's army and lived out his life as "Donizetti Pasha", Chief Musician to the Ottoman Army. The young Gaetano

studied at the local Musical Institute in Bergamo. His first teacher was the distinguished composer Johann Simon Mayr, a Bavarian, who had composed a number of highly successful Italian operas. Donizetti advanced in his studies rapidly and was sent to complete them in Bologna under Stanislao Mattei, a well-known composer of church music. At age 20, Donizetti returned to Bergamo and, instead of taking up an academic career which his father pressed him to do, turned to composing music for local societies, usually amateur ones. During this period he wrote many of his string quartets and instrumental pieces. He received his first operatic commission in 1818, at age of 21, from a visiting impresario who wanted the work for the coming season at the Teatro San Luca in Venice. The opera Donizetti wrote to a libretto written for him by a fellow student, Bartolomeo Merelli, was *Enrico di Borgogna*. While it was no great success, the opera was appreciated by audiences enough to gain additional commissions for other works. One of these, *Zoraide di Granata* (1822), a big hit with Roman audiences, launched Donizetti as a professional full-time operatic composer. From then on he earned accolades for his fluent melodic gift, his knowledge of orchestration and his manner of handling his ensembles. His name became known throughout Italy and a flood of commissions began to pour in. For the remainder of his active life he produced anywhere from two to four operas a year, 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 audiences. This was *Anna Bolena*, a libretto about Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn and Jane Seymour. It was this opera 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 French opera (he had adapted two other of his operas for French production). It was equally successful in Italy, as *La figlia del reggimento*, and in England and America with minor variations in plot and staging, as *The Daughter of the Regiment*.

The Daughter of the Regiment is an enchanting, light-hearted comedy that has been popular with the public wherever it has been shown despite the attack made upon it on its opening night on February 11, 1840. The French composers and their supporters at the time tried to sabotage the performance—Berlioz took up their cause with a sneering review of the premiere. The opera does not suffer much in translation nor does it fail to please even when the audience cannot understand the words as happens in the high tessitura of 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 Marias include: Pauline Lucca, Adeline Patti and Luisa Tetrazzini. In modern times, the role has been associated with Lily Pons, Mirella Freni, Joan Sutherland, Anna Moffo, Beverly Sills, and Luciana Serra. My personal favorite remains Lily Pons.

The basic story of the opera, briefly put is about Marie, a foundling, brought up by the sergeant, Sulpice, of the "21st" French regiment of Napoleon's army stationed in the Tyrol. Marie is in love with a young Tyrolean, Tonio who saved her life. When it is announced that Marie is really the niece of a Countess she has to leave the regiment and is to be taught the ways of a noblewoman to prepare her to marry a foppish young Duke. The soldiers of the 21st help to reunite Marie and Tonio and determine the truth of Marie's parentage. (Why should I give away all the plot—see the opera). The University of Iowa Opera Theater will put on the Des Moines Metro version of the opera in English. If my memory serves me correctly, I believe Jennifer Ringo sang the title role in the D.M. Metro production that I saw some years ago.

Miscellaneous Notes and News

Followers among the Supers of the career of Michele Crider will have learned by this time that she had a remarkably successful debut as *Aida* for the San Diego Opera in May. She scheduled to make her debut with the San Francisco Opera in *Aida* on February 23, 1997 and in *Madama Butterfly* for the Metropolitan Opera during the early part of April, 1997. From now until her return to the USA she will be giving performances as *Aida* (Florence), *Leonora in La forza del destino* (Orange, France), in Verdi's *Requiem* (Copenhagen), as *Butterfly* (in Hamburg and then in Japan), *Amelia* in *Un ballo in maschera* successively for Berlin, Vienna, and Dortmund during

the fall 1996, and then ending the year as Leonora in *Il Trovatore* for Berlin. Between the San Francisco and Met performances, she will reprise her role in *Il Trovatore* for Vienna. I may have missed a few. She is going to be one busy lady.—(Ed. note: Too bad Michele will not be making her debut as Leonora for a Met *Trovatore*. If that were to take place I would insist on doing the super's role as turnkey in the castle/prison to witness that I did for the U.I. Opera production of the opera with Michele. I remember saying to her afterwards that if she were to do Leonora at the Met, to ask for me to do the super's role there!)

Michele's recording of *Un ballo in maschera*, a Teldec CD album, is already out. The Supers have purchased it and will donate the album to the Rita Benton Music Library. Her recording of the Verdi *Requiem*, for Chandos, is scheduled to be released very soon. We'll get that too for the Music Library.

Kimm Julian will be doing the title role in Verdi's *Macbeth* for Metro this summer. Several of us are going in for the opening night performance on June 22. *Macbeth* should have special significance for Kimm as his doctoral paper was on comparing the Verdi opera with the Shakespeare play and evaluating the demands made upon Verdi baritones for the role.

Reminders: The summer opera performances will be in Clapp Recital Hall on the evening of July 19 (Friday) and the afternoon of July 21 (Sunday). The tickets will be "general admission" instead of reserved. Thus to avoid getting a broken seat, come early. It is hoped that the broken-down seats in Clapp Hall will be repaired/replaced by next 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 the supers potluck supper have yet to be worked out. You will be notified when and where in time to make plans, but mean while mark off July 20th, as the most likely date. The food theme is "Tyrol" (Austrian but not Viennese).



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