

Newsletter • Bulletin

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Changes at Opera Lyra Ottawa

by Bobbi Cain

Rather extensive media coverage has emerged in response to a December 15th Press Release from OLO announcing a "Strategic Change" of direction for the organization. To quote:

"Opera Lyra Ottawa will develop new alliances with other opera companies to ensure that audiences have the highest quality opera available, while exposing those audiences to the best work from around the country." The company has been in discussion with the National Arts Centre for some time, and with Opera Ontario (a merging of Opera Hamilton and the Hamilton and the Kitchener-Waterloo (KW) Philharmonics—thus serving a wide area in Southern Ontario.) OLO hopes to engage in further discussions re joint productions with other companies across the country.

The Press Release went on to announce the departure of Artistic Director Jeanette Aster who has been in this position for a decade. She has helped guide the company through an era of strong artistic growth as it emerged from the stuff of a dream on the part of Diana Gilchrist to its present mature status. We wish to salute Jeannette as she moves to new challenges and to thank her for her dedication to the life of opera in the National Capital Region and in Canada. We also thank her for her support of and interest in the Brian Law Opera Scholarship.

Opera Lyra Ottawa faces an immense fiscal challenge with a reported accumulated deficit of over \$450,000. Opera production is a difficult and expensive business and the political bent of our country little values its contribution to the souls of our citizens. We must continue to work to change that bent—to say that the combination of glorious music, imaginative production, heart-rending drama or titillating comedy, and lively dance is a very special form of art. We in the NCOS are well-placed to engage in such a dialogue with both the public and private sector. On behalf of OLO we will do so.

In this issue an accompanying piece suggests a series of intriguing fund-raising initiatives directly connected with the upcoming *IL BARBIERE DI SIVIGLIA*. Like the NCOS, Opera Lyra Ottawa expresses great interest in the emerging youth audience, whether it be in performance or in appreciation. However, the suggestion that the essential "dress rehearsal" in a performance cycle is dependent on audience revenues is misleading. We wish the company the best in its aspirations to top-class opera performance and to the professional stance that accompanies that goal.

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There are still a few places available for the tour to the Met. Call Kathy at Congress Travel, 234-3360, if you are interested.

Montreal's *BUTTERFLY*

Just the opera performance for the music lover who thinks he's tired of *Butterfly*. Puccini's greatest score played by one of the world's greatest orchestras was the showpiece of the Montreal production. Conductor Alfredo Silipigni may be from New Jersey but he knows this music well and the orchestra responded magnificently.

Maria Spacagna is justly renowned internationally for her interpretation of the lead role. As *Butterfly* she was obviously not fifteen years old, but she sang beautifully especially in Act II where she demonstrated her dramatic power. She was joined in Act I by Paul Lyon, who possesses a fine tenor voice but who needs a little more stage experience to fully portray Pinkerton. Also notable were Kathleen Hegierski as Suzuki and Theodore Baerg as Sharpless.

The basic set was from the Opera of Philadelphia and, although a bit worn, was still quite attractive. The cutaway house was revolved by six

"Ninjas" from time to time to present a different aspect of the dwelling to the audience as the action shifted from one scene to another. This was done unobtrusively and worked quite well. My only criticism was that there was no decoration at all on the screens or on any part of the house, which gave it a somewhat incomplete, unfinished look.

Happily, the staging by Gina Lapinski was traditional, i.e. no shaving, picture-taking, near rape scenes, non-Oriental Japanese and no Atomic bomb. Trouble was a little girl (little girls do not run across the stage in the same way as little boys do) but she acted her part extremely well and should be commended.

All in all, this was one of the most enjoyable opera performances presented recently by l'Opera de Montreal. The capacity audience was most enthusiastic in applauding singers, orchestra and conductor. —M.K.

From the Chair

by Bobbi Cain

What an exciting time we have had as we are immersed in our celebration of the upcoming Metropolitan Opera debut for Ottawa's Gerald Finley! For all those who took part in the raffle for two places on the bus trip to New York in January, we send a very hearty "thank you" for your support and participation. For those of you who joined us at HMV, Sparks St. Mall for their customer appreciation evening and our draw for the raffle — what a great time we had. Even the weather cooperated with us. We had a video message of greetings from Gerald and family in England, and CBC-Radio's Rob Clipperton graciously drew the winning ticket. The winner of the raffle was Rachel Barreca, a graduate student who is head honcho at Lanark House, a residence at Carleton University, and is presently studying Radio Broadcasting at Algonquin College. She is thrilled to have been chosen, and the day of Gerald's debut, January 24th, is her birthday. Once we have paid for the prize package, our trea-

sure estimates that our net profit from the raffle will be over \$1,000, money we badly need. So thank you to everyone. The tour to New York is from January 23rd to 26th, and presently we have 31 people going on the bus, and a few others joining us in New York. Gerald's debut performance will be "Papageno" in Mozart's *THE MAGIC FLUTE* on the evening of the 24th, and then the Canadian Consulate in New York is hosting a celebratory lunch for all involved the following morning. Gerald's wife, English mezzo-soprano Louise Winter, will be there also. What a celebration we will have! We are working hard to formulate our programs for 1998—we still need to raise money—so if you have any ideas, give me a call. The next Brian Law Opera Scholarship competition is in January, 1999. We badly need someone on our Board of Directors to handle public relations: this is a very important job and we need help. Are you interested?

Seasons greetings to everyone and happy opera times!

“A disappointing *AIDA*” Wins Audience Approval

by Murray Kitts

Just what was the purpose of Richard Todd's review in *The Ottawa Citizen*?

If it was to stop unsuspecting opera goers from buying tickets then it was futile since all the performances were virtually sold out.

If it was to help improve the quality of performance in the future let me suggest that there may be no future for a company who is attacked so publicly and who is so dependent on different levels of government who are eager to find ways to cut grants or loans to the arts.

If it was to impress the readers with Mr. Todd's knowledge of opera then this too was a failure. Let me cite some specific flaws in the review:

1) If Mr. Todd is using a reference book which claims that *AIDA* was written for the opening of the Suez Canal, then he should throw that reference book away.

2) If Mr. Todd would care to examine the article on *AIDA* in Volume 3 of Julian Budden's definitive work, *The Operas of Verdi*, (Clarendon, 1992) he will find on p. 259 "As for *AIDA*, so often assigned to singers of Turandot, Verdi's ideal choice after Teresa Stolz was Adeline Patti, the singer of Amina and Lucia and the light florid repertoire." So much for his criticism of the lack of power in Maria Pellegrini's voice.

3) As for Louis Langlier, what would have been the criticism of Ben Heppner in this role? Too chubby for Mr. Todd to accept him as the general? In my opinion this was the best performance Mr. Langlier has given in Ottawa, much better than in the *LUCIA* that Mr. Todd gushed over (I loved *LUCIA*) some years ago.

4) As for the sets which Mr. Todd saw in Montreal, these were used much more effectively in the Ottawa production. The Nile scene is the prime example of this.

Even the Triumphant scene in Montreal had serious staging flaws: Amneris and the Pharaoh had to climb over each other to get to their thrones, the trumpeters were badly placed, and you didn't have to look too closely to see the same people coming round in the procession three or four times.

5) As for the stage direction, there were a number of quite positive improvements on previous productions. The singers performed well to the front of the stage, where they should be. The rhythmic movements in time with the music were no real substitutes for ballet, but were fairly effective. If I were to criticize the stage direction I would aim at the overdone "dumb show" during the Prelude (the music refers to *Aida* and to the priests, not to all these other people); the positively disgraceful upstaging of Rhadames during the "Celeste *Aida*", including the premature entrance of Amneris during the Tomb scene.

6) Finally, there is the most damning criticism of all: according to our critic OLO should have waited another ten years before attempting to stage *AIDA*. Surely the only real test of success or failure is how the opera was received by the audience. The performance I attended moved smoothly and held the complete attention and admiration of the newcomers to opera who accompanied me. I was particularly impressed by the large number of youngsters in the cast who donated their time and efforts to make the opera a success. And a success it was to judge by the audience reaction.

Perhaps it is the opera critic who needs ten additional years of study and development of his craft before submitting such damaging judgments in the public press.



The Raffle Draw at H.M.V.

Pat Adams

Puccini Country



Villa Puccini, Torre del Lago

Last April I stayed for about a week just outside of Lucca, a rampart-encircled mediaeval city located between Pisa and Florence. Even if I hadn't done some reading about Lucca before I arrived, the presence of a life-size bronze statue of Giacomo Puccini in a little square just off one of the main streets would indicate whom the Lucchese regard as their most famous son. Right in this square (across from the inevitable Trattoria Puccini) is the building where the composer was born and spent his early days

Climbing a couple of flights of steep stairs I paid my entrance fee (a few dollars) to a young lady whom I was told was one of the volunteer students who look after the place. One of the pleasures of traveling off-season is that there are no crowds to disturb you. Only two other people were in the Casa Puccini the morning I and my friend were there. Although the apartment was composed of quite a few rooms these were not very spacious to accommodate the large Puccini family.

Dominating the main room was the Steinway grand piano on which Puccini composed *TURANDOT*,

by Murray Kitts

which of course he was never able to finish himself. Another room housed the costume used by the Princess Turandot in the Met's first production.

There were many interesting photographs on display. On sale were some unfamiliar Italian performances of the operas and some cds of works by older members of the Puccini family, Giacomo's musical ancestors. On the whole the apartment was fairly empty and what was characterized as the beginnings of a library was a very small collection of books and records on a few glassed-in shelves.

In some ways I was disturbed by the emptiness of the place but the fact that the rooms were filled with music from *MANON LESCAUT* provided an extra atmosphere to add to the enjoyment of the visit.

Close to Pisa and even closer to the resort of Viareggio is Torre del Lago Puccini and Villa Puccini. The guide book implied that the Villa was difficult to find; not so. There is a clearly marked sign from the main street of Torre del Lago pointing towards the lake

and as you drive from the avenue the names of the cross streets: Tosca, Boheme, etc. were sure indications that this was the right track.

As you approach the Villa there is a barrier across the road which only residents of the area can open but there is a restaurant with a large parking lot right there and the proprietors seem to expect that visitors to the Villa will take advantage of their parking lot.

The Villa—a summer home—itself is separated from the lake by an expanse of lawn and to one side is a statue of Puccini with his hat and coat on looking like he is just striding along. In the summer the wind off the Lago di Massaciuccoli is no doubt very welcome; but in April it provided some of the coldest moments I spent in Italy.

A pilgrim to the Villa has to wait until the caretaker shows up—there is a bell which I rang before I noticed the sign in Italian, “Do not ring the bell.” The arrangement is to ensure that not too many people visit the Villa at one time. However, the caretaker arrived, took our money, let us into the Villa and turned on the lights. We were left entirely to ourselves to examine the downstairs floor and its contents.

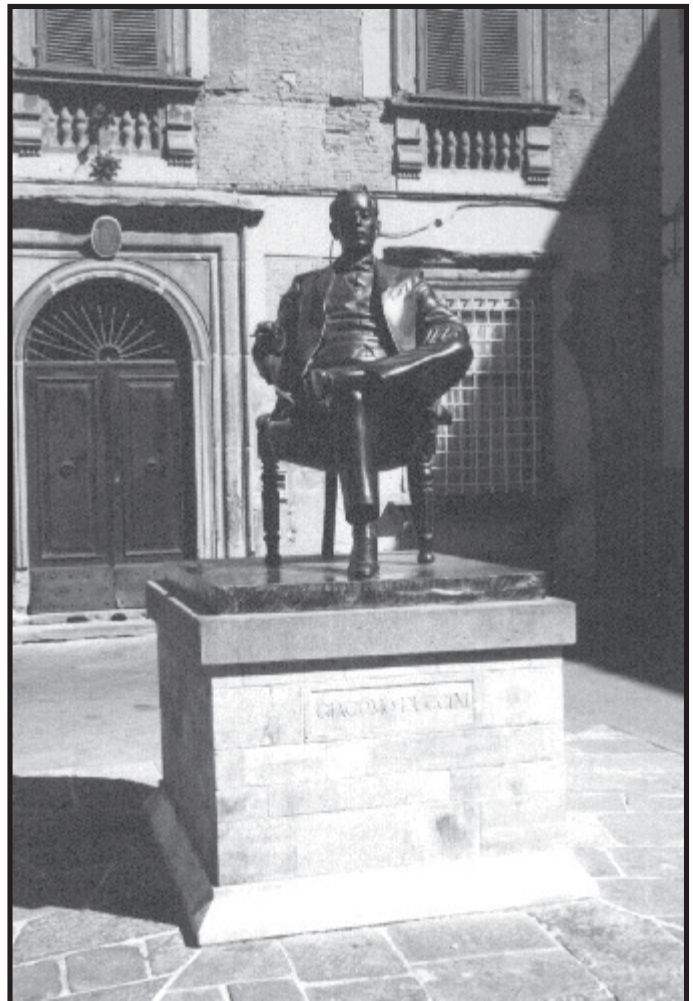
The most important room contains the tomb of Puccini and his wife. One could not help but be moved by visiting this spot, but more affecting was the display case which contained some of Puccini’s obviously distorted writing from his last days in Brussels. He was in great agony from throat cancer and yet tried to reassure his family that he was improving. His death mask is on display. Photos of the local townspeople carrying his coffin are very touching.

But there are so many pleasant momentos of the living man—his fishing tackle, the guns that he used (often illegally) for hunting birds on the lake. Here he sat with his friends from the local town and played cards; and from time to time would get up, go into another room to the piano and try out a theme or phrase, later incorporated into an opera.

There are a number of display cases with photos, letters, and other memorabilia. I was concerned with what appeared to be a considerable amount of physical deterioration in the objects displayed.

What was the cause of such neglect and such a sparse collection at the Casa Puccini? There were hundreds of visitors who signed the guest book during the summer months, so that some money must have been collected from admissions. It was only after returning to Canada that I learned that Puccini’s estate had been settled only this year, that a great portion of the money had been squandered by a servant of Puccini’s son (the butler did it!) and that this presumably was the reason for the lack of care of the two sites in Lucca and in Torre del Lago.

I hope this brief account will encourage anyone going to Tuscany to visit these residences—an unforgettable experience for any admirer of a great opera composer, now being ranked in the popular press as one of the greatest composers of all time.



Casa Puccini, Lucca

Creative Fund-Raising

by Murray Kitts

Opera Lyra has done it again! I had outlined a practical solution to their problem of costumes for *AIDA*. Instead of consulting me on the best way of raising money they are proposing that I send them at least \$10.00 to allow a student to attend a dress rehearsal of *THE BARBER OF SEVILLE*.

I have a few problems with this proposal. If opera lovers such as myself do not send in money, will *THE BARBER* be presented without a dress rehearsal? Will the dress rehearsal be held then on opening night? Having been ignored before, I won't even mention the possibility of an undress rehearsal.

And what about these students attending a dress rehearsal? There is a tradition in the theatre that the poorer the dress rehearsal, the better the opening night. Does this mean that we are in the absurd situation of trying to have students see a poor performance of an opera so that they will be encouraged to go to operas in the future?

These questions bothered me so much that I was inspired to come up with some creative suggestions for fund-raising more in keeping with the opera to be presented.

For the man who wants to serenade his lady love, a tenor and male chorus with guitar accompaniment to sing under the lady's window. (\$250.00–\$500.00, depending on weather conditions).

For the vocal student, lessons from a respect-

able-looking person who will not only improve one's singing but will give advice on how to deal with one's enemies. (\$50.00)

For the embroiderer, authenticated drawings of flowers by "Rosina" suitable for later working and framing. (\$25.00)

For the party-giver, an elderly, arthritic maid who will keep the your guests entertained by constant grumbling. (\$50.00)

For the hypochondriac, a consultation with a doctor who was renowned in Seville 200 years ago. (\$100.00)

For any man, tonsorial services from specially designated barbers, all called "Figaro" and all specially prepared by OLO's resident opera guru to discuss the salient points of the opera, replacing the usual topics of conversation, e.g. the Senators, (hockey team); the senator in Mexico, etc. This should be the biggest money-maker of all since most male opera lovers, although they like long-haired music, do get their hair cut professionally. (\$25.00)

However, a potentially more lucrative group are the ladies. The hairdressing fee charged by their specially designated "Figaros" can reflect current market prices (i.e., all that the traffic will bear.) As well, wigs could be designed for this special (money-raising) event.

Now I ask you, whose ideas are better? Have a lot of fun with my immodest proposals or force students to attend a disastrous dress rehearsal?

1998 Saturday Afternoon Opera Schedule

January 10 *PETER GRIMES* by Britten

January 17 *THE RAKE'S PROGRESS* by Stravinsky

January 24 *LA CENERENTOLA* by Rossini

January 31 *CAPRICCIO* by Strauss

February 7 *LES CONTES D'HOFFMANN* by Offenbach

February 14 *IL TROVATORE* by Verdi

February 21 *DIE ZAUBERFLÖTE* by Mozart

February 28 *SAMSON ET DALILA* by Saint-Saëns

March 7 *MADAMA BUTTERFLY* by Puccini

March 14 *L'ELISIR D'AMORE* by Donizetti

March 22 *LOHENGRIN* by Wagner (12:30)

March 28 *ROMÉO ET JULIETTE* by Gounod

April 4 *STIFFELIO* by Verdi

April 11 *DIE MEISTERSINGER VON NÜRNBERG* by Wagner (12:00)

April 18 *THE MAKROPULOS CASE* by Janáček (1:00)

All broadcasts begin at 1:30 except where indicated.

Not every person is blessed with an appreciation, or even an understanding, of the classics. One uncultured husband, dutifully accompanying his wife to music classes given by the late Henry Bonnenberg at the University of Ottawa, had the following reaction to his fruitless exposure to "music appreciation".

Adrift on the High C's of Bonnenberg

by Cy Torontow

O Henry, dear, please tell me clear,
 What's an oratorio?
 I seek reprieve from words like these:
 Fugues and concertinos,
 Barcaroles, sonatas,
 Marches, hymns, adagios,
 Preludes and cantatas,
 Not to mention minuets, carols and cadenzas,
 Pastorales, fantasies,
 Ballads and mazurkas.

Gregorian chants
 Aren't meant for the dance,
 Or so I understand,
 Tho' popes of old I have been told
 Had morals less than grand.
 Some were righteous, some outrageous,
 Not noted for their piety,
 They lived a Bacchanalian life
 On the fringes of society.

But I digress, back to the mess
 of music terminology,
 Where jargon words can seem absurd,
 Like the Church of Scientology.

When classical replaced baroque,
 Two hundred years ago,
 The masters aimed at plainer things,
 Embellishments must go!
 Music would take a simpler form,
 The flow of words less laden,
 But no such luck, they ran amok.

To ease the strain upon my brain,
 I thought I'd try "fast forward "
 And take a look at modern rock,
 Jazz and other swear words,
 Heavy metal, honky tonk,
 Swing, the blues and reggae,
 But I had to quit when some young twit
 Asked, "Sir, what's boogie woogie?"

Reluctantly, I tried anew
 To comprehend the cantos,
 Rhapsodies and symphonies,
 Andante or allegro;
 Madrigals and minstrels,
 Nocturnes and etudes,
 Reels and jigs and chanteys
 That border on the lewd.

But titles aren't the only things
 That drive a fella wild,
 Some so-called explanations
 On simple things get piled:
 Diatonic, modulation,
 Dissonance, home keys,
 Diminuendo and crescendo,
 What secret codes are these?
 Diminished fifths and minor thirds,
 (They sound like mathematics),
 Plus dominance, tonality,
 Harmonics and chromatics.

So Henry, dear, I ask you clear,
 One last and final query:
 Could I pass this music class
 With just jungle tom-tom theory?

Opera Within Reach

OTTAWA

NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE

Jane Eaglon. Jan 14 & 15

IL PRIMO OMICIDIO by Scarlatti. Jan 27

MESSA DA REQUIEM by Verdi. Feb 18 & 19

All are in the NAC Opera with the NAC Orchestra

Opera Lyra

THE MERRY WIDOW in Concert
narrated by Peter Jennings
with the NAC Orchestra Feb 21

IL BARBIERE DI SIVIGLIA by Rossini
March 14, 16, 18 & 21

All performances are in the opera of the NAC.
Information: 233-9200

HAMILTON

Hamilton Opera

POPERA (selected arias and duets from favourite operas.) Jan 29 & 31

RIGOLETTO by Verdi. April 25, 30 & May 1

All performances begin at 8:00 p.m. in the Great Hall of Hamilton Place.
Information: 1-800-575-1381

TORONTO

Canadian Opera Company

HANSEL AND GRETEL by Humperdinck
Jan 23, 25, 28, Feb 3, 5 & 7

THE CUNNING LITTLE VIVEN by Janacek
Jan 27, 29, 31, Feb 4, 6 & 8

FIDELIO by Beethoven
April 8, 11, 16, 21, 24 & 26

MADAMA BUTTERFLY by Puccini
April 9, 14, 17, 19, 22 & 25

All performances are at the Hummingbird Centre. Information: 1-800-250-4653

MONTREAL

L'Opéra de Montréal

IL TROVATORE by Verdi. Feb 14, 16, 19, 21, 25 & 28

LA CENERENTOLA by Rossini. March 21, 23, 26, 28,
April 1 & 4

NOZZE DI FIGARO by Mozart. April 23, 25, 27 & 29.

MANON LESCAUT by Puccini. May 30, June 1, 4, 6,
10 & 13.

All performances are at the Place des Arts.
Information (514) 985-2258