

NATIONAL CAPITAL  
*Opera Society*

*Société d'Opéra*  
de la CAPITALE NATIONALE

NEWSLETTER

SUMMER 2020



BULLETIN

ÉTÉ 2020



## President's Message

When I wrote my message for the last newsletter on March 1st, I had such enthusiasm for a spring full of opera. I had watched closely the virus situation in China and even so, I did not have the foresight to see how this virus would cancel all our wonderful planning.

Nevertheless, opera is available through the internet and “live streams”. We are virtually connecting with video through FaceTime and Zoom. It is amazing how everyone is embracing technology to connect.

One of my favorite events in Ottawa has been High C and High T. Murray Kitts has agreed to do a virtual High C and High T entitled “Fake News at the Opera” using Zoom. There will be no charge and no tea. Please invite your friends and fellow opera lovers to join us on June 21<sup>st</sup> at 2PM for our first virtual High C but no tea.

I am saddened to report that two of our dear members have passed away in May: Shelagh Williams and Bob Cumming. A tribute to Shelagh Williams is in this newsletter. Bob's wife, Marian, is a frequent contributor to our newsletter. Our deepest sympathies go to David, Marian and their families.

During this time of separation, let's stay connected by using the old-fashioned telephone, by zooming and watching live opera streams. Your ideas for ways that we can use Zoom for more ways to get together will be most welcome. Please let me know if you have suggestions.

Mark Robinson

### NCOS Board of Directors

Mark Robinson, President, Murray Kitts, Past President.

Board members: Francesca Fiasche, Diana Gnarowski, Vera-Lee Nelson, Peggy Pflug, Lesley Robinson, Carole Stelmack, Mary Frances Taylor

**Newsletter:** David Williams, Tom McCool

**Webmaster:** Jim Burgess

# Tributes to Shelagh Williams

We mourn the loss of long-time NCOS member Shelagh Williams. Members have shared their tributes and memories of her:

John and I first noticed the Williams at various concerts. They looked familiar, but we did not know who they were. Eventually we introduced ourselves and realized the connection was through our church, Christ Church Cathedral (Anglican.) Next, they suggested we go to Opera A la Pasta. And so we did, enjoying the evenings and the company, the presentations and the Italian dinner. Also getting to know the Williams better. There is something very attractive about a couple who are close and who enjoy each other's company as they so obviously did.

Our church has a service of Morning Prayer on the first Sunday of the month and Shelagh and David attended faithfully when they were not traveling. We also went to that service and looked forward to seeing Shelagh and David. Her enthusiasm and knowledge of opera was always infectious; Shelagh was bright and nice to be with on any level. Shelagh Williams was one of those people who come into your life and add immeasurably to it, although not necessarily a close friend or even a frequent companion. She was just nice to be around and she will be sorely missed.

Vera-Lee Nelson

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It might seem inevitable that a newly retired teacher-librarian would get to know another one, not yet retired, when the retired one came back to live in Ottawa in 1988. I was destined to meet Shelagh as a substitute librarian on a couple of occasions and was impressed by the order of the library and the respect for the librarian, obviously fostered by Shelagh's help and attitude towards them.

For the next few years, between my many travels I became involved with the National Capital Opera Society and its activities, always supported enthusiastically by Shelagh and David. Besides writing reviews on actual live opera experiences, Shelagh and David, with the collaboration of Tom McCool and Jim Burgess, produced an outstanding newsletter with accounts of musical happenings in Ottawa. I'm certain many of the NCOS Board members have been told that the newsletter is a valuable guide to promote music performances by all sorts of groups and individuals. Fortunate for the whole community was the passion for music and the theatre which drove the Williams couple to attend so many outstanding performances, locally and "within reach". Of course, Shelagh made onsite observations which she incorporated in reviews in our newsletters. Her attitude towards performers and performances always were positive and like a good teacher, would try to foster improvement.

My own debt to her, apart from the excellent support she always gave me in my various offices including President, came when I gave presentations to our members. I try to be spontaneous in my talks, so I do use only rough notes, not a full script. Shelagh always sat up front and many a time was able to give me a little prompt or suggestion when I needed one. I'll always be grateful to her for this. Sheila was always a happy person who loved to laugh and in company with her devoted husband, enjoy the beauty of the arts with other people. This is how I will remember her.

Murray Kitts

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I was so sorry to learn of Shelagh's sudden illness and passing. I will always remember her as a very talented and strong woman with many virtues. Her love of opera and music was outstanding and I shall miss meeting her and David at many performances throughout the city and around the world. She approached every performance with joy

and a highly positive attitude and wrote about them with candor, support and an awareness of the efforts and talent of all the participants from the stars and singers and musicians to the backstage crew who made it all happen. It was always refreshing to read her reviews in the Newsletter. She will be remembered and missed by everyone including the many young performers who have benefited from her humanity and generosity.

Carole Stelmack

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News of the sudden death of Shelagh Williams came as a total shock after our more than thirty years of friendship which included many operatic productions, which gave us mutual pleasure.

In great sorrow, memory took me back to a visit to Rome which we shared in 2010. How very much we enjoyed together the walking tour following the plot of *Tosca*, visiting the Church of Sant' Andrea della Valle, the Palazzo Farnese and Castel Sant' Angelo. We then rested our feet at a staged performance of *Tosca* at the Teatro Flaiano.

And next morning, again together, we peeled off from the group to spend time at the church of Santa Cecilia, the Patron Saint of Music, located in Rome's Trastevere. I remember Shelagh and I putting our noses against the thick glass panel, preventing entry, but still allowing us to see clearly the beautiful white marble figure of Cecilia.

"Vissi d'arte" very well describes Shelagh, I believe. It was largely living for music that drove Shelagh's pen in her role as critic. Precise research and a wealth of experience in performance were tempered by her innate empathy for the artist and love of the music itself.

Shelagh, we shall sadly miss you!

Ute and Michael Davis.

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I really appreciated Shelagh's column "Events You Could Have Enjoyed". She obviously cared about them deeply and her enthusiasm made me feel like I certainly would have enjoyed them too.

After the NAC concert in February in which BLOC winner Philippe Sly only had the final *Benedictus* to sing, Shelagh wrote "but it was worth it". Yes, her interest and support of young singers, enjoying their talents—it was worth it! Your good work, Shelagh, will live on.

Renate Chartrand

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Shelagh's bubbly enthusiasm for the arts and for travel was so infectious. It was always with such delight that she shared her experiences, both in person and in the pages of this newsletter and I shall miss her greatly. It was always so much fun to discuss with her the productions that we had both seen and to hear her thoughts, so eloquently and warmly expressed. Shelagh will long be in my thoughts as a lovely, gracious lady.

Lesley Robinson





# Reviews

## **The Last Weekend at the Met** **by Lesley Robinson**

We happened to be in New York the weekend before the Met closed its doors due to the COVID-19 virus. At the time of writing we have been back in Canada for more than two weeks, so it seems that we did not bring it home with us. Awareness was rising in New York. We washed our hands vigorously at every opportunity and avoided touching door handles, elevator buttons and railings on the Subway. Restaurants were open, but the least busy we have ever seen them in New York and Times Square was not its usual buzzing self, even though the theatres were still open.

### *Der Fliegender Holländer*

#### **CAST**

Dutchman	<a href="#">Evgeny Nikitin</a>
Senta	<a href="#">Anja Kampe</a>
Mary	<a href="#">Mihoko Fujimura</a>
Erik	<a href="#">Sergey Skorokhodov</a>
Steersman	<a href="#">David Portillo</a>
Daland	<a href="#">Franz-Josef Selig</a>

CONDUCTOR	<a href="#">Valery Gergiev</a>
PRODUCTION	François Girard
SETS	John Macfarlane
COSTUMES	Moritz Junge

We had been disappointed that Bryn Terfel had fallen and broken his ankle and had to withdraw from the entire run of *Der Fliegender Holländer*. This was to have been his eagerly anticipated return to the Met after way too long an absence of eight years, so the disappointment was heightened. Nevertheless, the new production by François Girard had all the mysterious eeriness required for Wagner's unearthly tale of passion and purgatory and the performances were top notch, so we were not disheartened on the night.

*Der Fliegender Holländer* was the first of Wagner's romantic, middle period operas, but it has much in common with later works. *Tristan und Isolde* premiered more than 20 years later, but shares the uncomfortable thematic coalescence of love and death. It seems unfathomable why Senta would throw herself into the sea because of her obsessive love of a stranger who had tried to buy himself a bride, yet somehow it is *her* love that brings *him* redemption—not quite women's lib. The set by John Macfarlane highlighted the starkness of the setting and the darkness of the tale. The bow of Daland's ship, hauled onstage by the crew, was an impressive feature of the set. The scene of the women waiting at home, spinning, was curiously presented—ropes hung from the ceiling and were twisted and entwined by the spinners as they sang.

Anja Kampe was a fervent and somewhat manic Senta. She is renowned for her Wagner roles. Although her performances in Munich and Aix-en-Povence were cancelled for the remainder of this season, she has a full schedule planned for next season, including roles in *Wozzeck*, *Fidelio*, *Parsifal*, *La fanciulla del West* and a reprise of the role of Senta in Munich.

Russian bass-baritone Evgeny Nikitin is best known for Russian and Wagnerian roles, although his repertoire is in fact quite varied and includes Mozart, Verdi and even Puccini. His busy schedule at the Mariinsky Theatre for the rest of this season has been postponed and performances in Paris and Japan were cancelled. Mr. Nikitin made a fine if abrupt end to his season in his role as the Dutchman. German bass Franz-Josef Selig was a robust and amiable Daland. His cancelled end of season performances would have included the role of King Marke in *Tristan and Isolde* at Covent garden.

Conductor Valery Gergiev was fascinating to watch. He conducted with what looked like little more than a toothpick in his right hand and employed his left with expressive dynamism.



L-R Franz-Josef Selig as Daland, Anja Kampe as Senta, Conductor Valery Gergiev and Evgeny Nikitin as the Dutchman

## *Agrippina*

**CAST** in order of vocal appearance

Agrippina	<a href="#">Joyce DiDonato</a>
Nerone	<a href="#">Kate Lindsey</a>
Pallante	<a href="#">Duncan Rock</a>
Narciso	<a href="#">Nicholas Tamagna</a>
Lesbo	<a href="#">Christian Zarella</a>
Ottone	<a href="#">Iestyn Davies</a>
Poppea	<a href="#">Brenda Rae</a>
Claudio	<a href="#">Matthew Rose</a>

CONDUCTOR [Harry Bicket](#)  
PRODUCTION Sir David McVicar  
SET & COSTUMES John Macfarlane

This production of Handel's *Agrippina*, new to the Met, turned out to be one of the most entertaining presentations I have ever seen at the Met. It was dazzling, thought-provoking, delightfully decadent, thoroughly relevant and absolutely hilarious. *Agrippina*, composed early in Handel's career and premiered in 1709, was described as an opera seria. It was only later that opera buffa became more fashionable and this version of the opera is very definitely "buffa".

The production began its life at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels at the turn of this century. David McVicar's contemporary setting highlights the opera's relevance for a modern-day audience and its themes of corruption, infidelity, political manoeuvring and lust for power seem even more apropos in the world of today.

The set, designed by John Macfarlane (the same designer as for *Der Fliegende Holländer*), centres around a long golden staircase leading up to the throne of Rome. Walls move to create the settings for various scenes, so that the single set becomes at turns boudoirs, grand public spaces and even a piano bar (although the "piano" is in fact a harpsichord, played on stage in accompaniment to the gyrations of some rather raunchy dancers). As the curtain goes up, we see the principal characters seated or lolling on their own sarcophagi. Things come full circle in the final scene, when the tombs are wheeled back on and they take their places, all in character. It's a compelling foreshadowing of how they all, one way or another, will come to a sticky end.

The entire cast performed with panache. The singing was of course superb, with a full range of voices from soprano (Brenda Rae) to bass (Matthew Rose). Not only did the singers perform with vocal precision, but the acting was magnificent and the comic timing perfect. Joyce DiDonato was a delightfully scheming title character, stomping around on her high heels, all in black, with the lace of her lingerie poking out seductively from behind the power suits. There was an unforgettable performance from mezzo-soprano Kate Lindsey in the role of Nerone. Complete with a fabulous wig and fake tattoos, she totally inhabited the character of the obnoxious, uber-entitled, coke sniffing teenage boy.

We were privileged to attend the last night of the run and the atmosphere of such a brilliant evening is a fitting reminiscence of the Met to keep us going until the curtain rises again.



L-R Matthew Rose (Claudio), Kate Lindsey (Nerone), Joyce DiDonato (Agrippina), Brenda Rae (Poppea) and Iestyn Davies (Ottone)

# NCOS Postcards



Here is a selection of photos, anecdotes and opera memories from NCOS members



**From Murray Kitts:**

## **An Opera Faux Pas**

I happened to be in London after my usual summer at Oxford, helping to direct the American students around the city and getting them to their lectures on time. Thanks to my contact with a lady from Toronto who introduced me to the director of the place, I was staying at a club in Mayfair close to all the wonderful attractions close by.

There was one problem. I had injured the big toe on my left foot. It was very red and swollen and quite painful. I was advised by a doctor to get it looked at when I arrived home. To make matters worse, the great Tutankhamen exhibition was on at The British Museum and standing in line for several hours did nothing to ease the pain in my toe.

What to do in London that did not involve walking? Passing by the Coliseum I recalled the performances of the first two operas in the Ring Cycle there. These were notable for a number of reasons including the use of an English translation of Wagner's text and the outstanding singing. At the end of *The Valkyrie*, soprano Rita Hunter was brought on stage where it was announced that she had now become Dame Rita Hunter by order of the Queen.



Unfortunately, my flight left before the two final operas of the cycle were presented.

The opera being presented at this time was to be sent to Germany on the occasion of the 1972 Olympics. This new opera was by Benjamin Britten. It was called *Gloriana* and was concerned with Elizabeth the First. I had heard via a broadcast, some music of dances from this opera. Although not a Britten enthusiast, I decided that this would be a pleasant way to spend an afternoon.

I had never sat in stall (a box just raised a bit above the last rows downstairs) so I thought I would splurge a bit and bought a ticket. The first act did not go well. Not only was my toe aching, but I really did not like the opera. But most of all, just before the curtain rose a woman arrived with a wheelchair with an obviously ill man in it. The poor fellow was incapable of normal speech, but kept up making garbled sounds all through the act. Of course, I was sympathetic towards one in such a condition and admirable of the efforts of his companion to try to offer him some diversion. However I decided to seek a remedy if possible. I had hardly begun to describe my problem at the box office when the attendant made the suggestion that he would change my seat to where I would not be disturbed.

With my new ticket I happily made my way to the bar for a nice G and T with (lo and behold) ice in it. I entered the new stall which was entirely empty. All was well except for this terribly painful toe. What if I? Well, why not? Carefully I removed my shoe and sock and placed the comforting ice on my toe. Relief at last! But wait! Discovery... The door of the stall opened and a lady and a gentleman entered. Did I try to explain my peculiar behaviour? No. The British are so used to eccentricities that I pretended to be just another eccentric and none of us spoke. After the lights went down, I managed to cloak my nakedness and finished off my G and T.

Never do this at the opera.

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**From Colleen Arsenau:**

### **And a Good Time Was Had by All**

This year was to be the 46th celebration of Settimana Italiana (Italian Week) in Ottawa. Unfortunately, due to restrictions imposed on city gatherings as a result of the COVID19 pandemic, the festivities had to be cancelled. When I heard this, it evoked memories from past Italian Week celebrations, especially my favourite event which was Opera in Piazza. Originally this was an "al fresco" concert where local opera singers came to Little Italy and performed in the open air. As time went on, a large tent was erected on the Corso Italiana and the opera singers as well as the audience were protected from the elements.

Pat Adamo, one of the founders of the NCOS, was the organizer and MC of Opera in Piazza. The concert would start at 7 p.m. and a few minutes later without fail, a brass band would go marching up Preston Street past the tent. The opera singers would continue on valiantly and the entire scenario was just considered a touch of the local flavour of the festival.



I recall one occasion when the opera concert started a little late. At 8 p.m. the leader of the next concert (a rock band) came on stage and told Pat that the opera concert had to stop and give up the stage for the next performance.



The opera audience had programs and we could all see that Nessun Dorma was to be the last aria of the evening. When Pat explained to us that the rock band wanted to take over the stage, a great protest erupted from the crowd. Pat turned to the rock band leader, gestured to the audience and with great aplomb announced: "The people have spoken." The band leader quickly left the stage, the tenor came on and sang his rendition of that magnificent aria to a standing ovation. Pat and all the singers polished off the concert with the traditional "Funiculi Funicula" and a good time was had by all.

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**From Francesca Fiasche:**

### **My introduction to Opera**



Picture this: Sicily in the 1960s; rock and roll reigned supreme on the radio and I loved it, especially American songs, even though I did not understand a word. On Sundays though, opera was played mostly on the radio and since it was my job (which I hated) to grate the cheese for our Sunday dinners, I used to sit in front of it (to make my job more tolerable) and I had no choice but to listen to opera. At the beginning I could not understand what all the screaming was all about. Imagine my surprise when I heard "O Lola" from *Cavalleria Rusticana* whose lyrics are in perfect Sicilian. I recognized what many people would sing all the time and I realized that it actually was from an opera. From then on, I began to love it and as they say, the rest is history.

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**From Vera-Lee Nelson:**

### **Postcards from life: a poor girl from a working-class town becomes an opera lover, or funnier**

This morning I got up at 6am, made tea and continued to my office to resume demolishing my piles of keepsakes (old Christmas cards from 2017 on, birthday cards, pens with no refills, etc.) For motivation I set my computer to the NAC concert featuring Measha Brueggergosman. I began to wonder, where did this all start? I love classical music, and especially opera. I grew up in a lovely ordinary family; music was not any part of our family life. My dad loved our big radio, to listen to Red Wing Hockey Games. I do know that he loved circus music! My mom was a great fan of Victor Herbert, pretty much in the abstract. There were no music lessons, or instruments of any kind in our house.

I do remember being taken to Detroit with a friend to see the Garde républicaine band of Paris. It was the first time I heard *Boléro* and I was gobsmacked! In public school we still had Music as a subject and a lovely big sunny room for our lessons. Mrs. Strauss, our teacher, taught me the fundamentals of all I know about the theory and practice of music. We listened, we sang and she explained. Although I was very young and had no background, I had a feeling in my soul that when I grew up, this would be my music.

And so it continued for a few years, until I went to the movies and there was Mario Lanza! That big voice, that music, presented with colourful scenes and costumes, and plots! How many teenaged girls became entranced by this star on the scene? And maybe they moved on to Eddie Fisher, or Elvis or someone more modern. I entered a no man's land of university, nursing and babies so it was some time before I was able to become (slowly) a camp follower of opera. Further hampered by lack of money and time with a young family, my excursions to the opera in



Toronto were scarce. Opera Lyra was wonderful when I moved to Ottawa and of course the Metropolitan Opera coming to our movie screens opened up further opportunities to widen my experience.

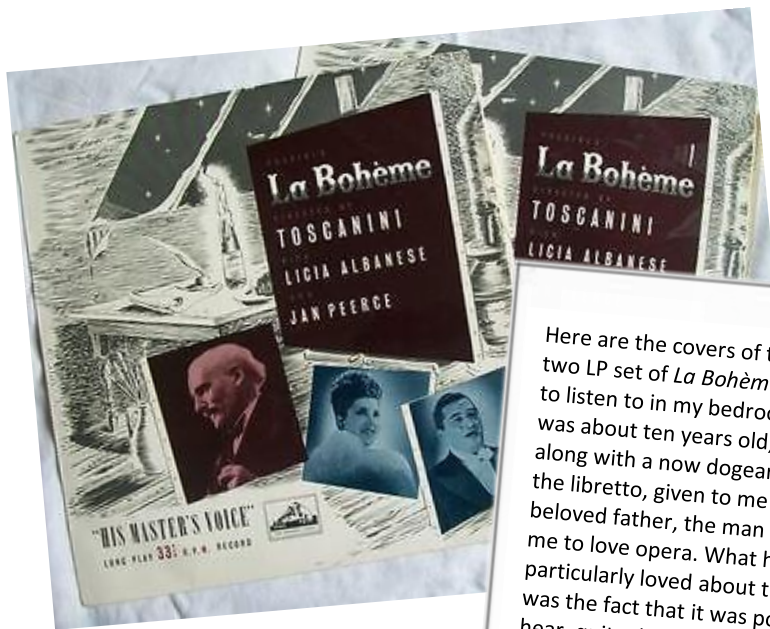
I could go on at length about all I am now receiving from this part of my life but perhaps I will just close by saying a big shout out thank you to Mrs. Strauss and to Mario (poor sad victim of Hollywood for all the joy he brought).

#### Postscript:

Recently remembering Mario Lanza, I decided to have “Hey Google” play me some of his music (from You Tube, of course) Oh dear! My mum was right once more. In my 13-year-old fervour I insisted to her that Mario was the best ever. I’m not sure I even knew he was a tenor. Well Mum smiled condescendingly and told me that in fact the best ever was Enrico Caruso.

I don’t think she had ever actually heard Caruso, but to the world of her time, everyone knew he was the best. And so it was left until now, when I heard the Lanza recordings for what they were (and they did make an enormous contribution, just not anywhere near the best ever tenor as I know now, decades later.) Back to Hey Google to play a selection of Jonas Kaufmann for me, to clear my palate so to speak.

So here I stand, the music enveloping me, Lysol wipe in my hand and dirty sink before me, waiting for me to move but I am lost in the music.



Here are the covers of the (scratchy) two LP set of *La Bohème* that I used to listen to in my bedroom when I was about ten years old, following along with a now dogeared copy of the libretto, given to me by my beloved father, the man who taught me to love opera. What he particularly loved about this recording was the fact that it was possible to hear, quite distinctly, the great Maestro Toscanini, singing, or rather humming along with Mimi (soprano Licia Albanese) in all the best bits.

Lesley Robinson



NCOS Newsletter

**From Carole Stelmack:**

I met Allan Monk when I was president of the Opera Lyra Guild. In fact, he became a close friend and stayed in my home on many occasions. He was very generous and once when he came to Ottawa to give a concert, he also gave a Master Class to help generate funds for Opera Lyra. Later that day I drove him to his concert and I was able to enjoy

his wonderful voice. At the end of the concert he received a beautiful bouquet of peach and yellow roses. When we arrived home, he gave me the bouquet! I was awestruck! It was the only time in my life that I was presented with flowers for singing!



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**From Diana Gnarowski:**

Growing up in the small town of Arvida, Qc, I came to opera, or perhaps opera came to me, in a strange and wonderful way. As a young girl helping my mother with family chores on weekends I heard broadcasts coming from Radio Canada/CBC, which were not Frank Sinatra or Rosemary Clooney, but something quite different from what my best friend Pauline and I had been routinely listening to. I was struck by the power and beauty of the music and magnificent range of the voices that I heard.

Since I was a member of the Jeunesses Musicales Canada, I had the good chance to attend a performance by Maureen Forrester and fell in love with her and with opera on an entirely personal level. In my later teens I joined the Arvida Choral Society which at that time was under the direction of Harold Byleveld, (who later moved to Ottawa) and under whose direction the Society put on *The Mikado* which turned out to be a great success. Many more were to follow and I recall that one or two more operettas were performed in which I participated, but sadly my memory is failing me at this writing and I can't recall which ones they were. In any case, it was a **wonderful** experience.

Then life took over—education, work, romance, marriage, children, the whole nine yards, until Michael, the subject of my life-long romance, was invited to teach at the University of Leningrad in 1977. Off we went on an epic trip to Europe which culminated in Leningrad, Russia. Leningrad, beautiful city that it is, was severely limited as to what there was to do, but thanks to the apparatchiks of the Communist Party we were put up in the fabled Astoria Hotel and spent our free time in glorious cultural immersion.



We marvelled at the architecture of the city built by Peter the Great, which had survived the siege by the German Army in 1941-1943 and had been scrupulously rebuilt; its magnificent churches—St. Isaacs with its columns of malachite and azurite, and the surviving palaces of Catherine the Great. One of the high points of our stay was that we all but lived at the Hermitage Museum, gawked at the early Picassos, the Morris tapestries and the pre-historic Scythian gold ornaments. But the highest point was our first, one of many visits to the famed Kirov Theatre to hear *La Traviata* where I was overcome by the orchestral performance and the spectacular voices which were not then heard in the West. Russia sent

few artists abroad and other than the cellist Rostropovich and the Red Army Chorus, the West remained in the dark as to the richness of the extraordinary talent in the then Soviet Union. We saw *Carmen* as well as local performances, which funnily enough included propaganda plays at the Mariinsky theatre. That was culture on a Cold War scale. But now to top it off there is of course “Opera alla Pasta”.

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From Tom McCool:

### The House That Wagner Built



There are a lot of things to like about opera but one very intriguing element for me is the opera house. One opera house that is special in many ways and very different from the others is the FESTSPIELHAUS in Bayreuth, Bavaria. One summer, many years ago, I was in the vicinity and decided that this would be an ideal opportunity to see *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (the Wagnerian opera spectacle that opened the FESTSPIELHAUS in 1876) and to see the opera house that was designed by Wagner for the presentation of his operas. The building, a timber structure with a brick facade is not especially impressive, either outside or inside, and could best be described as utilitarian. Upon entering the auditorium two things were immediately apparent—there was no orchestra pit and the audience was required to sit on long wooden benches with no backs. There actually was an orchestra pit, but it was located under the stage and the conductor and orchestra were not visible to the audience. One effect of placing the orchestra under the stage was a fuller, richer sound. Another consequence was that the audience was forced to direct their complete attention to the stage and not to the conductor’s gyrations. Wagner specifically wanted this and the musicians liked it because they were not required to “dress up” since they couldn’t be seen. The lack of comfortable seating can be explained by Wagner’s desire for the audience to be alert and not relaxed because he wanted their complete attention directed to what was happening on the stage. If it was uncomfortable -- too bad! Everyone knows Wagner’s operas are usually very long which was compounded by the fact that the intermissions at Bayreuth lasted one hour. Wagner felt the singers needed this amount of time to recover from the previous act and to prepare for the next. Consequently, the starting time at the FESTSPIELHAUS was 5:00 p.m. but even with the early starting time it was quite common for the productions to end quite late.

I am not sure if it is the same at Bayreuth today compared to forty years ago, but one thing you can count on...it will be expensive, very expensive. So, if you are planning to go to Bayreuth bring lots of money. However, at the end of the (very long) day at the unique and very special FESTSPIELHAUS you will consider the money well spent.

From Mark Robinson:

## My First Visit to Covent Garden or How I Got Hooked



It was July 1977 and I had finished my first year at university. At the time, my passion for music was classical music. I had not yet become passionate about Opera. One day, my dad asked if I would like to go to London to see an opera. I said, "Sure, why not?" It had to be better than being at home and watching the TV, which is what we did in the UK in those days.

We took the train and the tube. We arrived at Covent Garden in time to eat a sandwich. I didn't know that this was the premier place for opera in the UK. We took our seats in the orchestra and my dad told me we were watching the "B" cast. This set my expectations low, as we were not going to see the advertised Placido Domingo. The opera was *Aida* and it was magnificent. I remember this very large woman who sent shivers

down my back. She could fill the opera house with such a delicate and soft sound. And she soared above everyone else during the triumphal march. I saw Montserrat Caballe. What a treat! And my passion for opera began.

# OPERA

TOP 10

By Lesley Robinson

I have always been able to pinpoint my most favourite moment in all of opera. In fact, I can pinpoint my favourite note! (More of that later.) Thinking about all my favourite operatic moments, it has become clear to me that what I love the best are the moments where harmonies coalesce in a sort of sublime accord. So, all of my favourite moments are duets and more. I'd like to share my top ten. Please forgive the fact that almost all of them contain a tenor and of course my favourite renditions tend to involve Juan Diego Florez.

10

My favourite moment in Donizetti's *Don Pasquale* is "Tornami a dir che m'ami". It's a duet between the young lovers, Pasquale's nephew Ernesto and his beloved Norina. My favourite version is from the 2016 production from the Vienna State Opera featuring Juan Diego Florez and Valentina Nafornta, a very perky young soprano from Moldova. You can listen to this extract on You Tube at:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZTfV6220\\_I&list=RDsZTfV6220\\_I&index=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZTfV6220_I&list=RDsZTfV6220_I&index=1).

9

Number 9 on my list is another bel canto duet, this time “A te o cara” from Bellini’s final masterpiece, *I Puritani* with some crazy high notes. Once again, my favourite version features Juan Diego Florez as Arturo, this time with Nino Machaidze as Elvira. It is available on You Tube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MaLJXYQ1jxE>. The recording is from the Teatro Comunale di Bologna and was released on DVD in 2010.

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Another love scene is at number 8: “Nuit d’hyménée” from Gounod’s *Roméo et Juliette*. For the video extract featuring Vittorio Grigolo and Diana Damrau in a 2017 Live in HD performance from the Met go to: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1dboNnVcnXw>

7

At number 7 it’s back to Bellini (and Juan Diego). *La Sonnambula* may be a very silly story, but it contains some extraordinarily beautiful music. My favourite moment is the duet between Elvino and Amina, “Son geloso del zefiro errante”. It is Elvino’s jealousy that causes so much trouble, but he expresses it so touchingly that Amina can only respond with love. He talks of how he is jealous of the breeze that plays with her hair and of the sun that touches her face. Of course, she melts. My favourite rendition is the 2009 Live in HD Met broadcast featuring Juan Diego Florez and Natalie Dessay: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YSAdtXukcJw>. There is also a fabulous audio recording of Florez with Cecilia Bartoli: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKvrlVwHqes>.

6

I love the sublime Act 1 trio in *Così fan tutte* in which Fiordiligi and Dorabella sing a fond farewell to their fiancés, accompanied by the cynical Don Alfonso. Here is a link to the 2006 Glyndebourne version with soprano Miah Persson (Fiordiligi), mezzo-soprano Anke Vondung (Dorabella) and baritone Nicolas Rivenq (Don Alfonso): [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a\\_0FHyE3Pyk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_0FHyE3Pyk). The complete opera, available on DVD is a gorgeous, sundrenched version.

5

Number 5: no tenor here either—this is the beautiful Flower duet from *Lakmé* by Léo Delibes. It was sung gorgeously at the Baden-Baden Opera Gala in 2007 by soprano Anna Netrebko and mezzo-soprano Elina Garanca: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vf42IP\\_\\_ipw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vf42IP__ipw).

4

Number 4 is fittingly a quartet: “Bella figlia dell’amore” from the final act of *Rigoletto*. In this highly complex musical overlaying of distinct themes for each of the four characters, we are aware of the four very different personal agendas: the Duke is at his most persuasive, seductive self, Maddalena responds to him coquettishly, Rigoletto is full of gruff revenge and poor Gilda soars to the heights of agony and despair. The version I would like to share is from a fairly unorthodox production. No matter; the singing is transcendent. This is from a 2008 production of the Semperoper Dresden. The whole opera is available on DVD, but here is a You Tube link to the quartet: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tyoNeIyo8QQ>. Tenor Juan Diego Florez (of course) is the Duke, soprano Diana Damrau is Gilda, baritone Željko Lučić is Rigoletto and mezzo-soprano Christa Mayer is Maddalena.

3

Number 3 is “Au fond du temple saint” the duet between Nadir (tenor) and Zurga (baritone) in Bizet’s *Les pêcheurs de perles*. They remember how they had both loved the same woman, but had sworn to renounce that love for the sake of their friendship. It’s difficult to find an extract from an onstage production. Here’s a moving concert rendition featuring Jonas Kaufmann and Dmitri Hvorostovsky: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2MwnHpLV48>.

2

At number 2 is another fine bromance moment: “Dio che nell'alma infondere” from Verdi’s *Don Carlo*. Carlos and his friend Rodrigo swear eternal friendship in the cause of freedom. I’d like to share two different versions of this to showcase some of my favourite contemporary singers. Firstly, Roberto Alagna and (Montreal native) Etienne Dupuis in Paris in 2019:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0cAyTEAtfXc>. Here is another brief, moving extract from the San Francisco Opera 2016 production featuring Michael Fabiano and Mariusz Kwiecien:

<https://sfopera.com/1516-season/don-carlo/don-carlo-video-gallery/moving-moment-michael-fabiano-and-mariusz-kwiecien/>.

1

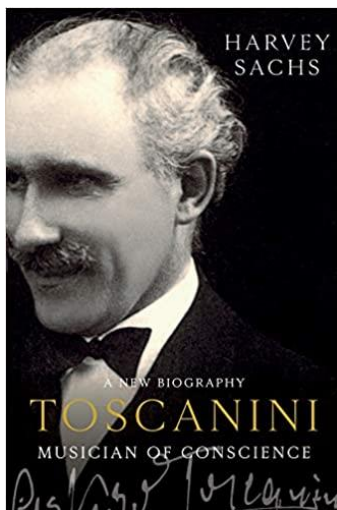
And now back to my all-time favourite moment, indeed my favourite note in all of opera. It is that moment in “O soave fanciulla”, in the final minutes of Act 1 of Puccini’s *La Bohème*, when Mimi joins Rodolfo in a soaring, orgasmic high note as they declare their love. It’s the moment where Rolando Villazon pins Anna Netrebko against the wall on the staircase in the 2008 film. You may (not) be surprised to know that I have a lengthy You Tube playlist of different versions of this aria, but I’ll just share with you my favourite: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ys-2Lybt8Do>.



# Book Review

*Toscanini - Musician of Conscience* by Harvey Sachs 923 Pages

By Mark Robinson



This was not the first book that I read about the great Maestro. However, it is without doubt a compelling and detailed description of this great man. The book chronicles his life from start to finish, including the incredible number of performances of operas and concerts in a season and how much he was paid. During rehearsals, he was often rude and angry as he strove for perfection. Surprisingly this Italian frequently conducted the German repertoire, especially Beethoven and Wagner. He always conducted without a score and frequently surprised people with his intimate knowledge of the score and libretto. Toscanini was known as the conductor’s conductor. Many conductors considered him the best. Outside of music, he was anti-fascist and became a figurehead against Mussolini. A lot of the latter insight to the Maestro was provided through recently recovered love letters. He was against divorce and had one wife. However, he did have many, many lovers, even through to his later years. It is a fascinating read about one of the great music makers.

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