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PARTERRE BOX

the underground queer opera newsletter

those darn divas!

Carol Vaness has decided to beat the new season rush by beginning her cancelling early: *Butterfly* at Sybil's Barn is definitely out. And we were so looking forward to seeing the strapping six-footer as the delicate Cio-Cio-San! Obviously that old debbil back problem is kicking up again. Or maybe 41-year-old (ahem!) Carol is finding change-of-life just as difficult as change-of-fach.

Cathy Malfitano (welcome back!) picks up the slack, including the *prima*. Meanwhile, Diana Soviero's fans (and ya'll are legion-- see elsewhere in this issue!) should expect to see a lot of her this year. I wonder if she knows Amelia in *Simon Boccanegra*-- or do you really expect either Cheryl Studer or Aprile Millo to show up for that avidly-looked-forward-to telecast?

Speaking of the Studerbaker, Deutsche Gramophon's damage control experts did not get the fix in soon enough on Covent Garden's *Aida*. The critics' reaction to La Studer's crash-and-burn! was brutal! Even worse than that notorious Vienna *Trovatore*. (At least Londoners are polite enough not to boo-- or were they just asleep as usual?) Later performances at the House of Vegetables featured New York's own Sharon Sweet and Michael Sylvester. Can you imagine crossing the Atlantic to hear that? Can you imagine crossing 66th Street?

Anyway, it bodes (as in Hannelore) ill for next season's new Met *Lohengrin*. Perhaps Studer's pallid and wimpy Elsa will be worth sitting through for Placido Domingo's swan knight and an exciting Ortrud (Gwyneth Jones? Eva Marton? Anyone will do, so long as it not Hildegarde ("Call me Jeff") Behrens.)

And, honestly, would you buy a used car from Joseph Volpe?

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POSTCARDS FROM TWO LAKES

By pure coincidence this summer I attended performances of two festivals which are situated on (or nearby) a lake. That is about the only thing that the Puccini Festival at Torre del Lago, Italy, and the Lake George Opera Festival in Upstate New York have in common. The former is an international festival, much more so years ago than now. Suffocated by serious financial difficulties, the Puccini Festival can nowadays offer an inferior number of performances and cannot have recourse to the very top names such as The Three Tenors, who used to show up often in that area in the 70's. The latter is a more provincial festival, which will always remain such, unless the artistic board does not decide to bring in drastic conceptual modifications. All operas are sung in English, a decision that may attract some more local opera goers, but which decidedly will always represent an insurmountable barrier to the festival's international ambitions.

Both festivals staged Puccini's LA BOHEME. Torre Del Lago's Festival, which takes place in an open air theater on the Massaciuccoli Lake in Tuscany just across a villa where Puccini wrote almost all his operas and where he is buried, presented a conventional production and a weak cast. Maria Spacagna's loud and insensitive Mimi' was the major disappointment. Keith Olsen was a decent Rodolfo, but his ordinary timbre and approximative Italian diction didn't certainly help him to excel in a role tackled by virtually all the greatest tenors of the century. Fernanda Costa and Giancarlo Pasquetto scored much better as Musetta and Marcello. Lake George Opera Festival, which despite the name takes place in a unromantic High School auditorium miles far from the lake itself, produced a Boheme with some good voices (Laurinda Nikkel's Mimi' and especially Daniel Mobbs' Marcello) and some less than acceptable ones (Virginia Browning's Musetta). The scenery was scanty but the actors' movements on stage direction were imaginative and functional.

TURANDOT, Torre del Lago's second title, was a much convincing production. Ghena Dimitrova is probably the only soprano around capable to face the terrible demands of the title role. Though slightly unsteady in the middle range, Dimitrova's dramatic soprano hasn't lost yet its phenomenal powerful top, which sounds like sabres in the air. Lando Bartolini can be viewed as a good Calaf, especially if you don't expect too many subtleties and nuances and you are willing to let yourself be seduced by sheer vocal power and secure high notes. Maria Chiara, unquestionably at the end of a glorious career, showed such a fastidious wobble in the notes above the passaggio that one couldn't fully realize what the note was that she was singing. Her Liu' was then almost unbearable. The production was at times ridiculous, such as the moment when Calaf, instead of striking it, simply points his fingers towards the gong three times. Undoubtedly the old production by Giancarlo Cobelli that this one just replaced was far more fascinating, mysterious and captivating.



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Lake George's second title was a much more interesting and intriguing one, Rossini's LA DONNA DEL LAGO, or better, unfortunately, THE LADY OF THE LAKE. This masterpiece of supreme beauty, rarely heard in the States though a repertory one in Italy, was marred by a totally inappropriate and fastidious staging: all the audience could see was nothing more than a black room with some chairs. I understand that Lake George Festival does not have huge funds at its disposal; however in many other cases (as in their Boheme itself) lack of money stimulated creativeness and imagination. Things were much better on the musical side. Though probably only one of the singers was a real Rossini specialist worthy of appearing in specialized festivals such us the Rossini Opera Festival in Pesaro, the whole cast offered some fine singing. Mezzo-soprano Manhua Zhan, the Lady of the Lake of the title, had a somewhat too light a voice for the lowest role Rossini ever wrote for his wife, diva Isabella Colbran. Her performance was rather unimpressive all through the opera, to redeem herself only at the very end with Elena's final rondo "Tanti affetti", sung with sufficient agility. The other female lead of this opera is a trousers role, much lower in range than Elena's. Melanie Sonnemberg's mezzo-soprano, though darker than Zhan's, doesn't have much of the authentic contralto sound and the difference between a somehow forced chest register and soprano-like upper range was too noticeable. However, she unveiled an impressive propensity towards the coloratura singing. Once in a while, the "boys" of the opera turned out to be the first of the class. Brad Williams' light and limpid tenor showed an amazing easiness in the extremely high range, and if his coloratura were more neat and precise he could become a worthy successor to Rockwell Blake's roles. Tenor Charles Workman has all it needs to secure himself Chris Merritt's parts: an striking range (the role of Rodrigo calls for the tenor to precipitate from the very high C above the staff to the very low A flat below the staff) and satisfactory coloratura. Moreover, being good-looking and sexy won't do him any harm.

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New York Opera Forum presents

Georges Bizet's Carmen

at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center
208 West 13th Street, New York, New York

8:00 PM Thursday, September 29
(Seating is limited, so arrive early!)

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Shelley [39] writes from the "Crying Game" syndrome - the reviews and word-of-mouth have built up audience expectations to the point that disappointment is inevitable. Let's face it - the show's no Invidia, or as Don O'Hearty says in "Imitation of Life," it's "all high ideas and low heads."

Siemgund should leave the audience, well, uneasy (as he says, "I was drawn to men and women"). Peter Hofmann's Walsung as Rock Star is but a fond memory now, but, wow, was he ever Trouble memory now, but, wow, Jim Morrison rewritten ("Wehwalt")! Imagine you're almost there. • A rival soprano on

parterre box is about remembering when opera was queer and dangerous and exciting and making it that way again.

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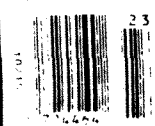
To Wang Fu:
Thanks for
Everything
Anna Moffo

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(AND 'LITTLE BUDDHA')
MUSCLES HIS WAY INTO AN
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Or, A Study in Diva Psychology

Two Ladies in East Fifty-Seventh Street

You know, I heard Eleanor had broken a tooth singing Tosca at the Met. Not long after I saw her on 57th St.

We spoke. So I said: "Eleanor, I heard you broke a tooth singing Tosca at the Met!"

I told you that role is too heavy for you!"

[Milanov here broke into peals of laughter satisfied by her own joke.]

Eleanor Steber:

I saw Milanov one time in E. 57th St. just after I started singing Tosca at the Met and she came over to me and said: "Eleanor I hear your broke a tooth singing Tosca the other night. Now, you know I told you that role was too heavy for you!"

Of course, the problem was I was singing her roles: Donna Anna and Tosca!

[Steber here smiled sweetly; new teeth.]

Dear Parterre Box,

Recently a friend from Chicago passed along his copy of your opera reviews, and I found it very interesting. It is too bad that you have had to limit yourself to that which you have seen or is available on commercial (pirated or otherwise) recordings.

My problem is that I go back to selling records while a student at Northwestern University shortly after WWII, then a short stint selling Columbia records on the "road," and after a hiatus of several years (during which I first Callas in *Lucia* in Florence in '53,) also Geiseking, Backhaus, among others), I returned to Chicago and opened and managed the first mid-west office for Angel Records, during which time Lyric Opera started up with ALL THOSE STARS. Until '79, my operagoing was restricted to San Francisco Opera. I say 1979 because that was the year in which I went to San Diego with friends, one of whom is a great admirer of Carlo Bergonzi. And since it was a Verdi festival of sorts, we took in a concert and *Traviata*. The tenor was forgettable, but the soprano was something very special. In fact, I was bowled over.

To have a beautiful Violetta with a great figure was all great, of course, but to have one who could sing and act?! And I have seen quite a few sopranos over the years, so I tend to be a bit jaded. But here was the real thing! and so, I have been following Diana Soviero's career ever since, and whenever possible, I go to see her perform. That means I have recently returned from my fourth trip to Montreal to see her in two each of the following: *Adriana Lecouvruer*, *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly* and *Carmen*. For

my money she is the best I have yet seen in any of these roles. You mentioned the broadcast to *Adriana* with Freni. She gave it the old college try, but "no." Not when I have seen Scotto and Soviero. And Scotto was still in good voice here in '77, I believe it was.

Soviero, for whatever reason, has just not had the big hype that lesser singers like Vaness and Studer are getting. They must be putting out a lot of money for self-promotion. And now Vaness is suing Breslin!

I have now heard her in San Diego, Costa Mesa, San Francisco, Houston, Miami, the Met, Ravinia, Montreal and Covent Garden. And as soon as I find out when she will be singing in Berlin and Hamburg, I intend to add these cities to my belt. I am always open to new voices, but for now, it is Soviero (besides being a great singing-actress, she's a warm and wonderful person. Not since Callas in Florence and Chicago (I won't count the final tour with di Stefano).

Maybe our paths will cross at the Met this coming year. Soviero will be there and so will I for a couple of *Butterflys* (there won't be a dry eye in the house when the curtain falls.

D.F.



is going to be involved in the arts. Even the

West shows whom she... I hate to be so lacking in optimism about the future of singing, but I've been terribly disillusioned by singers emerging lately, not to mention the horrible monopolies the whole music "industry" is forcing on us. A trip to Tower Records leaves me speechless: do Deutsche Grammophon and Philips really think that versions of *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Tosca* with Cheryl Studer and Carol Vaness, respectively, can stand comparison with the great recorded statements left to us by the likes of Sutherland and Callas? Unbelievable! If they must record new versions of these operas, why not give them to people who really deserve them? To date, sopranos Ruth Ann Swenson and Diana Soviero have made no complete opera recordings (absolutely criminal!) and actually have significant experience performing their roles in the theater, a credential that used to be considered an important justification for preserving an artist's work.

Somebody has got to start spreading the word to the uninitiated that they are being had. Otherwise, I may desert the opera houses all together. Again, I hate to be so negative but it infuriates me to be greeted by blank expressions when I mention to the average operagoer such great artists as Soviero, Swenson, Benackova, Fleming and others. Everything is marketing and hype these days, sexy CD covers and designer dresses, flash over substance.

As you can probably deduce, I am a big Soviero fan. A fabulous artist! I have now seen and heard her in opera houses throughout North America and have never failed to be moved by her heart-rending lyric soprano. She is a great actress and a highly expressive singer. In reviewing her 1984 appearances at the San Francisco Opera as Norina in *Don Pasquale*, *Opera* magazine stated that she sounded like the successor to Olivero and I believe it. She is now 48 years old and incomparable in the verismo and

French roles that Farrar, Garden, Albanese, Favero, Olivero and Scotto specialized in.

I first saw Diana in my native New Orleans, where she appeared in 1984-1986 as Violetta, Cio-Cio-San and Mimi. I have subsequently heard her at Chicago Lyric Opera as Marguerite in Gounod's *Faust*, the Ravinia Festival in an all-Puccini concert with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Metropolitan Opera as Cio-Cio-San (in 1992 and 1994), the Miami Opera as *Tosca* and L'Opera de Montreal as *Carmen*. Although I have not decided on specific dates just yet, I plan to see Diana during the 1994-95 season at the Met as *Nedda* and Cio-Cio-San, as well as Cio-Cio-San at the Miami Opera (January, 1995) and *Donna Elvira* (her first) at L'Opera de Montreal (May and June of 1995). She will also sing her first *Fedora* in Montreal in September of 1995 and I definitely plan on being there. Incidentally, Diana's husband is Bernard Uzan, the general manager of the Montreal company. She has a comparable status there to Callas when she ruled La Scala--unlimited choice of repertoire.





Because she has no recording contracts or big maestros backing her, Diana is something of a cult figure to her fans. She's a survivor, that's for sure. Most people aren't aware of this but she has sung in just about every major opera house in the world. In addition to the performances I mentioned above, she has sung at Covent Garden (Nedda in 1989 and Cio-Cio-San in 1993), the Bastille Opera (Manon Lescaut in 1991 and Cio-Cio-San in 1993, both new productions), Munich, Hamburg (she is scheduled to return here in the 1994-95 season as Tosca), Vienna (Liu in 1983 and Cio-Cio-San in 1993), La Scala (Nedda in 1987, with Jose Carreras singing his first Canio), Geneva (Margherita in Boito's *Mefistofele*), Rome (Massenet's Manon in 1983--tumultuous ovations were reported), Florence (Suor Angelica in 1988), Madrid (Suor Angelica in 1987, telecast throughout Spain), Toulouse (Marguerite in Gounod's *Faust* in 1983, telecast throughout France), Santiago (Manon Lescaut in 1992, telecast throughout Chile), Mexico City (Liu this summer, opposite Eva Marton's *Turandot*), and many more. She is scheduled to make her debut with the Berlin State Opera during the 1994-95 season as Cio-Cio-San. Other roles in her active repertoire include Adriana Lecouvreur and Musetta.

Although Diana has a 22 performance contract with the Met next season (tied with Vaness for the busiest soprano on the Met roster), I do wish Levine and Volpe would come up with some more adventurous repertoire for her. She and Richard Leech love working together--they'd be a marvelous pair in a new production of Massenet's *Werther*. I think Diana would be fabulous in a lot of roles she has not undertaken to date: Vitellia in *La Clemenza di Tito*, Maddalena in *Andrea Chenier*, Alice Ford in *Falstaff*, Elle in *La Voix Humaine* and Melisande. Most of all, I would love for the Met to pull their beautiful *Francesca da Rimini* production out of the mothballs and revive it with Diana, Domingo and Milnes in the lead roles. One can only hope.

I love to discuss great singers with others who enjoy them. Above all, I want expression from a singer. Technique and training are important, but I look first for style and characterization, both of which are shamefully lacking from most of today's performances. Congratulations to you on your wonderful new publication and good luck. I look forward to hearing from you.

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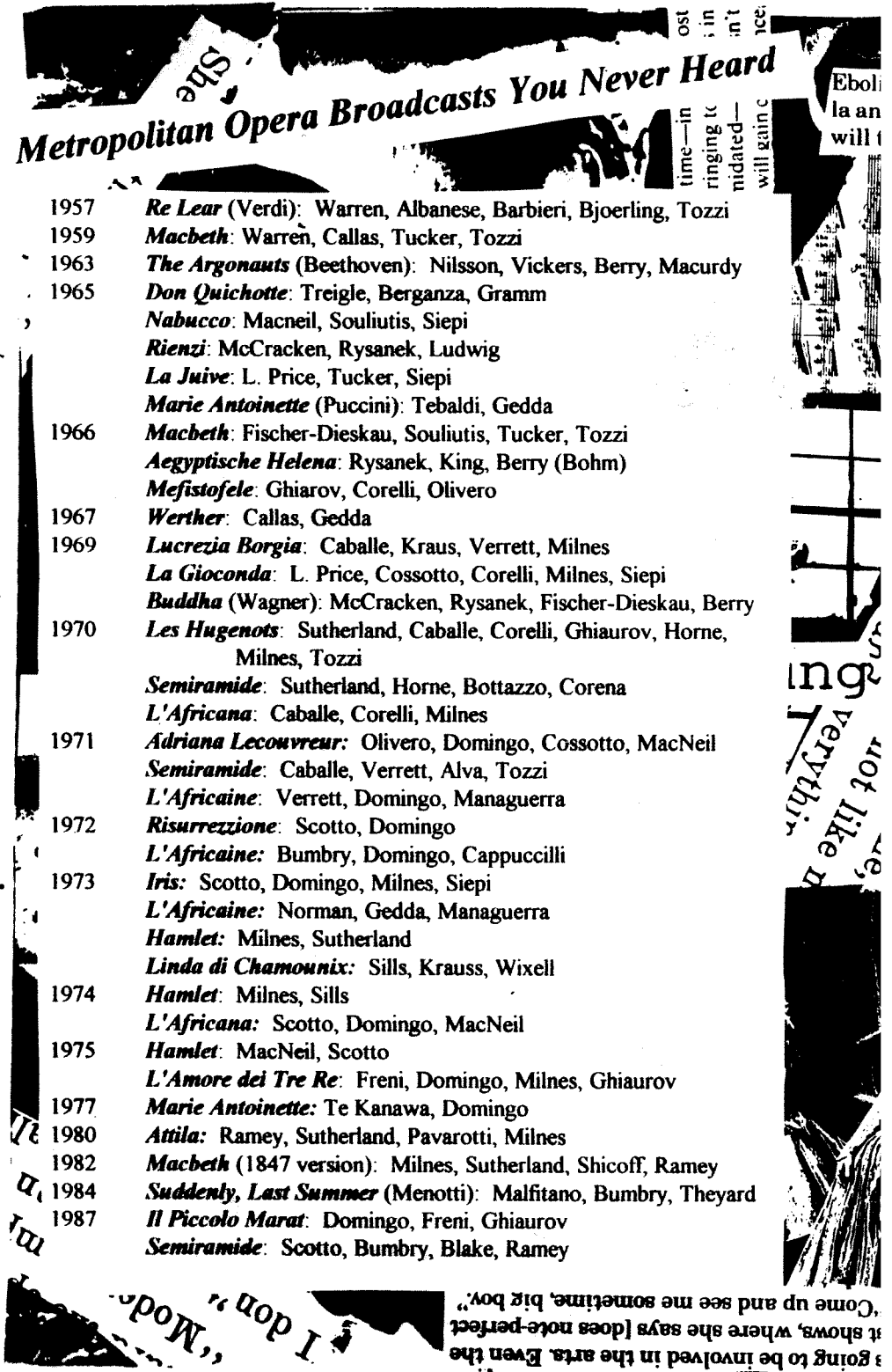
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Metropolitan Opera Broadcasts You Never Heard

- 1957 *Re Lear* (Verdi): Warren, Albanese, Barbieri, Bjoerling, Tozzi
- 1959 *Macbeth*: Warren, Callas, Tucker, Tozzi
- 1963 *The Argonauts* (Beethoven): Nilsson, Vickers, Berry, Macurdy
- 1965 *Don Quichotte*: Treigle, Berganza, Gramm
Nabucco: Macneil, Souliutis, Siepi
Rienzi: McCracken, Rysanek, Ludwig
La Juive: L. Price, Tucker, Siepi
Marie Antoinette (Puccini): Tebaldi, Gedda
- 1966 *Macbeth*: Fischer-Dieskau, Souliutis, Tucker, Tozzi
Aegyptische Helena: Rysanek, King, Berry (Bohm)
Mefistofele: Ghiaurov, Corelli, Olivero
- 1967 *Werther*: Callas, Gedda
- 1969 *Lucrezia Borgia*: Caballe, Kraus, Verrett, Milnes
La Gioconda: L. Price, Cossotto, Corelli, Milnes, Siepi
Buddha (Wagner): McCracken, Rysanek, Fischer-Dieskau, Berry
- 1970 *Les Huguenots*: Sutherland, Caballe, Corelli, Ghiaurov, Horne, Milnes, Tozzi
Semiramide: Sutherland, Horne, Bottazzo, Corena
L'Africana: Caballe, Corelli, Milnes
- 1971 *Adriana Lecouvreur*: Olivero, Domingo, Cossotto, MacNeil
Semiramide: Caballe, Verrett, Alva, Tozzi
L'Africaine: Verrett, Domingo, Managuerra
- 1972 *Risurrezione*: Scotto, Domingo
L'Africaine: Bumbry, Domingo, Cappuccilli
- 1973 *Iris*: Scotto, Domingo, Milnes, Siepi
L'Africaine: Norman, Gedda, Managuerra
Hamlet: Milnes, Sutherland
Linda di Chamounix: Sills, Krauss, Wixell
- 1974 *Hamlet*: Milnes, Sills
L'Africana: Scotto, Domingo, MacNeil
- 1975 *Hamlet*: MacNeil, Scotto
L'Amore dei Tre Re: Freni, Domingo, Milnes, Ghiaurov
- 1977 *Marie Antoinette*: Te Kanawa, Domingo
- 1980 *Attila*: Ramey, Sutherland, Pavarotti, Milnes
- 1982 *Macbeth* (1847 version): Milnes, Sutherland, Shicoff, Ramey
- 1984 *Suddenly, Last Summer* (Menotti): Malfitano, Bumbry, Theyard
- 1987 *Il Piccolo Marat*: Domingo, Freni, Ghiaurov
Semiramide: Scotto, Bumbry, Blake, Ramey



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