

Valley of the Divas

www.parterre.com



"Yes, Mother, I'm doing my voice exercises!"



"Jimmy Levine is no fag, and I'm the gal who can prove it!"



"I'm Kathy Battle and I don't need anybody!"

**PAR
TERRE
BOX**

**QUEER
OPERA**

We hear that...

The following items courtesy of "La Cieca":

What very dignified American diva has held up release of a major Wagner recording until she can loop three notes into the finale of Act 2?

What musical superstar is up to his old tricks again, performing La Son-NAMBLA (his favorite piece) all over Europe? And what red-headed board member is leading a movement to dump him?

What world-famous soprano's refusal to attend rehearsals led to a piano dress with no prima donna? Insiders said it should have been called Le scarpe rosse. (Please note-- this singer was not fired for her unprofessional behavior!)

What gay-themed opera has been quietly dropped from the Met's 1994-95 schedule following protests from several wealthy and prudish patrons?

In the wake of the Kathy Battle scandal, what unpredictable artist was overheard vowing to sing every single performance of her Strauss and Poulenc roles this season?



www.parterre.com

awakening scene

Channel 13's showing last month of Armistead Maupin's Tales of the City brought back to mind one of the few lasting innovations of the 1970's: the disco nap. I was just an opera princess then, but I remember how well forty winks used to set one up for the night's perilous journey from box to bar to baths.

But now, those of us who recall Leontyne's farewell (you know who you are) are finding it harder and harder to hit the ground rolling when the alarm goes off at 11 PM. But you can take Atavan if you try Ruth Sherwood's plan: program your CD player to wake you with one of the following:

Nessun dorma, of course, as sung by Franco Corelli, who else. Any recording will do, but try to find a pirate of a live New Jersey performance. If Franco doesn't wake you, the public will.

zweite Brautnacht! (the big aria from Die Agyptische Helena -- look for it on the Leonie Rysanek recital on HRE) The party favors Helen took have this effect: she's ten years younger, the night goes on as long as she wants, she binges on sex. Where can I get some? B-major ecstasy, as Leonie makes "a vacation of every high note."

• Bolero from Les Vêpres Siciliennes (on Angel's "Beverly Sills Sings Verdi") Bev bubbled through this ball-buster while fighting flu and a fever of 103. So you can quit whining and get dressed.

Act 1 Finale from Norma (on the aptly named "Gala" label) This legal pirate of the opening night of the '55 season boasts Callas, Simionato and Del Monaco, all at the top of their form. Maria gets wilder and wilder, but never loses control. And that high D she sits on for, oh, twelve beats-- if that doesn't wake you, call the paramedics. You're in a coma.

I could have danced all night (Birgit Nilsson on "Met Stars on Broadway." This one will clear your sinuses in a hurry. You'll agree with the Lady from Sweden: "Shleep, shleep, I couldn't shleep tonight! Not for all the chews in the crown!")

more on the back page

Dialogues of the Carmelites

Metropolitan Opera (2/28)

The Met's Salute to Queer Opera (see also Death in Venice and The Arthur of the Regiment) peaked in the fourth and best revival of John Dexter's production of Poulenc's tale of sisterly love. Although his 1977 lineup is dearly missed (especially Mignon Dunn) four out of five of the principals were good-to-excellent. If only the Met could bat .800 when they do Bohème.

Kent Nagano's way with the score was persuasive; I found it rather richer sounding than his recent recording of Carmelites. For one thing, he followed Poulenc's explicit instructions on vocal casting (Blanche = Thais, Constance = Zerlina, Lidoine = Desdemona, Marie = Amneris, de Croissy = Kundry). But the sonorities were transparent, never covering the singers. I'm not sure why guest conductors (e.g., Kleiber) can get such cooperation from the Met orchestra, while their playing for their music director is exciting but often crude and noisy. Maybe he likes the way they sound. I can't explain it.

The men in the cast covered themselves with shame; when Charley Anthony is the best male voice in a show, you know you're in trouble. The only total loss among the women was Florence Quivar: her heavy vibrato, mushy diction and imploded stage presence reduced Mother Marie to a nun-entity. But then, Mignon spoiled me for all time (she will never be matched in this role, or as Die Amme, either). I can't understand why Quivar was assigned this part again, after making such a mess of it last time around. Doesn't anyone else in the world know the music?

Following Régine Crespin's celebrated interpretation of Mme. de Croissy has to be no fun at all, but Helga Dernesch took on the role with dignity

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



KATHLEEN BATTLE

and distinction. (as a late-in-the-game replacement for Christa Ludwig, one hears). I was pleasantly surprised at her clear, practically unaccented diction and mastery of Poulenc's style. The mezzo still possesses enormous authority and the voice remains big and colorful. True, she ran out of voice during the death scene, but who doesn't? All she lacked was a certain warmth and femininity (Crespin was stern; Dernesch was dour.) But I look forward to her Klytämnestra and Zia Principessa.

Sister Constance can work one's nerves (she's just so damn perky-- remember Soeuer Betsy du Bavardage du Christ?) but Heidi Grant Murphy soft-pedaled the switch-to-deaf aspects of the role, emphasizing the novice's commitment and purity (a real reine Thorin). The voice is lovely if itty-bitty, un peu sec, which is fine with me-- the music is sweet enough as it is. And she can sing legato. Whoa. She can sing legato. Tremble with joy when you hear those words. But her real breakthrough is her subtle way of reordering the plot around the love story of Blanche and Constance. (Poulenc hesitated to set Bernanos' play because of what he perceived as "a lack of conventional love interest." Surprise! The love interest in this show is exactly that: conventional.) I still don't like Constance's goofing off and gabbing in the workroom scene-- she should be hard at work while Blanche sulks-- but Murphy is damned adorable. Keep an eye on her.

Who else can be so wildly miscast as Teresa Stratas and still make such a memorable impression in a role? Mme. Lidoine is meant to be an island of calm (early interpreters: Crespin, Price, Sutherland, Gencer); Stratas is a tornado. But her reading of "Salve Regina" was fascinating: ecstasy, not resignation. No, she doesn't sound like a thirty-year-old any more, but the

(as they say at OOHY, "please turn over quietly")

CAROLITE

voice is hardly threadbare (how many 56-year-olds can make that claim?) Better to call it "broken in," like a favorite pair of slippers. And she means every note, every syllable, every gesture. You are a fool if you miss this performance, or her Komponist later this year.

I confess I have not been a fan of Dawn Upshaw-- her voice as an instrument is on the ordinary side, and there was a time a couple of years ago when she was being promoted as ruthlessly as Cecilia Bartoli is now. But this performance turned me around. She is an artist in the Stratas mold-- intelligent, committed, unafraid of giving. Moreover, she has everything the part of Blanche de la Force requires-- musicianship, superb diction, charm and fragility. She never pushed her voice, and yet every note, every word carried, even into the notoriously dead downstairs standing room area. And the middle voice has gained in color in the past couple of years-- the Parlor scene in Act 2 was ravishing. Upshaw understands that Blanche is a lady (the soprano is a Southerner, and it shows), and that even at her most hysterical she should observe a certain decorum; her performance is all the more moving for its restraint. Should she favor New York with her Manon, I'll sit through the ghastly Ponnelle production to hear it. And after that, when she's ready, no hurry... maybe Lulu?

PARTERRE BOX welcomes your contributions: reviews, comment, humor, or gossip. Best contribution each month wins one of our flawless PARTERRE BOX t-shirts. This month's winner: Giovanni Fucina for "Awakening Scene" Other Contributors: Ferdie Ehrenreich, James Jordan, Belle Katz.

Write to

www.parterre.com

Kathleen Battle chose oddly innocent role in which to play the prima donna.

questo e quello...

Hasn't it occurred to anyone but us that the Kathy Battle firing was a way of sneaking the divette out of a role in which she could only have had a resounding failure?

Edward Rothstein ("The Undoing of a Diva"/NY Times 2/27) thinks we have all turned against La Battle because she is acting humble onstage and grand off. He has perhaps not heard of Lily Pons, whose very name meant "diva" for a quarter of a century, whose repertoire was virtually identical to Battle's and whose offstage decorum was very lavish indeed. And no one had a problem with that.

HMV records (B'way & 72d) refuses to let PARTERRE BOX post its flyer on its Classical bulletin board. We won't shop there again, and we hope you won't either. The selection at Tower is better anyway.

awakening

Vada in fiamma! (aria cut from "Macbeth", sung by Sherrill Milnes on Angel's LP version, Muti conducting) The big guy has had a rough night with the witches, but he's ready to kick some Scottish butt. Sherrill in E major. Vegetarians beware-- this is real food for real people.

Hôtel (Poulenc chanson sung by Régine Crespin/Decca) What's the hurry? It's not even midnight. Nobody will be at Sound Factory for hours. Relax and light up with Régine: "Je ne veux pas travailler. Je veux fumer..." Cool.

The Italian Street Song (Eleanor Stever on VAI video) You should have as much fun dancing as La Steber does singing. The archetypal diva/broad outzings even Sills; her bang-on high C is the aural equivalent of a line of cocaine on a silver mirror.

and if you're still drowsy...

Vicino a te (on "Franco Corelli, the Golden Years"/SRO) The Testosterone Kid is joined by Renata Tebaldi for a demonstration of why opera these days leaves me cold. Should Stephen Spielberg ever want to recreate the sounds of dinosaurs fucking, he should sample this duet.

So open those eyes, baby, and may your evening end as noisily as it began!