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# fishbone

This past month has seen an extraordinary affluence of prima donnas in concert here in New York. Within the space of two weeks an amazing number of divas and divettes has graced our concert platforms. I missed two of them simply because I was not given press tickets and I was not willing to spend a single penny. However, I don't feel too sad about missing Kathleen Battle and Jessye Norman; I have already had the opportunity of attending their concerts quite a few times in the past, and the reports I heard about their recent performances were not the most reassuring.

I heard that La Battle is doing nothing but worshipping her own ego on stage, singing for herself and not to the audience who paid big bucks to hear her. Go on like this, Kathy, and very soon your bathroom will be the only place where you'll be able to sing to yourself. I also heard that Jessye Norman has definitely entered the path of an irreversible vocal decline, and I don't have any difficulty in believing it.

Now a few words on the divas whose concerts I did attend. Cecilia Bartoli is possibly the biggest musical bluff of the century. She has a pretty voice with easy coloratura, but... 1) the voice is so small that those sitting in the third row in the orchestra can't hear her at all; 2) she's not a mezzo-soprano, but just a soprano lirico without high notes. Calling her a mezzosoprano di coloratura is an insult to such artists as Marilyn Horne and Jennifer Larmore; 3) she's just a studio singer. Once artists became stars after years and years of tough roles on stage; now you can

just sing Despina or Zerlina and a few arie antiche and, provided you have a pretty face and an important record-company button-pusher backing you, you can become an international star.

The paradox is that in her native Italy where people still know something about voices and are not so easily duped by sexy CD covers, La Bartoli doesn't stir all this excitement. Nobody really cares for her. I was present when she made her La Scala debut in Rossini's *Le Comte Ory* three years ago; there were no lines in front of the opera house and she was greeted with only polite applause.

La Bartoli has said that Italians do not fully understand her because their idea of a mezzo is a Verdi singer like Cossotto or Barbieri. Perhaps she has not heard of the triumphs that Horne and Valentini Terrani (real belcanto mezzos) have always enjoyed in Italy.

Cheryl Studer, another studio recording queen, bowed at Carnegie Hall for the first time on May 2nd. Alarming rumors coming back from Europe were not encouraging: in particular a friend informed me of a catastrophic *Trovatore* in Vienna, described as one of the most clamorous operatic disasters in recent times.

Opera was banned altogether from her New York recital, except for a harmless "Io son l'umile ancella" offered as an encore (I can't see Adriana as one of her future roles, but you never know-- she's recording everything.)

Ultimately, although she cannot claim to be one of the most inspired lieder singers in history, her recital was pleasant and satisfying, especially the group of Samuel Barber songs in the second half. But why must she be so stiff on stage?

Kiri te Kanawa is another soprano who certainly doesn't shine for exuberance and liveliness. If you have a friend who suffers from insomnia, tell him to listen to five minutes of Kiri and five minutes of June (La Frigida) Anderson, and I assure you he won't get to count the third sheep.

Te Kanawa's concert had an interesting program-- opera arias from Handel to Strauss, performed with all the style and class that have always characterized La Kiri, though the voice itself showed some aging-- not so much in range as in reduction of volume.

You cannot deny the signs of aging in Marilyn Horne's voice either. Appearing at Weill Hall early in May, the diva gave a wonderful recital centered on lieder and art songs. Far from her usual belcanto stuff, and in spite of a voice that is past its prime, Jackie (if I may) mastered this alternative repertoire with an unlimited range of colors and nuances, always careful to stress the importance of each word, of each sound. Definitely the most exciting recital of the month.

Why was (after all) a rather ordinary and routine *Tosca* (4/16) at the Met sold out months and months in

advance? Simple: Big Luciano's appearance as the unlucky Cavaradossi.

It doesn't matter that his voice has lost most of its former freshness and all its flexibility. It matters even less that his vocal palette, so limited in its range of colours, is totally unable to render Mario's sensuality and passion. And finally, the audience were also willing to overlook his stage rigidity. His movements were so euphemistically "essential" that drastic changes had to be made in the elaborate Zeffirelli production. In Act III, the stage level did not rise and show the dungeon, where Cavaradossi was supposed to descend and sing his farewell to life, apparently because Lucianone wasn't in the mood for extra exercise.

On the other hand, Maria Guleghina would theoretically have all the requisites to be an ideal Floria Tosca: stage presence, slim figure, sensual acting, dark good looks, and, not least, a strong spinto soprano. I use the conditional because her powerful instrument is marred by evident technical problems which prevent her from being a state-of-the-art Tosca. Every high note is an adventure: the high C on the word "lama" ("blade") indeed lacerated my ears, and the famous descending phrase at the end of "Vissi

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To quote Kathy Battle: "No object sure before was ever half so pleasing!"

d'arte" (ah, Magda!) was badly worked out, leaving her breathless as a fish out of water. (These were not isolated incidents, because I have heard Guleghina's Tosca six or seven times in the past five years, since her La Scala debut in 1989, and she always has the same problems.)

James Morris's Scarpia was a revelation. I won't say everything was immaculate in his singing; on the contrary he showed at times some forcing and strain in the upper reaches of his voice, due to the fact he is actually a bass-baritone, and Scarpia's music lies outside his vocal baricenter. But it is also true that most of the time Scarpia's role doesn't call for a smooth or perfectly polished voice; his vocal writing is formed mainly of broken, agitated phrases. The secret of success in this role is dramatic stage presence and involvement; in this Morris was praiseworthy. His Scarpia was both elegant (let us not forget that Scarpia is a Sicilian aristocrat) and wild, mellifluous and ferocious when these qualities were called for. On the whole, a very good performance, despite the above-mentioned vocal discomfort.

Christian Badea proved himself an attentive conductor and praiseworthy accompanist. Indeed, he worked miracles following Pavarotti's highly personal sense of rhythm, especially at the conclusion of "E lucevan le stelle," when the tenor rushed so much he left the orchestra a couple of bars behind. Since Scotto's infamous revelations, we are all aware of the fact that Pavarotti can neither read music nor solfège, but is it too much to ask that in the 16 years since his debut in this role, he should have learnt the music?

Nicholas Fishbone

# Opera Manhattan Announces The New York Stage Premiere of Georg Friedrich Handel's opera *Amadigi*

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Opera Manhattan will produce Georg Friedrich Handel's opera *Amadigi*, which premiered in London at the King's Theatre in May of 1715, and has never been staged in New York. The libretto is by Nicola Haym.

Performances will be Wednesday, June 15, Friday, June 17, Wednesday, June 22, and Friday, June 24, 1994, in the Sanctuary of the Church of the Resurrection, 119 E. 74th St., New York. Tickets are \$28 and \$20. Tickets are available through Opera Manhattan by mail at the above address or by telephone inquiry at (212) 315-3161; and at the door the nights of the performances. All performances start at 8:00 pm.

# Menoriti Rules

by Giovanni Fucina

Not since the last years of Richard Strauss's life produced *Capriccio* and the *Four Last Songs* has the musical world witnessed an Indian summer like that of composer Gian-Carlo Menoriti, whose brutally veristic music drama *Rentboy* is rocking opera houses from Vienna to San Francisco. This reworking of the Dame aux Camellias/Traviata myth deals in starkly modern terms: the Alfredo character is the son of the President of the United States; his lover is an HIV+ hustler and porn star— and a tenor to boot.

Inspired, the composer says, by the Pavarotti/Domingo duet of "O Mimi, tu più non torni," this musico-dramatic masterpiece collages fragments of Verdi, digital samples of the Cukor/Garbo *Camille* film soundtrack and live performance of the composer's trademark heart-on-sleeve (or hard-on-sleeve) lyricism.

The success of this daring work should come as no surprise to those of us who have followed Menoriti's career since his spectacular debut that fateful Saturday afternoon in 1938 when he startled Geraldine Farrar by coming out during an *Opera News on the Air* interview. Let's take a moment to remember the long steep road Menoriti has traveled since then.

That broadcast was in connection with the Met premiere of Menoriti's *Emilio Goes to the Baths*, the first of his many queer-themed operas. "My

first idea was to set an opera about the traditional soprano/tenor/baritone triangle, but then I thought—why deal in coded text (as did, for example, Hoffmansthal) when it is so easily misinterpreted? Remember, I am not a heterosexual like Verdi or Puccini. Thus, I transformed the libretto by emphasizing the promiscuity of Emilio, who can't get laid due to the jealousy of his two boyfriends."

"Alone at the tubs, he sings the *romanza* 'While I waste these precious showers.' When the bathhouse is raided, Emilio settles back for a gang-bang led by the Chief of Police."

With this triumph under his belt, Menoriti turned to Broadway for his smash double bill: *The Telefuck* and *The Deviant*. The former piece is best remembered for the "Bondage Aria," heard in every Mr. Gay USA pageant in the past forty years: "And how is your slip-knot, and how is your half-hitch, and how is your square knot, and how is your dear little granny knot?"

Dated? Perhaps. But *The Deviant* remains a shocker: Madame Florid, a charlatan pop-psychiatrist, bilks her customers by claiming to "cure" their children's homosexuality. In the gripping final scene, the old fraud shoots and kills a drag queen, discovering too late he is really her son Moby, "doing" Anna Maria Alberghetti (the haunting *Black Schlong* aria.) Florid then strips off "her" blouse to reveal a hairy chest—as a disembodied voice chants,



"Mother, mother, are you queer?" George Jean Nathan called it "the queerest show I've ever seen" and Leonard Bernstein fell on his knees in homage to Menoriti in the middle of Shubert Alley (more than once, it is rumored.)

It was during the record-breaking four-year run of *The Deviant* that

Menoriti met his long-time companion, Flake. "I had just returned from a tour of *Boys on Blades*, the leather-themed ice show, and I was part-timing as a table-dancer at the Adonis," recalls the humpy boytoy.

"Gian-Carlo showed up late one night, claiming to have lost his coat-check. Next thing I knew, we had

moved my few pitiful possessions to the little guest room on the top floor of Gian-Carlo's east side apartment."

But the lovers were soon separated when Flake went out on a two-year US State Department Tour of *The Deviant* opposite Fedora Barbieri. "I still remember the 45-minute ovation at La Scala," recalls Flake, "and being excommunicated by the Pope brought Gian-Carlo and me much sympathetic publicity."

More in the mainstream (but brimming with gay sensibility) was the opera buffa *All About Eve*. Who can forget the definitive cast of the opening night, January 15, 1958, at the Metropolitan Opera: Eleanor Steber (Margo Channing), Rosalind Elias (Eve Harrington); Nicolai Gedda (Bill Sampson); George London (Addison De Witt); Giorgio Tozzi (Lloyd Richards); Blanche Thebom (Karen Richards); Lorenzo Alvary (Max Fabian); Mary Costa (Miss Caswell); George Cehanovsky (Aged Actor); Thelma Votipka (Birdie); and Lucine Amara (Phoebe).

Louis Biancolli led the unanimous praise: "Menoriti has certainly written the best comic opera since *Der Rosenkavalier* or *Falstaff*; future generations may call it the best since *Così fan tutte*." *All About Eve* remains a prima-donna's delight: Ljuba Welitsch (in Vienna), Regine Crespin (Paris), Leyla Gencer (Rome), and Beverly Sills (New York City Opera) are perhaps the best-remembered interpreters of Margo; and we all remember fondly Elisabeth Schwartzkopf's farewell recital in New York, when her last encore was Margo's aria "Funny business, a woman's career."

"Writing about the life I know, the queer life, is what keeps my inspiration always fresh," says Menoriti. "Perhaps that is why I have found the most satisfaction in my operas based on the works of Tennessee Williams." Audiences have agreed with Menoriti's judgment: *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Any More*, first performed at the 1959 Florence May Festival with Magda Olivero and Franco Corelli, is still a mainstay of the repertoire whenever the proper combination of *diva d'une certaine age* and *tenore di beefcake* can be found: the chemistry of Munich's Astrid Varnay and Peter Hofmann is legendary.

Somewhat less successful was *A Streetcar Named Desire*, commissioned to open the Metropolitan Opera at Lincoln Center. Menoriti's score was overwhelmed by Franco Zeffirelli's production: Leontyne Price's beautifully-sung Blanche spent most of the opening night trapped in an ornate trolley-car whirling around and around the vast Met stage. Even the *Times'* luscious four-column front page photo of Justino Diaz in his torn t-shirt couldn't salvage this fiasco. However, Renata Scott's success as Blanche (Chicago, 1981) has started a quiet but noticeable groundswell of revival of this problematic but fascinating work.

But Menoriti's reputation was redeemed with the worldwide success of his best-known-opera, *Suddenly Last Summer*, which is the first since *Turandot* to enter the standard repertoire. The formidable mezzo Regina Resnik calls Violet Venable one of the three greatest singing-actress roles ever written (equal, she says, to Klytemnästra and Dame



Barbieri and Menoriti files in controversial scene from *The Deviant*.

Quickly). New York opera queens have been known to come to blows over the relative merits of various Met revivals of *Suddenly Last Summer*: 1968 (Resnik, Rysanek); 1975 (Crespin, Stratas), 1984 (Bumbry, Malfitano) or 1993 (Rysanek, Upshaw) are all contenders for "definitive"; certainly they were all flawless. For my money, the Cossotto/Ricciarelli version (La Scala 1973) can never be excelled, despite the mediocre Italian translation; the debut of Jose Carreras as Dr. Cukrowitz gained him the nickname "the singing Montgomery Clift."

Worldwide success led Menoriti to "stretch the envelope" with *The Saint off Bleecker Street*, a melodrama set in a celebrated gay disco. Julia Migen's-Johnson's crossover hit recording of Annina's aria, "O sweet Jesus, spare me some Ecstasy" became an anthem of the feel-good 1970's. More than one famous Italian tenor came out during curtain calls for this piece, perhaps inspired by Michele's fiery aria, "You are ashamed to say: I was a faggot..."

"I remember marveling that *La muette di Portici* once started a revolution," recalls Menoriti. "but now I know it is a combination of elements that can lead to such a movement." He is referring, of course, to the 1974 performance of *The Concealed* at the Bolshoi that led to the fall of world communism.

"Do not give me the credit for that," laughs Menoriti. "Better to thank Galina Vishnevskaya for her overwhelming portrayal of Mazda Sorel, the lesbian separated from her lover by a repressive government." But Menoriti and Vishnevskaya

were amply rewarded for their efforts when they received the Nobel Peace Prize.

"It was a crazy time," recalls the Russian diva. "First, the destruction of the Berlin Wall, then the United Nations resolution extending full legal rights to homosexuals worldwide. To have contributed even a fraction to this great liberation was the zenith of my career."

The mutual admiration of composer and soprano led to her commissioning *The Music Lovers* from Menoriti, in which she created the role of Madame von Meck.

Meanwhile, Menoriti searched for ever more controversial topics. A line of Bernanos from *Dialogues of the Carmelites* ("... and what the little shepherd does from time to time with pure and trembling heart all of us must do day and night") inspired *Amahl and the Nocturnal Emissions*, with its controversial musical depiction of masturbation. Surely no other living composer could have handled this subject so delicately.

No survey, however brief, of Menoriti's work would be complete without a mention of the ballet *The Uniform*, the *Drag Queen*, and the *Matador*, or the one-act opera *The Sperm*. And perhaps it is time to re-examine *I Love Loca*, written for the farewell of Beverly Sills. While this bizarre, almost surrealistic retelling of the life of Juana the Mad (as staged by Charles Ludlam) was hardly everyone's cup of tea, it certainly served to redefine "gay sensibility" in the early 1980's-- and to inspire La Sills to commission a whole season of queer operas for NYCO in 1985.

"It was nothing, really," she muses. "I mean, name me an outstanding contemporary composer who isn't gay." But the resounding success of that season ("It's here. It's queer. Subscribe to it.") is credited with gaining Sills her current post as General Manager of the Metropolitan Opera.

Which brings us full circle: *Rentboy* is Sills's choice to open her 1994-95 season. "The Met's production of *Rentboy* may not be the first," boasts the carrot-topped impresario, "but it's the one everyone will remember!" Jessye Norman conducts, Pedro Almodovar is directing, and the production stars Plácido Domingo and Luciano Pavarotti as the doomed lovers.

The opening night gala is a benefit for Q.E.D., the organization founded by out musicians to provide positive queer role models. Says Menoriti, "I sometimes imagine what my life might have been if I had not come out. Sure, I might have been administrator of some chichi arts festival, but I'm certain my inspiration would have dried up, leaving me to scrape out bad imitations of my early work and to attack younger, more gifted artists."

"So I call on all of you-- queer composers and librettists, queer directors and designers, queer critics and administrators, queer divas and queer divos! Come out! Separately we are a pitiful joke, but together we are opera!"



Costume designs by Rolf Langenfass for Met *Rentboy*: the Act Two, Scene 2 ballet features soloist Jeffrey Edwards

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December 10 <sup>2</sup> **La bohème**: Scotto, Daniels; Pavarotti, Hampson (Levine)  
 December 17 <sup>1</sup> **Rigoletto**: Peters; Pavarotti, MacNeil (Santi)  
 December 24 <sup>2</sup> **Hansel and Gretel**: Battle, Elias, Rysanek; Prey (Solti)  
 December 31 <sup>1</sup> **La bohème**: Freni, Soviero; Pavarotti, Milnes (Domingo)  
 January 7 <sup>2</sup> **Aïda**: Millo, Budai; Mauro, Milnes (Santi)  
 January 14 <sup>2</sup> **La bohème**: Scotto, Daniels; Domingo, Hampson (Santi)  
 January 21 <sup>1</sup> **Il barbiere di Siviglia**: Horne; Blake, Hampson, Dara, Ramey (Muti)  
 January 28 **La bohème**: Freni, Soviero; Domingo; MacNeil (Levine)  
 February 4 **Der Rosenkavalier**: von Stade, Scotto, Battle; Pavarotti, Korn (Thielmann)  
 February 11 **Tosca**: Caballe; Pavarotti, MacNeil (Domingo)  
 February 18 **Il trovatore**: Caballe, Cossotto; Pavarotti, Milnes (Santi)  
 February 25 **La bohème**: Stratas, Daniels; Carreras, Hampson (Fiore)  
 March 4 **Le nozze di Figaro**: Vaness, Battle, von Stade; Ramey, Hampson (Bonyng)  
 March 11 **La bohème**: Norman, Soviero; Domingo, Chernov (Levine)  
 March 18 **La fille du régiment**: Battle, Elias, LuPone; Pavarotti, Plishka (Thielmann)  
 March 25 **La bohème**: Behrens, Daniels; Domingo, Milnes (Levine)  
 April 1 **Don Giovanni**: Vaness, Te Kanawa, Battle; Lopardo, Morris, Plishka (Levine)  
 April 8 **La bohème**: Dimitrova, Bartoli; Domingo, Milnes (Levine)  
 April 15 **Turandot**: Marton, Battle; Domingo, Plishka (Santi)  
 April 22 **La bohème**: Domingo as Rodolfo (Acts 1 and 3)  
 Pavarotti as Rodolfo (Acts 2 and 4)  
 Domingo as Mimi (Acts 2 and 4)  
 Pavarotti as Mimi (Acts 1 and 3)  
 Stratas as Musetta (Levine)

**All casts subject to change once the performance is sold out.**

Have you seen this  
 said, "If the tenor doesn't have a hard-on  
 doing my job right." Similarly, I'm not  
 Siemgund should leave the audience, a good  
 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 ("Wehwalt")! Imagine  
 Jim Morrison rewritten by John Rechy, and  
 you're almost there. • A rival soprano once

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