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The queer opera zine

no comment!

PHILADELPHIA

The Academy of Vocal Arts rounded out its sixtieth-anniversary season with a daring but successful *Un Ballo in Maschera*. Daring because the dramatic dimensions and vocal demands tested the small confines of the Helen Corning Warden Theater, as well as the resources of the academy's young singers. Successful because AVA triumphed musically if not always dramatically. For Verdi's prelude, Kay Walker Castaldo devised a gay sex scene for Oscar and Gustavo (the opera was placed in Sweden, though most characters retained their names from the Boston version). Aside from a few other lapses, the director animated the personal drama at the heart of Verdi's opera. On May 12, Christofer

Montanari staged a performance of

The Sacristan

(who has a nervous trick of twitching his neck and shoulders)
Vainly I soak them! Dirty they are and sticky,
Fouler than any frowzy choir-boy's dicky...
Good sir, I mean you

Questo e quello

This just in: HBO has begun principal photography for *Augusta: My Life as a Diva*, the film version of the life of Jessye Norman. The biopic has already started lensing in Norman's native Georgia, as well as Salzburg, Berlin, London and New York. Jason Alexander will costar as James Levine, Antonio Banderas portrays Plácido Domingo, Janet Jackson will impersonate Kathleen Battle, and The Artist Formerly Known as Prince has accepted the role of Maria Ewing. And HBO has persuaded one of Hollywood's biggest stars to portray La Norman herself-- Wesley (To Wong Foo...) Snipes!

Licia's Pet: The big show in town last month was *definitely* the Licia Albanese Puccini Foundation Gala Concert Thang at Alice Tully Hall September 16, La Cieca's first time ever at what has become a cult event in the Manhattan musical firmament. The concert has a slightly ditzy quality not unlike that of Albanese herself; presenters and winners and hangers-on all make charming and incoherent speeches, and the running order seems to be an ad hoc concern at best. Among the honorees were Albanese herself, Eve Queler, the late Sergio Franchi and, oh, dozens of other people, so you can see why the ceremony stretched on for four hours.

The afternoon started with a bang in the form of Mme. Albanese's legendary reading of our national anthem. Of course one knows her Opening Night arrangement (soprano with audience backup) but this was my first experience of the solo version. The two interpolated high B-flats are of course celebrated (and pretty damn impressive for a woman of 70, let alone Licia); what I didn't realize is that she *interprets* the song as if it were, well, a song:

agitato (pp)

dolcissimo e legato

O'er the ramparts we watch'd were so gallantly streaming

più allegro

< sf

sempre ff, marcato

And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air...

subito p (misterioso)

Gave proof through the night

cre- - -scen- --do fff (quasi parlato)

That our flag was still there!

La Albanese, fetching in a black cocktail-length sequinned frock and balancing atop Scotto Heels,¹ deserved every decibel of the ballpark-style ovation the audience (I almost said "crowd") lavished upon her; she reappeared frequently thereafter for impromptu anecdotes, introductions and snatches of melody. Had we asked nicely, I believe she would have shared her favorite recipes.

The official Mistress of Ceremonies, however, was another Legend of Song, Patrice Munsel, who is Auntie Mame. Resplendent in white silk crêpe heavily ornamented with gold paillettes, she succeeded almost completely in keeping this train on its tracks, regaling us along the way with a soupçon of Cole Porter (*But if, Licia, I'm the bottom-- and you know I'm not-- you're the top!*) And what a speaking voice-- ladylike yet sexy, like a cross between Kitty Carlisle and Sally Kellerman! Why isn't she doing commercial voiceovers? Munsel was among the many to laud Licia with that double-edged brand of compliment that goes like this: "When I was just a little girl/boy growing up in [location] I used to listen to Licia's records/broadcasts all the time..." *Everybody* told that story; but by the time Giorgio Tozzi was reminiscing about his infancy listening to his Papa's weathered Albanese *Bohème* 78's, Licia's smile began to harden. At least no one called her La Vecchia.

Now, I see this massive inherent flaw in the format of this awards presentation; the winners end up sung off the stage by the presenters. Example: Tenor Robert Iarussi (a Study Grant Winner) sang what I am sure was a very nice "Amor ti vieta" and gratefully accepted his award from James King, who then proceeded to sing "Winterstürme" like a fucking god. So you see, folks, I honestly can't tell you *what* Mr. Iarussi sang like-- it's not *his* fault; it's just unfair to contrast a beginning singer with one of the great voices of the century. And the veteran singers look like they're showboating at the kids' expense. It's not true, of course, but it looks bad. Those in charge at the Albanese Foundation should consider a different format for next year's event. Not that I would want to dispense with some of the vocal treats these "guest presenters" provided, from Robert Merrill's mellow "What'll I do?" to Lucine Amara's bang-on "Pace, pace;" from Barbara Conrad's committed "Condotta" to Rosalind Elias's soulful "Non ti scordar di me."

But, for La Cieca's money, the hit of the afternoon was Marta Eggerth Kiepora, who twinkled and sighed and smiled a wistful little half-smile and finally consented to sing "just one little song." A standing ovation heartened her enough to attempt "just one little encore." No, my dears, Frau Kiepora was *not* hiding behind the door

¹ See *Talk the Talk* elsewhere in this issue.

when they were handing out brains. It was almost an embarrassment of riches that the encore, a Hungarian folk song, was ravishingly sung, two and a half minutes of spun silk. La Albanese staved off the threat of yet another encore by tottering onstage to heap congratulations upon her delightful colleague. The two divas exchanged kiss after kiss, then they brought down the house with their classic "no, after you" exit.² Munsel's take on the preceding love-feast: "These two great ladies of the stage could give all of us acting lessons." *Me-ow!*

B.J. (Stand-up Opera) Ward did her routine of arias and yak. Her amplified "Broadway Baby" speaking voice was a little hard on La Cieca's ears, and her material is twice-told at best (may that wretched Birgit Nilsson "comfortable pair of shoes" chestnut rest in peace already!) But she's cool; La Cieca cannot find it in her heart to dish *anyone* with the balls to pop a high F into *Ernani*. My bet is she'd be a hoot as Olympia-- or a double handful as Despina. Any takers?

The second half began with a medley of Sergio Franchi selections on the sound system (and, yes, La Cieca had indeed forgotten just how ravishing a voice it was); then the unlucky Mr. Iarussi opened the second half with "Non t'ami," one of Franchi's best-loved numbers. Does somebody at the Foundation have it in for this guy?

I don't remember much about the other singers. They were mostly well-prepared, healthy voices, but no one seemed to have any "vocal message." Yes, Theresa Cincione did some lovely things with "Signore, ascolta," and I will be most interested to find out if Rafael Suarez can sing a whole Calaf as lavishly as he does "Non piangere, Lù." Kyung Mook displayed a warm, rich baritone in Malatesta's aria. But most of these award-winners were polite, not passionate.

Part of the problem was repertoire. Marjorie McClean, who shared first prize, unwisely chose the Italian-language version of Mathilde's aria from *Guillaume Tell*, and then performed only one verse. I mean, who ever heard of one verse of the Toreador Song or *Mon coeur s'ouvre a la voix*? Anyway, though she sounded way over-coached, Ms. McClean does have a pretty voice; she may well make a lovely Violetta, depending, of course, on how she looks in the dress. And closing a concert with Dandini's "Bee" aria is a letdown, even when it's sung with more pizzazz than Stephen Powell (the other first-placer) seemed willing to provide. I am told he was zippier singing Mathis from the pit at City Opera.

² Incidentally, or perhaps not so incidentally, Mme. Kiepora has recently added Heidi Kreisler (Licia's role in *Follies*) to her repertoire.

But at last, presenters, winners, guests and all (and there were millions of them) assembled onstage to sing the final chorus from *Turandot*. And Licia held that last high B longer than *anybody*!

Souppçons: At least one insider at Sybil's Barn predicts a massive success for Denyce Graves in her debut as Carmen. Our source says he's observed La Graves in rehearsal; she marks most of the role, but when she turns it on, even the chorus sits up and takes notice. Certainly worth a look-in! The same source says the Met Titles system worked like a charm at technical rehearsal. La Cieca will be the first one to stand and cheer if this controversial idea is a success. But remember, she said the same thing about Reaganomics.

A "dream team" cast of Sylvia McNair, Ruth Ann Swenson, Cecilia Bartoli, Roberto Alagna, Boje Skovhus and Bryn Terfel will star in the Metropolitan Opera's world premiere of *Amici*, the new opera buffa from John Corigliano.³ It's a fantasy about a group of rich white people who live in fabulous apartments they couldn't possibly afford, where everyone sits around all day long sipping designer coffee and trading second-hand zingers, where the men are all closet cases and women all have bad haircuts. The sextet have already laid down tracks for the Act One finale, *Sarò là per te*. A *People* magazine cover is in the works.

Only disconnect: I tried, God knows I tried to like *Mathis der Maler* at New York City Opera. Please don't think I'm a bad person, but I find this opera a sanctimonious bore, way overlong and diffuse and the title character so poorly drawn as to be a grey hole at the middle of the work. Yes, the Nazis banned this work, and they were right, if for the wrong reasons. La Cieca thinks those who venerate this work for its "political significance" are missing the boat as bad as Goebbels.

Dilettante that she is, La Cieca couldn't help thinking Meyerbeer did a better job depicting the Reformation in *Les Huguenots*. (I'll pause for a moment to let the hissing die down.) Now, think about it. Feuding Catholics and Protestants? A beautiful strong-willed noblewoman coerced into a politically-motivated marriage? The best-intentions manipulations of a liberal-minded ruler leading to a massacre? The difference between *Mathis* and *Huguenots* is that Meyerbeer accomplished something Wagner called "emotionalizing the intellect:" the love story softens us up so we *feel* the tragedy of

³ And William Hoffman, let me hasten to add before he complains to the *Times*. Really, anyone who takes credit for writing the libretto of *Ghosts of Versailles* must be applauded for his courage, if for nothing else.

is goin intolerance.⁴ And the admittedly lurid denouement (the Catholic vest who father unintentionally orders the execution of his Protestant daughter) brings home the horror of religious bigotry in an blunt but powerful (and entertaining) way. Well, that's just *not* Hindemith's style. The vast canvas of religious strife should set Mathis' conflict in thrilling relief; instead it overpowers his lackluster, dramatically tepid vacillation. I tell you, Mathis makes Pélleas look butch. You'd think *Mathis* is going to be about how Mathis transforms his doubts and sufferings into great art. In fact, a lot of people think that's what the opera is about. No. It's about giving up, putting away the tools of your art and just sitting down waiting to die. Now, that theme isn't necessarily morbid: look at *The Tempest* or the *Four Last Songs*. But these are works of old men: they know what they're writing about. When he wrote *Mathis*, Hindemith was 38, an age when most men still feel like they can conquer the world. I think that's one reason the whole resignation theme rings false. The other is that the character doesn't have much of anything to disengage from: Mathis is no Hans Sachs. My guess is that the historical Mathis tired of having to watch his back all the time and said to hell with it, I can make my art without all this political crap. But Hindemith depicts that type of masochistic romantic renunciation stuff that needs a Wagner to avoid bathos. And (need I say it) Mr. Hindemith, you're no Dick Wagner.

I don't think the City Opera forces deserved quite the trashing they got from the local press. Yes, the show was done on the cheap, and pretty much looked it, but it would be madness to sink a fortune into a show you can't ever revive. It was a mistake, I think, to use that ruined church as a unit set: there's no "War and Peace" before/after contrast. Plus the playing area was off-off-Broadway sized-- four people made a crowd. Rhoda Levine's direction was mostly harmless, though the Lutheran/Catholic insurrection in Tableau Two was risible: talk about your Bible Thumpers. Ursula's big Straussian aria went for little due to the aimless blocking Levine imposed on Lauren Flanigan; more damagingly, that Dream Ballet looked like Agnes de Mille's worst nightmare. The symbolism of the ribbon (relationship, connectedness, commitment) is Teutonic enough, but Levine festooned her cast in red streamers--Flanigan was trussed up like something from the *Vogue* bondage issue. The cute little fag next to me commented, "The last time I saw so many red ribbons on a stage, I was at the Tony Awards." Otherwise there was a lot of stand-and-sing, walk-and-sing, kneel-and-sing.

⁴ All right, yes, Wagner called it by a German name. But the English phrase sticks in my memory, and if you think I'm wading through *Opera and Drama* again to find the original, well, I'm not, that's all.

William Stone as Mathis impressed with a smooth medium-weight voice, what the Germans call a Kavalierbariton. I'd like to hear him as the Count, Giovanni, maybe Posa. Lauren Flanigan improves all the time: a powerful but elegant young-dramatic, she should be doing those gigs Cheryl Studer gets offered (and cancels). Mary Dunleavy and Robynne Redmon did lovely jobs in roles with few vocal opportunities (Redmon mostly had to sing while getting raped in a leftover *Puritani* dress, which can't be fun); Michael Hayes displayed a powerful, roughhewn voice. The crowd just ate up Allan Glassman, but I found his voice too "fixed," with only two speeds, loud and off. The role of the Cardinal is difficult, true, but Glassman made it sound well-nigh impossible. I should mention that I saw a performance when Robert Duerr stepped in for Christopher Keene. As far as I could tell, he led with authority and consideration for his singers. I say bravo to him and bravo to his hard-working and poetic orchestra. May I hear them all again in a more likable work.

What's the deal with this Alagna guy? Is he misunderstood, or is he some kind of a nut? Is he a real, individual talent, or just EMI's male Cecilia Bartoli? Tenor Roberto Alagna claims he's never had a voice teacher, refuses to work with a coach, says he learned everything he knows from listening to other singers' records. And he says stuff like "...I listened to everything-- opera, orchestras, singers, chamber music-- and today I am a recording bulimic." Sure, Bobby, but is that a good thing or a bad thing? If his EMI debut CD is any indication, he's a light tenor with a pingy top voice. It's a pretty sound, but... I worry about the lack of a real "core" to the voice-- even the resonant acoustic of this recording doesn't conceal a pronounced breathy quality. And his singing style is schizophrenic, either hyperkinetic or dead in the water, either crooned or belted, with no middle ground. Between these extremes he favors the "clean, modern" style: "his voice allows no rubato, no portamento."⁵ In April we'll hear his Rodolfo at the Met, and then maybe we can judge for ourselves. You know La Cieca will keep a completely open mind. (And, please, someone talk to Mr. Alagna about those fey, smirky album cover photos-- he looks like Michael Feinstein!)

-- La Cieca

⁵ Both the quotations in this paragraph are from the slick British mag *Opera Now*. I think you can see how, between Alagna's *unyielding* good taste and his pouty Sicilian looks, he's a British opera critic's wetdream come true.

Sunday in the Park with Scourge

by Jeffery Kennedy

Summer ended when I hopped on my bike and pedaled over to Golden Gate Park for the Opera in the Park performance last Sunday. An annual event sponsored by The San Francisco Opera and the *San Francisco Examiner* for 22 years, Opera in the Park marks the opening of the fall opera season. Singers perform selections from the upcoming season on a small collapsible stage erected at the far end of Sharon Meadow. An orchestra, fighting for elbow room, plays behind them. Because Sharon Meadow is the size of a football field, the performers use microphones and giant loudspeakers puke the sound over the crowd. A sort of Lollapalooza for the we-think-we're-so-smart set.

Being my first time, I optimistically thought Opera in the Park would be fun while I dodged traffic en route. Sharon Meadow banks around the edge like large green bowl, so from where I pulled up on my bike, I could see the entire scene. Literally thousands of people. "Wow," I thought excitedly, "look at all those opera buffs!" But then I took a closer look.

I should have gotten a clue from the Opera in the Park blurb that ran in the weekend *Examiner*: "Cultural highbrows, straw-hatted connoisseurs of alfresco dining and just plain music lovers can find joy..." In other words, middle-class white people who think eating cold, oily Safeway salad out of quart-sized plastic containers and washing it down with cheap white wine while sitting on sheets is the epitome of high life. These people had "this is living!" stamped on their foreheads. Evading dogs, children and tubes of sunblock, I grimly pushed my bike to a clear spot in their midst and sat down.

It was difficult not to stare at the pale, pasty thighs of the woman sprawled out on a blanket in front of me as she chatted with her friends in a sundress much too short for her squat body. You know her friends: the binge-and-purge women wearing tight t-shirts, jeans, red lipstick and sunglasses under manes of permed hair and the fat stubbly guys wearing dirty t-shirts and baggy shorts, itching to scratch themselves. Between the five of them sat more food than I eat in a week. Looking at them, I wondered, "Why are they here?" and then I wondered, "Where are the fags?"

The answer appeared in a puff of cologne. Off in the distance, delicately picking his way through the picnickers, was Mr. Gym Queen: bare-chested, unnaturally smooth, cosmetically tan,

squeezed into a pair of Lycra op-art shorts. As he gingerly stepped his way toward us, the women in front of me perked up like dogs thrown a bone. Glancing around, I began to notice mustaches, dyed hair, beefy biceps and that incredibly phony laugh only A-list gay men do. There were several pockets of Mr. Gym Queens scattered among the straight cliques like so many turds. Looking at them, I wondered, "Why are they here?" and then I wondered again, "Where are the fags?"

Looking around, I thought, "I never see these people at the Opera House," and then realized that this event really had nothing to do with opera. The opera house is for opera lovers, and it seems to me that opera lovers fall into two categories: jaded rich people desperate for sumptuous entertainment and poor unhappy faggots compelled to spend their last \$21 on a balcony seat in the rafters. There were few opera lovers amongst the people in Sharon Meadow stuffing themselves with bad food, basking in the sun despite the clouds. Opera in the Park is a scene, the thing to do, heavily promoted in the local press. It's a tradition, like Thanksgiving dinner.

It's no surprise, then, that the performance began with a stirring rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner." "What is this, a baseball game?" I asked myself while grimacing. Flummoxed, I didn't realize that practically everyone else had stood up, hands over hearts, all teary-eyed, until the second verse. Well, practically everyone: a man and a woman sat absorbed in their books. They were probably Russians (and they weren't eating cheap deli takeout). I remained seated. Afterwards, I watched a breeder man wrestle with the temptation to stomp over and lecture me about my unpatriotic behavior. He contained himself, probably because he didn't want me to tell him to fuck off and mind his own business in front of his two adorable children.

The music? The singing? It doesn't matter much, because you couldn't really hear it anyway. Opera outdoors just doesn't make sense. An outdoor setting dilutes nearly everything that makes opera enjoyable to me. Without the theatrical atmosphere-- the private closed-in feeling, the sets, the intermission smoking rituals, the curtains, the lights-- my attention starts to wander.

I will mention that Carol Vaness strode onto the stage waving a hand at the crowd as if she were Homecoming Queen. The crowd, of course, roared. Once everyone calmed down, she screeched her way through something by Mozart. Her diction was awful. How hard can it be to pronounce words properly? Maybe she wasn't slurring. Maybe those horrible loudspeakers distorted her voice. I

doubt it, though. When she finished her mealy-mouthed performance, a gaggle of middle-aged men in baseball caps and walking shorts sitting on stubby lawn chairs waved preprinted "Bravol" signs in the air.

Is it any wonder I left during intermission? Pedaling as fast as I could away-- from the meadow, from the crowd and what they represented, from a performance that treated opera like football halftime entertainment (San Francisco Opera Director Lofti Mansouri as head cheerleader)-- and though the park toward the beach, two aggro Brad Pitt types driving a new Volkswagen van screamed "faggot!" at me. A half-hour later, while I was standing on the beach staring out into the Pacific and thinking about how exhilarating and solitary surfing must feel (kind of, you know, like seeing a great opera performance), an ugly man with his girlfriend in tow angrily accused me of cruising him.

Boytish **Jeffery Kennedy** is the editor of *Campfire*, a zine for "people who would rather listen to, let's say, ABBA than Hole, who get a lot of pleasure out of pop culture."

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Heads will roll

Each autumn, when Peter Hunter and Richard Breath must decide whether to East Coast it or West Coast it, they study repertory and casts, hotel prices and weather patterns. Inevitably the West Coast wins. So off they went to San Francisco for Donizetti's *Anna Bolena* and Glinka's *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, neither of which ever seems to show up on the Met Opera broadcast schedules.

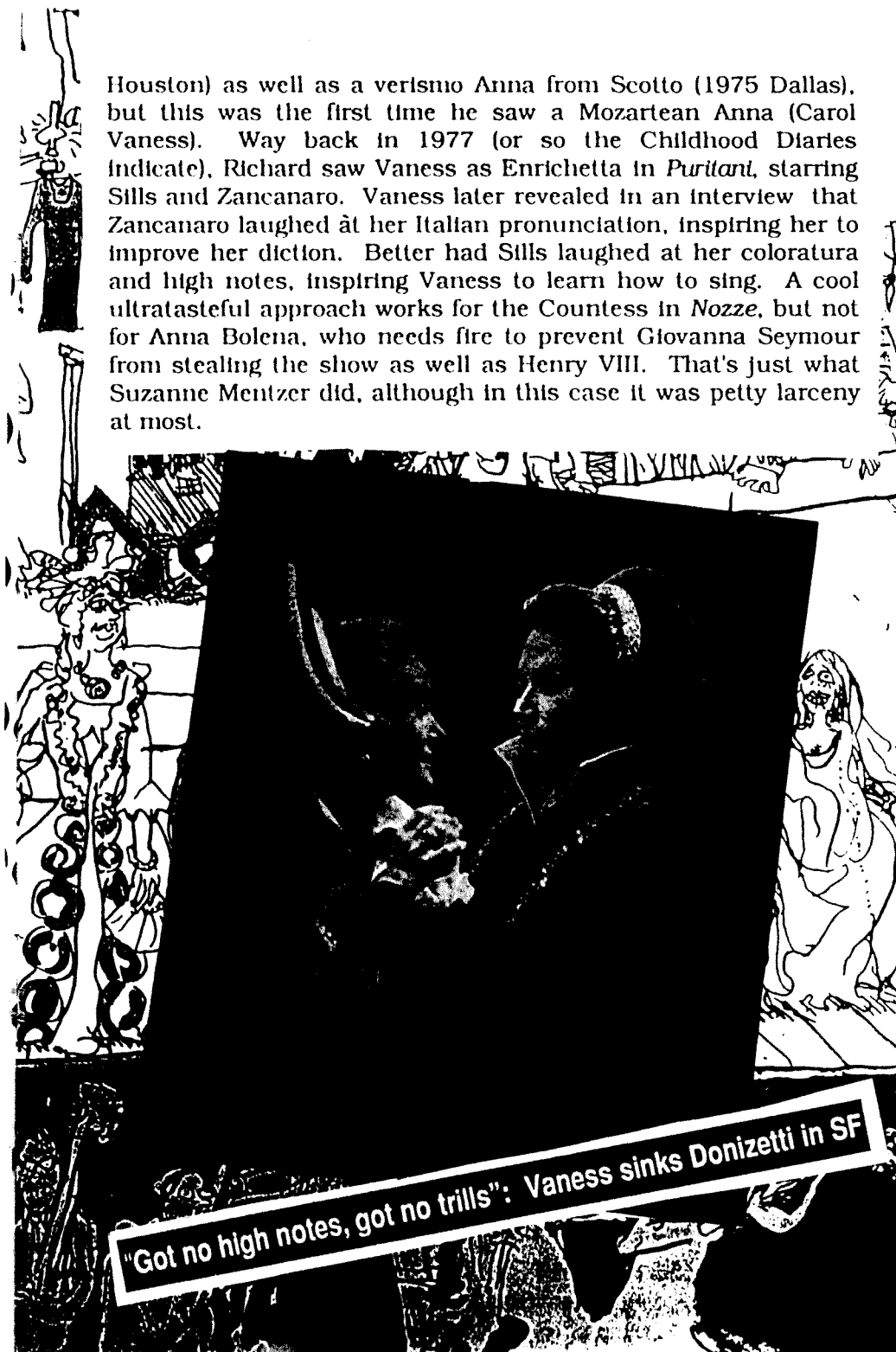
Peter and Richard have found the most *amazing* hotel on the fringes of the Tenderloin where young German tourists crowd themselves three and four to a room and spend most of their time in the hallways in bikini briefs, pounding on each other's doors. This always gives Peter and Richard something to talk about as they walk the eight short blocks to the Opera House.

Richard once read a disparaging article about elderly bachelors who wear kilts to the opera house, and, although he has seen it to happen in New York, Houston and Austin, he was delighted to see it happen again in San Francisco. While sipping a quarter's worth of champagne (marked up 800%) from a cheap plastic flute, Richard and Peter beheld an old bearded gent in full Highland drag cross majestically through the lobby. That was the only thrill of the night.

According to recent research, young men turn out gay because they are allowed to listen to too much Donizetti as children. If this is true, SFO's *Anna Bolena* could send us all straight back to Berg and Henze. Just fourteen minutes into this heavily-cut performance we were missing the overture, the second verse of Smeton's ballad and half of Anna's cabaletta. Throughout the evening numbers were routinely chopped in half; however, this did not make for a short performance. Long scene changes brought us the diversion of snippets of background information projected on the surtitle screen: history à la fortune cookie. The conductor, Roberto Abbado, sluggishly plodded his way through the score so slowly that the evening was Wagnerian in length.

Richard recalls that one of the first LPs he ever bought was the Callas *Mad Scenes* featuring a huge chunk of the final scene of *Anna Bolena*. He fell in love with that LP, the final scene and the whole concept of rare Donizetti. Since then he has seen bel canto Annas from Sutherland (1984 San Francisco and 1986

Houston) as well as a verismo Anna from Scotto (1975 Dallas), but this was the first time he saw a Mozartean Anna (Carol Vaness). Way back in 1977 (or so the Childhood Diaries indicate), Richard saw Vaness as Enrichetta in *Puritani*, starring Sills and Zancanaro. Vaness later revealed in an interview that Zancanaro laughed at her Italian pronunciation, inspiring her to improve her diction. Better had Sills laughed at her coloratura and high notes, inspiring Vaness to learn how to sing. A cool ultratasteful approach works for the Countess in *Nozze*, but not for Anna Bolena, who needs fire to prevent Giovanna Seymour from stealing the show as well as Henry VIII. That's just what Suzanne Mentzer did, although in this case it was petty larceny at most.



Vaness was in dreadful voice; when required to sing high and loud at the same time, the results were painful. Moreover, her omission of cabaletta and stretta repeats left us with no indication of her facility with original embellishments. She did sing both verses of *Coppia iniqua*, but she included only the safe, now sacred, Callas variants. A few more performances like this and Vaness will become known as the Ermanno Mauro of sopranos. As for the dramatic side of her performance, someone should inform Ms. Vaness that constantly flicking her velvet train does not constitute acting. The famous "Guidici!" passage, in which even an ice princess can strike sparks, went for naught. This Anna came across more like a nine-year old miffed that her brother had cut off her Barbie's hair.

Roberto Scanduzzi as Henry sported a bizarre orange wig, but made exciting dark bass sounds. He later donned a chapeau that made him look more authentic. Giuseppe Sabbatini (Percy) started out with a high, dry, pinched sound but later opened up with a thrilling *Vivi tu*. In his entrance aria, he tried the trill as written (not totally successfully) and he took chances with diminuendo effects on high notes. Best voice of the evening was Mentzer, who sang Vaness off the stage in their confrontation duet.

Richard has heard the overture to *Ruslan and Lyudmila* countless times, as well as an old recording of Farlaf's Rondo, but he had no idea what to expect from the complete opera done In The Style by imported Russians led by current supergod Valery Gergiev. San Francisco's performance was a revelation-- four hours of bel canto with eye-popping costumes and magical scenic effects. The story is impossible to follow, with too many characters involved in fairy-tale adventures, but the music is so gorgeous one can forgive the libretto (as apologized for in the program notes).

Act One contained a fabulous bravura coloratura aria in the Donizetti mode, sung by debutante Anna Netrebko. She returned in Act Four with a long, ravishing Bellinian cavatina. Her brilliant voice belongs on the rosters of other major houses as soon as possible. The Met will probably offer her a Musetta or two sometime in 2004.

Coloratura mezzo Elena Zaremba (in a trouser role as Prince Ratmir) took center stage for Act One's grand concertante and stretta, a piece that might have been penned by Rossini. Jeffrey Wells as Ruslan held his own against the otherwise mostly-Russian cast. The only weak link was Vladimir Atlantov (Finn),



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whose execution of his very long Act Two narrative aria made for a very painful ten minutes or so.

The opera boasts two ballets: a very French sylph divertissement in Act Three, followed in Act Four by a suite of Russian "Nutcracker"-style dances; the audience gasped in disbelief at the stage full of lavishly-costumed cast and supers. Stage magic involving a midair battle between a bearded dwarf and Ruslan (both flying on Peter Pan wires) and the giant singing head of a statue (*Don Giovanni* meets *Siegfried*) delighted the sold-out house.

By chance, Richard and Peter's one free night coincided with a Symphony program top-heavy with opera stars. Michael Tilson Thomas conducted the Beethoven Ninth with Ruth Ann Swenson and Jerry Hadley as two of his soloists. It was one of those electrifying, hair-raising nights. The concert opened with three Ives choral songs, plus Schoenberg's *Survivor from Warsaw* narrated by Benjamin Luxon. These rarities delivered emotional wallops. Thomas, taking over as the new musical director of the Symphony, could do no wrong this night and the audience gave the Ninth one of those standing ovations that make it a joy to go to the concert hall.

And so, Richard and Peter concluded another another interesting to the West Coast, but not before raiding Star Classics and loading up on rare music to tide them over until their next trip. Opera Rara has come out with volume III of their series of rare Italian opera music (this time covering 1820-1830)-- it's amazingly obscure material. Then there is Sumi Jo's new *Carnival* CD, containing tons of French nougats wrapped in glittery gold foil by Richard Bonyngé, who unearthed these glamour truffles too late for his lovely giantess of a wife to record. Ms. Jo does a spectacular job of coloring the fireworks. And to top it all off is Schreker's *Die Gezeichneten*, another of those decadent banned-by-the-Nazis woldreams that sounds like a gallon of Korngold poured atop ten pounds of Richard Strauss. Finding such rare treasures is what makes life worth living, at least for. . .

PeterHunter and Richard Breath

readers rant. . .

Dear Parterre Box,

Grazie Dio! You're back! During your absence I'd been hiding in my cave desperately trying to ignore those commedia dell'arte fags that keep prancing by, not to mention that hag of theirs, Zeppoli, or whatever the hell her name is. Doesn't she *ever* shut up? In any case, as soon as I knew you were back I ran immediately to my good friend Mme. Flora. She's a wonderful friend, really, even if she does bear an unfortunate resemblance to Regina Resnik. We dusted off the old crystal ball (no wisecracks!) to see what fate held in store for us at the Met this season. Oh, can anything compare to the feeling one gets at the beginning of the Met season?! The excitement! The anticipation! The hopes and dreams! All of which to be cruelly dashed against the rocks and drowned by season's end, of course. But I digress. Here, without further ado, are our predictions:

- The new Koenig/Yeagan/Schuler production of "Cosi Fan Tutte" under Levine will be such an unmitigated bore that Cecilia Bartoli will actually fall asleep onstage in the middle of a performance. She will not be re-invited.
- After her "triumph" in "The Makropoulos Case", Jessye Norman will replace Betty Buckley in "Sunset Blvd." The high-lying tessitura will prove to much for her, however, and she will soon be replaced by Licia Albanese, who will go on to win the Tony for "Best Revival".
- By mid-season, realizing that the majority of the audience is either staring at the "Met titles" or sleeping (or both), the Board of Directors will decide to save a fortune by doing away with sets and costumes altogether. The few true opera-lovers remaining will be outraged; the Met, as usual, will ignore them. The trend will continue in future seasons until scandal erupts at a performance of "Boris Godunov", when, during the coronation scene, a wealthy patron inadvertently raises his head and realizes that there is nothing on stage but a boom-box and a pile of CDs.
- The triumphal scene from "Aida" (featuring such noted belcantists as Andrea Gruber, Michael Sylvester and Sherrill Milnes) will produce such a cacophony of loudly sour notes that several audience members will suffer blackouts and/or temporary hearing loss.
- Realizing that her performances are threatening to become more frequent than her cancellations, the Met will fire Teresa Stratas.

- Regine Crespin will return to the Met as Wotan.
- Sharon Sweet's performances will be:
 - 90% fortissimo
 - 70% out-of-tune
 - 50% understood by the audience
 - 30% understood by Sweet herself
 - 10% better than what's on T.V. that night
 - 0% worth the price of admission

- The entire score of "Andrea Chenier" will be transposed down a minor third.
- James Levine will approach Michael Jackson about composing an opera based on the 80s sitcom "Diff'rent Strokes". The Maestro will make many, many, many trips to Jackson's Neverland Ranch to discuss the project, as well as to conduct coachings for the two young leads. Eyebrows will be raised, but Elizabeth Taylor will deny everything.

(Mme.) Florence Quartavodka

Flossie dolling: It's been ages! Remember, Parterre Box is your zine too. La Cieca needs your opinions, your reviews, your wisdom-- and that applies to all you other lovely people out there in the dark. LC

Dear Parterre Box,

I must begin by expressing my continued admiration for your wonderful enterprise. The quality of the writing and reviews is excellent, and your articles are much more interesting than that of other opera publications. It is refreshing to read reviews which take sides with gusto. Strongly expressed opinions elicit strong reactions, however, and in my case, your reviewer's slur of countertenor Derek Lee Ragin in the otherwise accurate and witty review of the dreadful movie, "Farinelli", prompted me to write in protest.

The reviewer seems not to know much about the state of countertenor (or falsettist, or whatever term you will) singing today. Comparing Mr. Ragin unfavorably to Jochen Kowalski or Brian Asawa is within reason, since all singers have their individual strengths and weaknesses, but to credit Messrs. Kowalski and Asawa with more spirited vocalism than Mr. Ragin is ridiculous. It seems likely that your reviewer is basing his opinion of Mr. Ragin solely upon the latter's performance in the movie. It is clear to this listener that the extremely dull performance of the synth-voiced hero in the movie was due, mostly to the limitations of the soprano: Mr. Ragin can and does sing faster,

more accurately, and with more exciting ornamentation than the performance in the movie suggests.

Brian Asawa has an essentially lyric voice, with a lovely tone that is good for tear-jerking arias such as he sang in *Xerxes* in Santa Fe. But his is a smallish voice which lacks agility and is guided by an inexperienced musicality, as those present at his New York debut recital in the W.R.T. at Lincoln Center last year heard. Mr. Kowalski has an amazing publicity machine and a personality suited for public life ("Don't I look like a rock star?"), and does indeed have a wonderful power to his voice. What he does not have is agility. To sing most of the bread-and-butter countertenor roles, most Farinelli roles included, one must be able to negotiate rapid passagework and ornament.

Some castrati specialized in sweetness of voice, some in virtuosity of ornament; the best had both. Needless to say, even the "sweet-voiced" musici were able to ornament and improvise beyond the powers of most of today's singers. Countertenors of the hooty, dull, English school were developed for church choirs and even today remain best in non-dramatic parts. (Michael Chance has, to my ear, a sweet tone and beautiful sense of line.) Exponents of the French school have sharper voices and are more stylish, but generally lack the Italian fire for the best opera roles. (For countertenor singing at its most soporific, listen to the "Three Countertenors" CD released by Harmonia Mundi.) Germans and Americans vary a great deal in voice and style, but generally seem to offer the best operatic countertenor singing.

There are few men today who interpret castrato roles well, and Mr. Ragin is indisputably one of the finest among them. Another, Jeffrey Gall, the first countertenor to sing a featured part at the Met, has an uneven voice that led the *Boston Globe* to dub him "the Maria Callas of Countertenors." But his brand of vocalism is best suited to opera: his characterizations are vigorous and fiery, his cadenzas and ornaments are in correct style, but never dull. Derek Lee Ragin has a number of mannerisms which mar his performances, most notably his tendencies to scoop and to croon. Some may take exception to his rather fruity tone, and there is also a certain breathiness (sometimes associated with African-American singers) in his voice. He also "yodels" to make register changes. Obviously, this guy spent too much time listening to Leontyne Price records as a child. But with his prodigious technique and range, vivid characterizations, and exciting, florid singing, Mr. Ragin is one of the finest countertenors in opera and oratorio today. To anyone who calls his vocalism wimpy, I suggest a session listening to his many recordings. For dazzling, if somewhat sloppy, virtuosity, try the "Rompo i lacci" of his Guido in La Handel's *Flavio* on Harmonia Mundi.

As it has now become cliché to note, it is impossible to replicate the castrato sound (as the movie proves). However, the music written for castrati is too wonderful to abandon, so women and countertenors have stepped into the breach. While this necessarily involves some compromise in the musical result as originally intended by the composer, at their best, performances with castrato substitutes can provide moving and transcendent experiences. Were we to disqualify singers who entail such a compromise in musical result, we would never hear Wagner and would rarely hear *bel canto* and big Verdi roles. Flawed though his singing is, Mr. Ragin provides authentic drama and fine musicality in his inspired singing of music originally written for castrati. That the wretched "Farinelli" and its soundtrack have opened new ears to the glories of florid, baroque opera and have given us a new perspective on how a castrato might (or might not) have sounded may just be enough to justify the making of this turgid and historically inaccurate film.

Keep the issues coming. Cheers!

The Ultimate Arbitrator

Dear Unknown One: Fascinating! May one ask who you are? La Cieca can keep a secret. Until then, the blue fish swims in murky water. LC

Netropolitan Opera

Bob Ross, publisher of San Francisco's Bay Area Reporter, has granted permission for WORLD WIDE WEB MARKETING ALTERNATIVES to reprint *Tales of Tessi Tura* in cyberspace. Throughout its 15-year run, George Heymont's *Tales of Tessi Tura* caused a sensation with its *scandalous* photo captions, raunchy innuendo, and *ribald* humor. The first opera column to be written through the eyes and ears of an openly gay music critic, *Tales of Tessi Tura's* "take no prisoners" style of classical music criticism earned Heymont three of San Francisco's prestigious *Cable Car Awards* as well as the dubious distinction of being labeled "the Joe Bob Briggs of the opera world." Opera fans wishing to access a library of *Tales of Tessi Tura* columns on the WORLD WIDE WEB can now do so at the following address:

<http://www.wwma.com/tessi/>

TALK the TALK

(or, the Parterre Box Dictionary of Queenspeak)

Augenblicken, Vierzig: What the audience grabs (intentionally or otherwise) during Act One of *Parsifal*. Especially if Levine's conducting. (See also *Zèdes, faire les*)

Bartolitis: A malady symptomized by an "artistic" choice to sing with a breathy tone; other telltale signs include inaudibility, unsightly facial tics, a microscopic repertoire and an uncontrollable case of the cutes. See also **Moffo Throat**.

Diva Anecdote: Perhaps because their lives onstage are so exciting ("weeping bitterly, she consents to the horrible bargain..."), divas have a way of romanticizing their offstage exploits as well. Maria Callas is served with a subpoena; the next day she warns Walter Legge, "when I tell you the details, your blood will freeze!" At a Hollywood party Marilyn Horne shmoozes with a little fat drunk lady who turns out to be (no! yes!) Judy Garland! Zinka Milanov climbs into the wrong limousine after Birgit's Aida and quips, "If Madame Nilsson takes my roles, I must take her Rolls!" Kathy Battle demands a makeup artist prior to a radio interview! Rise Stevens' right boob pops out during *Carmen*! Now, let's face it, *nobody's* life is *that* exciting. So when you hear a diva anecdote, remember it has been edited for content and formatted to fit your screen. See also **X-ray Story**.

Fake Place: A trick vocal placement used to produce a "floated" high pianissimo (*à la* Price, Caballe, Te Kanawa, and all Viennese singers). It's crooning, not real singing, and it's not all that hard to do. Not at first. But it will get you in trouble: you'll lose the *loud* high notes (*à la* Price, Caballe, Te Kanawa and all Viennese singers.) If you *must* sing in the fake place (and I suppose you *will*, because those queens in the audience just ooze when you do it), please try to keep the breath going and sing with an open throat. Otherwise the sound won't connect and you'll sound like Jessye Norman in the middle and

Kathy Battle on top (sort of the way Jessye Norman sounds these days, come to think of it.)

Gay Friends: When a diva is wearing a dress that is unflattering, unfashionable, inappropriate or just plain ugly, one says, "Obviously she has no Gay Friends," because, my dears, a gay friend would have talked her out of that horror and into something more diva-esque. I mean, that's what fags are for. Oddly enough, even some singers who have *multitudes* of gay friends have no Gay Friends. Take Beverly Sills. Jessye Norman, on the other hand, has the Gayest Friends in the world. Dr. Repertoire recalls a gala he was assisting with some time ago. Suddenly a voice boomed over his headphones: "Dr. Repertoire, please report to Miss C----'s dressing room immediately! "O dio," thought Dr. R, "Laryngitis? Argument with the maestro? Broken tooth cap?" Brimming with trepidation but determined to put on a brave front, Dr. R arrived at Madame's room to be confronted with the demand: "What do you think-- the multicolored shawl? Or the red with the fringe? And which brooch?" (PS: She went on looking FABULOUS.)

Grand Opera Buzz: That breathless, tingly, ecstatic feeling you get when you are at what Ethan Mordden calls a "demented" performance. It feels like really excellent speed but it's not nearly so hard on your liver. The Grand Opera Buzz can be caused by fabulous singing, balls-to-the-wall acting, dazzling star quality or, oh, just call it magic. Some nights Dr. Repertoire felt the Buzz: Gwyneth Jones's *Gotterdammerung*, Scotto's *Suor Angelica*, Corsaro's *Tote Stadt*, Pavarotti, Freni and Kleiber's *Boheme*, Rysanek and Hoffman in *Walkure*. As you can see, the Grand Opera Buzz is a rare pleasure indeed; enjoy it when you get the chance, and pay the rent next month.

"Please, is not for me, is for the public. They no want to see me like this."

Lady from Sweden: Don't hang your shit on this diva. So-called for a real Lady from Sweden, Birgit Nilsson who was, to put it mildly, nobody's fool. (Remember when Birgit protested that dark and darker Walkure production by showing up for the dress rehearsal wearing a winged miner's helmet?) By extension, any no-bull diva is known as a Lady from Sweden. When, for example, some very brave Assistant to an Assistant informed Marilyn Horne that the Met's new sets for *Carmen* would be built entirely of sound-absorbing carpet, the mezzo didn't scream. She didn't throw things. She just cooed "Ve ladies from Sveden don't like zis." And management trembled. When confronted with unreasonable demands from directors and conductors, another Lady From Sweden (Renata Tebaldi, to be specific) flashes her "dimples of iron" as she murmurs such phrases as "Lo provero"¹ or "I can no do" or (my own personal favorite) "Please, is not for me, is for the public. They no want to see me like this." If a gold-lame costume doesn't flatter her coloring, a Lady for Sweden bellows "I'm not Sophie Tucker, goddammit" (Horne, Met debut) or else she chops the offending garment in half (Sills, La Scala debut). And when a creepazoid General Manager attempts to give the tenor the final curtain call after *Gioconda* (imagine!), a Lady from Sweden (Scotto) shrieks, "Siete gente di merda!"² So, to sum up, "I'm a Lady from Sweden" means approximately "Don't fuck with me fellas, this ain't my first time at the sitzprobe."

"No, I'm not calling Anna Moffo a cocksucker."

Moffo Throat: A form of mild laryngitis characterized by a breathy, "sexy" vocal sound. Moffo Throat is caused by fatigue, mild infection, smoke, alcohol, and/or sucking cock.³ Proper treatment for Moffo Throat includes:

¹ "I'll try..."

² "You are people of excrement!"

³ No, I'm not calling Anna Moffo a cocksucker. On the contrary. She's Italian, remember?

- vocal rest
- steam
- antibiotics
- spending half a G on a laryngologist
- "Mme. M is suffering from severe bronchitis, but, against her doctor's orders, she has consented to sing so as not to disappoint her many fans."

And if that doesn't work, you can try swooning during the introduction to *Caro nome*; it's effective if just a bit gaudy.

Scotto Heels: [aka Stratas Spikes, Cossotto Wedgies, or Dolora Zajic Come Fuck Me Pumps] Ultra high platform heels (very seventies) worn by ittybitty divas. The very first time I saw La Scotto live was in *Il tabarro* and she was leaping around that barge in seven-inch heels with three-inch platforms like a cross between a mountain goat and Bette Midler. But even Miss M. might have flinched at the Bride of Frankenstein platform sandals La Scotto teetered atop later that evening as *Suor Angelica*. We must keep in mind that Scotto is barely five feet tall; she has to wear big heels to look plausible in just about any role except Gretel. As such, she is merely following in the, uh, footsteps of such gay icons as Elizabeth Taylor, Mae West, Judy Garland and Madeline Kahn, fireplugs all. Really, Scotto's quite graceful on those stilts: check out her classic Met telecasts of *Boheme* and *Manon Lescaut*, which both, incidentally, include yummy closeups of Renata's massive footgear. What's even cooler is, the guys wear 'em too: note Jon Vickers' cork-soled wedgies in his photo as Samson in the *Victor Book of the Opera*-- add cat-glasses and he's ready for a weekend at Palm Beach. For a current example of high-heeled diva excitement at its most unbalanced, check out Millo and Zajic in *Aida* clomping around like Pee Wee Herman doing the Big Shoe Dance.

Sutherland Phaser Trill: Haven't you noticed how much Joanie's trill sounds like one of the phaser weapons from *Star Trek*? It's a nice fat wiggly sound with both pitches cleanly defined, plus it has that cool "whirring" timbre. Not to be confused with the Sills Rattle Trill, the Callas Turkey Trill and the Caballe Vestigial Trill.

"Makropolous Case is in English because Madame Norman can't be bothered to learn it in Czech."

That Woman: a diva you don't like. As in "Someone has to let That Woman know she has no business singing Norma!" Calling a singer "That Woman" is perhaps somewhat harsher than calling her "La" ("None of this nonsense of Carmen being casually discovered amidst the crowd for La Bumbry, oh no!") or "Madame" ("Makropolous Case is in English because Madame Norman can't be bothered to learn it in Czech.") But "That Woman" is not so cruel as the national origin/animal epithet: "That Norwegian cow ought stick to Wagner"; "That Russian pig really thinks that sound is sexy"; "Where the fuck did that Lebanese moose get the idea Aida is a redhead?" But no matter how provoking the diva's behavior, one must draw the line at the nicknames some tacky queens think are so fucking witty, like "Miss Piggy" or "Jess Enormous" or "Monsterfat". Dr. Repertoire has it on very good authority that these are the very same tacky queens who tape photos of Billy Baldwin to their refrigerator doors, so I ask you...

This Year's Callas: [aka A Weltstar is Born] Every year some dark-haired, dark-eyed girl with a piquant combination of voice, looks and stage presence is touted as the next Callas. You know the drill:

- She appears out of nowhere singing a "Maria role" in some European Podunk. Her acting, musicianship and vocal production all fit into the category of "interesting but uneven." The critics overlook her; the queens learn how to spell her name.
- She fills in (and triumphs) at a major summer festival. The critics notice her; the queens call her flawless.
- She signs with a major record label and is mentioned in *Opera News*. The critics analyze her; the queens call her by her first name.

- She debuts at the Met and releases a crossover CD with an undignified cover photo. The critics rave, the queens, well, they hate to complain, but there are one or two *little* things...
- She's the subject of a *Times* feature in which she declares she is tired of being called "another Callas." The critics find fault; the queens write her off.
- She takes on a role that she has *no business* singing under a conductor who thinks he's Toscanini and a stage director who has a crush on the tenor and a costume designer who hates women and then two days before the opening she gets bronchitis but she refuses to cancel. And she alone gets blamed for the ensuing *Trainwreck*. The critics scream for blood; the queens say she wasn't *that* bad, just not that good.
- She gives a few more "interesting if uneven" performances to half-full houses. She announces she has a few openings for very talented pupils. The critics forget how to spell her name; the queens begin to collect her pirates.

When one realizes that Miss X is doing the Faux-Callas thing, the only proper response (besides deep and sincere pity) is to sing, sing, sing:

"Have you met my good friend Maria,
The craziest girl in her Fach?
You'll know her the minute you see her:
She's the one who abuses her glottal attack..."

see also Suliotis, Elena; Sass, Sylvia; Nicolesco, Mariana; Cuberli, Lella; Putnam, Ashley; Fabbricini, Tiziana, and, I am very afraid, Gheorghiu, Angela.

Trainwreck: A solemn fiasco. A disaster on a truly Biblical scale. An operatic *Waterworld*. In other words, a Mess, and we're not talking *Petite Mess Solonelle* here, we're talking *Mess* in H-moll. Like Te Kanawa's New York *Violetta* when she forgot both the words and the music of Act IV. Like Behrens' opening-night *Elektra* when she cracked the first "Agammemnon." Like a *Butterfly* when Licia Albanese led the audience in booing the production team off the stage. Or like a *Sanson et Dalila* "starring" Elena Obraztsova, which was described by one queen as "like being in a car wreck with Jacqueline Onassis. Very exciting, and I couldn't wait to tell everyone I know about it, but I wouldn't want to do it again."

"I tink I brek my nack."

X-ray Story: A type of diva anecdote that's all windup and no delivery. Named for a story told by Renata Scotto for the Met's 100th Anniversary Gala. It seems Renata took a bad fall at the end of her debut *Butterfly* back in '65. She was in terrific pain, was rushed to the hospital... But let her tell it. "I tink I brek my nack. Waal, it toorn out I was all royt, but I 'ave to 'ave an ex-roy." Pretty lame, huh? I mean, you expect a lot bigger payoff: amnesia, at least. Or she has to do rehab with a little old physical therapist who turns out to be Toti dal Monte. Or else she's paralyzed and, oh, let's see... she says she never wants to sing again and she becomes a recluse and then she meets this cheerful little disabled boy with a really great singing voice and so, bitter Renata agrees to attend the kid's performance of *Amahl and the Night Visitors* and, wait, it's Christmas Eve, and at the end of the show the kid really *does* walk and then Renata realizes the true meaning of Christmas and she sings "You'll Never Walk Alone" with a chorus of children from lots of nations. See, that would be a real Diva Anecdote. But instead, spoilsport Renata pops a Tylenol and gets on with her life. ("It hoort so mahch!") Divas beware: if you insist on telling X-ray Stories, Edward Downes will 86 you from the Singers Round Table.

Yuggayugga coloratura: A method of articulating florid music with lots of itty bitty glottal attacks. It's superclean, but not very pretty: at its worst it sounds like simultaneous gargling and yodeling ("Si, Lindorulugalugalug miugalug sagalugarugalug") Not to be confused with *aspirated coloratura* ("Sihihi, Lindohohohoro mihihio saharaharaha.") Mostly mezzos do the Yuggayugga thing, (e.g., Beganza, Horne, Bartoli), but the all-time Yugmistress is undoubtedly Cristina Deutetekom, whose Queen of the Night sounded like she had a throatful of marbles.

Zèdes, faire les: What the audience does during *Pelleas et Melisande*. Including the intermissions.

Dr. Repertoire

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Art

is

either

plagiarism

or

revolution