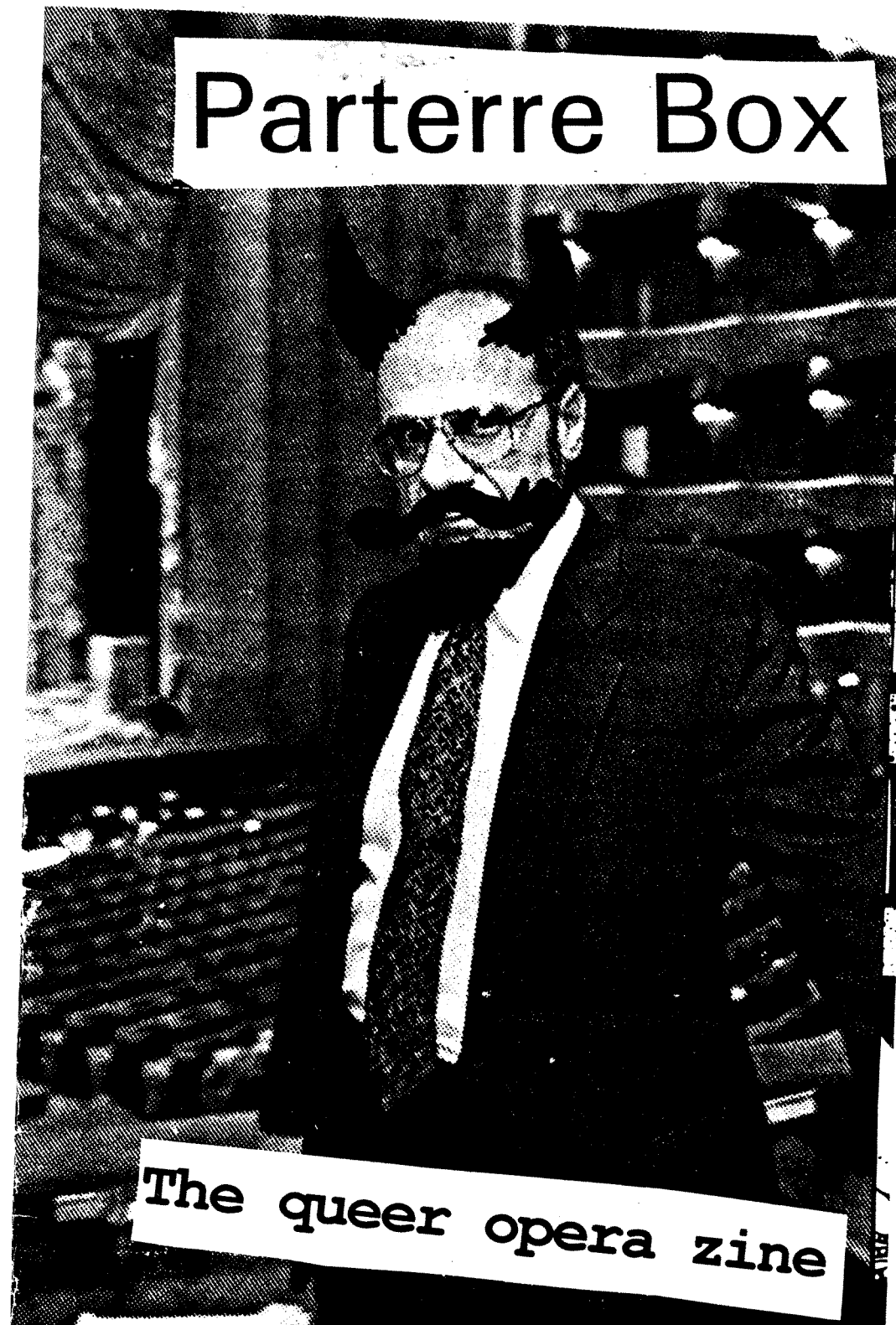


Parterre Box

#17

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The queer opera zine

Sweetie darling, pack your bags. We're going to Rio for carnival in 1996! What? Aren't sun, surf, drag queens, samba music, sex, booze, drugs, buff brasilianos in jeweled g-strings, and Bidu Sayao enough to tempt you to flee slushy old New York in dreary mid-February and go flying down to Rio, Rio by the sea-o? Well, all right, then, sweetie, brace yourself, because this year the celebration features what has to be the greatest super-special added attraction of all time:

*** The Three Sopranos ***

Yes! And what sopranos they are! In no particular order: Kathleen Battle, Aprile Mollo and Frederica von Stade! Can't you just see it? The hair! The gowns! The medleys! ("I Enjoy Being a Girl/The Girl from Ipanema/The Ladies Who Lunch/Mira o Norma!") The trio arrangements of arias we all know and love! ("Perchè, perchè, Signor! Signor! Signor!") The inevitable salute to Carmen Miranda, complete with fruit-salad hats! Oh, isn't it just too too too gay? Well, just you wait. Master of Ceremonies for this truly once-in-a-lifetime musical event is none other than Elizabeth Taylor's own personal lapdog, Mr. Roddy McDowall. Yes, her! So, darling, would you be an absolute angel and pick me up a tube of Bain de Soleil on the way to the airport? Cheers, thanks a lot.

While we're waiting for this apocalyptic event, we can content ourselves with Ms. Battle's soon-to-be-released CD of kids' songs, featuring Andre Previn's settings of "Winnie-the-Pooh." The title of the album is, of course, *Hunny and Roo*.

Seriously, though, I rather liked Ms. B's much-maligned *So Many Stars*-- if neither the music nor the performance was world-shaking, so what? Kathy singing bossa nova is easier to listen to at dinner parties than those fucking monks, that's for sure. And the lite repertoire suits Kathy's current vocal estate: if you can't do Lily Pons, why not do Astrud Gilberto? But La Battle's latest effort, a scant 45-minute program of Previn, Barber and Gershwin, is bad enough to go platinum as a party record. We all know

composition has never been Andre Previn's long suit, but, jeez, even Neely O'Hara would turn up her nose at such uninspired Europap as "Honey and Rue." Battle's performance of this goop is a heavily-miked blur of heavy breathing, like an easy-listening version of "Love to Love You Baby." Alas, even better-quality repertoire seems to inspire her none at all: she sings Gershwin in the style of *Nymphs and Shepherds*. (I swear Battle must have coached her Gullah with Elizabeth Schwartzkopf: "Daunt lay team Händel may, witty sot Hans.")

The Barber Knoxville is rock-bottom, probably Battle's worst recorded performance. Again, her arch diction ("people sit on their poaches" "a house drawing a buggy" "vahnneella, strobry, and stoached meelk") makes Eartha Kitt sound normal, but I'd overlook that if only Kathy sang with energy and imagination. Instead she dilutes Barber's rhapsody of small-town life into a soulless vocalise. Is she simply incapable of responding to the text? Even such a straightforward phrase as "a loud auto, a quiet auto" defeats her. Recall Leontyne Price's *trompe l'oreille* effect at this point: a minute shift of vocal color made the "quiet auto" recede into the distance. My favorite interpreter of the Knoxville, Eleanor Steber, handled this passage even more imaginatively: the narrator sounds first peevish, then pleased, as if the auto had suddenly remembered his manners. In contrast, Battle's reading is comically flat: is a simple change in volume too much to ask? I understand that it's unfair to compare her light soprano to such sumptuous voices; however, the difference is more than simply a matter of vocal weight. Dawn Upshaw's recording of this piece is delightful and touching because her subtle phrasing and keen attention to the text more than compensate for a less-than-glamorous instrument. But Ms. Upshaw is a precious artist; Ms. Battle, as this disc proves once again, is just an expensive doll.

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Meanwhile, Decca are releasing a compilation disc to celebrate the 60th birthday of Luciano Pavarotti. It's called *King of the High B's*. Yes, all right, that wasn't worthy of me, was it? My dears, let's get a grip! Singing is a hell of a lot more than high notes and opera is enough of a circus as it is-- why artists have to be cast as *Evel Knevel* is beyond me.

My congratulations to Anthony Tommassini of the *New York Times* for breaking the story that Pavarotti was performing "Pour mon âme" transposed down a half-step. (Ever since this revival was announced, Joseph Volpe hasn't

Questo e Quello

stopped raving about how Pavarotti was going to sing those "nine high C's." Well, now we know.) But I really must question Tommassini's statements that Pavarotti sang "an alternate version" of the aria and that "another standard version exists with the aria transposed further downward, to B flat." Now, La Cieca doesn't know much about these things, but it seems to her that the term "version" suggests an adaptation or arrangement. You know, like, for example, Strauss's overhaul of Zerbinetta's aria. Or Mozart's simplified rewrite of "Fuor del mar" from *Idomeneo* (which most singers-- including, incidentally, Pavarotti-- prefer to the very difficult original). Or Leonard Bernstein's alterations to the vocal line of "Maria" to avoid taking dear Larry Kert above high A.

Now, in contrast, what Lucianone was performing was simply the original version of the aria transposed down. No rewrite, just a different set of orchestra parts. Look, the guy has nothing to be ashamed of: Caruso, Lehmann, Ponselle, Sutherland, Horne, Domingo-- EVERYONE has transposed. Pavarotti himself has frequently performed the big arias from *Trovatore* and *Bohème* transposed down either a half or a whole step. But have you ever heard anyone say, "Pavarotti sang an alternative version of 'Che gelida manina?'" Sure, okay, the Pav made an error of judgement in implying he was singing "Pour mon âme" in the original key, and it's a cinch he was not particularly well-advised to attempt this role at this point in his career. But cut him some slack. What's one lapse weighed against the quarter-century of glorious singing he has lavished upon us? I mean, this is New York, girls. Let's show a little more class than those skanks in Milan who booed *Don Carlo*.

Surely some Met spin doctor conjured up this "alternative version" smokescreen to shield Pavarotti (and his employers) from accusations of for misleading the public. Yes, La Cieca does sound cynical but, remember, she was around during the seventies; a flubbed attempt at damage control always leaves her with a bad taste of Watergate in her mouth. Volpe and Herbert Breslin have

For the record: Tonio's aria ("Pour mon âme") in the original (French) version is in the key of F. In *La figlia del reggimento* it's in E-flat. According to the spokesperson for the Met, Pavarotti is performing the aria in E. But my source, who was at the *prima*, says no, it's E-flat for sure. I'm ready for someone with a tape recorder and a tuning fork to settle this so we can get on with our lives.

compromised their credibility: even perfectly innocent-sounding statements like "voices naturally darken and deepen with maturity" and "Mr. Pavarotti had been on antibiotics since last month" have taken on an unsavory tang of coverup. In particular, the big bad Volpe's lame attempts to explain away the Met's complicity in this debacle, coming hot on the heels of his stonewalling on last season's *Madama Butterfly* fiasco and his bully-boy firing of Kathleen Battle, suggests there's no velvet glove on that iron hand. Met fans, you'd better get ready for a bumpy ride.²

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La Cieca asks: why does that tall, versatile soprano cancel so often? Back problems, she says-- or has her recent crash diet led to an eating disorder? All we know is, spectators at her recent San Francisco performances nicknamed the emaciated diva "Anna Bulimia."

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Well, I'll say it: Seat Titles work. La Cieca has made the pilgrimage to Sybil's Barn for *Carmen* and *Queen of Spades* (Orchestra Row E and standing room, respectively), and she is willing to testify that the Met's titling system-- yes, that same titling system La Cieca herself badmouthed so often and so loudly-- is a technical marvel and a boon to any operagoer except the most titlephobic. One might, of course, desire the translations to be a bit more literate; errors of grammar and punctuation creep in from time to time. Furthermore, La Cieca is told the Seat Title version of *Aida* is so politically correct that it omits the naughty word "slave." And, of course, the occasional howler of the "Give her two black eyes" variety is in evidence: the young men outside the cigarette factory in Seville sing:

We come every day
to see the cigarette girls

And I do wish the folks at the *Times* would try to keep in mind that some of read the paper at breakfast. When I saw Breslin's statement that Pavarotti "built up a tremendous load of phlegm and just couldn't continue," I just about unswallowed my bear claw.

But even premature ejaculation isn't as exciting as **Denyce Graves**, who was making her overdue but very auspicious debut. She's got all the candy-- a big healthy bronze-tinted voice, voluptuous good looks, well-focused acting ability and genuine star quality. I mean, when she's on stage, she's **ON STAGE**. Her singing is close to perfection: I especially liked her hypnotically quiet card song. Many Carmens (you know who you are) scream most or all of the Act Four duet; Ms. Graves has enough in reserve to sing even the most dramatic outbursts. Her reading of the character as Carmen the Slut was well-sustained and honest, lacking only irony. Several unobtrusive details (kneeing Zuniga in the groin, that **Rita Moreno** gypsy dance, the overdone mockery of José outside the bullring) strike me as starchy and *appliqué*, inconsistent with Carmen's intelligence and honesty. On the other hand, her Act Two pantomime of impatience and studied nonchalance while waiting for José's arrival was a precisely-judged gem of comic timing. I look forward to seeing Ms. Graves in a new, well-staged production (Paul Mills' traffic direction for this revival doesn't count); then she will surely add more texture to her currently rather broad portrayal. She has the voice, she has the charisma; now she wants only a little fine-tuning to become the great Carmen of our time.³

If this performance by La Graves felt *als Gast*, maybe that was because the rest of the cast wasn't up to much. **Richard Margison**'s lyric tenor was reliably produced with an easy top, but lacked oomph for the second half of the opera; **Barbara Frittoli** is a pretty girl with an ordinary voice. As for **Sergei Leiferkus**, will someone tell me why Russian singers can still get away with Italian and French diction that would get an American flunked out of undergraduate school? Reverse discrimination, I call it.⁴

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³ Unlike far too many up-and-comers, she seems to be willing to say "no:" **Amneris** and **Eboli** are not on her schedule; **Dorabella** and **Charlotte** are. I'd love to hear La Graves in **Rossini**, but I'm afraid that another mezzo debuting this year has got a lock on that repertoire.

⁴ And I don't believe **Leiferkus** is really a baritone. My date at that *Carmen* (a tenor) turned to me during the Toreador Song and whispered, "There's your José." (He also felt Margison was way out of his depth. When I asked what repertoire Margison belonged in, Mr. Tenor replied, "He'd be great in *Postillon du Longjumeau*.")

The biggest frisson in the Met's *Queen of Spades* comes from hearing **Leonie Rysanek** moan "No one can sing any more; no one can dance." This is the year of Leonie's farewell, and she is the last of the giants. In a Met Guild conversation with vivacious **F. Paul Driscoll** a couple weeks ago, the diva expressed admiration for the voices and musicianship the current crop of young singers, but puzzled over their lack of heart. She offered no solutions, but we can be grateful for this last chance to profit by her example, for at seventy Rysanek is still creating. Her reading of the Old Countess has nothing in common with **Regina Resnik**'s dour Gorgon or **Regine Crespin**'s worn-out courtesan. She is a spoiled, bitter, nasty old bat, clinging to life out of sheer spite; in Rysanek's view, this crone should die and put us all out of her misery. Rysanek leached all sentiment from her voice, suspending the Gréty aria timelessly between life and death: only in **Samuel Beckett** might we find so harrowing an exposition of mortality. (Dr. Repertoire says if he had his way, he'd cast Leonie in a German-language revival of *Happy Days* or *Not I*. We can dream.)

At another point in the Driscoll interview, Rysanek insisted that the success of a production depends on perfect casting "from the stage to the pit." Well, someone at the Met must have heard her, because this new production was cast mostly from strength. Among the best were **Birgitta Svenden** as **Pauline** (in fact, I wish **Tchaikovsky** had given this character more to do) and **Nikolai Putilin** as **Tomsky**. I'm afraid **Dmitri Hvorostovsky** did not live up to his PR, but then, who could? Oddly, considering how hot he looks on a CD cover, little smolder carried over the footlights: he seems to lack star stage presence. On the other hand, Mr. Hvorostovsky's voice is definitely an A-instrument; his rich, seamless legato made **Yeletsky's** aria the musical high point of the evening. And, besides, in the words of the Russian folk song, "Karabejniki."

Ben Heppner and **Karita Mattila** sang cleanly and sweetly; she tired during that incredibly heavy final duet, but that's **Tchaikovsky's** fault. Unfortunately, they are both placid, laid-back performers, odd choices for the neurotic **Ghermann** and **Lisa**. (**Jon Vickers** and **Teresa Stratas** sang these roles at the Old Met. See the difference?)

⁵ Literally, "Oh, the little box is full." Oh, baby, is it ever! That we could see even from standing room!

Valery Gergiev led the Met orchestra lovingly and with attention to detail: he is literally the best conductor in the world today in this repertoire. Not the least of his virtues is his insistence on a transparent orchestra sound that never overwhelms the singers-- even in the most dramatic passages we could catch every note, even every word.⁶ I only wish some of the Met's other conductors would emulate his habit of supporting, not overwhelming, the singers. And I would be fascinated to hear what Mr. Gergiev might do with Verdi and Wagner. Any chance, Met management?

You know, Elijah Moshinsky has a fine eye for detail and can realize a striking stage picture; he is evidently a serious and sincere artist. So why does his work rub me the wrong way? Maybe because I think he indulges in superficial mannerism when he's capable of creating real drama. Even the his less successful productions (the Met's fussy *Ariadne* and glum *Otello*, even Covent Garden's ghastly *Aida*) suggest he would be a superb stage director if only he'd concentrate more on character and a less on "effects." For instance, in *Queen of Spades* we were in trouble less than a minute into the show when Moshinsky broke Dr. Repertoire's Rule #1 of Opera Production: *Don't stage the overture*. Moshinsky showed us Ghermann playing solitaire amidst shafts of light and roiling smoke. He's obsessed with gambling, get it? But we know that anyway: Tchaikovsky provides a perfectly adequate scene of exposition not five minutes into the opera. Throughout the evening Moshinsky's "touches" continually distracted me from the music and drama: Why was the whole action enclosed in a giant picture frame? Why was the only repeated set piece those dreary, confining grey wings? Why did the Countess appear in Lisa's bedroom disguised as Norma Desmond? Why was the all-important death scene of the Countess played in total darkness? Why didn't Lisa put on a dress before leaving the house to go to the Winter Canal? Why would the ghost of "The Queen of Spades" choose to throw Ghermann a curve by materializing in a red dress? In general, why did everything have to look so fucking designed, from the "Christmas window display" Summer Park set to the "Ascot Gavotte" Ballroom to the "film noir" Winter Canal? My date called the production

⁶ Despite a brass section without a lip between them; the whole night was marred by their blats and skwawks. The horns had an off-night in *Carmen*, too: the "fate" theme in the Prelude sounded like it was being played underwater. I know the guys in the pit are overworked, but, jeez, do they have to sound like a pick-up band?

"chichi," but I think "faggy" is closer to the mark. One truly fabulous moment (the appearance of the ghost at the barracks) just does not make up for a whole evening of busy, unmotivated, anti-musical direction: even the reappearance of the Countess in the final scene misfired. Mark Thompson (who did the window dressing) and Paul Pryant (who designed the obscurity) made their debuts with this production. Let's hope it's also their farewell.

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And a farewell is definitely overdue for the veteran Met usher who worked Orchestra Left for *Carmen*. During the first act he grumbled, jingled his keys, opened and shut the door, read and reread his program with an unshaded flashlight, hummed off-key, then fell asleep and SNORED LIKE A FUCKING WHALE until a standee woke him up. And may a mysterious "pinging" sound beset the BMW of that Young Urban Professional who disrupted the second act of *Queen of Spades* with his lengthy non-emergency cellular phone conversation and then loudly cursed the audience members who dared to shush him. *Muori*, yuppie scum!

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La Cieca was pleasantly surprised (and we all know how rarely that happens) by a program of scenes presented by a group new to her, the CoOPERative. This "co-op" group has a refreshingly optimistic goal: to "foster a community spirit and convivial atmosphere" in which to practice their art. That's a quotation from their mission statement, which emphasizes the importance of a nurturing, non-competitive attitude to the creative process. Well, La Cieca thinks that philosophy⁷ is nine kinds of cool, and she had fun at their fetchingly entitled *Night of Twisted Psycho Opera* (October 28). Such plot as there was concerned this crazed, willful, temperamental diva (if you'll pardon the tautology!) who inherits this haunted castle where all sorts of weird shit happens, like a secret panel slides open and out pops a singing doll, that kind of thing. Linda Lehr wrote the script, wisely keeping dialogue to a minimum while providing continuity for a mixed bag of scenes.

⁷ You may notice the CoOPERative's credo sounds remarkably similar to opinions expressed elsewhere in this issue in the article "Yes, Opera Sucks, but..." Amazing how great minds etc. etc.

Sarah Ann Jamison, who is apparently doyenne of this company, played the wicked primadonna with the clenched jaw and steely eye we recognize as the identifying characteristics of the Lady from Sweden in High Dudgeon; I was afraid of her. Ms. Jamison's singing is reminiscent of Eleanor Steber's: remarkably secure and even from top to bottom, with really stunning diction-- I caught every single word of her two scenes. That's particularly impressive because I had never before heard "This Place is Mine" (by Murray Yeston) and I knew only slightly the aria from *Regina* because I really hate that opera. It's a real testimonial to Ms. Jamison's talent that she made the Blitzstein bearable. Most sopranos are determined to be adorable even in unsympathetic roles, but to her credit Ms. Jamison served Regina's venom straight up, no chaser. La Cieca sees Vanessa in this lady's future.

Another standout was lyric soprano Jennifer Griffin, whose Rusalka was luscious and sensitively phrased, and gracefully acted, too, even if her "watersprite" ensemble of crinoline and lamé tanktop struck me as unseaworthy. I'm hoping to hear Ms. Griffin's sexy voice in some sinfully sensuous Puccini or Massenet at the CoOPERative's next program; Gretel is not really her role. But the *Hansel* scene was one of the more twisted of the evening, thanks to Paul Marquis, whose Rosina Daintymouth was ready for Wigstock: auburn 'do, lace cocktail dress, faux pearls and, yes, in late October, *white pumps* (evil! evil!) Mr. Marquis' sleek gams, smug grin and nasal timbre delineated a witch more blasée than maniacal; it broke La Cieca's heart when the scene ended before the Counting Song ("five and six are witches' tricks...")

Baritone Kyle Pfortmiller's chilling interpretation of Don Giovanni as strung-out Eurotrash was enough to give poor Cieca both the heebie-jeebies and cause for concern: in the Act 2 finale this talented and very young artist was pushing his lyric baritone way too hard. Ease up, fella, we want to hear more from you.

Among many other solid performances, let me single out two: Chieko Koba's sexy/spooky Doll Aria and Raquel Hecker's very slick Bolcom songs. And a word of praise to the protean and indefatigable John Schenkel, who showed up in just about every number. The CoOPERative's next show is *Love Me Tender* (awww!) this February. Write to them at 175 Riverside Drive #5K, New York, 10024 for more info.

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Don't you dare forget December 3 is Maria's birthday.

summer/soviero/simone

I don't know what the climatic conditions were like in your neck of the woods, my dears, but Enzo Bordello almost relocated to the North Pole after Chicago's scorching summer of 1995. Power failures, high humidity and an average daily temperature of 106 degrees left him **postrato nella polvere**.

And he was in good company: after being stuck on a runway at O'Hare Airport for hours the morning of her debut at the Ravinia Festival, Hildegard Behrens sang a concert of Wagner and Beethoven. The heat in the Ravinia pavilion was reportedly excruciating and a sparse audience indulged Behrens as she croaked her way through some of the grandest climaxes in Western music. If only she had the last act of Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* in her repertoire. **Strazia crudel**, indeed!

The scorching temperatures abated just in time for Montserrat Caballe's eagerly awaited appearance during the closing days of the Ravinia Festival. Tout le gai Chicago turned out for the soprano's concert, no doubt enticed by ads especially designed for the queer rags. Under a photo of Caballe wearing catglasses, the caption read: "Catch those pianissimos, girl!" Truth to tell, most of the buff boys promenading on the Ravinia picnic grounds couldn't distinguish Caballe from Chaka Khan. Oh, well, if hype has to sell seats, I'd rather see a genuine diva like Caballe be the beneficiary of it and not some mediocrity like Sharon Sweet.

The program held few challenges but suited Caballe's current vocal estate well enough. **Tutto declina**, however, and the soprano's legendary breath control must now be counted a thing of the past. Furthermore the tone became harsh and ugly in forte passages. Still, her fabled **pianissimi** were as lovely as ever.

Rather unexpectedly, it was Caballe's artistry that made the deepest impression. The long scena from Verdi's *Otello* was notable for its beautifully sustained mood and sense of atmosphere. "Il est doux, il est bon" from Massenet's *Herodiade* was suffused with both a spiritual and sensual yearning. Best of all was the stunning rendition of "O ma lyre immortelle" from Gounod's *Sapho*, a performance full of Crespín-like grandeur.

After intermission, Caballe sang a half-dozen arias from the zarzuela repertoire. The Catalan coquette was really in her element here, flirting outrageously with the cute Latino maestro, giggling at the slightest provocation and generally having a hell of a good time. At one point, Caballe whipped out a black lace fan and began ventilating her peeled-down **decolletage**, commenting: "I need better control my bodily functions." The queens ate it up.

Stamina seems to be a real problem now for Montsi; her encores ("O mio babbino caro" and the like) sounded alarmingly fatigued. There were shades of Rocky Horror at this point in the concert: as if one cue, someone started screaming for Norma and the diva repeated her now-famous Carnegie Hall response, "I weesh I could." Of course, "Casta diva" would have brought the house down-- but when "Io son l'umile ancella" is an ordeal, it's wise to leave **le public** with sweetly savored memories.

The diva recently announced she is preparing Strauss' Elektra for Athens in 1998. Given her reduced capacities (both physical and vocal), I won't be holding my breath for the results. Still, Caballe is one indestructible diva (her recently published biography is a litany of medical crises survived). This high-glamour evening was the highlight of an otherwise dismal summer season.

Fleeing the **lande ignude** of Claudia Cassidy's old stomping ground, Enzo retreated in September to that **terra di pace** otherwise known as Montreal. Circled in red on the Diva Butcher's itinerary were Diana Soviero's initial performances of Giordano's Fedora for L'Opera de Montreal. As expected, Soviero consolidated her reputation as **prima verista** with a portrayal of take-no-prisoners intensity.

What impressed me most was not Soviero's impassioned response to the text and dramatic situation-- I've come to expect that-- but the remarkable condition of a lyric voice in a repertoire that invites hard use. Her tone was full and firm, the musicianship confident, the technique rock solid. After singing in the cellar all evening, Soviero capped the duet that ends Act Two with a bang-on high C. And speaking of catching those pianissimos, girl, have you noticed all those Caballe-like finesses

that Soviero leavens her singing with these days? As Germanna di Giulio (one of Lanfranco Rasponi's golden oldies) says, "A little portamento makes all the difference." And so it does.

What else is there to gush over? Oh, yes, the diva was a vision in a series of ash-blonde wigs and drop-dead gowns. Some of the local critics complained that Soviero was too diminutive for this dragon-lady character. Christ, haven't we been through all this before with La Scotto? **Non e l'altezza che fa la grandezza**. Obviously, the Montreal critical community are not reading their Parterre Box; Dr. Repertoire addressed the issue most sensitively in issue 16 (see "Scotto heels" listing).

Soviero was surrounded by committed colleagues. Quebec natives Lyne Fortin and Gaetan Laperriere have voices of international calibre and deserve to be heard at the Met. (Here's a suggestion, Mr. Volpe: relieve Soviero of her Musetta duties, give the role to Fortin and let Soviero sing Mimi for a change.) As Olga and De Sirieux, respectively, Fortin and Laperriere made the most of their limited opportunities. Substituting at the last minute for Fabio Armiliato (who was recuperating from being shot in the foot during an *uccisione* not-quite *simulata* at a Macerata Tosca this summer), Ermanno Mauro sang the role of Loris Ipanoff better than expected; some bellowing aside, Mauro supplied a ringing, ardently phrased account of the famous "Amor ti vieta."

Bernard Uzan's direction took the story seriously; the action was keenly phrased. He made maximum use of Michel Beaulac's handsome settings, including an imposing marble palace for the Parisian act. Alfredo Silipigni's conducting conveyed obvious affection for this opera or at least the verismo idiom.

And now for a little reality check: there ain't much going on in this Fedora thang. No one is a bigger verismo queen than Enzo, but this cloak and dagger piece is all pose and no substance. Yes, the title character sings a lilting "chotchke aria", swears an oath of chastity on a poisoned crucifix and collapses screaming on her fiancé's corpse (and that's just the first act!), but Giordano's heroine is an outrageously impulsive woman who never elicits the sympathy we feel for her stylistic cousin, Tosca. I can understand how Tosca's vulnerability in a high-stress situation drives her irrational behavior. By contrast, I have no empathy for what ultimately undoes Fedora: stupidity and

sadism. The tenor character is conveniently clueless and masochistic. Whether he's rhapsodizing about his white-haired mother in her castel lontan or whining about his misplaced affection for that trashy wench Wanda (an offstage character), I just want to do the Cher Moonstruck routine and yell: "Snap out of it!"

Like two sides of a tedious coin, Fedora and Loris are inexorably drawn to one another. But that does not a good opera make. While Enzo is the first to commend L'Opera de Montreal's effort to provide Soviero with an outlet for her veristic bent, he is sure you'd agree works like Iris, Risurrezione, Francesca da Rimini, Zaza or La Wally would have been more worthwhile (or at least interesting) endeavors.

Having experienced Freni and Soviero, both superb, in this claptrap of a bygone era, I was sure a few decades might pass before I encountered Fedora again. But the broad is starting to follow me around-- I'm off to London soon and, wouldn't you know, friggin' Fedora is playing Covent Garden with Maria Guleghina. Maybe I'll head for English National Opera that evening; with three divas on a match, Guleghina has gotta be the unlucky third. New Yorkers should note that Fedora arrives at the Met next year with Freni in the title role--and Soviero as her understudy.

Back in the Windy City, Enzo took in Lyric Opera's first production of its 1995-96 season, Verdi's Simon Boccanegra. Few operas in the annals of Lyric Opera can claim so rich a performance history as Boccanegra. In recent years, baritones of such stature as Piero Cappuccilli and Sherrill Milnes have triumphed here in the title role. But it is the legendary Tito Gobbi, who appeared in Chicago as Simon during the 1950's and 60's, that aficionados associate with this historic character.

In his collected essays on Italian opera, the late Gobbi said of Simon Boccanegra: "I cannot describe the joy, the respect, the sheer love with which I have tried to serve this great work." In explaining his attachment to the title role, Gobbi wrote: "Boccanegra represents an ideal government, operating with justice, honesty and love . . . Simon is a giant both physically and in character. He cannot be performed by a small man." I am thankful Gobbi never had to encounter the likes of Nucci,

Chernov and other artistically small men who seem to have inherited his beloved role. However, Alexandru Agache was a fine interpreter of Simon, imbuing his every utterance with conviction. Accustomed to the general facelessness of today's Verdi baritones, Enzo was quite unprepared for the eloquence and poetry of Agache's portrayal. On the debit side, Agache's casual physicality does not always mirror the depth of his singing. Furthermore, the voice itself is of secondary interest to the probing intelligence working behind it. Still, Agache delivered a stirring performance that revived one's hopes for the Verdi repertoire in these vocally parched times. Given the Met's weird casting policies, New Yorkers should expect to see him around 2009 in the role of Marcello.

As Amelia, Kiri te Kanawa sang with glowing tone-- and looked like a goddess, in spite of a piss-yellow floozy wig as tacky as the one Renee Fleming wore in the Met's Peter Grimes. (What happened to the lovely mahogany tresses Kiri wore in the Covent Garden version of this production?) Her voice lacks ideal weight for Verdi, but she was affecting on her own terms; the trill that crowns the Council Chamber ensemble hovered radiantly in the air like the dove of peace Verdi surely meant to evoke.

Michael Sylvester did his Bergonzi-wannabe routine in the role of Gabriele Adorno with only minimal damage to the music. Robert Lloyd's handsome bass drew every bit of pathos from Fiesco's "Il lacerato spirito." Richard Cowan also made his mark as the villainous Paolo.

Lyric Opera's staging was (except for Ms. te Kanawa's coiffure) a faithful recreation of the 1991 Covent Garden staging, now available on video from Decca. Elijah Moshinsky's direction had its fair share of oddities (Boccanegra plays out his long death scene standing up), but the commitment and energy he inspired from his cast was refreshing. After his Butterfly fiasco at the Met last season, I had not counted on much from conductor Daniele Gatti. Surprisingly, the maestro encouraged a wealth of nuance from orchestra and singers alike. If the Butterfly experience proved a humbling experience for Gatti, may others learn as profitably from their mistakes. Lyric's Boccanegra illuminated the reasons for the great Gobbi's esteem.

Enzo Bordello

Maria's List: the top ten QUEER influences on the life, career and legend of MARIA CALLAS

10. **Kenneth**: hairdresser to the rich and famous; created the widely-imitated big-hair chignon that Maria adopted in the post-Jackie era (roughly 1967-74). Maria wore a Kenneth 'do at many of the epochal events of her life, including the 1973 comeback tour and the 1969 "I am so happy to have been present at your great success" reunion/photo-op with Renata Tebaldi, whose big hair is another story altogether.
9. **Pier Paolo Pasolini**: director of Maria's only film, *Medea*, which is to my mind pretty close to an ideal queer film: Maria's in it, of course, and that counts for a lot, and the costumes and locations are all bizarre and exotic, and the mise-en-scene is arty and obscure enough to inspire hours of invigorating argument. And, let's see, what else? Oh, yes, Signor Pasolini's casting of those gorgeously scruffy beachboys (as the Argonauts) is an inspired artistic choice.
8. **Yves Saint-Laurent**: designer to Maria when she was at her most chic, circa 1960. Perhaps the most breathtaking image ever of La Callas can be found toward the middle of the *Debut in Paris* video: Maria, a vision in Saint-Laurent's peau-de-soie gown and shawl, smiles demurely and poses a bit for the television camera. Could she have known how truly pretty she looked at that moment?
7. **Leonard Bernstein**: conductor/queer icon whose unbeatable mix of American (hard-working/vital) and Gay (stylish/sensitive) made him the perfect collaborator for Callas. Saved the day by taking over Maria's *Medea* on five days' notice. As conductor of the Visconti/Callas *Sonnambula*, devised ornaments for "Ah, non giunge" that are perfectly idiomatic, yet so fabulously difficult that even Maria abandoned them after one season; no other soprano has even attempted them.
6. **Elsa Maxwell**: unattractive, annoying lesbian *poseuse* who haunted the fringes of the art world. In other words, the Fran Leibowitz of her day. Ridiculed Maria in print (imagine a columnist today fuming over the color of an opera singer's wig!); fell in love with Maria at first meeting; convinced her there was a world outside of the rehearsal hall; reinvented Maria as a jet-setter. Then Maria got bored with Maxwell's stunts and cut her loose. And was Elsa bitter? Oh, girl!

5. **Terrence McNally**: playwright whose *Lisbon Traviata* and *Master Class* explore the relationship between the Callas mystique and the gay psyche. Has done for opera queens what Harvey Fierstein did for drag queens. Symbol of assimilated queer sensibility, and a truly funny guy: "If you love Maria Callas, you're an opera fan. If you love Joan Sutherland, you're an opera queen."
4. **Nicola Rescigno**: conductor/martinet who rode Maria's coattails to glory in the early 1960's. Known as the poor man's Georges Pretre; in Nicky's defense, he was one of the few maestros who could both accompany Maria's singing and tolerate her abuse. Famous quotation: "Maria was not a beautiful woman; she was fat, obese; her legs were like those of a pachyderm." Nice talk, huh?
3. **John Ardoin**: by day, one of America's two or three most discerning and wise critics; by night, a priest who has dedicated his life to the deification and the continuing adoration of Goddess Maria. To call *The Callas Legacy* a discography is like calling *Casablanca* an entertaining flick: Ardoin's book is a superbly detailed and loving analysis of a great artist's creative development.
2. **Luchino Visconti**: aristocrat/artist. Transformed a gifted singer into a great artist. First (and still perhaps the greatest) modern opera director. Collaborated with Maria on her greatest artistic triumphs, including *Anna Bolena*, *Traviata*, *Alceste*, *Iphigenie*. Revived and refurbished the idea of style as the true substance of opera. Victim of Maria's jealousy: after 18 hours of intense rehearsal for *Sonnambula*, he wanted to go home, but Maria cried (in a crowded restaurant, mind you) "You're lying! You have a date with Lenny!"
1. **Franco Zeffirelli**: designer/director. Transformed a great artist into an icon. Looked at a 210-pound Wagnerian soprano in a cheap sweater and skirt and discerned glamour: his casting of Maria in *Turco in Italia* was a major step forward on her journey to stardom. Designed a *Traviata* which was Maria's favorite because "the costumes were more beautiful than in any other production." Noticed Maria was neglecting her vocal studies--because her nails were too long to play the piano. His productions with Maria of *Tosca* and *Norma* are monuments to the mystery of the gay man/star lady relationship. His documentary film of Maria's life ends with "Ah, non credea" on the soundtrack. . . as the great curtain of La Scala slowly falls.

Fishbone in Philly

The Opera Company of Philadelphia's revival of Bellini's final masterpiece *I PURITANI* (October 15) was slightly less than a rarity for local operagoers, for it was last presented here in 1972, when the dominant reason for its staging was unquestionably the presence of diva Beverly Sills and the emergence of one of the few tenors who could do full justice to the leading male role, young Luciano Pavarotti. The Sicilian composer has never been a favorite in Anglo-Saxon countries, and *I PURITANI* followed the fate of all his other works in America, falling from grace and sinking into almost complete oblivion in the first part of our century. If part of this neglect can be blamed on the general contempt in this country for the belcanto and early-romantic Italian school, another reason was undoubtedly the progressive dearth of singers capable of mastering the flexibility and range necessary to tackle this repertoire. But the cyclone called Callas swept away most of the former prejudices, in the general audience's minds if not the critics', and in her wake *I PURITANI* and other Italian early-romantic masterpieces were revived with a certain frequency, notably if a primadonna (Sutherland, Sills, Caballé, Gencer) imposed them.

The Philadelphia *PURITANI* was not centered on the presence of a diva such as the above, but could count on a generally reliable and committed cast of established singers. Gino Quilico, who got most of the local press attention due to the fact that his father Louis had undertaken the same role in the last Philadelphia production 23 years ago, impressed the audience with his magnetic stage presence, notable acting skills and charming dark good looks as well as with a flexible and pleasant voice. His baritone is perhaps too light for the role of Riccardo, whose creator Tamburini was more what we nowadays would call a bass-baritone

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rather than the *baritono brillante* Quilico appears to be at his best. Although somewhat overparted, his voice at times covered even by the underpowered Bellini orchestration, Quilico gave a fine interpretation to his role, delineating a Riccardo less cruel and more sympathetic than usual, making it clear though numerous details (e.g., his extreme emotional participation in Elvira's mental confusion) that his character is not a heartless villain, but a man driven to desperation by unrequited love.

Gregory Kunde repeated his Arturo just months after essaying the same role at Carnegie Hall. If on that occasion it appeared that his vocal organization is a basically flawed one, with astonishing high notes seemingly beyond human reach clumsily linked to the rest of the voice, and an approximate resolution of the crucial notes around the *passaggio*, it must also be noted that in Philadelphia he gave very few signs of the evident vocal strain that led him to the brink of aphonia in some moments of the Carnegie Hall performance. Again, owe must be grateful to Mr. Kunde for his not compromising with the overwhelming demands of the role, and again, his F in alt was not a countenorish shriek but a very pleasant note to hear indeed.

As both Quilico's Riccardo and Kunde's Arturo were already familiar to my ears, my attention was mainly focused on the Elvira of Susan Patterson, whom I had never heard in this role. A singer of temperament, she created an Elvira more tragic than pathetic, abetted by a full lyric voice produced with liberality. However, this spontaneous generosity, combined with thick metallic overtones in her upper range, made for a certain unbalance in the coloratura passages and an occasional lack of smoothness and tonal beauty. Additionally, the extreme high notes were often aggressively attacked and released with too much impetus. Her Elvira was consequently not as "well-sung" or spectacular as Devia's, probably the most celebrated of the moment, but unquestionably far more dramatically gripping and intense.

The only real disappointment among the major roles was Manfred Hemm (Giorgio), who appeared to lack the legato indispensable for the spinning out of the typical Bellini "nenie."

Maurizio Barbacini gave a far too "modern" rendition of the score, conducting without much imagination in a brisk, speedy manner and not allowing the singers to engage in variations, *rallentandi*, *messe di voce*, etc., all techniques essential for a historically faithful reproduction of an early Romantic opera. The most unforgivable crime was the elimination of the *dacapo* in the *caballettas*, a butchering which should be avoided with horror after years of the Belcanto renaissance.

The production, a fairly traditional one, was over 20 years old but didn't look its age. The sets were "essential" (my word of choice for a frugal production) but functional. It was clear that the director of this revival, Marc Verzatt, had concentrated on the psychology of the characters, their actions and interactions. Particular care was taken with Elvira (who appeared to be emotionally disturbed right from her entrance, as she engaged in a convulsive duet with her uncle) and especially with Riccardo, who at times emerged as the real protagonist rather than the antagonist. The costumes were very beautiful and lavish, though they clashed with the "Puritan" austerity of the sets.

Nicholas Fishbone

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FAX FROM FLORA

[Flora Bervoix, America's Most Beloved Retired Courtesan, is now living with her Spanish lapdog in Ridgefield, Connecticut from whence she regularly, if occasionally acidly, observes the scene de l'opera. Her motto is *Cheers et Veritas.*]

SEATTLE: Hola, Cieca! I'm just wondering if you are covering the Wagner events here in Waterworld-by-the-Sound for PARTERRE BOX?

Did you send your foreign correspondent? I say that affectionately (you know how much I love Germans!), because Seattle was transformed in August into a European city with loads of Krauts and others from overseas for the Seattle Ring Cycle Festival. Everywhere I went - Skippy's Steam Bath to Ye Olde Sidewalk Cafe - the place was filled with Europeans. And Japs. All kinds. Good and bad. Gay and straight -- and in between. And what fun! Festive and so Wet. Good food! The Seattle Opera even offered lectures on Wagner in German. It's true! I went to one. It's too tiresome to report on the entire Ring Cycle and all those singers, etc., so let me give you PARTERRE BOXERS a glimpse of the world from old Flora's 20/20 peepers, OK?

But, first of all: WHO is that Dr. Repertoire in your recent issue? I'm not saying he isn't just a hoot and all that, but the mutha has a faulty memory! For the record, and from my archival conscience (about the only kind I have!), I make corrections to his "Talk the Talk:" Quoth Dr R: "Rise Stevens' right boob pops out during Carmen." No, it was her luscious left titty. Dr. R. had better have his eyes examined.

I recall the evening very well -- the opening night of the new Tyrone Guthrie Carmen, ummm, well let's see around about 1951/52. Rise's leftie popped out of that basic black dress and looked all around the house. I was singing Frasquita, natch. Frank and Dick in the men's parts; oh, and Lucine. Reiner. Quite something! I was totally fabulous and almost stole the curtain calls from Rise. She was making sure of her success with that boob bit; we all knew that. But I stacked her cards in the Smuggler's Scene, and she had to sing "mort" while looking at a picture of Tucker's dick! Hee hee!

But wasn't there one more 'booboo' from your Dr R who said Birgit came to a von Karajan rehearsal in "a winged miner's helmet." Not so! Point it, it had a lamp -- to illuminate the perverse Karajan's dark set; wings, if there were such, were coincidental. Lamp is the point. Gosh! OK, now we're straight!

As for Dr. R on having gay friends, he's So Right! Eleanor Steber once told me, "If it weren't for the Boys, curtains all over America would not go up!" Yes, all us opera divas must have some Merry Friends. And I am glad at last to see in print what I always sensed: B. S. (that's Miss Sills) had no gay friends to speak of; certainly not enough. I am not in the least sure B. S. has wound up having any real friends at all. "Be a friend to have a friend," I always whispered to Violetta in Act I !!! Let's just say, B. S. was not really as good as she thought she was, and she overcompensated all the way. So contrived, and talk about judgmental!! End of B. S.

Wait! Before I resume my Fafner guise, did any you older fagulini catch that priceless moment of vocal history in Gary Sinese's TRUMAN movie on HBO back in September? Our favorite Margaret Truman (Daniel) was so sweetly portrayed and the whole thing was quite on target, INCLUDING the little soprano voice singing 'Voi che sapete' in the background near the end of the film. I said to my friend, "Sounds just like Margaret, flat as a pancake!" Know what? When the credits came Margaret Truman was listed as providing her recording of Cherubino's aria! HIIIIILARIOUS! Well, you know how I am about historical accuracy; just loved it! Thanks Harry, er, Gary!

OK, Seattle; Wagner. It went reasonably well, as Wagnerphiles Worldwide know by now. The Seattle symphony played with spirit and warmth, while Maestro H. Michael conducted with a lot of poetry in his stick (chew that one!), as well as rousing vigor when needed. It helps that the Seattle Opera House pit is about half covered a la Bayreuth. Most of the male voices were excellent; I'm not going to bother you with any commentary on the female singers. Just read the list and you'll know. The Rochaix staging continues to be ridiculous, a pointless exercise. Thank God it ends this year.

You've heard by now how ill-fated tenor John David de Haan crashed and burned as Siegfried in rehearsals with inflamed vocal cords; the question around the house was - were his vocal cords inflamed by a virus--

or by Wagner? Most experienced and knowledgeable members opted for the latter. So do I. I heard lyric tenor David sing Anatol in VANESSA seven years ago and even then he was way over his (empty) head. Honestly, I do wish David would lose 65 lbs. and return to his operetta and Mozart roles.

But more than that, I wish opera managers would cast with their musical brains (if they have any) and not their theatrical taste. I mean it! Think about it and you will, too.

We should all be grateful to Speight Jenkins for carrying on the Glynn Ross tradition of the Seattle Ring Cycle, and to Boeing and all those other corporate supporters, jocks and otherwise, who underwrite it and make it possible, including a \$100,000 1995 dragon used three times and junked. The Met and Chicago and San Francisco Rings come and go, but Seattle hangs in there -- singers or no. Jenkins said at a press conference: yes, de Haan did have a sore throat, and yes, he really could sing Wagner, and besides he LOOKED so perfect for the part! Oy, there's the rub! For far too many in opera looks are all important.

To make it complete and confirm the real focus of the Seattle company (and many another), during his press luncheon when Jenkins announced their next Ring Cycle (2001), he spoke at length about his production team; he could not name cast ("too early"), and then, poof, he called for questions. Fortunately, the first question was: Can you say something about the musical direction of your next Ring?" Blushes and flusters: "Oh, gosh! Yes! Of course. I've been so busy this week, with the new tenor and all. I just forgot!" (Jenkins IS from the South, after all, and those plantation queens can get agitated!)

The General Director was able to announce, once reminded, that Armin Jordin of Switzerland will be music director for Wagner. But, that was not all: the GM and his new staging director for the 2001 Ring (a certain Miss Wordsworth - I jest just a little - [love that girl!]) a director of drawing room comedies and the occasional Mozart or Handel opera), dished the hell out of musicians and conductors, complaining how hard they are to work with, how little they look at the stage or care about it and - afterthought - Armin is not that way! <Wanna bet?>

So, what else is new? Keep in mind Jenkins was a NYC newspaper writer and music critic before he took on

being general manager at Seattle about ten years ago. Such a qualification! Well, he has done a fine job in the community, with education and funding the Wagner cycles. But, does Seattle perhaps need a strong resident music director (a leading conductor), who runs the show musically and while the administrators administer? Just the way most opera companies do, including that other good one on the West Coast with their (mainly) "butch" Scotsman musical director? [But that's another story, another time.]

One of my girls just said her pussy has turned orange and I have to find out who it was! Any thoughts? David Caruso?

Bye for now! My champagne is going flat and we can't have THAT!

Love from,

Flora Bervoix

[To All:

God and Chris forgive me for my comment two issues ago about the late Chris Keene not looking well; for some reason I had not heard he was in the final stages of HIV disease and did not know of his problem. His loss is tragic, and so sad for opera. He was a strong creative force and will be missed. A few years ago I spent some good evenings with Chris in conversation-- he was Right On, one of the good guys. Damn!

F.B.]

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Yes, opera sucks, but...

This is a reply to "American Opera and the Drug of Government Funding, or, Why U.S. Opera Sucks" from *The Singer's Network Newsletter*. In this article "Stefano" blames said suckiness on, among other things, too much government assistance to opera companies and the stifling of singers' "freedom to interpret" by autocratic conductors and directors. At one point, he compares American opera to Amtrak (lack of competition leads to high prices and lousy service).

Dear Stefano,

WHILE I AGREE WITH YOU that opera in the US today sucks bigtime, I think you're way off base putting the blame on arts funding and stage directors. (I'll let conductors defend themselves, thank you.)

Let's start with your comparison of American opera companies to Amtrak. I'm not here to defend mass transit, but it seems to me the main reason Amtrak is so expensive is that it serves lots of places where transportation is necessary but unprofitable. The trains run at a loss because they're mostly empty, so they have to make up the slack by raising prices and accepting government subsidies. Look, if Amtrak could pick and choose its routes the way airlines do, they could lower prices and probably show a profit, but at what cost? Thousands of people would lose access to transportation. That's why Amtrak gets government funding: because no one competes with them; they provide a service no one else is willing to do. The same reasoning can be applied to arts funding: opera is necessary to the quality of life but unprofitable, so government helps it along.

The last thing opera needs is to be placed in direct competition with for-profit entertainment. Producing opera is expensive because, compared to other forms of entertainment, it's wildly labor-intensive. In other words, it takes a lot of talented people to do opera the right way. (Look down into the pit some night during *Phantom of the Opera*. Not nearly 110 musicians down there, right? Now, think about a rock concert-- four guys performing for 30,000 or so. Or a pro basketball game, televised live to tens of millions.) So opera is already in competition, not only with musical comedy, pop and rock concerts and professional sports, but with itself-- in the form of video

and CDs. Twenty years ago, if you wanted to see *Boheme*, you had to go to an opera house. Sixty years ago, if you even wanted to HEAR *Boheme*, you had to go to an opera house. Now, you can just stop by Tower Records-- and a Laserdisc costs only a fraction of an orchestra seat.

What you call a "drug," government funding, provides only a tiny percentage of the budget of any American opera company. The lifeblood of every opera company is ticket sales, the largest chunk of which comes from audiences who know, well, not a whole lot. Everything they know they learned from watching PBS: they know *Butterfly*, *Boheme*, *Carmen*, *Aida*, *Tosca* and *Cats*; they know Pavarotti, Domingo, Norman, Battle, Bartoli, and Hampson; they know Lavish. These days, opera is about what sells. And what sells is not necessarily the same thing as what's good. That's why America's "important" opera companies specialize in Opera for People Who Have Never Seen an Opera Before:

Stovetop Opera ("Just add three days of rehearsal, and they'll all say 'Mom, let's do *Tosca* again next season!'")

Monster Tractor Pull Opera ("The Three Tenors sing 'Nessun Dorma' Live from the Great Wall of China on Pay Per View")

Après Zeffirelli Le Deluge Opera ("The sets actually move before your very eyes!")

What's worse, audiences today prefer their performers cool: "I just love Kiri te Kanawa's Puccini: it's so **soothing!**" Weary yuppies don't go to the opera to be disturbed; they really don't want to give themselves up to emotion, cry or laugh uncontrollably or lie awake all night trembling with excitement, or even worse, come to blows over the soprano's ornamentation of *Ah! non credea mirarti*. They want diversion, not catharsis; entertainment, not art. *Muzak ist eine heilige Kunst*.

Meanwhile, a genuine superstar like Mirella Freni sings Adriana Lecouvreur in New York and the Met can't sell out a single perfor-

mance (the dimwitted New York Public didn't even know when to applaud!) Meanwhile, a worthy, interesting piece like *Death in Venice* is cancelled in favor of a lackluster revival of *Barber of Seville*. (Word on the street was the Met's PR people couldn't sell the Britten because it is perceived as a "gay work." Audience homophobia = boxoffice death). Meanwhile (even as I write this), a great production of a great opera featuring a great performer (John Dexter's staging of *Mahagonny* with Teresa Stratas) IS DOING NO BUSINESS AT ALL! And all this is at the Met, an American Institution for Over One Hundred Years with a rock-solid subscriber base and a huge endowment they can count on as a safety net for losses incurred performing less-popular works. (And remember, the Met's idea of avant-garde is Janacek.) Smaller companies strapped for current operating funds can't afford to offend ANYBODY-- the priority is to sell those tickets, and let art take care of itself.

After ticket sales, most of a company's income must come from private or corporate contributions. The disadvantage of this funding is the innate conservatism of the donors. Dowagers and oil companies have in common a distaste for "controversial" (political or especially sexual) content. Productions and performances must be sanitized for their safety.

Government funding at its best is a cushion for opera companies against an ignorant public and skittish benefactors. Well, it should be, anyway. Unfortunately, in the wake of our nation's swerve toward conservatism, what few arts grants survive are applied to already-existing projects like "outreach" and "young artists" programs whose benefits are questionable. Does a company selling out twenty *Bohemes* a season at a \$135 top need subsidizing? Do we really want to see any more "modern American" operas that turn out to be bad imitation Puccini (or, worse, bad imitation Philip Glass)? Do apprentices really learn anything from a program that uses them as slave labor comprimarios? Does "developing a young audience" have to mean forcing a badly-sung, boring *Barber of Seville* down the throats of kids who'd rather be behind the gym smoking dope? (Given the choice between bad Rossini and good reefer, wouldn't you?) We keep right on backing these same dreary programs, partly because We've Always Done It That Way and partly because it really doesn't cost all that much: government support for opera is a measly couple

million a year-- less than what the Pentagon spends on marching bands. But who benefits? Not the artists, not the audience, not even the administrators. Nobody except the celebs on the National Endowment advisory board who earn their honoraria for reassuring the public that art is basically harmless, maybe even a little bit good for you, like fluoride.

What do you think would happen if-- you took a chunk of that arts money and commissioned a new, unknown composer (no bitter queens from academia need apply) to develop an opera on a contemporary subject (teen sexuality, club culture, absentee parents) and cast young, smart, hungry singers (not those middle-aged City Opera hangers-on), and then marketed the show to kids as something hot, exciting and even a little evil (*It's Not Your Parents' Opera*)? Well, yes, you'd have to defend yourself against accusations of "wasting money on frills" and "teaching children to fornicate and disrespect authority" and probably even "prostituting a beautiful art form." But you just might accomplish the real goal of opera: communication between committed performers and an involved public through the arts of music and drama.

That's just one idea. By allocating government support to that kind of project would help accomplish two goals: connecting a new generation to an ancient art, and demonstrating (through financial commitment) the (presumably) vital importance of art to our society.

AND WHILE WE'RE ON THE SUBJECT, I'm tired of hearing about what evil creativity-sucking monsters all us stage directors are. I swear to God, Stefano, it's been weeks since I practiced human sacrifice. There are a lot of directors and conductors and designers around who truly seek to serve the music and to facilitate the singers' performances. This is in spite of singers who show up for rehearsals musically unprepared, or who have not a clue what the text means, or the ones who have already decided down to the last flick of an eyebrow what they're doing and don't mind wasting everyone's time to argue with you, or the ones who are in so much vocal distress that they can't do anything but push out the notes, or the ones who are such emotional basket cases they burst into tears every time you make a suggestion. You work with them. The up side is you also get to work with the vast majority of singers who are smart and talented and open-minded

and fun. You try to make everyone look his best while attempting to keep faith with the composer and the librettist's intentions. And sometimes you manage to make it all work.

Zinka Milanov once said, "It's easy to sing Norma-- if you sing it badly." Similarly, really excellent direction is hard, mostly because it has to **look** easy. A good director by definition doesn't call attention to himself: the ultimate compliment is "Wow, what a great opera." Not "You sure are a clever guy." Well, that's the ideal world. *Ma, in America*, as I believe we all know, subtlety is wasted on opera critics; they overlook the self-effacing in favor of the self-serving. And the same rules that apply to singers apply to us: those who don't get reviewed don't get rehired; and even a bad notice is better than no notice at all.

So even the sincerest of us are sorely tempted. After all, who has time to fine-tune his concept to singers' individual performing styles when you're busy penning self-serving "controversial" program notes? Who gives a fuck about the opinions of Puccini or Illica and Giacosa or even Catherine Malfitano when you've got a captive audience for your brilliant ugly-American take on *Butterfly*? Who wants to shoulder the responsibility of leading unstable and sensitive artistic types on an exhausting journey of discovery when it's so much more fun to play with cool toys like revolves and smoke and lasers and shit? Who has the patience to analyze Strauss and Hoffmansthal's musico-dramatic intentions in *Elektra* when forcing two sopranos to simulate lesbian sex in front of three thousand people gives you a hardon you could hammer a nail with?

Or in other words, who wants to be a crummy handmaiden of art when it's so easy to get billing above the title:

Daniel Barenboim's *Tristan und Isolde*!

David Hockney's *Turandot*!

Peter Sellars' *Don Giovanni*!

Look, I'm not asking you to excuse the Sinopolis and Marins and delMonacos and Pountneys. But to try to see that it's **critics and audiences** that have given them their clout. Competition (again) for

a severely limited number of jobs has led these media darlings to put on their antiartistic dog-and-pony shows. Yes, Peter Sellars works that *Enfant Terrible* number to death, but he's neither the first nor the worst. The director and the conductor are bound by the same rule as the singer: In this world, persona counts for more than talent, or, ya gotta get a gimmick if you wanta get a hand. Don't tell me you haven't noticed how singers are marketed now: Jessye Norman as "The Goddess of Unyielding Good Taste." Dmitri Hvorostovsky as "That Slavic Sigh Guy." Cecilia Bartoli as "The Connie Francis of Opera." Freedom to Interpret, alas, doesn't sell tickets. Media-friendliness does.

At the risk of sounding like every other fag who's ever written about opera, I evoke Maria. How many in her audiences really knew what Callas was trying to do? How many of the public (let alone the critics) really appreciated her complex integration of musicality, voice, acting and star quality? And how many were there because she was Jackie's Husband's Girlfriend?

Stefano, the solution to the opera problem is complicated, maybe even impossible. But the beginning is to free opera from the shackles of "competition." First we cooperate. Then maybe we can make some art.

James Jorden

*Stefano has a lot of interesting stuff to say
and his zine is definitely worth reading.
I'm sure he'd love to hear from you.
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