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#20: post-gala depression

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NO COMMENT!

QUESTO/ QUELLO

by La Cieca



Random thoughts during the Levine Gala:

No one will dispute the fact that James Levine is a terrifically talented guy. He's hard-working, tireless, dedicated to the Metropolitan Opera to the point of not having a life. He is clearly one of the most powerful and influential figures in the world of music today. And he certainly deserves recognition for all these qualities.¹ But La Cieca can't help feeling that there's something distasteful about having the honoree coordinate, design and star in his own gala. Wouldn't it be more appropriate for Mr. L to sit back in a stage box and accept the kudos of his grateful colleagues instead of (as usual) insisting on being the *primo uomo assoluto*? Does the camera really have to cut back to Levine soulfully conducting every time the singer on stage took a two-bar rest? And has anyone else since Marlene Dietrich had the utter gall to take a solo curtain call in front of a specially-designed autographed drop curtain? Pride goeth before a fall, Mr. Levine.²

Oh, La Cieca will give the guy this: the Met orchestra is *eerie* in its perfection: they don't get tired, they don't make mistakes, they can play anything; their technique is so refined that they don't seem quite . . . human, do they? Yeah, that's it. This phenomenal orchestra's playing is clean but cold. Not a lot of soul. But we know that's not always true: remember how they sounded for Carlos Kleiber? So, do you think the problem could possibly be . . . well, you tell me.

Old people sing better than young people.

Why? Well, obviously time winnows out the mediocre—artists like Gwyneth Jones, Alfredo Kraus and Sherrill Milnes are the cream of a whole

¹ That is, in addition to the celebrity, the handsome salary and the enviable artistic freedom he already enjoys.

² One of La Cieca's witchier friends suggested that an even more appropriate way to honor the Maestro would be an impromptu private concert by the Boys Choir of Harlem. So maybe the gala wasn't such a bad idea after all.

generation. They always were and always will be more than pretty voices; their fierce intelligence and artistic curiosity (neither subject to the physical ravages of time) make their performances ever more interesting: they never stop learning. Look at **Deborah Voigt**— she'll be around for a while; her "Dich, teure Halle" is secure, warm, confident— even bold, when she took a **Rysanek** vacation on the top B. She looks happy and dignified, too, unlike many who followed her. Let's her her Kaiserin here soon, please!

Vladimir Chernov's Figaro is more Petrushka than Harlequin— touched with that oddly dangerous goofiness of the Russian circus. This music suits his voice rather better than the big Verdi parts the Met heaps on him; can anyone doubt that his role in *Falstaff* is really Ford? And few pieces can be less appropriate for a gala than the *Don Carlos* duet for Posa and Phillipe. No tune, nothing to show off the voice, and for sure no big finish. And then there's that barbarous translation— the Met must be the only place in the civilized world that still performs this masterpiece in so distorted a form. And this piece could be handpicked to highlight **Thomas Hampson's** current shortcomings: his tiny voice forces him to hector and manipulate. No way they could have heard him in the house, but I'm sure even the back row of Family Circle must feel the breeze from his flamboyant eyebrow-waving. **Roberto Scandiuizzi**, on the other hand, is a truly solid artist with an outstanding instrument. True, he is still a rather generalized interpreter; a great conductor-director team could help him achieve greatness. (Cute, too.)

Richard Leech sounds tired in the Cilea— or maybe the piece doesn't suit him. Since the voice at ff still works fine (and is quite thrilling), maybe it's time Rick went for broke: Manrico, Calaf, Des Grieux, Radames, Lohengrin.

Renée Fleming is a MESS, behaving (even worse, sounding) like a sloshed saloon singer. Yes, "Depuis le jour" is about remembering your first sexual encounter, but it shouldn't sound as if you still have a throatful of cum. This aria is not just a pretty tune: it's a formidable technical test of breath control and sustained soft singing, with difficult leaps that must be sung evenly and frequent soft attacks on high G. Listen to **Eleanor Steber's** flawless rendition on that VAI *Voice of Firestone* video: she makes her points without slurping and crooning and eye-rolling. Ms. Fleming had better realize it's time for her to stop coasting on her gorgeous timbre and start singing like a grownup and acting like a lady. Otherwise, I predict a major crisis within five years. (Angry letters may be sent to the usual address. . .)

³ Don't get me wrong: I LIKE Ms. Fleming. I just don't want her to be a victim of the inability of most audiences to see through surface beauty to discover the artistry (or lack of same) beneath. The problem is, the bloom will fade. How many of you remember the Met Centennial Gala of 1983, only 12 seasons ago? Two of the most glamorous voices of our generation were featured: **Leona Mitchell** and **Katia Ricciarelli**. Neither of these sopranos is 50 yet. And where are they?

Ridiculous Theater revive this ungrown...

he

What a contrast between flabby Miss Fleming and elegant **Gabriela Benackova**; even ignoring the fact that the Czech artist is a good 15 years older, you tell me who sounded better, fresher, more expressive— and without distorting the music. La Benackova complemented her heartfelt and limpid singing with immaculate grooming and a simple but chic gown: she's a true diva, as classy as her lookalike **Candice Bergen**.

Does anyone really want to hear that *Ghosts* quartet, with its advertising-jingle tune and lyrics? With as much reshuffling as went on on the day, why not cut the damn thing when **Teresa Stratas** cancelled? Some lovely singing from **Wendy White** suggests a Dorabella or a Donna Elvira is in order. Otherwise, call this one a pit stop.

Ghena Dimitrova brings dignity, style and a surprisingly responsive voice to the *Ballo* trio: why has she no public in New York? Strong support from **Juan Pons**; **Franco Farina** is obviously the next **Bruno Beccaria**. (Again, odd repertoire for a gala...)

The moment we all waited for (newlyweds **Roberto Alagna** and **Angela Gheorghiu**) turned out to be a washout: I was expecting her to throw the bouquet into the audience or for **Joe Volpe** to make a surprise appearance to croon "Sunrise, Sunset." The Singing Breeders let the vocally undemanding Cherry Duet fall apart due to (I guess) nerves. Now, Mrs. Alagana is almost unbelievably pretty, looking more like Violetta than anyone except **Anna Moffo**. He, on the other hand, really rubs me the wrong way with his "look at me, I'm an adorable little squirrel boy" routine. His (uneven) voice still shows promise; hers is, apparently, shot completely to hell. Prediction: **she's going to drag his career down with her.**

Now, here's my question: just how high is the gain on the microphone turned up when you can HEAR the soprano humming the tenor's pitch?

Nice to see **Ileana Cotrubas** back in the house, and nice to see her so happy, too. Vic says she looks and sounds like a voice teacher who has lots of cats. Doing her **Anne Baxter** take-no-prisoners thing is **Dolores Zajick** ("Doloick" as TV Guide calls her) Cool dress, cool attitude, dynamite voice. A pity she's not a mezzo (listen to the flip on those high Cb's!) A real star, though. Let's hope some crossover (e.g., Santuzza) is in her future. PS Have you ever noticed you never see her and **Carolyn James** at the same time? Coincidence?

Aren't you tired of looking at the side of **James Morris's** mouth?

Vic and I spend most of the intermission fighting over what toppings to order on the pizza, but we do notice how silly Mr. Levine looks straddling the chair. Sit like a normal person, please. Dynamite Debbie opens the second half with the *Ernani* trio— what sweep and grandeur! **Plácido Domingo** looks slim and rested; this music sits rather high for him at the moment, but he's still stylish. Scandiuizzi's very dashing. The whole piece is unified and "operatic" on a grand scale.

Scat at the Royal Opera Dame Kiri te Kanawa has new Times

Presenting the award for Best Documentary, **Meat Loaf** and **Dana Carvey**... uh, sorry, I glazed over there for a minute. The very versatile **Bryn Terfel** (who is anything but a high French baritone) acquits himself very well in the *Pearl Fishers* duet: please note that he sings piano with full support, never crooning: not easy, but definitely worth the effort. And **Alagna** sounds absolutely at home in this music, lacking only a touch of rubato. Forget **Don Carlos**: this is his real repertoire.

Ruth Ann Swenson's vulgar appearance contrasts oddly with her too-too genteel singing of *Juliette's Waltz*. Her anemic phrasing lacks proper support, the middle voice turning wispy under pressure. This somnambulistic approach results in no climax at all: a lackluster cadenza sets up a high note that, for a moment at least, refuses to speak. Advice to a soprano headed for trouble:

Get it out of the fake place, honey.

Alfredo (Mr. Smoothie) **Kraus** illustrates what I mean: he has resolutely avoided forcing his slender lyric tenor throughout his career, but did you ever have trouble hearing him? It is true at this point the voice is not exactly fresh (my guess is that it sounds warmer in the house); but how free and energized is his tone, even after all these years! Even more impressive than the *Werther* is his contribution to that spurious *Hoffman* "septet": **Kraus KILLS** in that high tessitura, feeding dust to his disgracefully dowdy colleagues (and none duller than *Duchess of Downbeat* **Florence Quivar**.)

I want to be charitable and hope that **Jessye Norman** is just having an off-night, but the fact is, she hasn't had an on-night in years. So sad, because her body overhaul (she has surely lost over 100 pounds) has transformed her into a rapturously beautiful woman. Tonight, she is gowned exquisitely in crepe and silk without a speck of jewelry: she moves with the confident grandeur of a **Martha Graham**. But her brutally off-pitch singing in so unchallenging a piece as "D'amour l'ardente flamme" leaves no doubt: the voice is gone; she is coasting on star-power. It was a pleasure to turn to the perfectly-tuned **Susanna of Dawn Upshaw**. No wonder she's controversial:

she's so damn smart! Yes, **La Cieca** does indeed prefer more legato in her Mozart than **Ms. Upshaw** is willing (or able?) to provide. But how mean she feels to carp at an artist so alive, so fresh, so responsive to music and text! She has her own way: like it or not, we must respect it. Bad night for the American boys: **Jerry Hadley's** "Dein ist mein ganzes Herz" finds him in choppy voice. Tenor **Vic** points out that this is a much harder piece than it sounds, sustained in an awkward part of the voice, so let's give **Mr. Hadley** the benefit of the doubt. He's a fine and valuable artist, deserving of our patience while he works out his current problems: may he return to form soon!

Who knew **Karita Mattila** was so funny? Anyone who can hold her own with teddybear **Haken Hagegard** is indeed nobody's fool. Their *Fledermaus* duet

is bubbly fun with an undercurrent of sex that is positively delicious. **Ms. Mattila's** cleanly-defined staccati (so hard to sing in tune) set up a cool bit of business when the watchfob emerges from her cleavage without a single snag.

Not to put down **Juan Pons**, but **Sherrill Milnes'** rendition of "Nemico della patria" bumps the Spanish baritone into a distant second place. **Milnes** is a frequent target of criticism for off-pitch singing, but anyone with an ear and a conscience will have to place his intonation well above average among this gala's artists. And, even with a worn voice, **Milnes** finds a sustained power and an almost frightening intensity in this warhorse that eludes many younger artists.

Waltraud Meier is channeling Joan Crawford.

No, that's not a good thing: imagine five hours of such *schreierei!* (Note, for example that the climactic high A and Ab are both the same pitch: Bb.) **Ms. Meier** is obviously an intelligent and musical artist and a magnetic actress. Let's hope she returns to her proper *fach* soon, before it's too late.⁴

A trip to the microwave to reheat pizza means I miss most of the *Pasquale*; **Mark Oswald** and **Paul Plishka** seem to be having a grand old time, though. Let's hope **Mr. Oswald** gets his deposit back on that faulty tux.

There's only one honest way to steal a show: simply to perform better than anyone else on stage. And that's just what **Carlo Bergonzi** does. **Vic** and I are literally on our feet shouting "bravo" at the end of his (untransposed!) "Quando le sere al placido." What immense integrity and dedication! What sensitive and poetic style! What truly formidable and indestructible technique! And, of course, what a truly magnificent instrument—unforced, sweet and still perfectly placed after almost half a century. **Bergonzi** is the gold standard—few singers will ever achieve his level of artistry, but they should all try. Add courage to the list of the tenor's virtues: he takes on the *Lombardi* trio on very short notice, a good deed that could very well have boomeranged had he committed even the tiniest error. But **Bergonzi** is, if anything, even solidier in this piece than in the earlier aria (the nerves had settled a bit, perhaps?); there is real grandeur and generosity in this singing, and that vital quality **Caruso** called "something in the heart."

⁴ Yes, I understand that the repertoire of a German mezzo is pretty circumscribed: the **Wagner** and **Strauss** bitches and not much else. Even a **Weltstar** like **Christa Ludwig** never had international success with such meat-and-potatoes roles as *Carmen* or *Amneris* or *Eboli*. She took a gamble and turned dramatic soprano with great success for a decade or so; I have no doubt she is **Ms. Meier's** role model. But even **Ludwig** drew the line at *Isolde* (famously leaving **Herbert von Karajan** out on a limb at Salzburg in 1972!)—and let's not forget that she sang only limited numbers of opera performances in alternation with recitals and concerts. **Ms. Meier**, in contrast, has a heavy schedule of *Isolde's* and *Sieglinde's* (and *Carmen's*!), no doubt booked five years into the future.

A pity the Maestro can't take a break from hugging the merely competent **Raymond Gniwek** to congratulate the true star of the evening. But that oversight pales into insignificance next to the defensiveness of Mr. Volpe as revealed in his intermission interview—jeez, you'd think this was *60 Minutes*! And can you think of a better way to put a pall on a gala evening than to whine on nationwide TV about the cancellation of ailing **Luciano Pavarotti**?

Hey, Joe! Don't be an asshole ALL your life!

To return to loftier topics: the great **Bergonzi** is partnered by the underappreciated **Ferruccio Furlanetto** and the, well, let's just say **OVERappreciated June Anderson**. The soprano seems to be spiraling into a vocal nosedive: her unsupported tone has turned wiry and unsteady in pitch. Her complete lack of feeling for **Verdi** style goes without saying.

Who ever said *Yevgeny Onegin* was dull? Not when you've got firecrackers like **Catherine Malfitano** and **Dwayne Croft** to sing it, it's not! The soprano is at the zenith of her career—the voice is solid and strong, the musicianship fiercely intelligent, the acting bold, imaginative and "starry" in the very best sense of the word. And (not so minor a consideration!) she looks the best she has in a decade: slim, lithe, intensely feminine. She and her demon are working in tandem now: don't get in her way. And Mr. Croft is hardly left in the dust—the voice is simply luscious, the style impressive in one so (relatively) young, and he gains in presence with his every appearance on stage: who would believe he was singing **Fiorello** only five seasons ago?

CAROL: Well, Suzanne, tonight we're here to present the Oscar for Best Special Effects...

SUZANNE: Then you should win, Carol, because your singing in *Così* this year was both special and very effect-ive. [applause] Wasn't she great?

CAROL: Thanks, Suzanne, but what I really liked about that production was getting the chance to sing with you!

SUZANNE: Thank you, Carol. But we have an award to present. The nominees. . .

⁵ Two weeks later: Anderson's singing at the gala sounds like golden-age stuff compared to her disastrous *Giovanna d'Arco* for Opera Orchestra of New York. A full post-mortem of that debacle is coming from our Mr. Fishbone. Alas, Ms. Anderson returns to Carnegie Hall next season in [are you ready for this?] *Ernani*!

Oops. Sorry. Dozed off there for a minute. Anyway, finally it occurs to the dimwitted Cieca why **Carol Vaness** and **Suzanne Mentzer** sound so yummy together: they have the same voice! But's that's all to the good: both Mozartean ladies are in tiptop form tonight, sounding fresh, lively and full of charm. I think they'd be fun in *Rosencavalier*. But I'll pass on the *Norma*.

Class act **Grace Bumbry** looks and sounds the way we all want to look and sound at 60: she is in MINT condition. I will be perfectly frank here: I really thought this segment would be the camp highlight of the gala. Notso: such regal presence and majestic vocalism belong on this stage more often than just gala nights. Principessa di Bouillon, anyone?

Aprile Millo confirms the impression she made in *Andrea Chenier*: she seems to have turned the corner on her vocal problems. The tone is steadier, more even, and (grazie dio!) bang on pitch all the way up to high B. Thus we can once more observe clearly her many sterling qualities: the lush, warm timbre, the aristocratic phrasing, and the depth of feeling that her fans have admired for years. Once she is secure in her new technique, Ms. Millo might be well advised to change her *fach* to "crazy ladies." We've been waiting for the next great **Tosca**, **Santuzza**, **Adriana**, **Minnie**. Millo may well be ready to step into those (platform) shoes.

My voice gone now/Ain't no use a-listenin'/ To a washed-up mezzo/Screw in' up the scales

...note to **Maria Ewing**: just because **Michael Jackson** is one of his clients doesn't mean he's a good dermatologist . . .

In response to overwhelming public demand (and, perhaps, a fat check from Sony), the MET offers **Jane Eaglen** in the longest goddamned Immolation Scene I've ever heard.⁶ Maybe Mr. Levine remembered the old rule about 20 minutes per pound? My impression, formed entirely from what I saw on the tube, you understand, was that the British soprano is, well, not bad. But underwhelming. She seems to show an alert feeling for the words, but the voice sounds shallow, with a hint of the beginning of a register break in the lower-middle area. (My impression was confirmed by a couple of informants in the audience that night: it looks as if the voice is "directional," like, say, **Rita Hunter**'s: when she turns her head the sound goes away.) Still, she's very young; she may well develop into the "Brunnhilde 2000" we've all been waiting for—though her punishing schedule for the next five years hardly allows her time to sleep, let alone continue serious work on her technique.

⁶ Those in the know report **Hildegard Behrens** was furious the Met invited Ms. Eaglen to usurp "her" repertoire. The veteran soprano angrily cancelled her appearance at the gala, and (so they say) her *Ring* appearances next season as well!

I'm in the minority, I know, but I *liked* the Drunk Song. There's something liberating about great ladies like **Frederica von Stade** acting like a doofus. Especially when she can balance that off with a peachy "Voi che sapete" earlier in the evening. This lesson was not wasted on **Kiri te Kanawa**, who wailed out a damn fine "Mi tradi" before going gonzo for the *Don G* sextet, up to and including feeling up Bryn Terfel. You're going to be talking about that scene 25 years from now—and what do you bet those young fags won't believe you until you show them the tape! And before we move on, a word of praise for Dame Kiri's gorgeous gams! Who knew?

Is that really **Sam Ramey**, or is it a new **Lily Tomlin** character? Let La Cieca be the first to praise the basso on his continued magnificent vocal estate. Surely no one since **Pinza** or **Siepi** has lavished so much luxurious velvety tone on the role of Mephisto. And yet, for me Ramey (as always) lacks that sense of identification, of total immersion in the music, that separates superb craftsmen from great artists. He just doesn't *send* me. (While I'm dodging thrown objects, I might as well say Ramey leaves me cold in the *Nabucco*, too. His voice is many wonderful things, but Rolling Thunder? No.)

And who ever would believe that the Trio from *Rosenkavalier* could land on the stage with a thud like a ton of congealed molasses? Even **Joanna Lumley** lookalike **Anne Sofie von Otter**'s solidly professional and frequently poetic Oktavian can not repair the damage done by Renee Fleming's meowing and **Heidi Grant Murphy**'s undersinging (if indeed she was singing at all—I sure as hell couldn't hear her!) Ms. Fleming provides a few moments of unintentional melodrama with her desperate pleading glances at the Maestro ("Please, just a little faster! I'm *dying* up here!") Eventually (about three hours into this number) La Cieca dozes off, she even dreams a little, but when she wakes up the confounded thing is still plodding on and nothing has changed: one exquisitely manicured chord follows another (at an infinite distance):

beautiful but dead-- a musical waxworks.

Out tick-tick-ticks the Legend on her little spike heels. A little reminiscence, a laff or 2 (the Saga of the Purloined Towel was a perfect Diva Anecdote!) Then, **FING!** she blows the fucking house down with just a few supernaturally well-preserved notes. Cynical **Everett Zimmerlein** rings up: "Birgit Nilsson's beginning to show her age. That 'Hojotoho' was down a half-step." No matter. The Lady from Sweden has just reaffirmed her title as World's Most Beloved Retired Diva. (Sorry, **Sylvia Bills**!)

Even if she objects to flying in the great **James King** to sing two lines of recitative (conspicuous consumption at its worst); even if she finds the Maestro's agenda in programming the *Meistersinger* transparently obvious ("Let us all praise the great man who has dedicated his life to his art!"), La Cieca is bowled over by the opulence of the finale: the Met orchestra and chorus truly are the best money can buy.

And so to bed... but, wait a minute. Waiting for La Cieca when she arrives home is a fax from style maven **Signor Pozzonero**. He has a few words to say about the . . .

WORST-Dressed Singers at the Levine Gala

- 10 Jane Eaglen: "She looks like a shut-in."
- 9 Sam Ramey: "Abraham Lincoln used to dress like that. Remember what happened to him?"
- 8 June Anderson: "If only a butterfly could emerge from that cocoon!"
- 7 The Ladies of the Met Chorus: "Give those \$87.50 beaded tops back to the Sweet Adelines where they came from."
- 6 Gwyneth Jones: "That dress was tacky even when it fit. Say, 20 years ago?"
- 5 Maria Ewing: "Direct from her record-breaking run at Rainbow and Stars in *It's Delightful, It's Delicious, It's De-Gershwin...*"
- 4 The Alagnas: "This ain't the prom. Grow up. And tell Junior to shave his peachfuzz."
- 3 Waltraud Meier: "A pink flowered bouffant with a box-pleated contrast peplum? What is this, *Female on the Beach*?"
- 2 Ruth Ann Swenson: "Careful with those things, honey. You'll put someone's eyes out."
- 1 Renee Fleming: "Jessica Rabbit does *Vanessa*. And did you check out that model of the Sydney Opera House on her left shoulder?"

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A Gran Night for Sinking

La Gran Scena Opera Co. di New York delved into the vaults for their "Greatest Hits" evening (heard May 11); like all the best humor, these hysterical scenes only gain in the retelling. Count it as a bonus that the night I saw them, all the divas were all in simply divine voice-- not a clinker among them.

I admire so much this company's multilayered approach to camp: No one else but the Ridiculous Theater has ever clashed high and pop culture so resoundingly. Not only is Santuzza quite massively pregnant, but she's sporting a genuine Lucy Ricardo maternity top-- that unfortunately matches the tablecloth! And Mamma Lucia's boasts an electric candle stuck on top of a chianti bottle-- an hilariously heartbreaking evocation of every bankrupt opera workshop you ever saw.

New to me was the company's tabloid *Cav*, which confirmed a theory suggested by some of their other early work (e.g., *Traviata*, *Fanciulla del West*): the comedy in these ur-Gran Scenas is decidedly more queer in concept and execution than their later more mainstream efforts. Take, for example, Lola's entrance down the center aisle, cruising the men in the audience. One expected her to sit on a lap or two, certainly-- but when she tore open that gentleman's shirt and diddled his nipples, well! The gag shows up again later: Santuzza reminds Turridu of happier times-gone-by with more titplay.

The raunch didn't stop there. You can leave it to Gran Scena to milk every last drop out of a Dick Johnson joke: "Mr. Focaccia's Dick is well known to operagoers the world over" was one of their *tamer* efforts. The lustful/terrified look in Minnie's eyes when she mutters the simple line, "Buona notte... *Dick!*" is funny, sure, but terrifically honest as well. Of course the virginal Minnie is curious. She wants it so bad, in fact, she can practically taste it. But she's afraid at the same time. Everyone's first sexual experience is like that, but of all the productions of *Fancuilla*, which has ever been so honest as this one?

So, let's talk divas. The voice of the truly *ageless* Vera Galupe-Borszkh (as portayed by the ever-boyish Ira Siff) was in fine, fresh fettle, granting her the interpretive freedom to plumb the heights and soar to the depths of her chosen repertoire. Her lengthy career on the stage (some

authorities say nearly half a century, but the diva looks no more than sixtyish at most), means La Dementia doesn't miss a trick. She knows there are only two **really** effective moments in that *bitch* of an aria "Pace, pace," so she prunes her performance to just the first and last notes (both impressive!) She has the wit to parody Puccini's monumentally ungrateful vocal writing in the *Fanciulla* scene: the register changes between her shrill top and her guttural chest voice are as bracing as a plunge from a broiling sauna into a frozen river. And even when she goes left and her coiffure goes right, she has the smarts to play it: Minnie declares a truce in her struggle with Jack Rance long enough to repair her toilette, just the way Tebaldi would do it.

Mme. Galupe-Borszkh's Santuzza was just magical. Like so many, uh, veteran divas, she has reinvented herself into a "traumatic soprano;" her myriad flaws just give the music more character. Her glottal attack is exemplary, and she is mistress of the Soprano Scoop, a dying art among today's too-tasteful performers. What better way to depict the Sicilian girl's anguish than with noises that sound scraped from the throat with a trowel? But that is not to say it's all screaming: her "No, Turridu" was a lesson in sustained rubato vocalism. The scene for a moment recalls that wonderful sensation that **used** to happen during a great performance of, say, "Vissi d'arte," when it seemed nothing in the universe existed but you and the diva and the music, suspended in time and space in a kind of artistic ecstasy. The last time I saw it in a "real" opera was when Rysanek sang the Gréty aria in the Met's *Queen of Spades*; that same kind of quasi-religious hush came over the audience at the Kaye Playhouse: no one breathed, no one moved, and (here's my point) no one laughed.

The same kind of respectfully delighted silence greeted a "new" company member, the retired African-American diva Miss Helen Back. The only real "comedy" in her segment was a great typhoon of a snatched breath after a very long phrase. Otherwise her medley of "Home Sweet Home" and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" was simply deeply-felt and technically accomplished bel canto. Johnny Maldonado (who portrays Miss Back) boasts a warm, rich and sizeable instrument and has the musical sensitivity and taste to exploit his wonderful gift. At one point, Miss Back snipes, "We had real contraltos then;" Mr. Maldonado suggests that the species is by no means extinct. This versatile artist also appears as the spitfire *falcon* Carmelita Della Vaca-Browne, who proves once and for all that there are no small roles for large artists. Whether as a Suzuki impatient with Cio-Cio-San's vaporings or a Tisbe determined to upstage Cenerentola (and succeeding!), she KILLS with the subtlest comic

touches: just the lift of one eyebrow when she removes the lens cap from the none-too-bright Butterfly's telescope speaks volumes about the hidden life of the *comprimaria*. If I ever wondered why Jessye Norman doesn't play maids, now I know.

Doing her best to hold her own opposite Mme. Vaca-Browne was the debutante Kavatina Turner (Kyle Church Cheseborough): imagine Harolyn Blackwell's voice with Angela Bassett's attitude. Her take on Butterfly was a diva so caught up in the drama she can't handle props-- I loved her look of annoyance when her tiny chrysanthemum disappeared into a huge vase. La Turner's voice is not what you'd call *warm*, you understand, but it does go up and up and up-- perhaps La Gran Scena should offer her Olympia or Adele? Vocally she was more at ease in the Rossini, poaching Philene Wannelle's chain of turns to some very pingy high B's.

Though I'm sure La Wannelle could have pinged those B's herself very nicely, thank you. Philip Koch's voice just gets bigger and bigger: the sustained top notes in the "Nacqui all'affano" were MASSIVE. In addition to her virtuoso coloratura technique, Miss Wannelle unveiled her charmingly provincial Italian diction ("corray"); she is an American to her fingertips. Jay Rogers has really made Sylvia Bills his own: such a good-natured sort of broad, forever startled that the audience finds her plot synopses so hilarious. Charles Walker made a welcome return to the company as the superannuated tenor Alfredo Sorta-Pudgi-- seeing him only days after Carlo Bergonzi's appearance at the Levine Gala just proves how accurate are Mr. Walker's powers of observation. He faced real competition from Bruno Focaccia (Emmanuel di Villarosa); the "Italian-born and Italian-bread" tenor is a hot little guy with a hot little attitude. The voice ain't bad, either. Company regular Keith Jurosko is reportedly taking a sabbatical from a very busy performance schedule. His "Fodor Szadan" was missed by all: David Orcutt's Jack Rance was energetic but unobtrusive.

As the kind of golden-age performer this troupe parodies recedes ever farther into the past, the comedy grows more bittersweet: you can't help remembering how it used to be. Ira Siff said in an interview in *Opera News* a few years ago that he couldn't imagine sending up singers like te Kanawa or Battle. So how must he feel about the current crop of Gheorghius and Swensons and Flemings? You just can't kid singers who are *smaller* than life.



aren't they just . . .
adorable!

Those HOT young(ish) singers are back, and they're more *adorable* than ever! You'll swear you're drinking maple syrup right out of the bottle as you hear opera's favorite breeders fake their way through such love duets as: *Tu! Tu! Amore, tu? O nuit d'amour*, and *O sink hernieder Nacht der Liebe!* PLUS the world's most lovely love songs: *You are Love, If I Loved You, Love is a Many-Splendored Thing, Baby Love, Stop in the Name of Love, You Can't Hurry Love, Where Did Our Love Go, Love to Love You Baby* and *D-I-V-O-R-C-E*. Available at TOWER Records, J&R Music World, and at a bus shelter near you.

Angela GHAGHIU
Roberto LASAGNA!

Il trionfo di Westchester

There are basically two ways a small and recently established opera company can make a name for itself and attract attention: one is specializing in unusual repertoire, offering modern exhumation of long-forgotten works or alternative versions of popular masterpieces, which will catalyze the attention of the specialized press and opera globetrotters. The second way is to present evergreen favorites with a cast of renowned artists. In a few words, none but the local opera buffs will go if you stage *La Bohème* with unknown singers, whereas you can put your name on the map if you cast it with singers who are on the Met roster. The Westchester Hudson Opera Company seems to have chosen this second path. In its first season of activity, it has already staged two productions (*Tosca* and *Il Trovatore*) with international names such as Evstatieva, Weidinger and Schemtschuk.

Il Trovatore (April 4) was a production which would have not been out of place in some of the biggest opera companies throughout the world, especially if one considers that it is one of the most difficult operas to cast in the entire repertoire. As a matter of fact, the cast was in many ways remarkable. Christine Weidinger does not have a traditionally beautiful or Italianate voice; however, her technique is solid and her range noteworthy. She is an extremely committed and exciting soprano, and her performance as Leonora was both stirring and gripping. Carlo Guelfi brought a dark, sturdy, sensual baritone quality to the role of Conte di Luna. He is one of the very best baritones to emerge in recent years and we have no doubt he will be the leading Verdi baritone in the near future. His acting skills are not so refined as his vocal qualities, but when overwhelmed by such a cascade of sound one is more than willing to overlook a certain stage stiffness. Ljudmila Schemtschuk was a compelling Azucena, convincing both dramatically and vocally, although showing some signs of vocal strain, especially in the extreme upper range. Richard Di Rienzi has tackled Manrico too soon in his career. His voice has a pleasant and captivatingly opulent middle range, but becomes dangerously thin and strained at the top. Although he doesn't appear to be more than a full lyric, he seems to favor dramatic roles like Pollione or Manrico to which he cannot do full justice. And one wishes he would stop trying to imitate Corelli.

Charles Rosecrans' passionate and intense conducting was nearly ideal for the vehement and fervent nature of Verdi's masterpiece. The chorus, on the contrary, left much to be desired. The production, imported from the New Orleans Opera, although evidently realized on a tight budget, suited this opera like a glove, simplicity being after all a virtue in a story like *Il trovatore's*, a primitive tale of passion and revenge.

-- Nick Fishbone

San Francisco used to be the big try-out town for singers who wanted to test the shallow currents of a role before diving into the murky turbulence of New York City. Now, Houston seems to have usurped that honor. Lately, Houston has seen Bartoli's first U.S. Cenerentola, Jonathan Miller's misguided updating of *Rosenkavalier* to 1911, and Robert Wilson's *4 Saints in 3 Acts*. Rumor is Catherine Malfitano will try her Lady Macbeth here in about 2 years. Peter Hunter and Richard Breath went to Houston for Carol Vaness's first Norma. It was not a failure; it was not a success . .

it just sort of . . . was.

Why is it that a perfectly fine, respected Mozartean would decide she needs to assume Maria Callas's repertory? First we had *Tosca*; then we got Anna Bolena; now we have Norma. It doesn't make sense.

The performance was heavily cut, and the singers did not mesh. Vaness thought she was in a Mozart opera. Michael Sylvester shouted as if he were singing Turiddu. Carlo Colombara decided it was a Verdi night. To judge by the jaunty tempi, Roberto Abbado must have concluded he was conducting an Offenbach operetta. Only Suzanne Mentzer realized they were doing Bellini, and she stole the show, as she had done in a similar pairing with Vaness in *Anna Bolena* in San Francisco.

The team of Muni and Conklin came up with their typical darkened set littered with broken statuary. As with a 1992 "Trovatore" they also inflicted upon Houston, characters were not allowed to exit. They had to hang around and silently interact during preludes and postludes. Worst victim of this policy was poor Adalgisa, who did not get to run away with the children after her second duet with Norma, but had to stay onstage as a mute character for the rest of the opera, offering herself up for sacrificial execution and then falling asleep. (She had also appeared as a mute character during the entire "Casta diva" and its abbreviated cabaletta.) Other stage action was equally absurd. Instead of hitting the gong to signal the uprising against the Romans, Norma grabbed Adalgisa's hands and looked heavenward.

The heavy cutting of repeats was the major flaw of the performance, originally billed as 3 hours and 15 minutes. It came in under 3 hours. Only the "Mira o Norma" cabaletta retained both verses, with an attempt at

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Scandal at the Court of King Lear
Dame Kiri te Kaniwa

original ornamentation, and this was the only number of the performance that aroused the audience to a minor frenzy. In stark contrast, some big numbers were greeted with a cold, stony silence, not the best of moods for a bel canto opera. Most people wanted Italian hothouse; we got meatlocker.

You could have made ice-cubes in the air around this Norma. No wonder Pollione dumped her for someone with secure high notes. Vaness has no business singing this role. She looked slim, trim and gorgeous in a red wig and black gown (just like an old Callas *Medea* LP cover Richard has cherished for years). But the voice has a flutter, which sounds perfect in Mozart but not in Bellini. The loud high notes were from a different, scary voice. They didn't meld with Mentzer's. Neither does Vaness have the temperament. In the big rage scenes against Pollione, she sometimes remembered to shake a fist. And during the cello prelude to Act 2, there was no way to know what (if anything) she was thinking. She could just as well have been debating which restaurant to go to after the performance for mesquite barbecue plate and margaritas. The finale sounded eerily like Te Kanawa singing the end of *Traviata*, and one left the theater wanting cold booze and warm eardrums.

One would hope that Vaness has some kind of career guidance counselor who can convince her that she needs to stick to her Mozart fack, and not become this year's Poster Child for Vaulting Ambition.

While Peter believes in N.A.T. (Nothing After "Turandot"), Richard Breath has been known to appreciate the occasional opera written after World War II. It was, therefore, a struggle of wills as to whether they would go to Houston for Carlyle Floyd's *Susannah*, and whether--once there--they would enjoy themselves. It promised much. After all, Samuel Ramey could have been over in Europe earning Big Bucks singing Verdi, Boito, or Gounod; instead, he was in Houston as the Rev. Orin Blitch, seducing Nancy Gustafson as *Susannah*. A good time was had by all, except the ignorant morons who booed the conductor, Richard Bado, at the final curtain.

Chicago did this opera with Fleming and Ramey two years ago, so it's not a totally unknown quantity, but it is risky to do it in certain parts of the U.S. Cornpone crackers do not necessarily want to see themselves up there onstage with people in overalls shouting in Southern Gothic accents, but *Susannah* deserves more viewings than she gets. New York no doubt considers itself too sophisticated for the harmless lyricism. And San Francisco queens would just as well forget their own hillbilly roots, so apparently it's only the hypocritical heartland that can put this opera on. But since the hypocrisy of the heartland is the opera's main subject, this truly complicates the issue.

Had Ramey not been starring, the audience would not have been there. It's hard to imagine any other bass in the world who could pull this role off. Things get ultra-juicy in Act Two with the sermon, the seduction, and the confession. The audience could not have been more pleased, although several of the surtitle captions had been removed because of audience snickering at the wrong moments.

Gusafson had her problems. In the quiet, lyrical moments, she was exquisite, but when the orchestral surges washed up, she got drowned out, which the blamed on the conductor. Mark Baker as Sam proved to have a loud, powerful tenor, and one hopes he has a good career ahead of him. The final curtain calls had the audience in raptures of cheering, until the conductor tried to bow, but luckily the composer himself came out for the final bow, and the booing turned to cheers. How often does one get to cheer a living composer for an opera that Samuel Ramey has just starred in? Think about it. We do live in plush times.

Peter and Richard (who imagine themselves as looking like Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt but actually look more like Howard Stern and Tim Conway) jetted from Texas to glittering Gotham for a circle jerk of 5 operas at Miss NYCO and her wicked stepsister--Miss Met. Their quest was

the hunt for red-hot diva!

After 5 operas, they realized why they hate Lincoln Center and prefer getting their opera in San Francisco, Santa Fe. Houston, Los Angeles, and other saner points West of the Mississippi River.

- Has anyone else ever noticed how the Met is now a creepy mausoleum cesspool with poisonous cobwebs hanging from the rotten ceiling? But then what else could you expect from a company whose next season's repertory boasts TWO operas by Giordano but nothing by Richard Strauss?
- And why is the Met now filled with tourists who converse nonstop during the performances in German, French, and Spanish, as their flashbulbs pop excitedly?
- And why do the audiences at NYCO loudly converse nonstop during the performances (in English) while the people seated on the end seats of each aisle in the balcony kick the metal rings that loudly clang against railing poles?

- And why do standees in both houses spend the opening minutes of the first acts stampeding forward to seize empty seats only to complain resentfully that the seats aren't any good and they should try to move forward before intermission?

The first opera on the agenda was the new *Forza del Destino* at the Met, a dreadful production. Too many of the sets were shallow, suggesting only 15 feet of space, as if designed for a smaller house. Debbie Voigt has shed a few pounds, but she still looks like Miss Piggy on Prozac. She tried for some glorious sounds and excited some portions of the Family Circle, but one doubts that Leontyne, Eileen, or Zinka ever RAN offstage as much as Debbie does, erasing the illusion of grandeur. Sergei Larin sounds loud and might be the Met's next Ermanno Mauro. Vladimir Chernov waved his arms around like a scarecrow in a storm, detracting from attempts to sound Warrenesque.

The next opera was *Salome* in such a vulgar sleazefest that the production team should have their heads chopped off and served up on sequined salvers. Was Malfitano to be the Red Hot Diva? Not really. She camped and lurched around like Holly Woodlawn in a Warhol amateur night. She was often drowned out by Runnicles' climax frenzies. And what has happened to Bernd Weikl? Is he channeling Cornell MacNeil's bark and bluster? The set was a raked Expressionistic nightmare, and the performance was equally slanted and Absurdist.

The next opera was *Attila* at NYCO, which was such a camp treat that it deserves to be presented every season. Is Audrey Stottler a Red Hot Diva? Not really. She's big, but she sounded more like Ulrica than Odabella. She and the Attila did manage to sing both verses of their caballetti with ornaments, but the baritone and the tenor (the latter looking all of 17 years old) didn't even try. Peter and Richard saw Ramey and Guleghina do the same roles in Houston last year, so it was hard to think favorably of this cast.

The next opera was *Rosenkavaklier* at NYCO in a ludicrous "concept" updating to pre-World War I. which Richard and Peter had previously seen in Houston. It didn't work then; it doesn't work now. The updating gains nothing but loses much. There were no Divas anywhere in sight at this performance.

The final opera was a grand old-fashioned hawg-wallow: the first performance of the new *Andrea Chenier* at grossly inflated prices. The big questions were "Will Pavarotti really appear?" and "Will he be able to hit the high notes?" He was so cautious, being Pavarotti instead of Pavarotti-as-Chenier, that he might as well have been telephoning it in from the beach. He ran out of breath during phrases. The high notes were there, although pinched and uncomfortable. Still, he survived, so it turned out to be a triumph of sorts. Why do people adore Aprile Millo? She is bland, boring, and weak: Diva-Lite. Only a tiny handful in the Family Circle booed the production team for its very cheap-looking sets.

Tourists in NY cannot live on opera alone, so Richard and Peter went on their Diva Safari into the wilderness south of 49th Street. First they saw Uta Hagen in *Mrs. Klein*, an emotional tornado with more tears than a Tammy Faye retrospective. This was quasi-Diva but serious to the extreme. Then they tried Julie Andrews in *Victor/Victoria*, a Diva Fest only for people who don't know what a Diva is. She is too careful, too safe and sedate now. It was all so safe for the blue-rinse matinee crowd in from Jersey.

The boys thought they had found their Red Hot Diva in Zoe Caldwell, but that wasn't Maria Callas giving that *Master Class*, it was Terrence McNally in drag. Peter knows John Ardoin, and Peter was predisposed to tell everyone that Maria Callas was not a sharp-tongued, vicious, snippy, petty little limelight queen. Still, Zoe is FABulous and deserved her huge operatic ovations.

The Red Hot Diva momentarily surfaced in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, as Nathan Lane got more audience response out of an arched eyebrow that certain sopranos get out of entire performances. La Lane can fling more Diva attitude to the back row of the balcony than Voigt, Millo, and Malfitano put together.

Of course, the epitome of Total Theatre, where music and image merge feverishly, remains the Gaiety, where naked Prettyboys dance to the ultimate Red Hot Diva Music of Madonna, Cher, and Sade. The Met should try this approach for any kind of honesty, giving the audience not what it wants, but what it needs. Peter and Richard saw more theatricality in 90 minutes inside the Gaiety than they saw in 16 hours at Lincoln Center.

-- Peter Hunter and Richard Breath

Richard Breath wants to know:

Did Maria Callas really say, "Joan Sutherland was the best Clotilde I ever worked with?"

When is a major US opera company going to mount a full-scale production of Messiaen's *St. François d'Assise*?

As companion piece to the "Ezio Pinza drinking fountain", why doesn't the Met unveil the "Renata Scotto Urinal" on the Family Circle level?

If Pinkerton's only point of contact with Cio-Cio-San is through Sharpless, how come Pinkerton knows about the kid but Sharpless doesn't?

Why does the Met perform *Meistersinger* and *Parsifal* absolutely uncut, meanwhile chopping the hell out of *Traviata* and *Rigoletto*?

Why didn't Plácido Domingo ever get around to *La Juive*? Or *Guglielmo Ratcliff*? (The pirate recording of the 1963 Rome performance reveals that this Mascagni opera has some stunning tenor solos.)

Was Mario del Monaco really buried in his *Otello* costume? And the makeup?

When Dmitri Hvorostovsky sings in the revival of *Barbiere di Siviglia* in SF this October, will he perform the dreadful staging devised by John Copley (emptying a chamber pot and sliding down a fireman's pole during "Largo al factotum") or does he have enough superstar clout to just stand there and sing?

Why doesn't someone revive *La Gioconda* for Galina Gorchakova?

Can it really be true that Diana Ross will star in a remake of *Diva*? Instead of rehashing this old "Jessye Norman" role, why doesn't Ms. Ross go for a more appropriate vehicle, like, say, *The Kathleen Battle Story*?

If Chris Merritt can sing Lohengrin in San Francisco, can Gregory Kunde's Tannhauser in Chicago be far behind? Or Dawn Upshaw's Turandot in Omaha?

What language, if any, was Maria Ewing "singing" in at the Levine Gayla? And do you suppose Eva Marton and Kathy Battle were sitting home alone watching it all on TV?

And didn't Carol Vaness notice when that bird got caught in her hair?

Operetta isn't such an easy thing to watch. I live in dread of Gilbert and Sullivan, for example. It's just so goddamned jolly. Everyone having such a clean rollicking family-value-enhancing time of it all. Fat lady jokes. Labored puns. Sissy acts. And that human personification of the sound of nails on the blackboard the G&S character tenor: if you've ever sat through the seventh encore of a bad amateur "Never mind the why or wherefore" (is there any other kind?) you know what I'm talking about. It's like some hellish combination of public access television and karaoke, only you can't change the channel or leave the bar. The Viennese variety is if anything worse because you have to watch big stars like June Andersen and Kiri te Kanawa getting goosed along with the chorus girls (what makes everyone go anal all of a sudden as soon as they hear a polka?) And the comic (even if he, God willing, doesn't sing) is usually enough to make a hyena weep.

L'homme à la pomme

So, you see, I'm not an operetta fan. That's why I was so pleasantly surprised at *La Belle Hélène* as performed by L'Opéra Français de New York (April 24): Yves Abel's troupe served up a pleasant evening of good clean dirty fun, neatly sung and (mostly) stylishly presented. M. Abel himself deserves first billing, for he can make cheap music sound potent indeed. He whipped the big waltz-tune finale to Act Two into a true *bonne-bouche*-- rich, frothy, and, no doubt, very fattening. I can think of no higher compliment than to note that I never noticed M. Abel once during the concert: the music sounded like a miraculously perfect improvisation. He is not so much *chef d'orchestre* as dancing partner to his orchestra and cast-- and, as with all great dance teams, one could not tell who was leading. I am very interested to hear Abel in more standard repertoire-- I wonder if he shows the same flair in Verdi or Puccini?

I only wish every soubrette in the world could look upon and learn from Angelina Réaux: surely no one since Régine Crespin has been such a mistress of boulevard attitude. From her first slinky entrance in catglasses, mink and tiara (seemingly permanently welded to her scalp) she OWNED this show: a star turn in the very best sense of the word. Ms. Réaux is not afraid to be subtle: with a flick of an eyebrow she can transform a one-liner into a *double-entendre*. Every step she takes, every *moue* she makes, is synchronized to the score with wit and charm: like all great singing actors, she seemed to create the music herself. Her Elizabeth Tayloresque figure hampered her plastique not a bit: she even sang one duet with her head lolling over the edge of the chaise-longue, in a pneumatic ecstasy of love.

It is true that the diva lacks the ultimate in vocal allure for this ultra-sexy role-- her music-theater soprano began the evening sounding quite scratchy. She resorted to a striking if hardly stylistic Piaf chest voice for some of the lower-lying passages-- if nothing else, this device made her very Parisian-scented diction crystal-clear. I hope this delightful artist can learn to balance her vivid enthusiasm with a little more vocal restraint in future performances-- I want to hear more of her in the years to come.

A more classic French style was exhibited by Gordon Gietz as Paris. It's a sweet and pingy voice with an appealing bounce and ring: that appallingly tricky "Au mont Ida" sounded like child's play. But all this tenor's assets aren't in his mouth: Mr. Gietz is edibly cute, with a tantalizing fuck-you attitude. His act two seduction scene with La Réaux crackled with the erotic tension of *Belle de Jour*. Uh, but funny. Now, Mr. Gietz is not really a world-class yodeler, which made his third-act aria a little precarious. But lots of tenors with genuinely well-placed voices lack a falsetto, so I'll overlook it. He is "l'homme à la pomme" (the guy with the apple), for sure for sure; oh, he's got ALL the candy.

Standout among the rest of the cast was the very butch Lyne Comtois in the tunic role of Orest: her big, flexible mezzo made the most of this boisterous role-- she knows what testosterone sounds like. I enjoyed the fussiness of Marc Molomot's Ménélas: a silly fool, sure, but never begging for laughs. Gordon Edery, a tall, lithe *tête de peau*, traded off a wooly voice for an unctuous-to-the-max stage presence in the role of Calchas: I didn't feel cheated.

The performers (Mr. Gietz and Ms. Réaux excepted) were very nearly sunk by the hokey "Fransh" accents they were directed to affect by Stage Director David Walsh. His ideas otherwise ranged from the endearingly silly (the Game of Goose, a classic precursor of *le twister*) to the annoyingly silly (grown men prancing around in funny hats; that Texas accent on Agamemnon). But, really, not a bad job, given that semi-staging is really a sort of theatrical *coitus interruptus*--you always wish you'd either gone all the way or never started at all. I do wish Carol Bailey, billed as Production Designer, had thought twice about the abovementioned funny hats; in addition, she might also have noticed that everybody in the show was wearing black except for that one lady in peacock blue: I kept expecting it to mean something.

A swell and stylish way to spend a spring evening. The Poulenc/ Milhaud program this June looks promising too. In the future, the company really must revive *La Grande Duchesse de Gérolstein* for Ms. Réaux. And while we're at it, let's hear her in *La Voix Humaine*. . .

-- James Jorden

La Divina, the true voice of Philadelphia

Upon release of a beautiful new boxed set of Callas arias, Steven Mathers considers her legend and impact on gay men.

A large pile of black postcards bearing the familiar face of Maria Callas sits in the corner of a popular West End gay bar. Pallid complexion, arching eyebrows, tight pearl choker: the image reeks of suffering. Gay men know that score as well as Callas.

Even though she died in the late 70s, Callas is invading the popular consciousness once again. Her most recent surge in popularity came after an "appearance" in *Philadelphia*-- Tom Hanks plays her recording of "La mamma morta" to Denzel Washington in the moving "opera scene." It proved a revelation to many and a new generation has since become fascinated with the century's most enchanting diva.

It's no secret that opera has always been a draw for gay men. Great women singers are the biggest pull in a complicated equation, but the grand style and high passions of the occasion add appeal. Callas was certainly the grandest and most passion-filled of sopranos. Leonard Bernstein once famously remarked that she was "pure electricity."

And gay icons tend to be women. From Judy Garland through to Patsy and Edina, most are powerful and strong. Callas is of the same stock. Hers was a turbulent career which, with every threat of violence towards her maestro, courted upset-- a battle for credibility with come within the operatic establishment who derided her voice's lack of technical finery and a tortuous life conducted for the most part in public.

Her love for the millionaire tycoon Aristotle Onassis, his throwing her over for Jackie Kennedy and her subsequent early years in Paris before her death are powerful elements in a captivating life story.

Callas was a most assuredly glamorous creature. There is an undeniable element of the drag queen in her elegant dresses and slightly overdone eyeliner. At her debut concert in Paris, she glided down a flight of stairs clad in an exquisite Biki creation, a stole

draped around her shoulders, and with £1m in diamonds dripping from her neck and ears. Priscilla, eat your heart out.

Echoing gay men's body consciousness, Callas reinvented herself. She was a fat, clumsy woman of 210 pound who over a period of 18 months in the early 50s shed over 65 pounds to emerge a glamour-puss par excellence. She had achieved her dream of looking like Audrey Hepburn in *Roman Holiday* with all the resolve and discipline of a Soho gym queen.

But this is circumstantial beside the real glory of Callas, her voice. EMI, who are responsible for virtually all of her studio output, have just released the *La Divina* boxed set.

For those who already know their Callas and have a collection of any substance, this release is just a pretty addition, only the interview is new on CD. But the Callas virgin is urged to buy it.

It is an admirable monument to Anna Maria Sophia Cecilia Kalogeropolous, born in New York in 1923, who grew up to be the greatest operatic interpreter in living memory, also proving that 18 years after her death she still exerts an unloosened grip on the operatic world.

This article by Steven Mathers originally appeared in *The Gay Gazette*. In a comment in his ultracool fanzine *The Callas Circle*, he notes that EMI promoted their new *La Divina* box set by advertising in *Boyz* (a London bar rag), placing postcards in gaybars and bookstores (NOT in record shops!) and donating prizes including copies of the CD compilation and a full-length Callas mirror (oh, girl!) to "La Divina Competitions" sponsored by gay publications! For more information on Steven's FABulous zine

The Callas Circle

please see the next page...

You simply cannot live without *The Callas Circle*, a new zine created by Steven Mathers, who is a Major MariaMaven. I'm looking at issue #6 (March 1996) as I write this, and, well, it's just the answer to an opera queen's dreams. Steven has unearthed photos of La Divina that I have never seen ANYWHERE before, such as a beautifully serene candid of Maria's Violetta in repose (chignon, white ball gown with the straps made of "Dior" flat bows) taken from the wings of the Met in 1958. Other killer pics include Callas with Sutherland and Zeffirelli after *Lucia* at Covent Garden (you can see the eyeglasses in Maria's hand--no doubt she whipped them off when she saw the camera!) There's also one of the very last photos of Callas, visiting a heavily-madeup Rudolf Nureyev backstage at the Palais des Sports in 1977. Also featured in this issue is a transcript of a 1958 TV interview with Maria getting serious about such topics as the "Rome Walkout" and her preference for double beds. Plus an exhaustive listing of Maria's appearances on film, news and gossip, (one of the writers just returned from Spain where he was involved in the production of "A Montserrat Caballe Family Christmas with Special Guest Star Cher". . .) Some very knowledgable in--depth reviews of recordings and books complete this slickly-produced 28-page zine. Issue #7 promises pix from the Lisbon *Traviata* and readers' questions to Giulietta Simionato. For a sample issue of this FAB publication, send \$10 to: Steven Mathers / The Callas Circle, 64 Empire Court North End Rd., Wembley Park, Middx HA9 0AQ UK.

Filling a gap in the the absurdly scanty body of work on the relationship between homosexuality and opera is Sam Abel's new study *Opera in the Flesh* (from Westview Press. I bought a copy at Barnes & Noble for about \$20). This is a more "serious" work than that surprise bestseller *The Queen's Throat* by Wayne Koestenbaum, and in fact, Abel positions his book as an "answer" to Koestenbaum's work. I will say in Abel's favor that he is most enthusiastic about his subject: this guy really loves opera, and he has done extensive research (funded in part by Dartmouth College, where he is assistant professor of drama-- gee, I wish I could get a study grant to go to Europe for a year and go to the opera. I mean, he even met his lover along the way while he was writing this book. Some people have all the luck. But anyway.) A number of Abel's ideas are, if not absolutely original (stage directors have left so few stones unturned!), certainly well thought-out and stated in exciting and vivid language:

"In questa reggia" starts out as the opposite of a seductive aria. Turandot wants to make it a sexual climax for one, an exhausting masturbation fantasy in the musical stratosphere. By singing in an impossibly high range and at great length, she tries to keep Calaf out of the musical picture.

He goes on to depict Calaf's celebrated interruption of the "orgasmic" climax of the aria as a musical foreshadowing of the denouement: Turandot is fated to become one half of a duet.

Abel also has some interesting things to say about two important manifestations of gender confusion (the castrato, the trouser role) that show up in so supposedly staid an art form as opera. His discussion of trouser roles is more convincing to me, perhaps because he is talking about a phenomenon all modern operagoers have experienced first-hand. We all know about the tease set up in a performance of *Figaro* when we have a young and (one hopes) sexy girl playing that walking boner Cherubino. He is perhaps less successful in explicating the sexual allure of the castrato, perhaps because he is forced to depend on secondary sources instead of personal experience. (It surely doesn't help that he uses Anne Rice's fanciful *Cry to Heaven* as a reference. Ms. Rice's castrati have about as much verisimilitude as her vampires.) We really can't know why castrati were so hot, any more than we can understand why educated people used to flock to public executions-- it's just a different mindset, that's all. (I suspect that one reason the castrati were considered sexy was that they were so incredibly famous. Even serial killers have fan clubs.)

My big problem with this book is that Abel gets sucked into that critic's circle-jerk that makes so much modern criticism such a bore to plod through. He rarely just states his case without bolstering every argument with voluminous allusions to *other* critics (using that slippery criticspeak that makes me want to scream "Define your terms!" or, better, "What the fuck are you talking about?")--It's not enough just to note that a given idea shows up *as well* in, say, Lacan. Abel seems to feel that he has to validate everything he says by showing that Lacan (or Foucault or Clément) said it *first*. To me, that suggests Abel lacks faith in his conclusions, and that's a pity, because I think he's on the mark most of the time. I say, if it's a good idea, it doesn't matter whose idea it is.

But that's a quibble. *Opera in the Flesh* is a cool book, especially the last section, an appreciation and defense of live opera- in-performance. It's chewy but nutritious-- enjoy it in small bites.

Way less formal but, oddly, equally self-conscious, is *Opera for Beginners*, a "comic-book" intro from Ron David, with fun illustrations from Paul Gordon. It's one of the few opera books I've ever read with such an openly straight-guy mentality: **that's** weird enough to make Mr. David an honorary queer. Now, keep in mind that Mr. D is a voice-fancier (and, as such, a major Pav fan) and that his favorite genre is bel canto, and that he takes what Stefan Zucker says at face value. And Ron

makes it clear he hates Gigli and Mozart. I say you've gotta admire anyone who's **that** unafraid of making enemies.

Maybe Ron tries a little too hard to be hip, with references to too many rock and R&B musicians (pretty obscure to me, though I am trying to track down Della Reese's "Quando m'en vo...") But his survey of the prehistory of opera is fascinating if necessarily sketchy, and he has a way of making you want to hear every composer he discusses (except Berlioz, another entry on his shit list). He also is strikingly eloquent about the thunk-on-the-head you get the first time you hear Callas. He's very pro-Maria (unlike so many straight guys) so he's OK in my book.

And the cartoons can get pretty campy. Like, for example, Ron tells the story of Ghiringhelli swearing Callas will never sing at La Scala. Gordon's illustration depicts the impresario seated in a restaurant, screaming to his companion, "Never, not while I run this opera house, will that woman sing here!" And the waiter says to Ghiringhelli, "Fresh pepper with your words?" A fab gift (only 11 bucks) for an operatic virgin, especially a kid.

Very briefly: some recent CD releases that I've found rewarding include the utterly charming **Two Voices, One Heart** (RCA 7432129646-2), a showcase for Montserrat Caballe's still-bewitching art, and, more importantly, an introduction to her delightful daughter Montserrat Martí. The younger soprano's sweet lirico-leggero boasts an even scale and firm legato: her soft high notes are ravishing. And Montsi Sr. continues her exploration of the pop genre with a cut that sounds like it came off the soundtrack of an Almodovar movie. You *must* have that **Leontyne Price** recital on Gala GL 328 (including a "Zweite Brautnacht" that is guaranteed to get your dick hard); for 5 bucks, how can you go wrong? Still not convinced? Well, how about this: Miss Price introduces her encores in her own *inimitable* way ("Thankya") **Norma** on Lyric LCD 203-2 stars Renata Scotto, stylish as always, and (this time, anyway) in groovy voice (listen to her throw off those high C's!) as the erring Druidess. Her final scene is just *stunning*, despite Muti at his literal-minded worst in the pit. The maestro is marginally less infuriating for an **Aïda** in Vienna (Bella Voce BLV 07.209) with the young Domingo and Gwyneth Jones in the leads. Plácido's in better voice than La Jones is, but they're both committed and exciting: Act 3 is electric. It was about this time (1973) that critics began to predict neither of their careers would last out the decade. So you see, you shouldn't believe **everything** you read. . .