

# parterre box

the **queer** opera zine,  
presents its 23<sup>rd</sup> bulging issue:

**The Tenor of Very Little Brain!**

Catfight at the Met!

*Autumn in San Francisco:*

*Harvey Milk and Sam Ramey*

**Operatic Tearooms!**

Randall Wong: higher and higher!

Worshipping Leontyne!

PATRICE MUNSEL TALKS ABOUT KING KONG!

*Fleming Flappers!*

*Is Kallen Esperian a Duck?*

\*\*\* and much, much more! \*\*\*

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

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the queer opera zine



## Forbidden Love

# questo e quello

La Cieca wants to be the \*first\* to say "Go on, girl!" to the ever-ballsy **Aprile Millo**, who last week spoke her mind on **Ed Rosen's** operatic radio show. The soprano expressed her regret at the Met's out-of-left-field decision to change this season's production of *La forza del destino* to a revival of *Un ballo in maschera* (That unprecedented rescheduling was due, as we all know, to **Joe Volpe's** fanatical commitment to indulge every whim of The Tenor of Very Little Brain.) She went on to opine that *Forza* is of course not just a tenor vehicle, and that the Verdi masterpiece has a New York audience even when it is performed in the absence of a superstar tenor. This remark will probably make her no friends among the current Met artistic administration, but she said what she thought, and, furthermore, what so many believe but are afraid to express openly. I gain more respect for this lady every time I hear her (singing or speaking!)

La Millo revealed taste worthy of an opera queen in her selection of recordings: **Caterina Mancini**, **Zinka Milanov**, **Renata Tebaldi**, and **Claudia Muzio**. The recorded excerpts from Millo's Ravinia concert last summer revealed that her vocal comeback seems to be shaping up just fine, with particularly outstanding readings of "Dich teure Halle" and "You'll Never Walk Alone."

Should La Millo see this column (or if any pb readers are in communication with her) here's a big "in bocca al lupo" for her *Ballo* at the Met and her first *Tosca* this July at La Scala!

Mr. Rosen's totally excellent program can be heard Tuesdays on WTRN 93.9 at 9:05 PM. Be there. Aloha.

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Meanwhile, the way La Cieca sees it, **Joe Volpe** had three choices:

- I. *Forza* without the Pav
- II. The Pav without *Forza*
- III. Both

Both? Sure, why not? Scenario: *Forza* goes on as scheduled, but without Hanky Boy. Meanwhile, Pavarotti is in town with nothing to do for 4 weeks. Open up the house for 4 consecutive Sunday nights and have the bad boy do Pension Fund concerts. Doesn't matter what he sings. Charge people through the nose. Everybody wins and The King of the High Bs learns a little lesson.

And if the Pav don't want to? Sue him for every cent the *Forza* would have made, plus a few billion lire more in punitive damages. Give those Met attorneys something to do with their billable hours besides hassling HMV. Sure,

there'd be blood on the ground, but it would be nobly shed.

On the other hand, La Cieca will admit that Mr. Volpe's damage-control statement to the press sounded a model of tact, especially when compared to his legendary pitbull attacks on neurotic soubrettes and superannuated ex-divas. Give him credit: the guy knows how to grovel when he has to.

La Cieca offers her heartfelt sympathy to Ms. Millo and all the other artists who have been inconvenienced by these two gentlemen's little power game. **Roberto Scandiuizzi**, **Bruno Pola** and **Denyce Graves** will also miss the opportunity to appear in this heavily-publicized revival. **Deborah Voigt**, **Stefka Evstatieva**, **Kristjan Johannson**, **Jeffrey Wells** and **Juan Pons** will simply have to deal with the hassle of changing roles at short notice. And it looks like the mighty Met itself loses bigtime -- Deutsche Grammophon reportedly cancelled their recording contract when the Pav crapped out of the *Forza* project.

So, who's for buying standing room for the first *Ballo* and booing Hanky Boy's expensive ass off the stage?

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La Cieca was *staggered* to hear that **Brian Kellow's** excellent column "Notebook" has been 86ed from *Opera News*, effective immediately. This was La Cieca's favorite feature in the magazine, the one she always turned to first, because it offered up-to-date news and informal gossip about the personalities involved in the world of opera (sort of like "Questo e Quello", but cleaner.) In addition, Mr. K's writing was consistently witty, a welcome change from the usual la-di-da "with a warm smile and an engaging twinkle in her eye, lovely Anna Moffo welcomes us into her cozy Manhattan pied-a-terre" stuff.

It it not clear to La Cieca exactly which of the no-lobes at *Opera News* is to blame for this particular blunder, and in fact she has not been able at this point to get anyone official at the mag either to confirm or to deny this story. But you can bet she will waste no time in writing to the magazine to protest this truly idiotic decision. If you care to let them know your opinion (and I know you do!), contact:

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La Cieca attended the Met premiere of Britten's "Midsummer Night's Dream" November 25 and spent a sleepless night afterward trying to figure out exactly what it was she disliked so about this production.

After all, David Atherton led accurately and crisply with some really beautiful and transparent sounds in the fairy music. The ensemble was exceptionally tight: this was real festival-quality music making. Again, the word is transparent: none of that thick "German" sound **Maestro Levine** loads onto everything, including *Chenier* and *Pelleas*. The very beginning of the show was inaudible: I'm sure that will be corrected for the next performance. The children's chorus & the solo kids were stunning.

And there was not a weak link among the singers. Most impressive to me was **Jane Bunnell** as *Hermia*: strong of voice, perfect diction, clear and interesting acting choices, and real star presence. She is everything **Cecilia Bartoli** is cracked up to be. **Rodney Gilfrey** and **Kurt Streit** also good clean voices, both move well and are quite edibly cute besides. **Nancy Gustafson** is more problematic: unclear diction and a woofy generic sound. Just not very special.

La Cieca was surprised by **Sylvia McNair** as *Tytania*: she sounds so much like **Dawn Upshaw**, especially the sort of musical-theater voice production. The top is special, the middle rather ordinary. Excellent bass-baritone **Peter Rose** as *Bottom* sang the whole role, not talked or faked. **Jochen Kowalski** hard to hear in Act 1 (too low? a lot of this role seems to sit right on his break) but better later. Hootier than I remember. **Jeffrey Wells** a bit oversung but glamorous voice as *Theseus*, **Victoria Livengood** sumptuous and visually luscious as *Hippolyta*.

It is true the Puck was a washout, totally ineffectual and without a clue how to deliver the dialogue. He looked a bit like **Marky Mark**, which is of course a good thing, but would it have been so hard to find someone who can act? This young man was miked, of course (La Cieca spied the cord through opera glasses kindly lent by **Little Stevie**); is it altogether unlikely that other members of the cast may have been "acoustically enhanced" as well? Call La Cieca suspicious, but to her ears the words were simply too clear, and the solo children, talented as they are, surely cannot project that well.

But that wouldn't keep you up all night. No, it was the production (**Albery/McDonald**). La Cieca tossed and turned trying to puzzle out what, if anything, the production team was trying to say. She felt for the longest time she must have missed something. Many of the effects and moments were striking, even moving, but they didn't add up to anything I could understand. Some of the images were attractive in a sort of deconstructionist way, but the costumes were enough to wake you up screaming: *Tytania* modeled a fuschia ciré leather power suit,

tiara and beaded purse (and low heels!), *Oberon* screamed "fashion victim" in a puke-green velvet superpimp outfit, and Puck struck a girly note in a purple eyelash tailcoat and beaded **Liza Minnelli** slacks!

One of the sets for Act 1 was a series of flats with doors in them, an idea that shows up about three times a year either at the Met or the City Opera (see, most recently, *Turn of the Screw*.) Surely there must be some other way of coping with a limited set budget! Act 2 was this big wooden box the same puke color as *Oberon's* outfit, and the young lovers changed from modern-ish dress to these long robelike garments; the men suddenly sprouted Fabio-style coiffures (both *Streit* and *Gilfrey* looked like they were doing *Jokanaan*.) All four of the kids then wrestled elaborately on that ugly green floor; most impressively they never missed a note of the music! (Thank God for American singers!)

The wedding garb was Grecian by way of **Cecil B. DeMille**, sumptuously draped silk jersey exposing bare chests on the men. La Cieca is pleased to report that *Mr. Gilfrey* handily lived up to his reputation as opera's buffest divo, but in her opinion (unrepentant titpig that she is), the baritone might have put in another rep or two on the bench press. Anyway, in the finale *Oberon* and *Tytania* appear dressed for a 17th century masque (elaborate costumes, white wigs, etc.); **Ms. McNair** baring a *Ziegfeldian* expanse of leg.

The action was mostly pretty straightforward, if not particularly imaginative and followed the libretto, so that makes the weird sets and costumes all the more puzzling.

La Cieca was quite disappointed that *Mr. Albery* did little if anything to convey the subtle love/hate daddy/boy relationship between *Oberon* and *Puck*. Let's face it, the intergenerational queer sex theme is omnipresent in Britten's work; was *Albery* wary of shocking the Met's notoriously conservative -- not to say homophobic -- audience? (A symptom of the Met's discomfort with The Gay Thing was the inclusion in the November *Opera News* of an article by neoconservative columnist **Terry Teachout**, who advocates whitewashing the gay content of Britten's operas to avoid "limiting" the works to a fag audience.)

Then again, even the straight characters displayed no real affect. What La Cieca was looking for was less crashing-though-the-paper-moon cleverness (no matter how slickly executed) and more *Personenregie*, infusing honest feeling and reality into the phantasmagoria. With the exception of **Ms. Bunnell's** slow burn, **Ms. McNair's** blissed-out love trip, and one moment of murderous rage from **Mr. Kowalski**, the whole cast seemed disconnected emotionally. The result was a very cold night in the woods indeed, for which I must blame *Mr. Albery*.

La Cieca was delighted to attend this performance as the guest of the newly-blondined Little Stevie, who is celebrated in his circle for being willing to open up his box to those in need. During the intermission, we chatted briefly with the bewitching Ira Siff, impresario and primadonna of La Gran Scena Opera, who told us that the troupe is offering a preview of its new show here in NY prior to leaving for their European tour. Performances are December 19-22 at the MCC Theater, 122 W. 28th St. For details, you can call (212) 465-3384.

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La Cieca and her pals have taken a lot of heat lately on the internet and elsewhere for not abjectly worshipping at the Shrine of Renee. As we have made our feeling about La Fleming known on several previous occasions, we're not going there for the moment, and will, accordingly, reserve for some future date our comments on her recent assumption of the role of Blanche du Bois in Andre Previn's *Streetcar Named Desire*. But La Cieca, arbiter that she is, really must ask that you girls show a little restraint. You might begin by not calling your idol "La Renee". It's silly and tacky. And for God's sake, learn when and how to applaud. Screaming, "Brava, Diva!" after the first song of the Faure group (as some of the soprano's acolytes did at a recent Chicago recital) is just not done. By all means, be an opera queen. Just don't be a tacky opera queen!

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Oh, La Cieca could just slap herself for missing the Licia Albanese Puccini Foundation Gala Festival Competition Memorial Thang, especially Patrice Munsel doing her blue joke about King Kong. Miss Munsel really is Auntie Mame.

But Cieca did receive a last-minute invitation to the Richard Tucker gala. She had not graced Avery Fisher Hall in a long time, so the hideous acoustical gadgets that protrude from the walls (it looks like the set for a Terry Gilliam movie) came as a bit of a shock, especially since the sound still sucks. No bass response at all, like the inside of a cracker box. Give me Carnegie any time.

Dwayne Croft's voice really is lusciously sexy, but "Avant de quitter" he was dancing around like Teresa Stratas. Very tense. It think because he's more a bass-baritone than a lyric baritone. Often he sounds like a young Jose Van Dam. But it's a gorgeous voice. Kallen Esperian cancelled (awww!) so we got the glamorous voice of Stefka Evstatieva, who did "La mamma morta." Not the most energetic singer in the world, but she gives you your money's worth. Paul Groves has me worried. Every time I hear him the voice is smaller and wispier. Pretty sound, but so \*fragile\*-- "Ah fuyez douce image" sounded more sad than passionate. Stephen

West stood in for Paul Plishka in Zaccaria's aria and was boring.

June Anderson still has the extreme top notes (high C to E-flat); on anything in a normal range she sounds 60 years old, or worse. Parts of "Ah non credea mirarti" sounded like Anja Silja. The cabaletta was better, I guess because fast music excites her and motivates her to sing up to pitch. But, to tell the truth, there's more meaning when Patti Lupone speaks these words than when La Anderson sings them. Her bio lists an upcoming engagement that is surely a trainwreck in the making: *Trovatore* with the Pav at the Met in 1997!

Sherrill Milnes in goodish voice for "Nulla, silenzio." Very atmospheric. This short but intense role (Michele in *Tabarro*) would make much sense for him right now. When Ruth Ann Swenson walked out for *Barber of Seville*, I swear I thought it was Aprile Millo. Swenson is plumper than ever, and all of it is in her bust! This number (Act 1 finale) fizzled. No pep.

After the break Mirella Freni came on the the biggest ovation of the evening. She looked charming in midnight blue with a tight bodice and full skirt; her hair is now as platinum as Scotto's. Warm and involved "Io son l'umile ancella." She sounds 20 years younger than June Anderson.

Barry Tucker gave a plaque and this crystal paperweight thing with the American flag etched into it to a very gorgeous Leontyne Price, who did not sing, but gave a lovely speech recalling Richard Tucker: "He used to say, using his affectionate nickname for me, 'Price, let's go out there and have some fun'." Richard Tucker used to call her "Price"? La Cieca must say she admired La Price's restraint when Mr. Tucker referred to his dad as "the greatest of all American singers."

More lush sounds from Evstatieva in the Act 2 *Trovatore* finale, marred by some bellowing from Kristian Johanssen. This very cute tenor named Marcello Giordani then yelled the "9 High C's" aria from *Fille du Regiment*. I can sort of understand why you'd want to do this aria if you can do it well, but that doesn't explain Mr. Giordani's choice of this repertoire. Then Headlights Swenson sang "O luce di quest anima" very prettily, though to do the fast coloratura and get to the extreme top, she takes it off the voice and sort of "Moffo-izes" the music. But it's a really sweet and charming sound when she stops fiddling with it and just \*sings\*. I would really love to hear her as Manon.

And then Nicholai Ghiaurov gave us all a master class with "Ella giammai m'amo." I'd read so much adverse criticism of his singing lately that I was dreading this number. Wow, was I wrong. Beautiful line, a still-warm tone and of course absolute commitment and mastery. He "indicated" one or two top notes, a better idea than

Join A Club Ju  
I've come out of the cl

trying to sing them if you know they won't work. This man is a class act and a genuine star.

Novelty of the evening was the duet "Doute de la lumiere" from *Hamlet*, as sung by Swenson and Croft. She sounds ideal in this lyrical music, really caressing the melody. His timber is excellent for *Hamlet*, although I'm guessing the role as a totality would lie rather high for him. I will say he "partners" beautifully: he gave as much to Swenson as he did to Cathy Malfitano at the Jimmython.

And the nadir was the final trio from *Faust* with Anderson, Giordani and Jeffrey Wells. Out of tune and loud — in a word, hellish. We ended with the Fugue from *Falstaff* which made a surprisingly good gala closer. Mr. Milnes very funny and doing a bit of conducting along the way. Dynamite high C from La Swenson: I only wish she would sing with that much guts when there aren't twelve other people on stage! The evening didn't feel long, and I'm really interested to see what the abridged version will look like on PBS December 22.

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Industry insiders have a new nickname for EMI Classics: "Pussywhipped Productions"! Angela Gheorghiu demanded that the kissy-kissy cover photo of Roberto Alagna and Leontina Vaduva be removed from the company's new *La boheme* CD, and the company meekly agreed, despite the huge trouble and expense (reportedly over \$100,000) involved. (La Gheorghiu could have saved herself the trouble: nobody's buying this mess of a recording anyway!) So that's why the couple is so "inseparable" -- Mme. Alagna just doesn't much like her husband sniffing around other sopranos, especially ones he, uh, "dated" prior to tying the knot! What's next for "the Bonnie and Clyde of Opera"? A new recording of *Romeo et Juliette*, as a matter of fact, with Gheorghiu taking over Vaduva's role. So there!

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The old saying goes, if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, then it's a duck, right? La Cieca saw most of that 3 Sopranos thing last week and, folks, Kallen Esperian may walk like a duck, but she sure quacks like a mezzo. All the soprano pieces she did seemed to lie in the wrong part of the voice. I didn't hear that at first because I was so distracted by her constant singing just behind the beat, the surest way I know to suck the energy out of a piece of music. (What a contrast with Cynthia Lawrence, whose timbre is pure American-Generic, but who does have the wit to keep the music dancing by attacking just a hair ahead of the orchestra.)

My first clue that she might not really be a soprano was that "Bride of Frankenstein" face she pulled every time she had to sing a high note. No, not even all that high -- even on A-flat she was rolling her eyes. Then it began to sink in that the soprano tessitura, though she

sustained it acceptably enough, just didn't \*sound\* right. Not soprano-y. The best singing she did all night was in her lines (very low) of "You'll Never Walk Alone." A real ease and warmth to the voice there -- and a timbre that reminded me a \*lot\* of Jennifer Larmore. Ms. Esperian is a beautiful woman, with lovely presence, and, I think, a first-class voice. But I really am afraid she's not a duck.

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And can you fukkin believe this transoceanic catfight going on between Mesdames Meier and Zeffirelli? Now the Zef says he won't allow La Meier to do the telecast of *Carmen* in the spring unless the mezzo *apologizes* to him! This is after he admitted in print that he opposed casting her in the first place, and stopped working with her after they disagreed over the vitally important issue of the *color of her wig*! I can see it now -- a press conference at the Met, with Volpe and Levine in solemn attendance. La Meier reads a prepared statement:

I sincerely regret any confusion or inconvenience that has been caused by my refusal to wear the wig of the shade specified by Mr. Zeffirelli, and I now openly and of my own free will concede that Mr. Zeffirelli knows better than I do what hair-color best flatters my skin tones. As such, I will be changing wigs, effective immediately...

[uproar from the audience]

No, please, please! Let me finish...effective immediately, and I will continue to wear the wig specified by Mr. Zeffirelli as agreed to in my contract. I am now prepared to answer questions from the gentlemen of the press, but only on the subject of wigs and hairpieces. Yes, you in the beige sweater?

[From *Newsday*, November 28, 1996] Smarting both from negative reviews of his new production of "Carmen" at the Metropolitan Opera and the complaints about him by its star, mezzo-soprano Waltraud Meier, director Franco Zeffirelli now says he always thought Meier was wrong for the part.

"She didn't understand anything about the character, and she tried to do something completely different," he said. "She doesn't have the right voice, and she doesn't have the spirit.

"Once I understood that she was going to do it her way, I didn't even bother going to the rehearsals she was in.

"She began disobeying by leaving her hair red, instead of dying [sic] it black as I asked. She didn't look like a gypsy. She looked like a lady from Munich at a costume ball. If she wants to do the televised broadcast in March, she will have to apologize first."

Casting decisions, however, are ultimately the Met's to make, the company's general manager, Joseph Volpe, said through a spokesman. "None of these people speak for the Met," Volpe said. "I speak for the Met."

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Peter G. Davis pointed out in his review of the Met's *Carmen* that he hasn't seen anyone at that theater succeed in the role of the gypsy since Regine Crespin, and Rise Stevens before her. Only two great Carmens in, what, almost half a century? I mean, if it's such a great role and all, how come singers keep having such big resounding flops doing it? Well, La Cieca asked her evil twin Dr. Repertoire, who contributed the following few ideas:

1. **The Rhett Butler Syndrome.** Dear Clark Gable fought being cast as Rhett even though it seems so obvious that he is as perfect for this role as, say, Freni for Mimi or Tito Gobbi for Scarpia. But Gable felt that the novel was so popular and so famous that everyone who eventually saw the movie already had it worked out in their heads what every detail of Rhett should be like. So if he didn't meet these (conflicting) expectations, he'd disappoint. Carmen is one of the two most famous opera roles (with Butterfly); so everyone has his own idea of what Carmen looks like, sounds like, acts like. I agree with Mr. Davis that Regine Crespin was a superb Carmen -- because she most closely approximates to my ideal. Close second is Tatiana Troyanos, who obviously approached the part very differently but fulfilled another set of expectations (I'm of the opinion great roles admit of many "valid" interpretations; not everyone shares that opinion). So poor Mlle. X's Carmen is compared not just to Rise Stevens or Marilyn Horne, but to a Platonic ideal of Carmen-ness that no one can possibly live up to.

2. **Thankless.** You've got to sing your guts out all night long in the middle register where it's so fucking hard to be heard, plus the two famous pieces are in Act 1, so you have no big finish. Plus everyone else has a show-stopper setpiece: Toreador Song, Flower Song, and of course that bitch with the pigtails gets to sing *Je dis* and walk off with the whole damn show. And that last act! Especially in a big theater (is there any other kind?) that final duet always turns into 20 minutes of screaming, just when the audience is tired. Carmen is a role that demands a great voice, then gives it nothing "vocal" to do. Dramatically, it's very easy for Carmen to come off as no more than a horrible bitch, especially if the Jose is working hard for sympathy and is not willing to show the violence that is inherent in the character. The image the public is left with is this

heartless slut in a fancy dress goading this poor schmuck until he can't take it any more. So the audience dislikes Carmen, and by extension they dislike the singer doing the role.

3. **Funny Business, a woman's career.** This is maybe a little more controversial. Many successful singers get hardened by that climb up the ladder: music is a dirty business for women, and many of the more "feminine" just fall by the wayside because they are not willing to put up with the hostility, the loneliness, and the other bullshit that goes with building a career. Hard work and aggressiveness are reinforced. But those ideals are exactly what Carmen is not about: she doesn't go after anything; it comes to her. It's a very hard concept for many female singers to play, whether it's because they don't get it, or because they don't like to think about it. In a sense, Carmen mocks everything they stand for. So the character just eludes them. Apparently that's what happened to Waltraud Meier: the ever-trustworthy Everrett Zimmerman tells me that everything she did was well-thought-out and carefully calculated ("like Meryl Streep"), but applied from outside, as if the mezzo were saying, "Let me show you what I think Carmen would do at this point."

4. **My mother never told me I was pretty.** Even more controversial. Many artists use their expression as a sublimation of their sexuality, and as a result just don't think of themselves as being really baseline sexually attractive. So they (we're talking Carmens now) want to "do sexy things" when of course the only really sexy thing one can do is -- nothing. Carmen has no need of doing come-hither; the guys come hither even when she doesn't want them to. I directed *Carmen* last year, and I tell you, it's really hard to get the girls to abandon the hand-on-hip routine and just let the sexuality happen. They want to "do something", and a Carmen who has to "do something" to attract men has already missed the boat.

5. **Because it's there.** If you are a mezzo, you feel like you have to sing this role sooner or later, whether it's really right for you or not. Look, I'm sure even Frederica Von Stade has looked hard at this part, though thus far she has avoided even recording excerpts, wisely, I think we'll all agree. It's the same thing with sopranos and Violetta -- it's there, goddamit, staring you in the face, goading you: "Bet you can't sing me! What are you, afraid? Is the mezzo afraid? Oh, excuse me, you're not a mezzo, are you? Real mezzos sing Carmen!" So we get a lot of failed attempts, like Horne or Ewing, who are both phenomenal artists, but just couldn't quite get a handle on this part.

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La Cieca of course carefully followed the story of the bad old good old boys at Texaco, and she thinks they got off easy only having to pay \$175 mil (their stock gained



almost a billion in value the next day!) She has heard it suggested that right-thinking opera lovers should boycott the Met's lovely Saturday afternoon broadcasts, on the grounds that they are, uh, polluted by their association with the oil company.

Well, La Cieca has a better idea (did you doubt her?) Instead of boycotting the Texaco broadcasts, we should listen and enjoy as usual. Then, while we are still basking in the glow of the performance, we should write to Texaco along the following lines:

*Gentlemen:*

*Just a note to thank you once again for sponsoring these inspiring Saturday afternoon opera broadcasts. This afternoon's performance of "The Magic Flute" has, in fact, filled me with such an overwhelming feeling of brotherhood and love for my fellow man that I feel constrained to cease purchasing any Texaco products until I am satisfied that the insidious racism practiced by your company's highest-ranking employees has been completely eliminated.*

*I will of course resume purchasing your lovely products as soon as you can prove that you have taken steps to observe the letter and the spirit of our nation's anti-discrimination laws. Would you be so kind as to drop me a line as soon as this noble task is accomplished?*

*Looking forward with great anticipation to next week's broadcast of "Fidelio", I remain,*

*Sincerely yours,  
La Cieca*

## Fishbone around town

The new Metropolitan Opera Carmen (October 31) did not have a linear and easy birth. Rumor has it that Giancarlo del Monaco should have originally been in charge of the production. However, especially after the fiasco of his *Forza del destino* (I did not agree with those who trashed it, though), and particularly after his not-so-flattering comments about Pavarotti, the Italian director became "persona non grata" at the Met. It was therefore announced that the new Carmen would be staged by Lilliana Cavani, at her debut in the principal opera house in America. The Met and Cavani had - we hear - "different points of view," and thus Zeffirelli, absent from the Met for six years, reappeared on the roster.

This producer's name has long been synonymous with unbridled luxury and showiness, and this Carmen, though not reaching the excesses of other productions in the '80s (*Tosca*, *Bohème*, *Turandot*), is no exception. The first act is the most felicitous: a sun-bleached Sevillian square (Duane Schuler's lighting was very effective) with hundreds of painted white houses in the background. One may think he is in Seville during the International Expo, so huge was the crowd thronging this square, including horses, donkeys and dogs. One must however acknowledge that Zeffirelli works wonders in moving colossal huddles of people (the scuffle between Carmen and Manuella looked for once a real riot, tamed by the intervention of the horse police).

The second act displayed an open-air tavern (Don José's "Qui frappe?" was therefore incongruous...); the first act sun-bleached houses were now just small lights in the distance. The second act set was recycled for the third act, and the first-act square came back in the last act, accessorized with a huge cross and the plaza de toros.

The mise-en-scene, if not particularly revealing and in spite of some too many "Zeffirellisms", was pleasant and enjoyable. What did not work was the cast. The best of the bunch by far was Plácido Domingo. Not unlike Loris in *Fedora*, which he tackled in this same opera house less than one month ago, Don José flatters the veteran tenor's voice, which remains warm and sensual (in its low-middle range, at least). The interpreter was excellent: docile and bewildered in the first act, madly in love in the second, blind with rage in the third, and desperate in the fourth. And those Solons who have always accused him with musical superficiality and imprecision should have heard his account of the Flower Song, performed with absolute respect for all the expression marks and capped with a breathtaking pianissimo high B flat.

Angela Gheorghiu good (but nothing more than that) as Micaela. Quite frankly, we cannot understand the reason for her meteoric rise to superstardom. This girl's decent-quality voice is capable of powerful high notes but is much weaker in its low-middle register.

We will dismiss Sergel Lelferkus saying that he has been one of the major failures at the Met in recent years. His voice sounds like one of the worst comprimario tenors, as his high notes, feeble, flat and stretched, tended to crack on F and F#. And I should mention his incredibly Slavicized pronunciation. Lelferkus' Escamillo had already been buried in unflattering reviews last spring; how could the Met re-engage him for a new production?

A singer can choose several ways to interpret the role of Carmen, from the veristic style which dominated the first half of our century, to the more "intimate" approach adopted by Teresa Berganza, which mirrors more faithfully the Opéra Comique spirit.

Waltraud Meier seemed to have no precise conception of her role, and Zeffirelli must share the blame for this. She was an icy, even sexually frigid Carmen throughout the opera, only to explode in savage screams at the very end (the gypsy's famous line "Tiens! made many in the audience clap their hands over their ears). Years of gear-switching between the repertoires of the dramatic soprano and the mezzo-soprano (her real territory) have left her voice in shambles. Miss Meier "pushed" throughout her performance and the result was an annoying tendency to sing sharp, most obviously on the several high F-sharps of the Habanera, which was by the way received by the audience with utter indifference. As it often happens to those who stretch their voices beyond their natural possibilities, the German singer also displayed gaping breaks between registers.

James Levine was magnificent, extracting from the score all its brilliance and sweetness (the accompaniment to the Flower Song, real zenith of the evening, was simply glorious), as well as the sensuality which his protagonist so sadly lacked. We cannot understand however why Levine insist on performing the obsolete version with recitatives by Gulraud, which he augmented with spoken dialogue only in a couple of spots

Until December of last year, the name of Sonia Ganassi was totally unknown to the vast majority of New York opera lovers. Then the young mezzo-soprano took part in a single concert performance of Norma, stealing the show from eponymous Druidic priestess, Jane Eaglen. This "overnight" success led to Ganassi's Lincoln Center solo recital debut at Alice Tully Hall on 27 October. Rossini, Ganassi's career's guardian angel, opened the program with a French mélodie (of uncertain attribution, as a matter of fact), La légende de Marguerite, which is nothing but a reworking of the well-known ditty Una volta c'era un re from Cenerentola. La regata veneziana, and then three Donizetti pieces followed. The first half was concluded with Berlioz (La belle voyageuse, La Mort d'Ophélie, La Captive).

After the intermission, Ganassi performed several light Satie selections, which represented perhaps the less successful part in the program, concluding with an electrifying rendition of De Falla's Siete canciones populares españolas. The program was stimulating and demanding, and Miss Ganassi mastered it to perfection. Her voice is one of those which subjugate the senses by virtue of its timbre, purity, roundness and homogeneity. Although her low register does not yet have the same power as her middle-high range, Ganassi is a real mezzo-soprano, unlike some celebrated colleagues of hers who specialize in the belcanto repertoire. It is a voice full of overtones, which will have no problems in filling the enormous hall of the Met next year when she will make her debut there in Barbiere di Siviglia (you will forgive me once again the allusion to the same colleagues who, on the contrary, could not be heard beyond the tenth row in the orchestra).

What we did not expect, or at least in such an elevated degree, is such artistic maturity in a singer who made her debut barely five years ago. Ganassi found the right accents for each of the presented selections: she was lively and witty in La regata veneziana, sophisticated in Satie, energetic in De Falla and above all the real peak of the program - pathetic and effectively moving in La morte d'Ophélie, whose vocal arabesques were permeated with pain and emotional involvement. Ganassi obliged the audience's demands with three opera encores, Di tanti palpiti, Habanera (Carmen, she confessed to me, is her supreme artistic goal), and the Brindisi from Lucrezia Borgia, an opera she will soon perform at La Scala. The only advice we can

give her is to get rid of the music stand: it is not pleasant to have to look at a singer with her eyes glued to the score.

After a succession of high quality productions (Il Trovatore, I Puritani, Così fan tutte, Aida, etc.), the Opera Company of Philadelphia stumbled with a most questionable staging of Lucia di Lammermoor (14 October). After over thirty years of belcanto renaissance, it is inconceivable to offer to an audience a Lucia subjected to each and every possible cut one can imagine, showing a complete disregard for decades of stylistic studies and acquisitions. The daccapo of Enrico's cabaletta (and with it Raimondo's effective "frightened" pertichini); the third scene of the second act with Raimondo's cantabile Cedi, cedi o più sciagure; the whole Wolf's Crag scene at the beginning of the third act, and the usual stretches of recitative all fell under the merciless fury of the editor's ax. The famous ensemble at the end of the second act was heavily pruned, too. Evidently, there are those who continue to consider Lucia di Lammermoor no more than a showcase for sopranos willing to show off high notes, and not as one of the sublime masterpieces in the entire operatic literature to be respected in its absolute integrity.

Notwithstanding a few effective touches, such as the first scene of the second act, showing a Lucia far less docile and submissive than usual towards her brother (she raises her hands to him!), James De Blasis' production tended more often to border on the ridiculous. During the harp solo which prepares the way for the protagonist's cavatina, one could see a white-velled lady wander all over the stage, the first of many appearances and disappearances. She comes back at the end of the second act, and, of course, when the demented Lucia twice cries "Il fantasma", she popped up again. And when the poor soprano collapsed on the floor, the ghost reappeared and wrapped her in veils. At the death of Edgardo the mysterious wrath returned and finally lifted her veils: she is none other than Lucia herself! The director's intention to identify the woman killed by Edgardo's ancestor with Lucia is perhaps interesting and stimulating. Unfortunately, the incessant "andare e venire" of the spectral lady could not but create occasions of involuntary mirth. The director also had Arturo arrive at the castle with an entourage including two or three ladies, presumably his mother and sisters. Later, when Raimondo interrupted the celebrations to tell about the "atrocious scene", the unlucky bridegroom's female relations swooned and had to be dragged offstage (as icing on the cake, a few seconds later, some squires carried Arturo's bloody corpse across the stage).

It could have been easier to overlook such ludicrous touches if there had been a cast capable to steal our attention and divert it towards the magic of Donizetti's music. Those who see this opera as a mere soprano could in fact find satisfaction in Maureen O'Flynn, a young light-lyric soprano with a prodigious extension and remarkable technical skills. She has accurate agility, too, varying her daccapi with thoroughly personal and original ornaments. Interestingly, Ms. O'Flynn is endowed with a curiously tight vibrato, nowadays rather unusual, but reminiscent of certain light sopranos of the turn of the century.

It is frankly difficult to understand the reasons behind Stuart Nelli's ascent to fame. He is a tenor with a pleasant middle range, which however he tries to enlarge artificially, provoking as a result a rather strained high register. Stylistically he was a far cry from the romantic tenor model, displaying garbled diction, botched fraseggio, a suspect sense of pitch and a tendency to yell to express vehemence; the famous "Vi disperda" turned out to be nothing but a petulant scream.



The role of Enrico, as it is written, is not particularly high-lying; John Hancock, however chose to perform all the traditional high "puntature", upon which he repeatedly stumbled. Although weakened by the cuts, Raymond Aceto (Raimundo) displayed an attractive voice, sufficiently dark and soft. Conductor Maurizio Barbacini proved to be extremely effective in depicting the mysterious atmosphere which characterizes this opera, from an aptly gloomy and somber prelude, to the gossamer transparency of the introduction to Lucia's cavatina, to the tragedy of the final scene.

The difficulties and obstacles surrounding the staging of Don Carlo, even in the four act Italian version, are such that they often push this work beyond the reach of regional opera companies. Even if it is possible to produce this opera in a pared-down "essential" version without Hollywood-style sets and costumes (or the lengthy ballet), it is not conceivable to stage Don Carlo without a first class cast. Don Carlo needs six first rank singers; at the New Jersey State Opera, (20 October) they were nowhere to be seen (or heard). The men in the cast achieved the best results. The protagonist, Antonio Nagore, is a young tenor with a powerful timbre rich in overtones, but only in the low-middle range, inasmuch as he encountered considerable difficulties in sustaining high notes. Practically every note above the staff (and Don Carlo's tessitura is not particularly high-lying) turned out to be either unfocused, or off pitch, or both. I must note that I was not able to listen to his rendition of *Io la vidi*: due to rather clumsy management of the box office, so I will reserve my judgment of this character's only aria. Gary Lehman is a singer with a complex artistic past: beginning as a baritone, he later sang as a tenor with some success, then very recently switched back to the F clef. He is in any case an artist of remarkable musicianship, and if a certain lack of balance could be perceived in his vocal production (uncertainty as to where to perform the *passaggio*, sometimes as a baritone on a E flat, sometimes as a tenor a few steps higher), it is surely due to the abrupt gear-switches to which he has subjected his voice. We can recommend in any case that he not attempt into any Verdi roles other than Posa and (perhaps) Ford and Germont.

The triumphant hero of the evening was Ronaldo Gialotti. Of course forty years of singing do take their toll, but his impeccable style, clean diction and above all his refined technique allowed him to defy time. Stefan Skafarowsky was an acceptable Inquisitore but nothing more. His voice, though extended and secure in its high range, is dry and opaque. Besides, he lacked power and authority: nobody could have been frightened of him. Priscilla Baskerville has no business performing role of Elisabetta with her arid and guttural voice; Mariana Paunova, who in the past has been a respectable Eboli, seemed ill at ease in the agility of the Veil Song, short on volume and often off pitch in the rest of the opera. Frankly, Ana Rojas was miscast as the Heavenly Voice.

Although tarrying at times in tempi that were too slow (especially in the *Auto-da-fé* scene), Alfredo Sillipigni was gentle and delicate in the more intimate scenes, such as the first act Elisabetta-Eboli-Posa trio, or the garden scene at the beginning of the second act, as well as secure and vigorous in the confrontations between Posa and Filippo, and Filippo and the Inquisitor. We are certain the effect would have been even more positive had Sillipigni chosen a more reliable cast of singers. The chorus, conducted by David Malullo, was surprisingly good. Sometimes scantiness of means sharpens the wit. This was certainly not the case in Bernard Uzan's production.

— Nick Fishbone

# rrrreaders rrrrant!

To the Grossmachtigen Prinzessinen Editors/Contributors:

There are simply no words (or rather, the very words themselves) to describe what a fabulous publication *Parterre Box* is. It is the queerest zine that has ever existed, and truly the dream of life for all of us opera fairies. My beloved mate (Kevin) is also a Konigin der Oper, and one copy of the zine is sometimes not enough in the first weeks of its arrival (he hides it sometimes, so that he can have it all to himself, imagine). We savor it, we relish it, we swoon and sigh, we read it aloud to each other and shriek with laughter, and we talk about it endlessly afterwards. We love to agree with it, we love to disagree with it, WE LOVE IT SO MUCH!!! Dear, darling James, blessed La Cieca, the precious, adorable Enzo Bordello, the brilliant Dr. Repertoire--what wit, perception, intelligence, but most important, what QUEENINESS!!! What an enrichment in our lives, what a joy; how did we ever live and breathe without it? (Did I say there were no words?)

With deeply affected humility and histrionic modesty I offer my own queenly rantings about my ascent into the world of queer opera. (I hope I don't geev too mahch!)

Ah, THE experience that served as my passage into the world of opera queerness. It was, I believe, somewhere in 1960. I started out as a high school Moffo fan (wasn't really quite queer yet - sorry, Mr. Koestenbaum!), and quickly moved on to Zinka (getting queerer, no?), who frankly stunted my growth for years, as, fine as she sometimes was, being a Zinka queen meant not liking those rivals who were greater and more accomplished (Leontyne, Leonie, Tebaldi, to name three), and who I of course have subsequently come to adore as among the brightest in the Diva firmament, while my feelings toward the late Yugoslav have adjusted to include acknowledgment of her technical shortcomings, wincing at the uncomfortable sounds on many of her commercial recordings (done a bit too late, alas), and lamenting her lack of, uh, intellectual prowess.

Of course, there will always be in my queenly heart the memory of how much of an obsession she was to me in my tender youth. I did, by the bye, get to attend her three times--a '64 Desdemona that was pretty good, and two *Cheniers* in the old Met's final season, one of them not so good, and one really lovely. I cried like a baby queen all three times, of course. The Otello on this occasion was Dimitir Uzounov, who I had already heard as Tannhauser in Chicago: He was a pretty lousy singer, but the most memorable part of this Otello was that he was a bit puny in size, and it looked for all the

world as if this ample Desdemona, had she taken it into her head, could have given him an arm drag and a whip right into the first tier boxes. She didn't, though, because, as Ira Siff pointed out in his tale last time, Zinka's topmost concern, while the life was being squeezed out of her, was to keep her nightie down, covering those considerable legs of hers.

Zinka, however, was not a part of the defining event, the moment when I passed from being interested in opera and liking certain singers, some bad, some great, to being a full-blooded queer and queeny opera homo fag. (Does it show that I have been aching for all of those decades to have at a good writing/rant at opera queenery?)

Well, while still in the Moffo phase (brief, you understand, very brief), I joined the Angel Record Club, and as one of my introductory discs, I chose Mme. Callas's *Puccini Heroines*. At the time, I very much liked the operas of The Pooch as well as the other spaghetti and cheese producers, not yet knowing those of Monteverdi, Wagner, Mozart, Tschaikovsky, Debussy, Beethoven, Smetana, Dvorak, Janacek, Mussourgsky, Berg, Britten--you know, those real composers who set some drama or other to real, beautiful music which is worth it on its own merits. I did not yet know Maria's art or voice at all, but I was sure dazzled with the blond Italian movie star picture on the cover of the LP. I immediately found her voice beautiful, her singing hypnotic, and, frankly, I found all the blather about her notorious "wobble" so blindly, ignorantly beside the point. Perhaps part of the reason is that I heard her before I heard the blather; I have several times played her records for folks who don't listen to opera and have never heard the blather: they have always found her voice beautiful. Go figure!

(BTW, Amelita Galli-Curci ("Goiter-Chicken") was another minor passion predating the Moffo/Zinka years--how, I now wonder when I hear that boring, palid, imbecilic sound of her standing with her little beak stuck right in the recording horn, still unable to cluck consistently on pitch or sound human, could I have adored her so? You know, Amelita was the first of a line of famous and adored twittering idiots, and I hold her responsible for the legacy of Lily Pond, Roberta's Peter, and Beverly Silly; fortunately for our sensibilities, the current representation of this gaggle of singers, Mariella Devia, is neither famous or adored, so perhaps the species is becoming extinct...)

ANYWAY, to continue: I shared a bedroom with my 6 year old brother. He went to bed much earlier than I, of course, and thus when I retired for the night, I would stack a few LPs on my cheap portable toy record player and, snuggled under the covers, listen to them until they finished or I fell asleep. It was a precious time, just

me and music alone together. One night, the moon was full, and before I put on the records I opened the blinds to let the silvery moonlight in. Softly the beginning of *In quelle trine morbide* whispered from the clunky phonograph, and Her Voice floated out, mixing with the moonlight and my lonely early adolescence, and something irrevocable clicked--I knew that I had entered a world of magic, and that I would never be the same. However out of place I felt in my life, I belonged to this world. And Maria Callas had taken me there.

So, that was my passage into opera queenery. But I can't end this story without a mention of a couple of the many great performances I have heard over the years, since it is really when we are present in the dark vastness before the stage that we are transported to the queer land of opera. I could rave on for pages (whoops, already have!), but I shall limit myself to three of the most memorable, looking back on them from all these years.

1) I was in the Navy (that, my loves, is certainly another story, and not a fun one!), and in the summer of '68, after graduating from the Eastman Schiessschule gegen Musik and before going off to boot camp and four long years of misery, I got a ticket for a post season concert of the Chicago Symphony' *L'Italiana in Algeri* with Mme. Horne and a bunch of other folks. There was no staging, although I remember Horne looking, acting and being enchanting. What passion-filled, extraordinary singing! Huge, luscious, colorful, expressive voice, and fioritura like I had never heard, not Sutherland, not Berganza, not nobody. And she was beautiful to look at and meltingly charming. I left that night thinking Well, I never heard Schumann-Heink, or Ponselle, or Supervia, but I've heard Marilyn Horne, and I wouldn't trade her for... well, maybe for Supervia, but no one else.

2) In January of '71 I managed to get myself transferred to the Brooklyn Navy Yard. I rushed to the Met to get some tickets, and came away with tickets for three performances of *Die Frau ohne Scheisshaus* (I didn't then realize what excrement the music in this opera is), two with Christa and one with (gasp!) Inge Borkh. Well, Christa bought a one way ticket back to mezzoland after the broadcast, so Inge sang all the rest. This night in particular, she was the Inge of the 50's records. She was gorgeous of face, figure and voice, acted as if she were in a compelling play (rather than a schlag-laden strudel of an opera), and made me forget everything (even Irene Dalis, bellowing like an ox and looking like nothing on earth, and Robert Nagy looking like Col. Sanders and sounding like the honored guest at a hog-tie). And as if that weren't enough, Leonie was carrying on as only Leonie can, sensation beyond sensation, in the prime of her 25 year prime. I left that performance after bravoing myself hoarse, and got back to the ratty barracks, and

couldn't sleep for hours, my hands stinging, my ears full of gloriousness I hardly could believe I had actually heard, and my mind full of Inge.

3) I came late, alas, to La Gran Scena Opera Co. and the incandescent Mme. Vera Galupe-Borkhz, first hearing them/her in 1993. Talk about life altering revelations! The company, for all you queens goofy enough not to have seen them, is made up of the most hilarious, talented, artistic male Divas in the world. Mme. Herself is, to my perception, the crowning glory of Opera at the end of the 20th Century, and the true heir(ess) to the tradition of (going back only as far as recordings) Lili Lehmann, Emma Calve, Emmy Destinn, Claudia Muzio, and, oh, what the hell, Maria Callas too. And I'm not kidding. She sees how ridiculous and hilarious opera really is, and performs accordingly, but with a great, wonderful voice and dramatic artistry that really puts her up there with those other Goddesses. And since the historical Divas took opera quite seriously, Mme. Galupe-Borkhz actually takes us to yet another level of Art.

I love opera. There's nothing queerer in the world than opera, not even fellows sucking each others dicks! May all of our joys and pleasures with opera increase exponentially, like Zinka's chins!

Tons of love, Paul

Amici,

Tomorrow I may revert to kissing frogs, but tonight I kissed Leontyne Price. **Borders Books and Music** sits just off Union Square in downtown San Francisco, and that's where we queued up for the diva whose voice was the first I fell in love with. Arriving at 5:00 for the 6:00 signing, I found myself about 40th in line, behind a police barricade and in front of the big plate-glass window that showcased a larger-than-life-size photo of Miss Price (from her new *Carnegie Hall* album). When pedestrians asked us what was going on, we'd point to the photo. If they registered a blank, we'd make unkind remarks after they'd left. It's my personal opinion that ignorance of Leontyne Price is grounds for having your right to vote rescinded.

At 5:50, the limousine pulled up right where we were standing. When Miss Price emerged, everyone was dumbstruck. I managed to shout "Brava, diva!" Then everyone burst into applause. Head cheerleader!! She wore black with some curvy red lines in it, dress and turban. Sorry, that's the best I can do. (This ignorance of women's fashion has led some to question my professed sexual orientation.)

She began signing immediately. We soon moved inside; her CDs were being played over the sound system. As the recitative to "Tacea la notte" neared its conclusion, Miss Price began singing

along with her recording of perhaps 35 years ago; the voices sounded \*exactly\* the same. She rushed the "Ascolta" a bit, and glared at the speaker when the recording lagged behind her. More applause.

The line was situated so that, once you reached the front, you were facing the great diva. As I stood at the head of the line, all my carefully rehearsed lines vanished from memory. I strode forward, Miss Price made eye contact with me and extended her hand.

I grasped it and mumbled, "Sorry for the gelida manina."

"Oh, don't worry about it," she replied.

"Miss Price," I said, "You...look...fabulous!" And she did.

Cupping her hands and giving that "c'mere" gesture, she beamed and said, "Ooooh, give me more!"

We both laughed, and I finally started breathing. "You've obviously made a pact with Mephistopheles," I continued, and she dimpled. As she signed the three libretti I had brought along, I said, "I fell in love with your voice 30 years ago, and I'm still besotted."

"It's forty-one, no, forty-two years now," she replied.

"...and still counting," I added. "Will we get to hear you here in the future?"

"I don't know," she answered.

"Any plans for performances on the West Coast at all?"

"Not right now."

She had finished signing my libretti. I asked, "May I come around there and give you a little peck on the cheek?"

"Come on around," she invited.

And I came around.

John

Dear Parterre Box:

Well, since I've never quite considered myself an opera *queen* (as apart from a gay man who loves opera, but a lot of other classical music and a fair amount of theater as well), and since my first time wasn't the great experiential discontinuity it seems to have been for others, I don't really feel qualified to talk about "My First Diva Experience." Still, here goes...

I was born and bred in Buffalo, New York, which at the time was the second largest city in the United States without an opera company to call its own. My mother, however, is an opera buff, with a particular love for Mozart, Rossini, and Handel, and the sort of convoluted love-hate relationship with Verdi and Puccini you would expect from a politically aware feminist. So I grew up with the recorded voices ringing in my ears of such divas as Callas, Sutherland, Sills (not Caballe, surprisingly, but only because my

mother, being also an economical woman, was not one to buy multiple versions of even her favorite operas), Berganza, and Baker.

But the diva my mother adored above all others was Marilyn Horne; she bought all her recordings, even of *La Navarraise* and *Frauenliebe und Leben*, and when Horne gave a recital in Buffalo one season, my mother, who generally hated driving downtown to the local concert hall, got tickets for the two of us, and the evening of the recital was perfectly star-struck, buying every bit of Horne-related paraphernalia in sight (admittedly not much, but it's the thought that counts).

And I shared her admiration; I liked how Horne's voice could do everything she wanted it to do without the slightest strain, as well as the odd little shades and quavers (particularly in the lower octave) that made you sense there was a heart and a mind there. As a result, I, whose teenage musical tastes were otherwise pretty austere, grew up to appreciate the services of a really good diva... (well, considering how I turned out, this *can't* be a double entendre, can it?)

Still, canned diva just isn't the same as diva live. Not until I went off to graduate school at the University of California at Berkeley in 1980 did I get a chance to see world-class opera live across the San Francisco Bay; naturally I took that chance (until I came out three years later, opera was virtually the only thing that could get me across the Bay). My first chance that October was *Jenufa* with Elisabeth Söderström, a name that, brought up as I was on the bel canto revival, I hardly recognized.

I remember that I missed a subway connection and was late to the performance, not getting in until after Kostelnicka (Sena Jurinac) had dismissed the recruiting party. I remember in the second act seeing Söderström running about the stage in a state of high desperation and then settling down to pray (this was her post-partial delirium), and, thinking that I knew the plot of *Jenufa* better than I did and not having read the libretto, wondering, "This is marvelous! What ever could they be singing/speaking?"

I remember that after the performance I ran into a grad-school colleague and an older woman she had met who said that fifty-something Söderström reminded her of her teenage daughter, and we discussed the impact the performance had made on us. And in between? Söderström really made an impact, enough of an impact to get me to attend her American farewell in *Der Rosenkavalier* seven and a half years later; I'm still sorting it out even now. And as in any violently emotional experience, you may not remember the details too well; I feel ashamed not being able to describe the details of her singing, but I assure you she sounded great.

Brian Newhouse

Dear Box:

Even though I am a straight opera queen, you can count me in on the Boo-fest for the tenor of unusual size. [see "Questo e Quello" elsewhere in this issue] It seems to me that it would be an extreme disservice to the exalted art of opera not to at least let Pav know that he is no longer a welcome vocal talent in New York.

I believe there is a miked stage in a swamp in New Jersey where he can screw up the words to simple Italian folk songs for an appreciative audience of husbands dragged by their big-haired lunchbox packing wives. Maybe John Tesh could open with the Colorado Symphony providing the back-up under the watchful eye of Maestro Placido Domingo, since it looks like that's the only place he'll find work in front of an orchestra.

I can see it now, Tesh comes out with Placido, they bow and then lay into a mean instrumental jazz fusion classical new age version of the *Lamento di Federico* while Bart Connor deftly navigates the pommel horse. Guys snuggle down in their seats with their babes, and say things like,

"Man, are we in for a slamming evening";

"Wow, that Tesh can really tickle the Ivories, and that Domingo I thought he could only sing, but he also waves his arms real nice"; and

"Do you think Bart ever hurts himself on one of those rings?".

Next comes the Tenor Himself suspended from super heavy duty cables, flying over the audience. It's like a Pink Floyd concert. The laser light show begins as the Pav removes his hanky and sings *La Donna e Mobile* SOLO!!!. That's right, he sings all three parts at the end like the Three Tenors at Dodger Stadium. The place erupts, the crowd goes ballistic. He is the greatest tenor of all time! He can sing the work of three men by himself!!

Next comes a lot of smoke and girls dancing with feather fans. Can it be? Yes, it's *Nessun Dorma*, also SOLO! The crowd can't believe it. Who is this God? And then as suddenly as it began the Pav is lowered from the stage (having completed the work of *six* tenors by my calculation) all in one evening. Traffic is backed up for miles on the turnpike.

Yes, the Pav and New Jersey: made for each other.

Peace, BD

parterre box [the queer opera zine]

# A kind of quiet...

Randall Wong has the distinction of being the first male soprano ever to appear with the San Francisco Opera. A long time San Francisco resident, he is the creator of the role of Henry Wong in *Harvey Milk* (having sung at both the Houston and New York premieres), and has appeared in the Wallace and Korie composer/ librettist team's first major work, *Where's Dick?* A former member of Chanticleer, a voice such as Wong's is by necessity associated with Baroque and early music, and he appears frequently productions of Baroque operas, both in the U.S. and Europe. In connection with *Harvey Milk*'s San Francisco premiere, writer/singer/producer Ching Chang interviewed Wong, discussing *Harvey* the opera, *Harvey* the man, performers in academia, and gay life for Asian males in the seventies, among other things.

CC: The history of your involvement with *Harvey Milk* dates from its very beginning. How did you first hear about it?

RW: I first met Wallace and Korie in 1988 via a double route; the late Scott Heumann of Houston Grand Opera (who knew me from recordings) and a friend from Stanford, Nina Gilbert, who was also a friend of Michael Korie's. I sent them some tapes, and they invited me to participate in the New York readings of *Where's Dick?* Because of my involvement with Chanticleer at the time, I wasn't able to be part of it. But when the Houston Grand Opera mounted the work in 1989, they invited me to sing the role of Boldface Headlines. Boldface was rewritten for me to account for my higher range; it was originally a more conservative countertenor role, but after the rewrite, it included the now infamous high C-sharp and a string of high B's. The following year, I toured with Wallace and Korie, and we recorded the *Kabbalah* on Koch. It was around '91 or '92 when Wallace and Korie first discussed the *Harvey* commission, and the possibility of a role for me.

CC: Are you in fact or by implication part of the composite fictional character Henry Wong? Are there any artistic or dramatic implications from casting him as a male soprano? Did anyone find that portraying a male Asian character with a voice having little discernible testosterone would be controversial or offensive?

RW: I don't think that I am a dramatic source for Henry Wong; he's a composite of Henry Der and activist Michael Wong. The text for Henry Wong's aria comes in large part from Henry Der's actual words. And though I wasn't privy to the discussions, my impression is that the vocal casting was originally controversial. Perhaps there was a concern that a male soprano could be too bizarre or "unrealistic" (back when realism was an issue) for contemporary opera audiences, but Wallace and Korie made the decision on purely musical grounds. Since most of the character in this opera are male, a higher voice would provide musical relief. But as far as the Asian issue, Henry Wong as a male soprano actually pays homage to the Asian performing

traditions, where high-pitched singing (not to mention gender reversal) is common.

CC: Despite the notoriety their stage works have gained, Wallace and Korie are for the most part an unknown quantity in California. How do you characterize Stewart Wallace and Michael Korie's collaborations?

RW: I honestly don't know how to begin describing Wallace and Korie's collaborations, except that people used to assume that they were lovers, which is not true. Maybe it's because they seem to have an incredible sympathy for each other's gifts. But of course, one can see some similarities between *Harvey Milk* and *Where's Dick?*, for instance. Musically both works are very eclectic, occasionally pop music-colored, with a strong sense of architecture keeping it from flying away. The libretti however are extremely different. *Where's Dick?* was a wild and relentless black comedy, an America gone bad in nightmare cartoon style; the sweet or serious musical moments taken in this context took on a kind of evil parodistic cast. *Harvey Milk* has ample comic moments, but balanced with the serious and deeply felt; much of *Harvey Milk* is genuinely moving.

CC: Do you think the criticism directed at *Harvey Milk* has been valid? Are there other plans for the work?

RW: There is a recording planned. As far as the criticisms, I really can't say; I've been involved with the work for too long to be objective. One criticism, that the music is too eclectic and that Stewart is a magpie is one I take issue with; I think that the musical eclecticism is a strength rather than a weakness and that Wallace juggles the different styles with finesse. Some have taken issue with the gay content, some with the Jewish; others just feel obligated to find something to take issue with.

CC: Among the leads in *Harvey Milk*, you're possibly the only one who actually lived in San Francisco during the late seventies, and hence was able to witness the events depicted. How do you remember them?

RW: Those were the years I was finishing college, and was looking toward building some sort of career. I never lived in the Castro itself, so was never able to participate in the District 5 election. But Harvey was constantly in the papers, on television, and there was also his column on the *Bay Area Reporter*. Although he was an important political force in the city, he could sometimes come across as an annoying media hog. I remember the assassinations vividly; they happened at about the same time as congressman Leo Ryan's assassination and the Jonestown massacre. I was profoundly shocked and depressed with all these events happening in succession; it felt like the world had flipped. In the Houston rehearsals, it all felt kind of "twilight zoney" and it took effort to distance myself emotionally from what I was singing. Wouldn't you agree that Henry's aria ["A kind of quiet descended on the City. And Chinatown was quiet..."] is the saddest moment in the opera?

CC: Even in San Francisco, gay life wasn't taken for granted during Harvey's times, as it often is nowadays. People were often beaten up and died for being

gay. Chinese families in particular would often throw out and disown their gay sons in shame. How was growing up back then like? Were you out?

**RW:** I first moved to The City in 1973, I was very young; in '73 the Castro was becoming a gay neighborhood but it hadn't yet reached its saturation point. Bars and baths were pretty much part of a gay man's existence back in those now legendary days; I was peripherally involved, not an active barfly, but partook of an occasional drink or foray into the tubs. Choices open to young Asian gay men were pretty much limited to playing geisha to tiresome rice queens. Since I didn't really see myself fitting into this role, my participation was by choice limited.

**CC:** You are, of course, known for your work in period repertoire, as well as for your work with Meredith Monk, and now, Wallace and Korie. You have also taught at colleges and universities. How are the rewards different in the various aspects of your professional life, compared to being involved in a project of this scope?

**RW:** If you asked me this years ago, I would not have foreseen the amount of contemporary work I would be doing now. I guess learning how to count and those exercises in Modus Novus [a didactic compendium designed to teach musicianship for contemporary music] have paid off. While balancing early and modern repertoire would seem to be two different hats, they are not so fundamentally different. But teaching music can be like teaching anatomy. We analyze harmony, counterpoint, etc., just as one dissects a frog into its component heart, lungs, limbs, etc. But after a frog is dissected, is it really a frog anymore? Does it breathe? Obviously, music has to be analyzed to be understood, but in academia it frequently just ends there like a pile of frog guts and never becomes what it is supposed to be. On the other hand, the experience of performing is both terrifying and nurturing at the same time; the terrifying aspects are obvious, but performing music which have invested your belief in can feed your soul. Most of academicians have no concept of what performance entails outside of a university setting. Back when I was negotiating sabbatical leave at UC Santa Cruz for the Houston performances of *Harvey Milk*, the department chairman actually asked me in all seriousness to phone David Gockley [General Director of the Houston Grand Opera] and see if he could change the dates of the opera, to accommodate a music theory class. We know what Gockley's response would have been to that. I am sure that there are academic environments out there not musically thwarted by willfully provincial individuals, which are congenial and supportive of what faculty performers can bring to their programs, but unfortunately, these settings are by and large the exception.

(This interview first appeared in a slightly different version in the November 1 issue of the *SF Bay Times*.)

## parterre box talks to Klaus Tink

*The masterclasses of Klaus Tink, one of New York's most revered and venerable coaches of operatic repertoire, are an integral part of the training of singers of the Metropolitan Opera's Young Artists Development Program. We spoke to Mr. Tink at his studio in Manhattan's Upper West Side.*

parterre box: Mr. Tink...

Klaus Tink: Please. No need to be so formal. Just call me "Maestro".

pb: Uh, Maestro, can a singer have a career today without strong coaching?

Klaus Tink: Ha! I do not think a singer today can produce a tone without coaching. You know, when young singers arrive in my studio fresh from the conservatory, their voices are invariably so free, so natural. Revolting! It's my job to put an end to that. Singers for some reason prefer that "vocal" sound, which of course lacks the requisite "strained" timbre. It usually takes several sessions before a young singer understands the importance of a manufactured sound. A pianist is essential for this process. A "teacher" might be helpful, but teachers are often too sympathetic to singers. Singers really do not understand music and never have. God knows they do not understand singing.

pb: But pianists do?

KT: Absolutely. After all, most composers were actually sitting at pianos when they composed opera, and it only makes sense that the great operatic roles were really written for pianos.

pb: How do you work with singers in the Young Artist Program?

KT: First and foremost, I try to impress upon them the fact that interpreting a role is NOT their job. Their job is to do what the coach tells them to do.

pb: How do you accomplish this?

KT: The best way to break a young singer down is to use the term "Fach" as much as possible, and, of course, to confuse them. If a soprano has a particularly large and penetrating voice, you must tell her she is a soubrette. Women with sweet clear voices need to understand that an ugly sound is essential in dramatic parts. With men it is a little different. They are all just "Lazy Tenors": there really is no other vocal type for men. Except tenors, of course: they are all really recitalists. Now, if a male singer has a particularly large and penetrating instrument, I try to... but that is another story.

pb: What are your methods?

KT: Playing recordings of great artists is important. A young lyric soprano cannot go wrong if she has good example to follow, such as Ramon Vinay. A young dramatic tenor should listen to Emma Kirkby or



Elly Ameling. Another useful tool is hog calling. If a prize hog comes running while you are singing "Deh rendetemi la speme", then you have found the correct sound. Unfortunately, the conservatories do not tell them this, so we have to.

pb: Do you use any vocal exercises?

KT: I have developed a series of warmups that work as follows: the singer, starting with a cold voice, attempts to sing the most delicate pianissimo passages while imagining herself whispering into the telephone while hiding from an ax-murderer. That insures the tone will be breathy, yet tense. Meanwhile I yell at her that she is too old to have a career, or lazy, or whatever. Rude remarks about physical appearance are some of my favorites.

pb: What about breathing?

KT: Oh, go right ahead.

pb: No, I mean, what about breathing for singers?

KT: Breathing is highly overrated. After all, you have to breathe anyway, right? The important thing is building up the muscles of the neck and jaw so you can really push that sound out. After all, singing happens only in one tiny part of the body—the throat. So obviously the ideal is to have a throaty sound. You would not believe how hard it is to get singers to take the voice out of the mask and let it fall back into the throat.

pb: Isn't a throaty sound a bit of a handicap in a large theater?

KT: Who ever sings in a large theater? A real singer's whole career takes place at coachings and auditions. That is why the most important goal for a singer is to learn to sound impressive in a small, acoustically dry room.

pb: Uh, speaking of dry rooms, I hate to mention it, but it's quite warm in here.

KT: Whine, whine, whine. Are you sure you are not a singer? Look, my cats prefer it warm and dry. So you will just have to get used to it.

pb: You obviously feel very strongly about your position as coach.

KT: I am merely being practical. You have to work fast in a coaching, because you only get fifteen to twenty minutes with each student.

pb: Why so short a time?

KT: Because after a quarter-hour with me, most singers are so hoarse they cannot even phonate. Go for the burn, that is my motto.

pb: And your methods have achieved great success, we hear.

KT: I am proud to say that many of our Young Artists go on to sing comprimario parts all over the eastern seaboard, some of them for as long as five or six years before retiring and accepting a teaching position with a junior college. This would never happen without the Program showing them the way.

DSG

This is a strange year for San Francisco's opera company. The house is dark for a "seismic refit" (French for "patching up decades of earthquake damage") So the SFO has commandeered two other venues: big shows in the Civic Center Masonic Hall, smaller things in the old Orpheum Theater, a disused vaudeville house.

The Orpheum is located on the fringe of the Tenderloin District; it's so difficult to keep one's mind on high culture whilst stepping gingerly over the foamy rivulets of fresh piss that trickle across the sidewalks adjoining the entrance to the theater. And in case there was any doubt as to the sleaziness of this venue, one had only to visit the balcony men's room, which had the following graffiti above the urinals:

Cracks in the plaster, tra la la  
Better pee faster, tra la la.

next to a gaping gash bristling with exposed chickenwire. Anywhere else, operaloving boys would have converted it into a gloryhole, but in SF the message was clear:

REPAIR ME!

Harvey Milk was gay.

Opera is gay.

San Francisco is gay.

So an opera about Harvey Milk performed by the San Francisco Opera should be gayer than a duet for Jodie Foster and John Travolta. Unfortunately, it wasn't gay at all. It was sad. It was a bust. Worst of all, it was not necessary.

Peter Hunter and Richard Breath saw *Harvey Milk* when it premiered in Houston a couple of years ago. But they were already out in the Bay Area for *Tales of Hoffman*, and, since the paper promised major revision to the opera (including a reorchestration de-emphasizing those Broadway-style synthesizers), they were lured to the Orpheum Firetrap.

Mistake. This popera is still all surface, no depth, fragmented scenes choochoosing across the stage in no particular direction and to no particular purpose. And the queens in the audience were not best pleased to see themselves "opera"-ted on during the Castro scenes. (Parisian courtesans must have reacted the same way to *Traviata*.)

References to Tessi Tura, the spectacle of Diane Feinstein faghagging around, men in undies singing a love duet—you'd think this would spell instant success. All it did was make us long for next year, when we can spend a little time in the company of Elektra and Pelleas instead of Dan White and Harvey Milk.

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The *Hoffman* at the Civic Center was a satisfying treat. Gerald Howland's unit set effectively used the giant arena stage, setting a gigantic writing quill dripping blood above the action. Dozens of tiny dolls were strategically placed for the Olympia scene; black mourning wreaths set the tone for Antonia. During the final (Giulietta) act, the stage was covered with mirrors. A trap door facilitated unexpected entrances and exits.

The inclusion of additional music for Nicklausse and the Muse (the same character in this production) would have made for a very long night, had not other numbers been cut, including half of Frantz's "méthode" aria. It was a welcome tradeoff, because mezzo Ruxandra Donose (replacing Sheri Greenawald) has a major voice; she deserves to be heard in other big houses.

Jerry Hadley (*Hoffman*) was in good voice, though he opted out of some of the Kraus/Gedda high notes, which Offenbach probably didn't write anyway. But the role was still strenuous, because he never left the stage. Even during other singers' arias, he and Nicklausse stalked the stage in slo-mo, presumably struggling between Love and Art. We found it distracting, and I'm sure Mr. Hadley found it draining.

Sam Ramey was Sam Ramey: loud, virile, volcanic, a national treasure. One hopes his audiences appreciate his magnificent Big Villain shows.

Tracy Dahled herself up for Olympia, pinging out notes so high that NASA is still looking for them. Patricia Racette's Antonia came close to stealing the show with her gorgeously delicate voice. Her "Traviata" pathos provided the real climax of the opera, casting a shadow over the Giulietta scene, which was burdened with too much "new" music.

After the sordid pissoirs at the Orpheum, the gigantic facilities at the Civic Center seemed truly splendid. Oh, the sight of the throng of male operagoers and orchestra personnel entering this cavernous tea room! One violinist was trying to pee into a urinal while holding his violin and bow aloft in a pose reminiscent of the Statue of Liberty. A friendly audience member offered to "hold his instrument" while the player did his business (evoking hearty laughter from fellow urinators), but the violinist managed the full repertoire of peeing, shaking, tucking and zipping with his left hand solo.

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When rumors first bubbled up three years ago that Thomas Hampson and Ruth Ann Swenson were to star in *Hamlet*, opera queens west of the Mississippi began creaming their jeans in anticipation of savoring the thick purple syrup to be poured out by beautiful young singers. Unfortunately, so many things can go wrong betwixt the signing of a contract and the opening night curtain. Massive weight gain, for one. Hampson, once a ringer for Hugh Grant, now resembles Gerard Depardieu. He'd make a more plausible Falstaff than Hamlet. And Missy Ruth Ann is the image of Sally Struthers.

Often in cases like these, one can close the eyes and revel in voluptuous vocalism. But not here. Hampson's sound has grown coarse and wooly, unable to sustain a line. In place of vibrato, there's a wobble on sustained notes. He barked, yelled, growled and roared, varied with an occasional croon. What he did to the drinking song is criminal. He's ready to move on to Alfio and

Scarpia. Plus, his French diction is wretched: Richard's French I instructor in the Ozarks of Missouri had a more authentic accent.

Missy still has those high notes and a spectacular trill somewhere between those of Sills and Sutherland, a very good territory to inhabit. She served up her feast of High Note Tartare in the native tongue of her illustrious predecessor Joan Sutherland, which is to say in no language at all. I was upset to note the program book reported that Missy is about to take on *Traviata* in Chicago; it looks as if she is on the Lost Voice Highway. Can *Norma* be far behind?

The production team of Colin Graham and Gerald Howland trotted out every cliché in the book:

- Costumes suggested 1896 Paris, not medieval Denmark
- Mimed action during the prelude behind a murky-lit scrim
- A blond-wood unit set with crazily-tilted ramps

This set was the most hideous cheap thing imaginable-- Danish Modern on No Budget. Can't the royal family of Denmark afford even a tapestry or two? When it came time for Ophelie to take a swim, three tiny clumps of reeds slid into the castle and blue lights flickered on the scrim. One almost longed for Zeffirelli, who would surely have diverted the Mississippi onto the stage. If Hell has an opera house, its acoustics must match those of the Orpheum. One assumes there were woodwinds in the pit, but no one could hear them.

Benoit Boutet as Laertes has a nice French tenor sound in the middle range, but above the staff he sounded like a duck with a kazoo. His performance was bad enough to make Mother Teresa boo. Respected artists Robert Lloyd and Judith Forst were wasted on the fourth-rate slop Claudius and Gertrude have to sing. Ms. Forst gave her all-- emotion, commitment, volume, expression, but the part let her down.

In one of those ironies that make operagoing such a delight, the First Gravedigger woke us all up about 10:30 with a glamorous, ringing baritone that made everyone wish he were the one singing Hamlet. This talented hunk, who is booked for Escamillo, Papageno and Sharpless in some minor-league American houses this year, is named Bojan Knezevic. Keep your eye on him.

Lofti Mansouri must have a thing for baby-faced puppies. I'll bet both Yves Abel, the conductor, and Robert Perdziola, the costume designer, have to show ID when they go to the disco. One prays that Mr. Mansouri can reopen the War Memorial as scheduled in September of 1997, preferably with a production that does not star either Hampson or Swenson. (I can't wait for the Met's *Puritani*!)

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Next, we saw Borodin's *Prince Igor* in a version prepared by Francesca Zambello, who should never be allowed to direct anything again, with the possible exception of rush-hour traffic in downtown Bangkok. In the program notes she stated, "We have made some cuts and re-ordering, mostly in the traditional Acts III, IV and V." And what that means is, she didn't much care for what Rinsky-Korsakov and Glauzonov did to the mountains of unfinished pages, so she did what she damn well pleased. The result: an abortion. Everyone was dressed the fashions of the fin-de-siecle: Prince Igor was a

Romanov Czar in splendid white naval uniform; all the ladies sported fabulously chic Worth frocks. In this arena setting, the orchestra was placed 30 feet above the action and hidden behind a scrim. The stage thrust into the audience for an almost in-the-round feeling, which means that we in the less-expensive seats spent most of the night looking at the singers' backs. Another novelty was the myriad of closed-circuit TV monitors everywhere in the house, showing the singers and the audience what the conductor was doing.

Lauren Flanigan was amazing as Yaroslavna. She sang her last-act lament with her head buried in her arms, nonetheless floating sustained high pianissimi. At one point, the audience applauded her in mid-phrase, thinking her extended scena must be over. When it finally concluded a few minutes later, she was accorded one of the evening's warmest ovations.

The first half of the opera (just one intermission) was all-white to demonstrate to religious purity of the Romanovs. The second half was all-red - to show the bloody, fiery passion of the Polovtsis and Tartars. The epilog was dreary gray to indicate the everlasting suffering of the Russian people. No, subtlety is not this director's calling card. The program bio threatens upcoming productions from La Zambello in Houston, Seattle, Munich and London. You have been warned.

The Polovetisan dances turned out to be stunning eyepoppers, thanks two barechested hubbahubba beefcake boys whose terpsichory was an amalgam of Kirov and Chippendale's.

Alexander Anissimov, sporting five kilos of uncombed hair, managed to triumph over impossible acoustical conditions, delivering a nearly-ideal balance between the thunderous bombasticism and the subtle Rimsky-Korsakov orchestration that would have been lost but for he dozens of suspended mikes (oh, they were there only for the future radio broadcast? Sorry!) The chorus sang with lusty enthusiasm.

And what a surprise to pick up *The Bay Area Reporter*, SF's FABulous gay paper, and discover a nice long mention of *parterre box*, including a quotation of one of Richard's best lines!

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Is Chicago the only major city that still dresses up for Opening Night? We're talking top hats and capes on some of those queens! The ritual also includes the spectacle of ancient crones coiffed in red or blonde and bedizened in furs and jewels tottering up the steps and into the lobby as curious gawkers form a gauntlet and cheer them on with lusty cries of "You go, girl!" A quick gulp of dollar-a-sip champagne from a plastic flute, then into the auditorium for an Ivesian 90-part harmony singalong of the National Anthem -- now we were in the mood for GRAND opera!

For any given large-scale opera, there seems to be only one cast available at a time, and, like the Olympics, only one city gets it at a time. The Chicago cast of *Don Carlo* could just have easily been performing at La Scala, Vienna, the Met or Covent Garden. We got a hothouse verismo Eboli (Zajick), a belcanto Rodrigo (Chernov), a Mozartean Elisabetta (Vaness), and a total cipher in the title role (Sylvester). That left Sam Ramey as Filippo to steal the show. They

omitted the whole Fontainebleau act but inserted the brief scene where Elisabetta and Eboli exchange cloaks in the dark, after which, bizarrely enough, Zajick won a round of applause!

Thanks to Sonja Frisell and Gianni Quaranta, the sets were bare-bones minimal and the staging basic high-school march-and-pose. The radio broadcast next spring will, I hope, edit the auto-da-fe-scene to repair that clunker of a high note hit by Sylvester (the same note that caused Pavarotti such grief at La Scala a couple of years ago.)

Mourn not the passing of Cossotto, Verrett and Bumbry from the role of Eboli. Dolora Zajick of the velociraptor high notes and battery-acid chest tones is still here. That anyone could sing "O don fatale" with such volume in so large a house as Chicago is amazing; that she could do it with such blistering attitude as to strip the gold paint of the ceiling is almost unbelievable. And the pianissimo coloratura effects she created during the Veil Song are proof that she has more speeds than just on and off. This woman is amazing, and we should be thankful we have her.

Carol Vaness was quite exquisite in her earlier scenes. In a blonde 'do that made her look lovelier than Ricciarelli, she sang with grace, control and glacial restraint. For once, the farewell to the Countess of AreMBERG sounded like a real aria, not just filler. Things started to fall apart in the Closet Scene when she made some ill-advised Gioconda noises; then she ran out of gas in "Tu che le vanita": not enough support. She and Sylvester threatened a meltdown in the "marziale" section of the final duet. Finally one realized why the Fontainebleau act was missing: these two could barely make it through the four-act version.

Chernov poured out one suave elegant phrase after another, making everything sound like *La Favorita*. (I am still waiting to hear him and Zajick together in that opera!)

Ramey is king of the world, isn't he? Even without his high-heeled chacha boots, when Vaness towered over him, he sounded like a giant. The wardrobe designer did not do him any favors by dressing him in tights that displayed his skinny legs, but it was a great performance anyway, leaving us all buzzing about how he turned the auto-da-fe scene into a bass aria with chorus backup. Surprise of the evening was Eric Halvarson as the Grand Inquisitor. He outboomed Ramey in their scene. This guy should be singing the biggest roles at the biggest houses.

The Chicago Lyric is without a doubt the most gorgeous opera house in America. She is in splendid estate: the lobbies, the staircases, the proscenium--other major houses should take a lesson and learn from Chicago. The public feels better about the performance when it takes place in a tasteful building that is in good repair. (Someone in the Met's Administration should take a hard look at the peeling ceiling above Family Circle and remember what I've just said.)

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Remember when people rushed to the opera just because Italians were singing? Then came a couple of decades when American superstars dominated the world? Now, it seems, the Russians have taken over. Peter Hunter attended four operas

in two cities in six days, and Russians ruled: Olga Borodina as Carmen, Dmitiri Hvorostovsky as Figaro, Galina Gorchakova as Tosca and Valery Alexeyev as Scarpia.

San Francisco presented *Carmen* in that giant Civic Arena place with its jutting-out stage, which means many of us saw more backs than fronts. Also it means we heard some of the singers and didn't hear others. Crowd favorite Olga Borodina sounded like Marilyn Horne but looked like Elizabeth Dole impersonating Divine at a Senate Halloween party.

The big surprise was Jose Cura as Jose: he is handsome, sounds like Domingo, and stands taller than most divas, which is more than enough to ensure an international career. It's too soon to judge about his acting, which in this production consisted mostly of dodging chairs and swords thrown about by the spitfire Ms. Borodina. Micaela (Mary Mills) made luscious Freni noises in Act 1, then triumphed in the Act 3 aria. Richard Paul Fink was a disappointment as Escamillo. He sounds sensational in the Houston opera house, but was weak and underpowered in this giant auditorium.

Lotfi Mansouri moved his swarms of supers up and down the aisles and all over the three-tiered erector set stage, out Zeffirelli-ing Franco himself. A second-floor bedroom at Lillas Pastia's for the Flower Song was a nice idea, but the final act was so crowded with supers and chorister we could not see Carmen and Jose.

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At the old Orpheum Theater, *Barber* was a delight. The wretched 1992 production was scrapped, and an older one revived, but the main point of this production was some fabulous vocalism. Hvorostovsky was wonderful, cocky and full of himself. He made his first entrance climbing down from the third floor of Bartolo's house, where he had just finished fucking one of the upstairs maids. He then got dressed, flashing a glimpse of his skimpy white briefs as he pulled on his tights. Then, when he put on his pants, he had to reach in and rearrange his cock and balls (heavy lifting!), sending a wave of delightful giggling through the house. (Funny, I don't seem to remember Robert Merrill doing this particular bit!) During the prolonged ovation following his aria, the baritone strutted around the stage as self-satisfied as any rock star. Another highlight of his portrayal was a very extended shtick with a rectal thermometer with which he kept poking Basilio in the butt.

Jennifer Larmore was in amazing voice as Rosina. She combines the rapid turbo coloratura of Bartoli with the soft femininity of Von Stade. The only flaw is a strangely acid hooty quality in the very lowest register. But otherwise she had the audience rhythmically bobbing their heads in time to her fleet passagework. Speaking of fleet, John Del Carlo sang the fastest "A un dottor" in the history of the world: patter at its breakneck best. Alistair Miles was the rock-solid Basilio. Bruce Ford cancelled, so we got Roberto Sacco from the "B" cast as Almaviva. He is the shortest tenor yet: with Ramey's boots on, he might reach Joel Grey's chin. His voice was equally small.

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A couple of days later in Houston, Galina Gorchakova was blasting away as Tosca. It looks like the spirograph has sung a few too many *Flaming Angels* for her own good: now she can only sing loudly, and the high notes are wild to boot. The audience was not happy, but, since Farina and Alexeyev were also very loud, at least we were awake. Please, someone tell me: why do directors feel they have to tinker? In Michael Blakemore's production, at the end of the Te Deum, a worshipper suddenly waved a revolutionary red flag, which brought Scarpia's henchmen descending on him and stomping him, while everyone else just kept singing and praying. There were some unintentional howlers, too: during Act Three we could see stagehands strolling around (in midair?) just beyond the Castel Sant'Angelo.

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The big news in Houston is a new opera, Daniel Catan's *Florencia en el Amazonas*, the first Spanish-language opera commissioned by an American opera company. People approached this piece with trepidation because "new opera" generally means noisy dissonance or boring minimalism. But *Florencia* turned out to be the lushest, most romantic score in decades, with Respighi-like orchestration and a **FABulous** title role for Sheri Greenawald as a diva on a river journey to the legendary opera house of Manaus. Her voluptuous entrance aria won her a prolonged ovation. The audience also went wild for the lyrical love duets, staged with special effects in the style of Magic Realism: pink rain, a ballet of piranhas, and the character Riobobo, who looked like he once had a job as messengerboy to Keikobad. Climax of the opera was a visually-stunning transformation scene in which the heroine becomes a giant green butterfly: the audience was pleased beyond measure.

Other companies (LA and Seattle) have already scheduled this work: this is one new opera that seems to have a shot at survival. Its style may be ultra-retro, but it should please that majority of operagoers who hate everything since *Turandot*.

Not a bad week: Borodina as superstar, Hvorostovsky as superstud, Ramey as supergod, and a wondrously melodic new opera. Life is full of truffles -- if the hogs know where to dig.

Peter & Richard

