

parterre box

(the queer opera zine)

presents its 25th

bulging issue:

Deborah Voigt talks about:

weight loss, tenors,
life in high school
and being a Gay Icon!

The First Ever **Mawrdew
Czgowchwz** Quiz!

La Cieca tries to figure out
Albert Innaurato!

Reviews from **Rome,**
Barcelona and **New York!**

JAMES COMES OUT

(he's NOT an opera queen!)

Dr. Repertoire
discusses "Moedrolle!"

And much much more!

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

parterre box

the queer opera zine



#25: Old Fashioned Girl!

Moedlrollen are short but flashy character parts for a diva whose voice may be wrecked but everything else is still working just **fine**, thank you very much. These "third-career" parts consist, as Christa Ludwig once said, of "witches and old ladies who walk with two sticks": the operatic equivalent of (at best) Simone Signoret in *Madame Roza* or (at worst) Joan Crawford in *Trog*. Mme. Ludwig and her fellow classy dames Regine Crespin, Anja Silja, Evelyn Lear, Leonie Rysanek, Helga Dernesch and Astrid Varnay each added a decade or more to the career by majoring in Weird Old Bats. And the divine Marta herself is still at it in her nineties! Among those artists who are still alive and spitting, indefatigable Dame Gwyneth Jones already seeks the Moedl Way, with engagements as Die Hexe, the Kostelnicka and Begbick on her calendar; her contemporaries Hildegard Behrens and Jessye Norman could do worse than to follow the Jones example. German singers are encouraged to go on performing until they drop; thus the German repertory system is the source of most Moedlrollen. The Italian stagione system, on the other hand, offers relatively few third-career roles. Mythic Magda ("You'll Have to Beat Me to Death with a Stick") Olivero therefore remained a teenaged virgin until well past her 60th year-- in fact, even after she buried her second husband. Widely regarded as "The Energizer Rabbit of Sopranos", Olivero has left her footprints all over *the* autumnal role for Italian divas, Giordano's Fedora.

The core Moedlrollen are:

Herodias

Klytemnaestra

Die Frau in "Erwartung"

Elle in "La Voix Humaine"

Mme. de Croissy

The Old Countess

Leocadia Begbick

The Kostelnicka

Die Hexe

Madame Flora

Requiring rather more voice (but tempting!) are:

The Marschallin

Graefin Geschwitz

La Zia Principessa

Die Amme

Ortrud

Emilia Marty

Waltraute

Kundry

Marie in "Wozzeck"

Claire Zachanassian

The end of the line is: Die Kartenlegerin in *Arabella*

Moedlrollen are also delicious served hot with poppy seeds and butter.

Dr. Repertoire

QUESTO

The unintentional (but hardly unexpected) prima donna of the Met's ultraprincey gala Walküre (April 7) was **Deborah Voigt**, who in a single

season has vaulted the gap between spectacular promise and glorious fulfillment. In imagination, in movement, and especially in voice, the American soprano has established herself as the world's leading Sieglinde. While she does not perhaps yet plumb the depths of interpretation of such legendary ladies as **Regine Crespin**, **Leonie Rysanek** and the great **Lotte Lehmann**, Ms. Voigt's ample, completely equalized tone, rich velvety timbre, vivid projection and graceful, heartfelt plastique convince me she is the first great Wagnerian singer of the 21st century. In a word, in common with **Marcia Davenport's** Lena Geyer, Ms. Voigt is someone with "enough." (Do be sure to read James's interview with La Deb elsewhere in this issue--he still has that dazed look two weeks later, and I know for a fact that this time it's NOT just the drugs!)

So many others have praised La Voigt's Sieglinde so eloquently that all I shall do is to challenge her to find in the role the only aspect she does not encompass so far: the ugly part. I don't know if Ms. Voigt is squeamish vocally or histrionically, if she sees the character in a romanticized way, or if she is just so happy, well-adjusted and centered a person that she just doesn't quite identify with the bitterness and hysterical remorse that are so important to this character. Most probably what she needs is a real director -- even **Nilsson** freely acknowledges her debt to Wieland Wagner.

La Voigt enjoyed the luxurious partnership of veteran tenor **Placido Domingo**, whose Siegmund demonstrated once more the commitment, musicianship and star quality that have sustained his career for almost a third of a century. Mr. Domingo has found a way to make Siegmund work for him: vocally, of course, it fits him like a glove, lying an easy whole step lower in tessitura than most dramatic tenor roles. And Domingo's theatrical stock-in-trade has always been misunderstood loners. Siegmund will go down in history as one of Domingo's Great Roles.

The Walsung pair managed to rise above **Otto Schenk's** creaky staging (*20 hours of rags and

QUELLO

rocks") to tell a moving tale of the fated twins. Other aspects of the performance were less perfectly realized. **James Morris** no longer commands the freshness and power of voice that made him such a revelation a decade ago; his well-routined but unstylish interpretation now suggests not so much godhead as jarhead. **Hanna Schwartz** evoked audible titters with her decision to play Fricka as if she were **Vera Charles** in a revival of *Midsummer Madness*: less amusing was her inability to sustain long dramatic phrases. And that yellow striped schmatte she wore must die SOON! **John Macurdy's** Hunding was sturdy, once past a bit of huffing and puffing in Act One.

It is shocking enough that **James Levine's** much-praised way with this score has degenerated into a flurry of incoherent gestures for orchestra, but what sans-cervelles on the Met's staff made the decision to subject soprano **Hildegard Behrens** to the ritual humiliation of performing Brunnhilde without even a shred of voice? Hint—do pay attention to **The Man Behind the Curtain**, who emerged before Act II to announce Ms. Behrens' "indisposition" and get hissed for his efforts.

I found this performance particularly distressing because I have always said that the greatest artistic triumph of the Met's "Ring" production --indeed one of my greatest memories of any opera performance -- was Hildegard Behrens' silent listening to Wotan in Act 2. And remember, she rehearsed this production with **Simon Estes**, so any meaning in this monologue she found all on her own. On Monday night, when Mr. Morris sang the line about "Und fur das Ende werkt Alberich", Miss Behrens' face-- her entire body-- expressed a child's nameless fear. I wept. And I must say Mme. Behrens looks fantastic, slim and toned, with what looks to be some very expensive facial cosmetic surgery. From certain angles, she looks remarkably like **Greta Garbo**.

But (I have to say it), she **sounds** like Garbo too: of her singing it is probably best to say only that it didn't get any worse than it began. Ms. Behrens would have been well advised to cancel after the disastrous second act, taking her cue from the storm of boos and catcalls that greeted her solo call, but instead decided to attempt to stay the course: the resultant belting and shrieking reminded my date of **Glenn Close's** final few performances of *Sunset Blvd.* A floated phrase or two in the third act were all that remained among the ruins of a celebrated interpretation. The pity is, Ms. Behrens remains an intelligent and magnetic artist: and there are plenty of parts in which her wrecked voice could still make an impact (see the article on "Moedlrollen" inside the

front cover), but her attempting Brunnhilde at this stage of the game was a tragic mistake.

On a happier note, **Michael Giuseffi** reports:

Ed Rosen just called from Barcelona where he just returned from the *prima* of *Tosca* with the Licco company at the Victoria Theatre. **Aprile Millo** has just sung her first complete staged *Tosca*. Ed reports that she was just magnificent, the best sung *Tosca* he has heard since early Tebaldi. In fact, he found it hard to believe that this was the first time she did the role. The voice was gorgeous, rich and full; top notes were huge, secure and right on. The high C's were "incredible." "Vissi d'arte" brought a tremendous ovation.

Her acting, Ed adds, was magnificent, not in the old fashioned school that she is sometimes accused of. The killing of Scarpi was "incredible." Aprile herself called just a few hours ago, still buzzed from the performance, and reported that **everyone** -- carpenters, stagehands, dressers, the chorus--were assembled in the wings to watch the murder scene!

La Millo is scheduled to sing her first Met *Tosca* in 1998-99 opposite the debuting **Jose Cura**. And the line for standing room starts now!

Old News: Legend has it that way back in the '60s, **David Webster**, then General Manager of Royal Opera House, was at a dinner party when he spied a most scrumptious looking young man. Determined to win his attention (if only for a night), the impresario handed the young man a note reading "I'm David Webster, General Manager of the Royal Opera House. I'm willing to give you whatever you want." The youth turned to him and asked, "How about Callas in *Carmen*?"

La Cieca is sure you read **Albert Innaurato's** whatever-it-was about **Mirella Freni** in *Opera News*. If the editors over at that staid old zine were looking for controversy, they certainly got her wish. La Cieca likes Mr. Innaurato a lot when he wears his "serious critic" hat. A couple of years ago he wrote a simply stunning article for *OpNews* reviewing some historical releases (**Muzio** and **Steber** among them); his descriptions of the glories of these performances were so well-informed, so clearly stated, and, above all, so *loving* that I went out and purchased those rather pricey CDs and videos, and, what do you know, I was

not in the least disappointed. This guy really knows how voices work and, much more to the point, he knows how voices work *on us.*

But then there's this evil-twin Innaurato who seems to have escaped from the pages of an early rejected draft of a **Terrence McNally** play. He's the guy I call The Professional Opera Queen, and frankly, Innaurato doesn't do this character particularly well. The piece on Freni, a product of Innaurato's POQ persona, struck me as unfocused, self-indulgent, sloppy, jangly, and simultaneously overlong and abrupt. (And is their *any* lamer critical gambit than dumping on **Renata Scotto** for "desecrating" *Norma*? That was 15 years ago, for Christ's sake. What's next, Watergate jokes?) The piece is too gushy to stand up as real reportage, but all those interviews suggest there's some kind of traditional feature-feature lurking in there.

Innaurato seems to have a theme which certainly could bear exploring: "Is Mirella Freni really a diva?" (my answer: Only sort of. For what it's worth, I agree with **Magda Olivero**; Freni is miscast as *Fedora* in every way *except* vocally.)

But how can we be asked to consider *anything* seriously when Mr. Innaurato is screaming in our ears in present tense about bribing the usher and the maestro shaking his fist, and the thug hurling the lethal bouquet at La Freni? That stuff sounds like a failed attempt at the Felliniesque-- and what could be a *worse* style in which to discuss the hopelessly well-grounded Freni?

One sympathizes with Innaurato for trying (and failing) to pry an interesting word out of Freni, who must be the world's dullest interview. But, on the other hand, he doesn't draw particularly perceptive comments from anyone else he talks to, except possibly the young, casually-dressed usher in the box at La Scala (and, boy, was I wondering what direction *that* particular subplot would take!)

Fact is, there's really *no story* here, and all the euphoria in the world can't create one. But I submit that the biggest problem remains that Gallery Girl persona: we're just all heartily tired of hearing about La Innaurato and her obsessive love, thank you. Maybe all the screaming would sound more interesting if we could believe it was for real, but it just rings so false, as if Innaurato *wants* to be an opera queen but can't quite buy into the anti-intellectual, purely emotional mindset true queenery demands.

Word on the street is that this very dated piece (does Olivero still grant interviews?) was originally intended for that Eurotrash Bible *Vanity Fair*. I don't sound too vain when I say that where it **really** belonged was *parterre* box. At least here you *expect* irrational, disorganized, badly-spelled rant.

Yes, it does feel rather odd to sit here attacking Innaurato as a poseur: after all, I'm a grown man with a receding hairline who is pretending to be some exotic old gossip dame called "La Cieca". But I submit there's a difference here, and it's about irony. In other words, Mr. Innaurato thinks he's an opera queen, and I **know** I'm not. And he seems determined to take the gag at face value. In fact, (ironically enough!) he really is in the **same** fix as Freni. She tries to perform *Fedora* as if it were a real opera like *Boheme* or *Don Carlos* when of course it's no such thing. *Fedora* is campy trash-- trash that, I hasten to add, can be entertaining and even moving when it's done with real dash and style -- as Olivero and (though you couldn't prove it in New York) the splendid Diana Soviero have shown us. These great artists bring to *Fedora* those essential elements of camp -- energy and wit and **style** -- sufficient unto **Ira Siff** at his most Gran-Scena vibrant. Next to these artists, Freni doing *Fedora* is like a woman doing a drag show--which is to say: what's the point?

On the other hand, it is a blessed relief to pick up a copy of "Opera News" that does not focus on damage control for a wrecked diva's high-profile attempt at a Met comeback. (I score it 0 for 2 thus far, Waltraud and Hildegard!) And it's always fun to hear **Beverly Sills** say "ass".

Maybe I should take off the Cieca drag for a moment to explain what I mean when I say I'm not an Opera Queen. Frankly, folks, I just don't measure up.

Oh, I'm gay, all right, and of course I love opera, but that's not nearly enough. A real Queen worships a diva, and I do mean that literally. A real opera queen is at the opera house as often as **Lois Kirschenbaum**, and he's not just there listening quietly--he's throwing flowers and making pirate tapes



and sitting up all night drinking diner coffee and arguing over the 2002-2003 season-oh, you know, the whole Secret Seven thing. A Queen waits on line for hours to buy standing room for *every* performance and then he waits outside the stage door in a blizzard afterward to exchange a few words with -- her. He collects every tape, every review, every clipping. He follows her to the most unlikely locations the world over, where there is literally nothing to do but sit in a cheap hotel room until it's time for the performance, and he calls that his vacation. He gets sucked into violent arguments-- I mean with fists flying-- about that woman up there on the stage. He performs acts of Divadienst like making a special trip to a record store to ask for his favorite singer's CD - and if it's not in stock he talks the manager into ordering a dozen (he has the serial number memorized). He spends the whole night running up huge bills on the web or on the phone describing the evening's performance to other Opera Queens in Santa Fe or in Barcelona, even though they all may have to trudge in to their respective wretched pointless jobs in just a few hours. But he's happy, perfectly happy, because he believes with an almost religious devotion.

I am sorry to say I have never heard the call. I don't think I ever have heard a perfect performance, though I will admit there are a few artists who have inspired in me truly something like unalloyed fanatical demented, all right -- Queenlike-- admiration: Renata Scotto was one, when she was at her best. Gwyneth Jones, Leonie Rysanek, Eleanor Steber - maybe a few more. I don't go to the opera but maybe once every couple of weeks (and even then I leave before the last act every now and then), or occasionally when there's a week of unmissable events I may go three times in a week. But then it takes me a month to recover. I would be hard-pressed to find a single autographed photo among my things, and there are huge gaps in my CD collection: as far as I can recall, I don't even own a single recording of *Trovatore*. Can you imagine? Anyway, the point is, I just can't take the whole opera thang that seriously-- and that goes double for this zine, *croce e delizia* though it may be! I understand that *parterre box* is a joke, and knowing it's a joke sustains whatever tenuous grasp I have on reality.

I wish I were an Opera Queen, but, you see, I'm not.

Wiser heads than mine have judged the Met's revival of *Billy Budd* a definite artistic success (a pity so much of the house was

paper!); La Cieca, who has to admit she doesn't much care for this opera (not enough girls!), will only add that she was absolutely agog at the uncanny resemblance between blond-wigged, sailor-suited Dwayne Croft and '70's porn star Peter Berlin!

An American baritone who sings a lot in Europe told La Cieca all about *Giancarlo del Monaco's* new production of *Aida* in Koln. It's the "Cyberspace" *Aida*, you see: the King and Ramfis are "virtual" characters who do not appear physically onstage: they show up as icons on a giant computer screen while the basses stand in the booth and sing into mikes. "O terra addio", del Monaco has decided, really gains quite a bit by being sung while Amneris sits onstage, mouse in hand, surfing the web for porn (giant closeups of male genitalia are displayed on the big screen). It is true Mr. del Monaco didn't get to put all the finishing touches on this staging - after all, he was busy the whole last week of rehearsals assigning blame for the inevitable fiasco (no use waiting until the last minute!) At the Generalprobe, del Monaco said something that pissed the chorus off so badly that they walked out of the rehearsal, not returning until the director could be coaxed into apologizing- and that was three hours later! Came the *prima*, when the mezzo was booed, Mr. del Monaco gallantly stepped in front of the curtain, kissed her hand, and gave the audience the finger (My White Knight!); later, at his own curtain call (can you guess that audience reaction was, uh, mixed?) Giancarlo resorted to even more explicitly Italianate body language. So, what La Cieca is wondering is: how the fuck does this asshole get work?

It's not that often La Cieca go to an opera that I have neither heard before nor done homework on, but that's what happened with *L'amore di tre re* last month at Alice Tully Hall.

The opera was a presentation of Teatro Grattacielo, headed by the adorable and very talented *Gary di Pasquasio*. He's a very respected coach and accompanist here in New York who in this performance proved himself last night a most capable conductor as well. The Montemezzi score is a real tour de force for the maestro, and the Squaz rode the Korngold/Strauss/Puccini waves with real style.

The vocalists had few real opportunities, which is probably just as well, because they were adequate at best. Making the biggest impression was **Philip Cokorinos** as Archibaldo, but he tended to force for dramatic effect, leaving him hoarse by the end of Act 2.

Singing is not really what this opera is about, anyway. Besides the previously-mentioned virtuoso orchestrations, this show needs star quality and lots of it. Besides having nothing much to sing, the performers don't even have a plot to act. They're in love, or angry, or sad, and that's about it-- at great length. So real acting is pointless.

Personalities are needed. La Cieca reminded of a critic who wrote about a **Bette Davis** performance (in *Dead Ringer*, I seem to recall): "It's not acting at all, it's shameless showing off-- but just try to look away!" That's why I must humbly disagree with those fans who have suggested *L'amore di tre re* be revived for **Sam Ramey** and **Renee Fleming**: whatever their strong points, neither of these artists has a really vivid stage personality, certainly not enough to carry so tenuous an opera. **Diana Soviero** could certainly do it; so could (perhaps) **Jose Cura** in the generic Tenor-in-Love role. But the last basso who could pull off the role of Archibaldo (the real star part) was **Norman Treigle**. Sorry, Sam.

Boyish Jeffery Kennedy writes, "Really lousy San Francisco Opera season. This past year nothing I saw at the Civic Auditorium was worth enduring. The revamped Opera House should be quite spectacular, with no fear of the ceiling collapsing on your head." Jeffery is publishing *Girlina*, a zine dedicated to women in pop music of the '60s: his first issue is devoted to *The Caravelles*. If you're interested in Jeffery's zine, why not write him at 250 Page Street #1, San Francisco, CA 94102.

La Cieca was in diva heaven the night of March 17: two sultry young studs-about-town and new fans of da box invited her (yes!) to attend the **Renata Scotto** Master Class at Merkin Hall.

The Scottissima looked smashing in a simple black silk suit and four-inch spikes, and, girls, she **worked** that microphone cord. I swear I wouldn't have been surprised if she had broken into a chorus of "Zing! Went the Strings of My Heart."

After enjoying a rousing ovation from a capacity crowd of adoring fans, La Scotto ("My heart is bumping!") settled in for some serious pedagogy:

**Sing on the consonants to keep the legato.
The consonants link the vowels together.**

**Emotion is from mine [indicating her heart]
to you [indicating the public].**

**Italians speak of the "aristocracy of
vowels."**

**Never lose contact with the legato,
even when you make an effect.**

**Feel the emotions, but do not move your body.
Keep the sound on track.**

**I like all kinds of music, from Monteverdi to
music of today-- some! I don't like
electronic music because there is no feeling
there.**

**Sing a portamento, but not on purpose.
It should just happen because you feel it.**

**I prefer a portamento here, rather than
there,
because...well, besides the fact that here
it's written...**

Always her emphasis was on legato, clear and idiomatic Italian diction, and carefully considered expression in good taste.

For the record, the singers were:

Laura Tucker, mezzo-soprano ("Ces lettres" from *Werther*); **Alan Held**, bass ("Quand la flamme de l'amour" from *La Jolie Fille de Perth*) (yeah, Scotto hadn't heard of it either.); **Theodore Green**, 23-year-old tenor ("Una furtiva lagrima") (best singing, and most learning, of the night!); **Emily Pulley** ("Mi chiamo Mimi") [After a whole day of rehearsing *Carmen* and *Walkure* at the Met!]

William Hicks was the very helpful and sympathetic pianist.

Scotto spoke briefly of her Singing Academy, to hold its first session in the summer of 1997 "on the

beautiful shores of the Italian Riviera." Unlike some real or semi-fictional divas, she seems not at all bitter that her performing career is in its twilight years; she takes enormous pleasure, even gusto, in teaching. La Cieca saw no evidence tonight of the "toughness" or "bitchiness" some have reported at her other classes.

Everett Zimmerlein, La Cieca's voice coach, mentor and fellow curmudgeon, always says one of the cardinal rules of singing is: "If the high C is good, sit on it. If not, GET THE HELL OFF!"

Someone needs to tell **ReNAAAAAAY** about this rule: that yowl she emitted at the end of the 'Garden Scene on the Met's *Faust* broadcast was a disgrace to the vocal art, though it hardly came as a surprise after the swooping, scooping, gasping and meowing which comprised the remainder of her performance. While La Cieca did not brave the theater for performances given by the Dream Team (I may vomit!), she must say she concurs with the judgment handed down by a particularly reliable source: "Miss Fleming plays Marguerite like a bottle-blond Long Island beautician with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome."

On the other hand, Re-NAAAAAY's leading men all seemed in excellent form: **Richard Leech** is not a particularly poetic Faust, but the voice is solid, pingy and energetic, with an easy high C; **Sam Ramey** was in luxurious vocal form, and Mr. Croft is doing one his customary intelligent, vocally polished interpretations. I do wish he would get the sound a little farther forward and out of the throat, but it's a glamorous sound, no doubt about it.

Now, if only the Met just had a soprano who could sing Marguerite!

La Cieca wants to know: which force-of-nature veteran mezzo-soprano has left her faithful basso husband - for her new girlfriend?

La Cieca must say she just adores everything L'Opera Francais de New York does. It's just so damn chic! **Yves Abel** the boyish maestro (this guy makes **Michael Tilson Thomas** look like a crone) has discovered the secret of perfect ensemble despite the fact that the

cast is downstage of him and acting the whole time. Does he follow them? Do they follow him? It's an Astaire-Rogers kind of partnership and just about as poetic.

The opera-comique *La Colombe* (presented March 19) is quite short, about an hour of music, with a very slight and sentimental plot. Gounod's music is utterly charming and light, with more than a hint of Offenbach and Chabrier to come. The performing version by **Michael Kaye** incorporated recitatives composed in 1923 by **Francis Poulenc** for a revival mounted by **Serge Diaghilev**. The occasional pre-echo of such works as *Les Mamelles de Tiresias* can be heard in several spots, especially in Sylvie's chattering entrance scene.

Maestro Abel or whoever does the casting always comes up with winners: superb French diction, attractive, good acting, and -- most important of all -- fresh, sweet unforced voices (with one partial exception this time) You guys know by now La Cieca is a soprano freak, and she has discovered a new goddess. Her name is **Aline Kutan** (Sylvie), and she is tiny and round and adorable with flashing dark eyes and a baby-doll mouth from which floats the most adorable voice: like a combination of young **Mesple** and young **Popp**. The sound "speaks" instantly like a glass harmonica, and she is capable of both smooth legato and sparkly-clean coloratura -- and both effects come from the same voice with no sense of turning a switch. She is also a delightful actress with real star quality. This was her New York operatic debut, and if La Cieca were running NYCO, Ms. Kutan would be under contract by now.

The totally excellent **Lyne Contois** seems to specialize in trouser roles (she was Oreste in OFNY's *Belle Helene*) and she was appropriately baby butch in her tweed knickers and cap. What a joy to hear such unforced lyric mezzo-soprano singing, and with such clear, unforced French diction, too!

The men were for various reasons not on quite so exalted a level. **Dean Elzinga** offered a solid and stylish bass-baritone as Maitre Jean, but he camped a little too hard and wore out his welcome. He did do a nice job with his "No one can cook any more" aria in Act 2. I wasn't at all impressed with **Richard Troxell**, whom some of you may have seen in the recent film of *Madama Butterfly*. At that time La Cieca wondered why

Goro was singing Pinkerton's lines, and I can't say he sounds much better live. The voice is shallow and glassy, with no real legato; when he and Ms. Kutan sang identical phrases in the finale, the difference between a so-so singer and a real artist was glaring.

My compliments to **Christopher Alden** for his witty but never obtrusive stage direction; perhaps the constraint of working on a shoestring encourages the director to explore more subtle solutions than the bold effects he is known for elsewhere. I loved **Carol Bailey's** charming decor of origami doves. La Cieca looks forward to the company's *Beatrice et Benedict*, coming up May 7. Call 212-349-7009 for details.

The Met's new *Eugene Onegin* production was a disappointing evening; the big event was Neil Shicoff's return to the house, warmly applauded by a capacity audience.

La Cieca gets the feeling both conductor **Antonio Pappano** and director **Robert Carsen** (both debuting) must surely be capable of better work. Musically, the evening approached disaster. Pappano's orchestra sounded monochromatic and loud, and the ensemble could certainly have been tighter. I felt no real sense of climax at the end of the Letter Scene, or, for that matter, at the very end of the opera. On the other hand, La Cieca feels Mr. Carsen certainly did not deserve the very loud booing he and his team met at the curtain call-- after all, it's not *their* fault that this is the *third* empty-box production at the Met this season. (Once again, we must point the finger at That Man Behind the Curtain.)

Mr. Carsen did have, it must be said, several questionable, even unworkable ideas. Perhaps the worst was going directly from the duel (Act 2, Scene 2) to Gremin's ball (Act 3 Scene 1) without even a curtain. Onegin looked up from his friend's corpse, and liveried footmen enter with a basin of water in which he washed his hands. The footmen then did a complete makeover on **Vladimir Chernov** (accompanied by the Polonaise); by the time he is formally dressed (and his nails buffed!) we were in Gremin's palace. Of course, this scene is supposed to be years later, but the effect is that Onegin murdered his best friend and then went to a party!

Elsewhere, despite the occasional "arty" touch, Carsen created meaningful movement and stage pictures. The infamous stageful of leaves in Act 1 actually works, especially when the chorus of peasant women sweep the leaves in scene 3. But the problem all evening was that huge empty stage. Very few artists can command so



The Disney Company has chosen Baritone/Lecturer/Bon Vivant **THOMAS HAMPSON** to star in their lavish Broadway musical *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* in the leading role of Quasimodo. Says Hampson, "I'm well known as a recording freak and a word freak, so I welcome this opportunity to be a freak pure and simple."

large a space, and so "normal" a drama tends to look a little trivial without walls and furniture to give us a sense of scale. The production was updated to the 1850's and 1860's for no reason La Cieca can think of, but she will say most of **Michael Levine's** costumes are both attractive and in character. The one howler is an olive-green velvet day dress for Tatiana's final scene: the color is horribly unflattering to **Galina Gorchakova's** alabaster complexion, and the style made her look dumpy and middle-aged.

Top honors go to Mr. Shicoff. La Cieca has made no secret of the fact she is no fan of this tenor, but she must admit he was in excellent vocal shape tonight. The voice is larger, darker, and more even than it was a decade ago, and he has suppressed most of his "ecole de **Corelli**" sobs and gulps. He was also on good behavior as an actor, in general not indulging in the hamminess that led me on a previous occasion to call him "**Mandy Patinkin's** Evil Twin."

Both Ms. Gorchakova and Mr. Chernov moved well, looked fine and sang with feeling and style. But, I got no sense of obsession or torment or anguish. Both were just too, well, too grown-up, too well-balanced, their emotions too much under control. Both are solid enough performers, but neither is exactly inspired or subtle. The **Malfitano/Croft** Onegin scene at the Levine Gala struck sparks of excitement this pair did not even suggest.

Michel Senechal was quite the old pro in M. Triquet's couplets, despite a momentary lack of coordination with the maestro. Debutante **Irina Arkhipova** is not really a "cameo" performer, so her appearance had not much going for it than sentimental value. La Cieca got the impression that Mme. Arkhipova was not best pleased by Mr. Carsen's staging: as she lowered herself into that clumsily-placed trap door, you could cut the mezzo's disapproval with a knife.

And, oh yes, Mr. Carsen staged the overture (thus breaking Dr. Repertoire's Rule #1 for Stage Directors): Onegin tears up a letter and looks unhappy; the rest of the show is presumably a flashback. Been there. Done it. Sort of the way the whole production feels.

La Cieca

Deborah Voigt: *the parterre box interview*

I will tell you right now that I went into my first big-time diva interview literally **throbbing** with dread. I mean, I've seen that video where Callas's face turns really hard and then she says, in that deadly cold voice, "I don't want this to go forward."

Well, I was an idiot to worry, because the experience turned out to be utterly painless thanks to the wonderful **Deborah Voigt**, who took the trouble made me feel comfortable, and, even better, answered every single question I asked her directly and with humor-- and without a single "no comment" to be heard. A few days after her overwhelming success as Sieglinde in the Met's gala revival of *Die Walkure*, I got off the elevator in the Upper West Side building where Ms. Voigt is staying in while in New York. A blond head popped out of a door down the hall. "Are you James?" she called out. "I'm Debbie, come on in!" The diva (no press agent in sight) was dressed casually in a pale blue silk blouse and jeans. Her enormous steel-blue eyes and tousled blond hair lent her a striking resemblance to--of all people--Ellen Degeneres. So, I asked my first question:

James Jorden: I want to start out by asking just how it feels to be a Gay Icon.

Deborah Voigt: I'm really really surprised to hear that I am!

JJ: If you had been in the lobby after Act One of *Walkure* Monday night--oh, it was like a Barbara concert!

DV: (laughs) I love it. I had no idea. I read your publication before--you did an absolutely fabulous review of an *Ariadne* that I did-- it was great, it was funny the way it was written, but then I got this phone call from--is it the *Times* doing an article on you all?-- and she said to me, "how do you feel about the fact that you seem to be very popular among gay men?" And I said, "I don't necessarily talk about my fans with respect to their sexual preference, so I'm really surprised to hear that." I'm totally flattered, and I think that it speaks quite a lot about what I'm doing that people seem to be very enthusiastic about what's going on. I don't totally understand why, I'd be curious to know what it is in particular that excites this group of people more than another singer does perhaps.

JJ: So when we were all talking about the first act--and you understand this is THE gala event of the year...

DV: I am so thrilled! Tell me, do you guys just all meet up, or—

JJ: The word went out to meet at the Aprile Pole—where all the Aprile Millo fans have been meeting for the past ten years—*(she shrieks)* so when we get down to the orchestra lobby, it looks like a cocktail party at Noel Coward's—there were like 30 guys hanging out there—and one girl I even got a date out of it. I don't know if it's for me, or because I'm interviewing you, but I'm taking advantage of it! I'm meeting him tonight.

DV: Cool! You must let me know how that works out!

JJ: Okay. We are calling issue #25 *Old Fashioned Girl* because Ms. Voigt does things the old fashioned way, building an opera career by singing operatic roles on stage. You really have taken the serious route.

DV: I have. Part of that because I am serious about making appropriate decisions so that I can be here 25 years from now, and still doing what I'm doing—maybe a little bit lower. Also, maybe because I am a big girl (not as big as I was) some of the opportunities for that sort of thing may not have **been** there. For a long time I was resentful about it and said, why should I have to do this or that on stage, but in a way, I think it has protected me a little bit, it's kept me from doing some things that wouldn't have been good repertoire choices or the right sort of appearances to be a part of. But I've also surrounded myself with people who have very old fashioned ideas about a career. I'm studying now with Ruth Falcon, who is old-school in her approach. She's a really great teacher—

JJ: --who has built a long and enduring career for herself--

DV: Exactly—and it works very well because we sing some of the same repertoire—not totally, but helpful in that respect. And she believes in the vocal technique first and foremost—and today we see some singers not putting as much time into that as maybe they should.

JJ: The Rosie O'Donnell Question: when you were in high school, were you in all the shows?

DV: I was in **all** the shows. I was in swing choir, I was in chamber singers.

JJ: Were you in *Bye Bye Birdie*?

DV: No, but I played Tzeitel, I played Marian the Librarian, I was one of the wives in *Li'l Abner* all that stuff. I was president of the Thespian group, I was in all the choirs...I was also very involved with my church at that point in my life, and I did a lot of church music—even dated the preacher's kid for a while. You know, I've been trying to get on Rosie's show, but so far no luck.

JJ: Maybe Rosie resents you because you were so happy in high school.

DV: Yeah.. I **was** happy in high school but I was always kind of pissed, too, because nobody took it as seriously as I did. I was really into it, and even though it was fun, it was also Art, and I'd get very frustrated because my friends were just playing, and I was taking it very seriously.

JJ: So you were more Marcia than Jan.

DV: Yeah, probably. But who I really wanted to be was Laurie Partridge. Or one of those girls who lived with Bobby Sherman on, what was it? *(sings)* "The bluest skies you've ever seen, in Seattle"— *Here Come the Brides!* Yeah, lots of hours spent thinking about being one of those brides.

JJ: Obviously you didn't jump straight from high school to Sieglinde. What were the bittiest bit parts of them all?

DV: That would probably have been when I was an Adler fellow. I did things like, oh, the Lady in Waiting in *Macbeth*. Terry McEwen always put me in roles like that, like that one in *Nabucco*, not Fenena— Anna, which at least gave me a chance to soar a bit in some of the big ensembles. *Don Carlo*— the Celestial Voice. I think that was my SF debut, the Celestial Voice. Those were about the bitsiest, because I really came to opera late. I never even heard an opera until I was 19 or something like that, so I really didn't have preconceived ideas about "leading lady" roles—I didn't even know who Tosca was until I was 21. So to find myself an Adler Fellow singing Anna in *Nabucco* with Grace Bumbry was OK with me, because I didn't aspire to be Abigaille.

JJ: And now you aspire to be Abigaille?

DV: No. No thank you. But I do Lady Macbeth.

JJ: You seem like such a nice person, If there was one thing that was not completely to my delight in the Sieglinde the other night...

DV: Umm-hmm?

JJ: I wanted her to be a little harder, a little crazier I guess. I wanted her to get a little meaner...

DV: What opportunity is there for that? I'm just curious that...

JJ: I guess when she really starts going crazy in Act 2. I wasn't frightened as much as I was feeling sorry for her.

DV: Interesting. I'll think about that.

JJ: Maybe we're used to hearing so much screaming in the theater, and you don't scream... there are a couple of places in the role where I was saying, oh, that's what those notes are! That's your approach, within the music.

DV: But that's also me in that role, that's what I particularly bring to that character, and maybe Ariadne as well, maybe I have more sympathy for her—but that's interesting. . .

JJ: You know that you are the only soprano at the Met this year who is prima donna to both Pavarotti and Domingo... You want to talk a little bit about these two gentlemen?

DV: They couldn't be more different—which is not to say in terms of talent one is better than the other! I have to say that I have enjoyed working with Placido more, but that may be because of the nature of the roles we have done together. You can't really compare Amelia/Gustavo and what they have together on stage with what Sieglinde and Siegmund go through. I think working with Luciano there's always a bit more distance between you and he—and this is the second time I've sung with him—we've sung *Ballo* at Covent Garden as well. And Placido—what can I tell you—he gets out there and he sweats. Working with Luciano really is more the Luciano Show. But, frankly, I can't imagine what it would be like to be in his shoes. The pressure, especially now—I think everyone is waiting for something terrible to happen.

JJ: I could feel that at the *Ballo*—"is he going to try for the high C, and what will she do if..." I have to say you seemed most supportive.

DV: I've been told that—by some of the Met administration, and that's important to me. Look, I do respect where Luciano is in his career, in his life. I sympathize with that, because I can't imagine what that would be like---

JJ: You may find out one of these days.

DV: I don't think so, because I don't envision myself staying in it to the point where I don't love it, and I think Luciano doesn't really love it any more. I think he may love to sing, and he loves his stadium things, but to really be onstage and have to be concerned with what else is going on around him, I'm not sure he really **loves** doing that, and I can't imagine myself doing that. There are other things that I'm interested in, and I hope to move my career along in such a way that I can move on to other things when the time comes. I don't really love the traveling aspect, so I don't see myself like Miss Rysanek at whatever age she was still going on—though I say that to people who know me really well, and they say, oh please, you won't ever get off the stage!

JJ: Speaking of traveling, what's the groupie situation?

DV: I have a nucleus of about 3 or 4—I hate to use the word groupies—let's say "fans" who tend to pop up hither and yon and I am beginning to notice as I go back to the various theaters that I see some of the same faces, who maybe don't **travel** to see me, but I do see as I go from theater

to theater. I think it's important to have people like this. They buy tickets, they do the right word of mouth, they send out good reviews and pictures and announcements that there's a recording coming out, whatever. It's really important to know people who are that dedicated. Now, once in a while I'll get a letter that's a little—strange. Up until this season, I walked everywhere, I mean, I walked all over the city—I would never think otherwise, but this last time I was in New York, after a show, I was out on the street and this **very** strange man came up to me and kept saying, "Miss Voigt, Miss Voigt" and—well, he was **very** odd, and the point is, I think that crosses the line between "creepies" and "groupies." You know, this is new to me, I wish I knew more, that there are people who are that enthusiastic about me.

JJ: I got a phone call from a friend who doesn't live here in New York, about 2 am after the *Walkure* and I picked up the phone and all I heard was, "What was she like?" I guess we expect to see you in diamonds all the time.

DV: You know, I said to my press person, for the interview today I'm just going to wear jeans, is that all right, or should I get dressed up?

JJ: When I talked to the people who administrate your web page, they said, Debbie is really **really** web savvy. I get this picture of you after the performance—you take off the wig and you take off the dress and you sit down at the laptop and type, "Tonites *Ballo* was a HUGE success..."

DV: No, no, no. Not that, I do answer my email, and I do write Debbie's Diary—not as often as I should, but I do write it. I am loving this whole web thing, and it's true the web is not the first thing you think of when you think "diva", but I love hearing from people and answering their questions. I don't sit in my dressing room cruising the web, but something I do especially when I'm on the road in Europe is I check in with the opera newsgroup to hear what's going on. I was in Dresden at the time the decision about *Forza* vs. *Ballo* was being made, or had been made, and I was very interested to read the reaction to that decisions.

JJ: Right now on the net there's a lot of discussion of booing. Maybe that's not such a good question because you have no personal experience of that...

DV: It happened once, in Florence, I was doing *Macbeth*. It was a **terrible** production. I took my call after the *Macbeth* and the reception was great but one or two people booed and I came offstage to James Conlon, and I said, "Did you hear them, they were booing!" and he said, "Debbie, didn't you hear the cheering?" Seriously, I think booing is cowardly. I appreciate that people have their opinions and that they are entitled to their opinions and I may even agree that they are right in some cases—which we won't go into here!—however, it's so anonymous!

JJ: Like, if I boo, maybe a few people around me can tell who it is, but...

DV: The artist you are wounding to his soul is NOT going to know it's you. I don't understand why one can't just stand with his hands by his side. Or write a letter to the theater's administration. Now, in terms of a production being booed, I don't have as much of a problem.

JJ: I felt that way at the Met's new *Eugene Onegin*...

DV: I didn't see it, but I heard about the booing...

JJ: I got the feeling some the artists would have preferred a more traditional production...

DV: That happened in Dresden recently. It was my first *Kaiserin* and the production was by Rosalie. She did it very much, as she says, from a child's point of view, a child's idea of a fairy tale, very bright colors and basic shapes. I didn't mind it so much, and maybe I had a more open mind because I'd never sung this opera before, but it did bother some of the other singers who had done their parts many many times, and when we came out for the curtain call, it was—well, I've never heard such booing. I felt bad, because, if you are a serious artist and you really want to make the best of every situation that you're in—well, that's what you do, you give your heart and soul to it for five weeks, and then when the audience responds that way, you can't help but take it personally, even if you're just the one who wears the costume—I mean, I didn't **make** the thing, even if I did have some specific things to say about it, I didn't **design** it! And yet, if an audience has specific tastes, and that is the opera house's audience, you have to listen to their response. But to boo a singer—if people knew how much it hurts...

JJ: Okay. So how is the *Kaiserin*?

DV: The *Kaiserin* is great, she's super!

JJ: The funny thing is, am I right? she doesn't sing all that much, but...

DV: But everything she sings is hard!

JJ: I think Lotte Lehmann said once, "You sing and sing and sing for two and a half acts, and then suddenly it turns out the opera is about Maria Jeritzal!"

DV: She's right! *Susanna*'s the same way. And *Aida*, too!

JJ: I would think the *Kaiserin* is terrifically exciting to sing.

DV: It is very exciting, very perilous—there are some real pitfalls. Having done the part with Sinopoli — that's one take on it-- I'm really anxious to do the part again, with someone who has a different sense, maybe a better sense of Strauss style.

JJ: You've recorded it.

DV: Yes, during the performances, and that's going to be a bit of a snafu, because it was supposed to be released as a "live" recording— and Mr. Heppner didn't show up. So the three of us recorded the final quartet—or I guess the final **trio** in this case---

JJ: And what else is coming out?

DV: The next one to be released is *Elektra*, which I'm really curious to hear. It's a great cast. Did you hear, the *Elektra* is Alessandra!

JJ: It's interesting to cast the two of you together, since you're often thought of as being coeval...

DV: I hope there will be enough contrast between us... you know, Maestro Sinopoli had approached me about singing *Elektra*, and I thought, it's not exactly my last chance at the role—I had just sung my first *Chrysothemis* at the time, and I really love that role. Anyway, he wanted me for *Elektra* and Studer for *Chrysothemis*. I held my guns, and he said, look, we may end up losing the whole project, so...

JJ: It seems like so much work to learn *Elektra* for a recording when it's not like you're singing it on stage right away.

DV: Nol Plus, if I record *Elektra*, what's left after that?

JJ: The big I?

DV: *Isolde*?

JJ: There's some talk about Solti wanting you for a new recording, possibly based on concerts of one act at a time...

DV: Actually, I am recording *Isolde* with Solti, and Mr. Heppner, more details I don't know. You know, Solti kept me hanging for a **year**, making up his mind between me and Alessandra. Originally it was to be concerts, but that's gone out the window, and now it's only the recording, which by itself is going to take us over two years because of all the schedules. We start with Act 2. I'm a little worried about what people will say, you know, recording it before singing it on stage. We really tried to fit in a concert here and there, but there just isn't time. I knew when he asked me and I accepted I was opening myself up to criticism, but I just don't care, because it's such a great opportunity to learn that role with him—who knows this music better? I'm just going to roll with the punches.

JJ: And then, one of these days, *Isolde* on stage?

DV: Actually, I was asked to do it in Houston in 1999. I thought about it seriously, because I already know a lot of the role, and I think eventually it will be great for me. But Maestro Levine thought maybe 1999 was a little

too soon, and I already had some reservations, so that was the catalyst, and I said no. There's no hurry.

JJ: Again, where do you go after Isolde?

DV: There are other avenues I still want to pursue—*Aida* and *Trovatore*, and I really want to sing Tosca, but if I push myself into the German stuff too soon—well, you get typed. And there are ladies out there who are ready and willing to go out and sing the [German] repertoire, and I say good for them. What I think is, the world will always be interested in a new Isolde, whenever you decide to sing it. So for right now, I'll wait and let—someone else—get out there and do it.

JJ: So, what's the deal with Bayreuth?

DV: What's the deal with Bayreuth? *(she is silent for a moment)* Bayreuth offered me Senta, a contract for two seasons, without negotiating, and I had already accepted engagements in Seattle and San Francisco, and I don't like to back out. And Bayreuth wanted a picture—I guess they were concerned about the physique they were putting on stage, and I didn't have a photo that was representative of the weight that I'd lost—and besides, I think photos are not very fair—I mean, I move very well on stage, maybe better than some of my large lady colleagues, and you can't see that in a picture.

JJ: Maybe you should send a video...

DV: I don't think there was a video then...

JJ: Oh, you'd be surprised. I bet there's even a video of last Monday's *Walkure*. I know there's a video of *Elektra* out there with you and Miss Rysanek and Miss Jones..

DV: With Jones? Oh, it's a pirate....

JJ: Apparently someone smuggled a video camera into the balcony.

DV: Incredible! How's the quality?

JJ: Gritty.

DV: Oh. Well, anyway, I **thought** that someone from Bayreuth could come hear me in Dresden, and that didn't happen, and apparently you don't get into Bayreuth unless you audition—and send a picture... so right now I'm not singing at Bayreuth.

JJ: So, what's the title of the crossover album?

DV: No one has asked me to do one yet, but I have a title all ready:
VOIGT WHERE PROHIBITED

(We both scream)

JJ: And what's on it?

DV: Jerome Kern songs, Victor Herbert songs. Chestnuts.

JJ: You'll use a lot of chest.

DV: And some nuts!

JJ: And a picture of you on the cover in a turban.

DV: Not a turban. I hate turbans. Big hair!

JJ: Can we talk more about roles? What about *Gioconda*?

DV: Yeah, that's something we've sort of knocked around too. It's a possibility. Probably it would be a good idea for me, say, five years from now.

JJ: Norma?

DV: Interesting you should ask that, because I've just been offered a production in Europe. I'm really tempted to say yes; unfortunately the offer comes at a time that would really screw up my schedule. Actually I was offered a new production in Verona two years ago, and I said, "I don't think I'll sing my **very first** Norma in **Italy**, thank you very much!"—not to mention singing it outdoors with all the bugs! So then I was thinking about doing it in Baltimore, but I realized that's just too close to the Met—all **you** guys would be on the train to Baltimore!

JJ: By two the next morning the word would be all over town.

DV: And I'd be consulting my laptop to see the reactions! You know, I noticed there wasn't so much talk on the web after *Walkure* because most people were at the musical comedy thing at Avery Fisher, which everyone is **still** talking about ad nauseam...


JJ: The **smart** people were at the Met, and there's going to be a tidal wave of email after tomorrow's broadcast.

DV: About Norma. I worked on it some a couple of years ago and it felt pretty good. And then last week I took it in to my teacher and after we sang through it she said, you're **crazy** if you **don't** sing this. Meanwhile you have to take a look around the business and see who is being cast as Norma right now. The ladies who sing it now, aside from Jane, they all tend to be more lyric. I mean, June Anderson is basically a lyric voice...

JJ: But there's always two ways of doing a part. The Tosca who looks really good in the dress, and the Tosca who can really sing it.

DV: I want to be both!

JJ: So, what do to make the luck work backstage, what kind of rituals?



DV: When you're Southern Baptist, that stuff is of the devil! So I never really grew up thinking of luck, or... the only thing I'm absolutely panicked about not being on stage on time—I have that recurring nightmare, where I'm late, or at the wrong theater, or in the wrong opera. So I tend to get to the theater really early. At least I **think** it's early. I arrived at the Met at 4:15 for a 6:30 curtain, and then I found Hildegard had been there since 3:30 -- and she doesn't come on until act 2. Another time, I was singing in San Francisco, and I went into my dressing room, and there's a hypodermic needle with red fluid in it lying on the dressing table, and on the piano, there's red candle wax just blown all over the keyboard. So I called my dresser, and I asked, who was in this dressing room last night? And the dresser said, Miss Millo. And I started to think, is she a witch or... well, it turns out the hypodermic was apparently vitamin B-12, and the candle wax is a votive candle, which I guess is part of her ritual. I look at Aprile and I think, God, **that's** really a diva, that's what people think of when they say "diva". Sometimes my press people say to me I should be more aloof, or mysterious, but I can't do it. To me, that's artificial. For Aprile, it's real, it comes from inside. I laugh when I try to envision myself burning a candle in front of the piano.

JJ: So, I guess you have heard some of the jokes about *Debbie's Diet Book*, and *Doing it Debbie's Way*. But, honestly, you've lost some **serious** weight. I hope you don't mind if ask: what do you do?

DV: Well, first of all, I worked on my head for a long time. I had this enormous chip on my shoulder and thought that "I'm an opera singer, and it should be about the singing, it should be about the voice..." Well, then I tried moving into the society we really live in, and so I got myself a very good shrink, and I lay on the couch for a few years, and worked through a lot of garbage. Finally I got to the point when I was almost ready to do something, when I had a horrendous experience with Solti, that just pushed me over. When I went to audition for him for this Isolde recording, I sang "Dich teure Halle", and he was working on the Beethoven Ninth at the time, so I sang some Beethoven Ninth. So I get out the music to "Mild und leise", and Solti gets off his chair and walks over and puts his hands on my shoulders and he says, "Why are you so fat?" I was devastated. I just didn't see it coming. I really was hurt, and he says, "Is it the food?" You know how they look at heavy people, and they think we're slovenly, or lazy, like it's just a matter of overeating. If it were only that simple! And I tried to explain to him how it's an emotional issue, and then I realized, he doesn't **care**—nobody **cares**—he cares about what he **sees**! That particular experience, and realizing I might lose a recording over a matter of weight, well, I thought, I'm tired of this. I went to a diet doctor here in New York, Dr. Louis Aronne, and I started taking some of these new diet drugs for about three months about a year ago, and it really helped me get on track. Then I noticed the drugs were not working so well, and I was





having a problem with dryness, so now I exercise on the bike, at least 3 times a week -- and when I'm really concentrating 5 times a week-- and I just don't eat fat and sugar. I'm still not finished. I want to take off another 50 pounds if I can, but I feel so much better—and I feel like I can give more on stage. These *Walküre* performances are much more rewarding to me than they were a year ago.

JJ: This is just a personal impression, but the voice sounds better too. It's even all the way up and down, even those low B's.

DV: That's the idea. But when I think of those B's I don't think of chest—that's still in mix. For full chest I wait until low A-flat: "Totenreich!" I think the weight loss has freed up my air, my breath. I don't get winded any more. So far, there's no kind of vocal problem, which I'm always on the lookout for. Something I saw on the Internet after Jimmy's gala last year: they said, "I see the diet police have gotten to Deborah Voigt. If that's the case, it's the end of a great voice." I will admit there is a definite change in energy level about every 20 pounds, but I allow for that. Don't you think that, when you see singers who've lost weight, and then had a vocal crisis, those might be singers who were having vocal problems even **before** the weight loss, who were singing things they had no business singing—and the diet just made it worse?

JJ: You have to sing Sieglinde tomorrow, so let's wind up. Would you care to say something to shock and astonish our *parterre box* readers?

DV: Other than that I am so totally **jazzed** that I am on the cover of *parterre box*... Hmmm. Something to shock and astonish **your** readers... I don't think that's **possible**!



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Opera's holy relics--those inanimate vessels somehow related to the sublime, perpetually ungraspable sounds we cherish--are numerous. Recordings, scores, memoirs, autographed photos and programs, even seats ripped out of the Old Met: we covet, swap, hoard, and even pray over them. (My Callas autograph has got me through some rough moments.) It's seldom that a novel about opera is elected to sacred object status, but this has happened to James McCourt's *Mawrdew Czegowchwz* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975), certainly the best opera novel yet written.

In case you are one of the unenlightened not yet blessed by familiarity with the holy book, here's a brief synopsis: In 1947 New York, opera lovers are inspired by the discovery of a Czech contralto named Mawrdew Czegowchwz (repeat after me: Mardu Gorgeous). Heard at first only on the radio, her voice provokes a raving Czegowchwz cult among opera cognoscenti. The diva is eventually fetched to town, delivering a shattering New York double-header debut that takes Gotham by storm. The Czegowchwz Era brightens the already rich cultural life of the city; then the new, glowering management of the Old Met bullies, even fires Czegowchwz--triggering a sensational hunger strike, a sheepish management settlement, and a staggering second debut in which Czegowchwz reveals a newer, bigger voice capable of singing anything written. Her reign of glory is threatened by skullduggery from devotees of a rival diva, the aged Morgana Neri; but despite intrigue, an identity crisis Jung would have quailed before, and a past so complicated it takes TWO chapters to unravel, our heroine survives to enchant listeners for an age.

It's not only the unbelievably comprehensive knowledge of (and love for) opera demonstrated on practically every page of this tale of the ultimate diva that makes *Mawrdew Czegowchwz* a cherishable book. There's the novel's writing--so polished, intricate, and witty it marks its author as one of the most versatile, ingenious, and accomplished living American novelists. And, finally, the *Mawrdew Czegowchwz* text is saturated with the magic of lost New York--a Gotham ticker-tape sparkling with beauty, excitement, smart (as opposed to greedy) citizens, a New York with a beautiful Old Met, a magisterial Penn Station, eight daily newspapers, hordes of creative people and many more consumed by love for all the arts.

Like many Holy Grails, *Mawrdew Czegowchwz* ain't easy to locate. Published in 1975, it is not easily available (being out-of-print). Copies can be located, with a lot of effort, in secondhand book stores and through booksearch services, sometimes for reasonable prices (I recently purchased a \$7.50 *Mawrdew Czegowchwz* in a used bookstore). The diva appears in McCourt's second book, *Kaye Wayfaring in "Avenged"*, a slightly less magical but still delightful

sequence of stories. (Readers should also seek out the author's recent story collection, *Time Remaining*.) Devotees are here given the opportunity to prove the depth and strength of their sacred devotion by girding their loins to take..

The Czegowchwz Opera Czegwiz!

1. What are the signal letters of the all-Czegowchwz radio station?
2. What are the diva's fach and range?
3. Name the posh Manhattan manse wherein the desperately ill Czegowchwz finds rest, identity, and salvation.
4. Where do the opera lovers of McCourt's magical postwar NY go for nourishment between standing bouts on The Line?
5. In a press conference, Mawrdew Czegowchwz announces she will sing forty roles in the upcoming season. Name the five operas in which she sings **more than one** role.
6. Which very different operas were selected by La Czegowchwz for her New York debuts (and at which venues)?
7. Which diva partially inspired the first, magnificent chapter of *Mawrdew Czegowchwz*, and where did said chapter first appear (only to cause an immediate sensation)?
8. Which crucial figure in Mawrdew Czegowchwz's past was once called "that Bohemian serpent" by which immortal poet?
9. Which diva wrote a friendly congratulatory letter to the author of *Mawrdew Czegowchwz*, and, as the book says, "the letter, framed, hangs on Ralph's wall?"
10. Mawrdew Czegowchwz's voice when singing Violetta is described as "louder and wider" than that of which famous Met soprano?
11. Which diva, like Mawrdew Czegowchwz, was once saluted by her admirers by releasing a flock of doves into the Old Met?
 - a) Joan Sutherland
 - b) Lucine Amara
 - c) La Sirena
 - d) Cecilia Bartoli
 - e) None of the above.

12. What opera Mawrdew Czegowchwz prepares for performance inadvertently leads to the discovery of her great, perhaps greatest, love?

13. Who performs "an astonishing rendition of Musetta's Waltz Song, in perfect Italian" at a Czegowchwz gala?

14. Which of the following operas does **not** contain one of Mawrdew Czegowchwz's "forty roles"?

- a) *Lohengrin*
- b) *Tannhauser*
- c) *Wozzeck*
- d) *I Puritani*
- e) *The Makropoulos Affair*

15. At the end of the novel, Mawrdew Czegowchwz leaves the US for Ireland to make a film about her mother's turbulent life. What major operatic event occurs only days after her departure from Gotham?

BONUS QUESTION: While not actually claiming to be copies of real-life people, which actual persons do the following characters in Mawrdew Czegowchwz remarkably resemble:

- a) Max Crux
- b) Luigi Francobolli
- c) Tompkins
- d) Kolnichwasser
- e) Thalia Bridgewood
- f) "The Nameless Presence"
- g) "His Scarlet Eminence".

Answers

1. WCZG— all Czegowchwz, all the time.

2. "Oltrano", consisting of four registers or "voices" ("One for each season of the year, like the air") spanning a range of three and one-half octaves.

3. Magwyck, Upper East Side townhouse presided over by The Countess Madge O'Meaghre Gautier.

4. The Burger Ranch, which I believe was a real place, a non-alcoholic watering hole for opera lovers.

5. *Aida* (Aida and Amneris), *Don Giovanni* (Donnas Anna and Elvira), *Der Rosenkavalier* (The Marschallin and Octavian), *Die Walkure* (Brunnhilde and Sieglinde), and *Les Troyens* (Cassandre and Didon – in the same performance).

6. Mme. Czegowchwz makes her Carnegie Hall debut singing *Erwartung* "in fully open chest." Her debut at the Old Met is as Amneris in *Aida*, sung ("on a whim") in Czech.

7. According to an interview with the author in *Christopher Street*, McCourt was partially inspired in his writing by a friend and mentor's passion for the soprano Milizia Korjus. The chapter appeared in issue #13 of the New American Review.

8. The diva's father, Czech poet Jan Motivyk; the slandering poet was William Butler Yeats.

9. Maria Callas

10. Czegowchwz compatriot (sort of) Emmy Destinn

11. Lucine Amara (according to legend: I wasn't born yet, so I didn't witness the event).

12. Handel's *Oberon and Titania*

13. Mother Maire Dymphna, O.A.O.H., Irish nun who saved the infant Czegowchwz

14. *Lohengrin*--an interesting omission, since it concerns questions of naming and truth that become crucial to MCZG's own life.

15. The October 29, 1956 opening night of the Metropolitan Opera's season—which featured the debut of Maria Callas. Czegowchwz receives a letter recounting the historic event in the short story *Mawrdew Czegowchwz in Dublin*, reportedly the opening chapter in the desperately-awaited MCZG sequel, *Time Out of Mind*).

Bonus: a) Milton Cross, Met b'cast host; b) Louis Biancolli, exuberant NY music critic; c) Virgil Thomson, acerbic composer and critic; d) Irving Kolodin, sovereign Old Met historian and critic; e) Tallulah Bankhead, first lady of stage and screen, whose wit and glamour also inform McCourt's other fictional heroine, Kaye Wayfaring; f) Sir Rudolf Bing, controversial former *capo* of the Met; g) Francis Cardinal Spellman, flagrantly hypocritical closeted homosexual, alleged bedmate of sadomasochistic cross-dressing FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover, and Archbishop of the Archdiocese of New York. Truth IS stranger than fiction.

Former punk rocker Patrick Giles writes for .

The New York Times Book Review. His favorite operas are *Il trovatore* and *Lulu*.

Don Quichotte at Teatro dell'Opera di Roma is the stuff legends are made of. Since its premiere in Venice in 1982, Piero Faggioni's production of *Don Quichotte* has toured all over Europe, winning accolades in Naples, Barcelona, Paris, Florence, and now Rome. Oceans of ink have already been poured on this production. We can only add that it seems now almost impossible to see Massenet's opera in any other version. Its symbiosis of beautifully worked out special effects, poetic dreaminess and touching simplicity is probably what never fails to captivate us. The highest compliment one can pay to this production is that Faggioni succeeded in making a mediocre work look like a masterpiece. Unlike the knight of the woeful countenance, anyone who may wish to come up with another production will have to take on a *real* giant.

rrreaders rrrants & rrreviews

Symbiosis is also the word to describe Ruggero Raimondi's relationship to the character of Don Quixote. He precisely embodies the romantic idealist imagined by Massenet rather than Cervantes' earthier counterpart. His face has the mobility, expressivity of a cultivated, yet spontaneous actor. It is undeniable that his voice, after thirty years of career, sounds rather worn, or better, dry. But Don Quixote is not so much a singing role as a role to be *acted* through the voice, an immense task for a bass because it requires him to find an infinite palette of colors, expressions, and because the danger of making a fool, a clown out of Don Quixote is always lurking. It is a sign of this singer's intelligence that he has chosen a role that shows him at his best: Raimondi *is* Don Quixote.

Alain Vernhes was his ideal companion, his complement. Vernhes' baritone, not particularly sweet and beautiful but ductile and expressive, was reminiscent of the great Gabriel Bacquier's, skillfully conveying Sancho Panza's love and affection for his master.

Cervantes' coarse peasant wench Dulcinea becomes in Massenet's opera an refined, sensual courtesan, the object of love and adoration of the entire town. We are sure that Massenet would have loved Anna Caterina Antonacci in this role, for she exudes sensuality from every pore. Furthermore, the timbre of her voice is warm, with an erotically-charged vibrato, and her descents into the depths of chest register (far from acquiring the earthquake-like effect of some of her colleagues) sound like soft caresses. In other operas (*Ermione*, *Elisabetta*, etc...)

Antonacci deploys her virtuoso colortura technique to depict the rage and resentment of women scorned: as Dulcinea, her vocal agility takes on explicitly sexual overtones. Visually one could not wish for anything better: Antonacci is quite simply a gorgeous woman, and her drop-dead beauty was enhanced by Faggioni's stunning costumes. At the peak of her sensual frenzy in the fourth act she displayed a décolleté so daring that the poor guitarist accompanying her on stage lost track of his music!

Nick Fishbone

Kevin (the very significant other opera queen in the house) and I attended **Kathleen Battle's Carnegie Hall recital**, during which I had a very opera queenly association. The recital was a beauty, as lovely a performance as I've heard from Ms. Battle (I swoon to recall Pamina, Cleopatra, and Zerbinetta), and after a ravishing chunk of *Manon* as an encore, Kevin and I looked at each other and sighed "Oh, why does her severe and apparently untreated personality disorder have to make it impossible for us to see her in opera?" We'd even go to a Manon performance if she were in it!" Which caused me to reflect on the creation that her "recital character" is--no obnoxious, self-absorbed, abusive haridan here, just an artist performing music in a rapt, satisfying way (well, perhaps only a little arrogance in her demeanor, and a few condescending gestures toward the excellent pianist, Cliff Jackson). And I thought how the great (and not so great) ladies of song have created "characters" for their recital/public figure selves as well as their operatic portrayals; indeed, sometimes better ones than their stage creatures.

This association connected me to a much greater performance we recently attended just before Christmas, **La Gran Scena's VERA...the Life of a Diva**. The premise of this Gran Scena creation is the telling of the story of the crowning glory of 20th Century opera performance, Mme. Vera Galupe-Borszkh. As Madame herself says in the beginning, "A Diva must tell her own story. If she doesn't, someone else will, and you know what that means. **MASTER CLASS!** Someone who calls himself your fan makes you out to be Attila the Hun with high notes. Or worse, with no high notes!" Gran Scena program notes, and of course the delicious prattle of Sylvia Bills, have long related various snippets of the Stars lives and accomplishments each time they perform, but here we had a whole evening of the story of Mme.'s (and the Company's) many rises and falls, replete with fabulous musical excerpts.

Among the dish targets are teachers and teaching methods. Madame's teacher (and later, her husband) was, you know, the famous Manuel Galupe, the last of the castrati (she loved what "was left of him" --

besides, the diva muses, marrying a man who was **already** castrated saved so much time!). Manuel (as well as a number of other roles) was played superbly by the incredibly versatile Keith Jurosko. His soprano voice (as Mme. Gabriella Tonnozitti-Casseruola, the oldest living Diva) is hauntingly beautiful. Maestro Galupe treated us to an hilarious rendition of "La Danza" (chasing La Dementia around the stage, pinching her ass), and exquisite performances of Denza's "Occhi di Fata" and Tosti's "Ideale", the latter poignantly encoered as a duet with Mme. just before Maestro expires from a heart attack. I was moved to copious tears over the beautiful singing (and the death of the great teacher). Only The Ridiculous Theatrical Company's marvellous creations can combine tear-jerking hilarity with tear-jerking pathos at the same moment with the same perfection as Gran Scena.

Of course Gran Scena couldn't let Ms. McNally's wretched cartoon of a play get away, and **Mme. Galupe-Borszkh as the Diva experiencing vocal/emotional crisis and turning to pedagogy was funny and endearing--a bit arch, as was Lupone's Callas, but very intelligent as well.** She was aided by a brilliantly idiotic student in the person of Kavatina Turner. The aria was "Io son l'umile ancella," which Mme. sang even more beautifully than Freni (of course). (By the way, we did see *Master Class* -- and although the cheap sensationalism of the play made us rather sick,, we're real glad to have been there for La. Lupone, who was **great**. Thanks, Little Stevie, for talking us into it!)

The program included appearances by some of the other famous Gran Scena Divas (sadly absent was Carmelita Della Vaca-Browne, one of the finest living dramatic falcons). When we looked at the program and saw that Philene Wannelle, that mezzo of mezzos, would be doing an excerpt from *Samson and La-Dee-Dah* we were beside ourselves. The scene featuring "Mon coeur" was everything we anticipated, and then some (try as one might, it simply isn't possible to imagine what Gran Scena is going to do to--uh, with-- an opera excerpt). It was sumptuously sung and hilariously acted--and the final "Lache!" high B (both the note and the accompanying gyrations) would have turned Mme. Cossotto pea green with envy. Mlle. Wannelle is a real treasure--and she is living proof that there are no small roles. Her Nina in *Fanciulla* and Lola in *Cavalleria* have changed the way one thinks about seconda donna roles for all time. Mme. Galupe-Borszkh's classic takes on Tosca and Manon (Hi, Kathy) we had of course seen before, but would never pass up a chance to do see them again.

What made this an especially precious experience was that the play, and especially the performances, gave us Vera, Philene and Maestro Galupe as real people, their histories and personalities as well as their art, and we left feeling that we know them as well (or better) than we know

Renata, Leonie, Gwyneth, Astrid, Leontyne, Eleanor, etc., etc. And, isn't this a big part of what opera queenery (as well as **real** theater) is all about? As I have ranted in the past, for us, Gran Scena is **THE** opera company. yes, we do occasionally go to the Met, but it's generally so predictable and even the things you expect to be wonderful sometimes come off a-bit droopy (not recent enough exceptions are *Pique Dame*, *Pelleas*, and *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*). But **Gran Scena offers opera lovingly, beautifully and ridiculously realized, delicately lurching back and forth between silliness and seriousness.** Believe me, Vera and her gang. alter will change forever the way you see and hear opera. What an enormous blessing! When *VERA...the Life of a Diva* returns in the future, it is not to be missed.

Mme. Queler gave us a wonderful treat in early February (was she trying, in advance, to make up for the Voluptuous Horror of the *Ernani* that haunts the month of April?). **Opera Orchestra of New York's *Tristan und Isolde* with all the elements!!!** Mme. Connell was very beautiful and solid of voice, a bit too busy with her score to be optimally inspired, but a **REAL** Isolde just the same. A handsome sounding Heldentenor, a lovely, sensitive Kurwenal, and the **STAR** of the show, Petra Lang (American debut!) as Brangaene. Great voice, all the fixin's, and it looks like maybe she can act too! Eve perhaps just doesn't have it to be a great conductor, but she loves *Tristan* (who doesn't?) and gave a felt, very respectable performance--since we've been waiting over a dozen years to have this work performed complete (and when it next is done at the Met, we'll only have Jane Eaglen, ho hum), we love her for bringing it to us, and with fine singers.

So, what is the **story** with the recording careers of Leyla Gencer and Oralia Dominguez--especially given the rat-assed dreck that got to make records in that period! My theory is that Oralia was Mexican, and therefore too minority for the white international record companies, and that Leyla was too much of a problem to deal with, but I don't know much of anything about either of them except that they were among the Golden Age greats. And why does no one ever mention Janet Baker when Divas are discussed? She was a really great opera girl, and could carry on with the best of them (watch her *Mary Stuart* and her *Julius Caesar*). A musical artist of the highest mortal order (read: not quite La Callas) and a real actress too. Want to see a really great video? Steamy drama, good play, gorgeous music, great performances? Get the Ponnelle/Harnoncourt ***L'Incoronazione di Poppea***. I feared that Harnoncourt would be dry (his recording is a bit), but he's as juicy as the piece, and **everyone** sings and acts like there's no tomorrow. If you don't know *Poppea*, this is the way to meet it!

Love and kisses, Paul