

Newsletter • Bulletin

Summer

1998

L'Été

P.O. Box 8347, Main Terminal, Ottawa, Ontario K1G 3H8 • C.P. 8347, Succursale principale, Ottawa, (Ontario) K1G 3H8

Opera Alla Pasta: Sunday Afternoon at the Opera

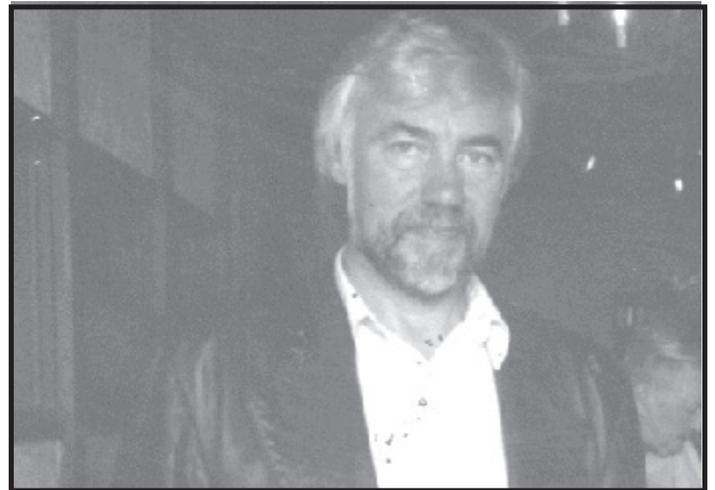
This fall we will be reviving our popular program of opera video presentations that was so successful two years ago. The program will be as follows:

Sept 27— *DIE ENTFUHRUNG AUS DEM SERAIL*
by Mozart

Nov 22— *L'ITALIANA IN ALGERI* by Rossini

Jan 10, 1999 — *LA GIOCONDA* by Ponchielli

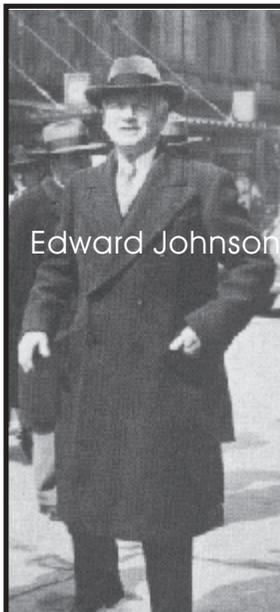
The videos will be shown at 2:00 P.M. on a large screen at St. Anthony's Soccer Club which is located at Preston Street at the Queensway. Parking is behind the building. The videos will be followed by a delightful pasta meal. A cash bar will be available. The total cost for each *rendezvous* will be \$15.00 per person. Please make reservations at 225-0124 two days before so we will know how many we are going to feed. Please join us for a fun time!



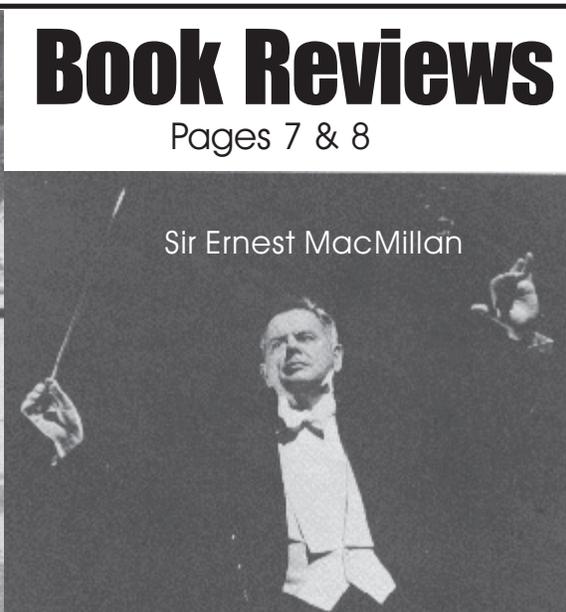
Brian Law returned to Ottawa for a visit in the spring. Unfortunately he won't be able to be here on January 23, 1999 when the fourth Brian Law Competition takes place at the Unitarian Congregation. But you should make it a point to reserve that date for one of our major activities. Also, watch for the "Thirteen Strings and Juniors Concert" scheduled for September 13, 1998 in Saint Andrew's Presbyterian Church. This concert will feature 1997 Brian Law Opera Scholarship winner, Julie Nesrallah.

Book Reviews

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Edward Johnson



Sir Ernest MacMillan

Sir Walter Scott at the Opera



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PRESIDENT'S REPORT

NATIONAL CAPITAL OPERA SOCIETY

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, JUNE 7, 1998

Last Saturday afternoon in Toronto I attended the Annual Meeting of Choirs Ontario, an organization of which I am a longtime past president. The guest speaker was Howard Dyck, whom you will all identify with Saturday Afternoon at the Opera. Howard spoke of the many threats to choral music (as you know that is also his bag) and stressed the importance of the arts, music and singing — all those factors that turn our environment from one of function and pure utility to one that promotes a warm, healthy and hearty existence.

As I have stressed before, we have to be eternally vigilant because our world of music, art, drama — all the elements of opera that we cherish can be easily classified as an endangered species in our economy and thus be worthy of our attention. The arts are a spiritual influence shaping our environment — affecting the growth, development and existence of living beings. The National Capital Opera Society was formed because fifteen years ago those special influences were severely threatened. With the advent of a new Chief Executive Officer, John Cripton, at the National Arts Centre, a focal point of many of our activities and thoughts, our discussions and the tableau of events have been most encouraging. The summer festival is back, and with everyone's support, Festival Canada will be a major feature of the Ottawa summer from now on. While we mourn the lack of full scale opera this summer, we welcome a new work by composer Rodney Sharman and director/librettist Atom Egoyan — a melodic work, *ELSEWHERELESS*, that was introduced to you in our last newsletter. The Centre wants to involve more of the community and more of the nation and this we heartily applaud. After all, it is Canada's National Arts Centre.

The year of 1997 started off with a flurry. On February 8th the third Brian Law Opera Scholarship competition took place at the Unitarian Congregation. The final jury consisted of soprano Roxolana Roslak and tenor Guillermo Silva from Toronto, and

coach Michael McMahon from Montreal. It was an exciting evening featuring four singers and fully televised by Rogers' Cablevision, a tape which dominated their programming for some time. As you all must know, the scholarship winner was mezzo-soprano Julie Nesrallah, who appeared in Rossini's *CENERENTOLA* the following evening at Carleton University. As we speak it is June 1998 and work is well under way for the 1999 competition, to be held in the same location on January 23rd. As you will hear from our treasurer, the endowment fund is close to \$18,000; however, we want to undertake a corporate fundraising campaign to propel it to at least \$30,000 so that the Society does not have to use its own funds to run the event. We need you to help us with that work.

Prior to that 1997 event, a very talented Ottawa baritone who was in town from England, presented an absolutely fabulous recital Fund Raiser for the Scholarship on February 5th in the midst of the worst snowstorm of the winter. Gerald Finley's offer to do the recital was a marvellous act of generosity. At that time he "let it slip" that he was making his debut at the Metropolitan Opera the following January 1998. Needless to say, the wheels quickly started to go round in our Board deliberations. With Gerald's consent (and his wonderful family's blessing) we decided to sponsor a bus tour to New York to his debut, and to have a fundraising raffle to assist with our fragile finances. After several months of NCOS/city negotiations we finally obtained our raffle license, and shared the end product with you, with many choirs, and with anyone that would help. Many of you sold tickets for that raffle, and we thank you for your participation. After all, this is your organization, and we are working on your behalf. Enough preaching! In early November HMV on Spark's Street hosted a special open house featuring excellent goodies and wine, great CD buys, and the raffle draw. As a prelude to the draw, a charming video greeting from

Gerald, his wife, mezzo Louise Winter, and their two small boys was played to the delight of the many persons there. Our CBC friend Rob Clipperton drew the winning ticket, and an Algonquin media student, Rachael Barreca, a member of the Ottawa Choral Society, was the lucky winner. Gerald's 1998 debut was on her birthday!

Since we worked so hard to get a raffle license standing with the City of Ottawa, we decided to do this every year as a fund raiser, featuring a special operatic goodie in perhaps New York. We are very concerned about our membership because our job continues on and we need the support. We feel that you approve of our devotion to young talent — whether it be debuts, Opera Lyra Ottawa's Young Artists' Program or the Brian Law Opera Scholarship. Our excellent newsletter keeps you informed on opera and operatic events, on very precious reviews of productions, and supplies news about singers, composers and locations around the world. We have enjoyed some very good movie videos and we are working to continue that effort on. But we need help. We are concerned because not every single opera person in the Region knows about us and has the option of supporting us. We badly need someone to work with us on publicity matters. Are you skilled in PR? When we move on the agenda to Board formation, consider your gifts and your free time. Presently there are a few of us doing a great deal of work and that cannot continue, without people saying — I'm feeling burned out! Do you want that to happen?

I wish to thank all those members and helpers of the Board of Directors - Pat Adamo, photographer; Tom McCool, newsletter; Murray Kitts, treasurer; Peggy Pflug, events; Gerda Ruckerbauer, membership; Jean Saldanha, secretary; Norma Torontow, vice-president and events; and Nonna Mellon and Sandy Stinson, assistance with events. To all others who helped, our thanks. This was a very busy year for everyone and without such support, it would have been much less successful than it has been. We have great plans for 1999 into 2000 and we hope you will join us in our enthusiasm. More about that later. I thank all the members for giving me the privilege of serving the Society. Thank you.



N.C.O.S. Board of Directors

President	Bobbi Cain
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Newsletter	Tom McCool
Finley Fan Club	Rachel Barreca Doreen Wilson

Membership Dues

If you received a Membership Application Form with this newsletter it means you have not paid your dues for 1998.

Please do so!

1998 Saturday Afternoon Opera Schedule

July 11	<i>HAMLET</i> (Thomas)
July 18	<i>RODELINDA</i> (Handel)
July 25	<i>ORPHEE AUX ENFERS</i> (Offenbach)
Aug 1	<i>DON QUIXOTE</i> (Kiernzl)
Aug 8	<i>CENDRILLON</i> (Massenet)
Aug 15	<i>GUNTRAM</i> (Strauss)
Aug 22	<i>OEDIPE</i> (Enesco)
Aug 29	<i>DER FREISCHUTZ</i> (Weber)
Sept 5	<i>THE OSTROBOTHNIANS</i> (Madetoja)
Sept 12	<i>I CAPULETI E I MONTECCHI</i> (Bellini)
Sept 19	<i>LA DAMINATION DE FAUST</i> (Berlioz)
Sept 26	<i>PORGY AND BESS</i> (Gershwin)
Oct 3	<i>MACBETH</i> (Bloch)

GREAT SCOTT !!!: Sir Walter at the Opera

by Murray Kitts

Every opera lover knows that *LUCIA* is based on a novel by Sir Walter Scott. However, there are a number of other operas based on Scott's writings. Like his counterparts today when they see their novels transmogrified into movies or TV specials, Scott might not be too pleased with the end products.

The first important opera based on Scott is by Rossini and was presented just nine years after the original work was first published in 1810. It is surmised that Rossini read a French translation of Scott's poem, *The Lady of the Lake*, which runs to almost 5,000 lines, and set the librettist, Andrea Leone Tottola, the task of writing a suitable Italian libretto. Obviously, the libretto skims the surface of the details of the poem, but the music certainly captures the beauties of nature described in the original poem, which incidentally has nothing to do with King Arthur's "Lady of the Lake".

In recent years, a not entirely successful production of *LA DONNA DEL LAGO* from La Scala has been presented on TV. Fortunately for the opera lover there is an excellent recording with three outstanding singers, Katia Ricciarelli as the Lady, Lucia Valentini Terrani as Malcolm and Samuel Ramey in the all too brief part of Douglas D'Angus (CBC M2k 39311). The Chambre Orchestra of Europe and the Philharmonic

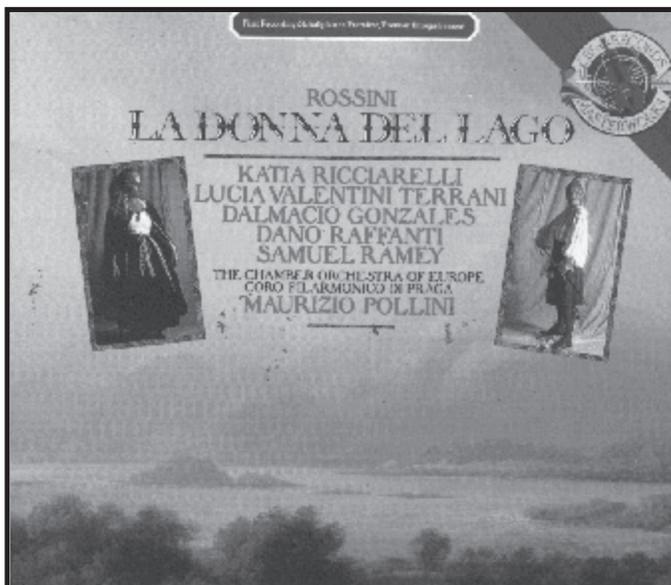
Choir of Prague are under the distinguished direction of Maurizio Pollini.

When this recording was first released in 1983 it created a sensation because no one except specialist scholars knew anything about the treasures to be found in listening to Rossini's serious works. Since then there have been a dozen of these works revived, but only a few come as close as *LA DONNA DEL LAGO* to be considered one of Rossini's most important works.

A recent recording of an opera that everyone has heard of, but never seen or listened to, is Boieldieu's *LA DAME BLANCHE* first heard in 1825, six years after the premiere of Rossini's opera. The libretto is based on no less than three Scott works, *Guy Mannerling*, *The Monastery*, and *The Abbott*. Very little of the original plots or characters are retained. The librettist was Eugene Scribe, who churned out an enormous number of opera librettos and was noted for tampering with original sources.

To give just one example of the departure from the original, in the opera "La dame blanche" is represented as a mysterious, almost supernatural creature who turns out to be the heroine in disguise. In Scott's novel, *The Monastery*, the White Lady first appears punishing an over-zealous monk by throwing him into the river: his crime – confiscating a bible that had been translated into the vernacular.

All this would be of very little interest if the opera were not delightful and well worth listening to. If you are familiar with the overture to this opera or with Boieldieu's magnificent harp concerto then you would expect the music of the opera to be lively, tuneful, lyrical and, at times, simply beautiful. and you would not be disappointed. The French female singers, Annick Massis, Mireille Delunsch and Sylvie Brunet, are all excellent. Rockwell Blake is not one of my favourite singers, but he turns in a fine performance, handling all the high notes with ease; fortunately a French actor handles the spoken dialogue for this role. Orchestra and chorus are splendidly con-



ducted by Marc Minkowski on a new EMI recording (7243 5 56355 2 5).

According to the CD notes, there have been 1679 performances of *LA DAME BLANCHE* at the Opera Comique in Paris, but none since 1926. Perhaps the fact that it is not a funny comic opera has led to its eclipse for so many years. Not a great opera, but a truly delightful one.



Ten years after the premiere of Boieldieu's opera Donizetti composed *LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR*, one of the most popular operas ever written. Most opera goers are well aware that it is based on on Scott's novel, *The Bride of Lammermoor*. They may also know that the novel is based on a true story. In Scott's novel Lucia's husband survives the murderous attack by his crazed wife and leaves Scotland forever. The hero and his horse are swallowed up by quicksand as he tries to evade Lucy's avenging brother. One can forgive the librettist, Salvatore Cammarano, for changing the hero's death into a suicide, which follows a glorious final aria.

Reading Scott's novel today is still a pleasure. However I'm sure modern readers who know the story from the opera only would be surprised to find so much humour in the tale centering around Caleb Balderstone, Edgar Ravenswood's steward, and Caleb's attempts to keep up the Ravenswood honour.

Probably every opera lover has their own favourite *LUCIA* recording. Mine is the earlier (1961) Sutherland recording with Cioni, not a great tenor but very passionate, and Robert Merrill and Cesare

Siepi to round out the cast with the Santa Cecilia orchestra and Chorus under Sir John Pritchard (London 411 622-2). I love the choruses in this opera and the Italians do them best. I also enjoy all the added sound effects—thunder and sounds of people enjoying themselves—of which some critics disapprove. Most of all I enjoy hearing the voice of Joan Sutherland at this early point in her wonderful career.

Finally we come to a real oddity, presented in 1867, thirty-two years after *LUCIA* was first performed. When Bizet began receiving the libretto from J.H. Vernoy de Saint-Georges and Jules Adenis he remarked: "My *FILLE DE PERTH* is not much like the original." Scott's novel, *The Fair Maid of Perth*, is a fifteenth century tale of political and religious strife, rich with details of the folk customs of Scotland. Bizet's opera has little or none of this. What it does have is: an anvil chorus; a *danse bohémienne*; a drinking song; a mad scene; etc. In other words a number of tested and tried operatic numbers that have been successful for other composers.



If you can find Bizet's *LA JOIE FILLE DE PERTH* (EMI 7475598) you can listen to an outstanding cast performing this work: June Anderson, Alfredo Kraus, Gino Quilico, Jose van Dam and Gabriel Bacquier with the Choeurs de Radio-France and the Nouvel Orchestre Philharmonique under Georges Pretre. Mind you, this is not another *CARMEN* or even *PEARLFISHERS*. But no admirer of Bizet would want to miss it, in spite of the libretto.

Of all the operas discussed I think Scott would have objected most strenuously to this one as it misrepresents and distorts his story.

So we have one masterpiece (*LUCIA*), a major work by a great master (*DONNA*), one of the best early French operas of the 19th century (*DAME*), and a curiosity by another great master (*FILLE*). All the Scott works are at the Ottawa Public Library.

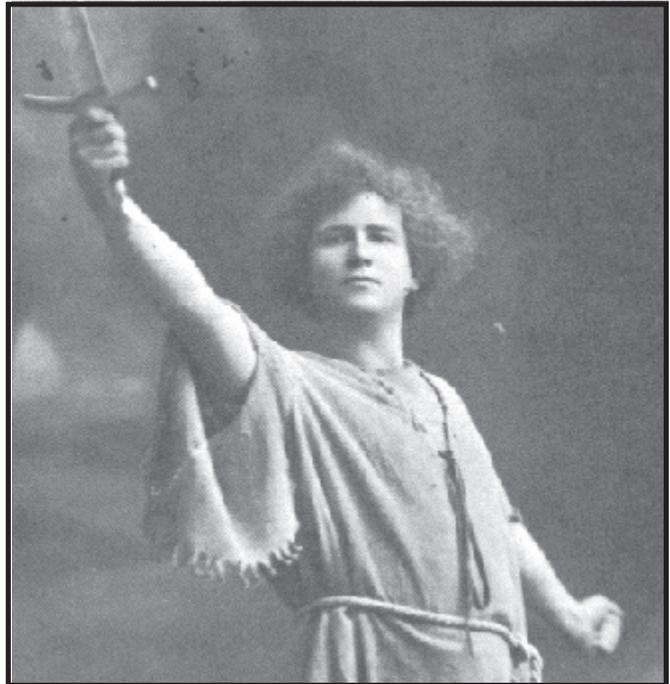
BOOK REVIEWS

Edward Johnson of The Met

After reading this biography (*THE TENOR OF HIS TIME: Edward Johnson of the Met* by Ruby Mercer. Clarke Irwin, 1976) I asked a graduate of the Faculty of Music at the University of Toronto (and an opera enthusiast) what she knew of Edward Johnson. Her reply: "I never heard of him, but I do know that there is an Edward Johnson Building on the campus." Pity! Johnson was one of the true giants of twentieth century opera. He had a distinguished and unique career that should have guaranteed his position in musical history. In fact, he had at least four different careers, any one of which would be the envy of any ordinary mortal.

Johnson was born in Guelph Ontario in 1885. He first came to prominence as a Broadway musical star after the turn of the century. However, his true love was opera and he forsook the bright lights of New York to learn his craft in Europe. There, as Edoardo di Giovanni, he developed into the foremost tenor of Italian opera. One of his rivals was Caruso. In 1919 he returned to America. Then at the Chicago Opera and later at the Metropolitan in New York he became the leading tenor of both companies. In 1935 he was appointed General Manager of the Metropolitan and during his fifteen year regime his opera company become the most prestigious in the world. In the fifties he returned to Canada and became involved in developing opera and music education at the University of Toronto. Unable to master the Byzantine politics of higher education he was not as influential in this endeavour as he would have liked. He did, though, get his name on the building. He died in Guelph in 1959.

The author of this biography, Ruby Mercer, is a former Metropolitan Opera soprano during Johnson's regime who later became a radio commentator, a writer and a well known opera supporter in Toronto. It becomes very clear early in the book



Edoardo di Giovanni in the La Scala premiere of PARSIFAL, January 9, 1914

that she is an unabashed admirer of her subject. She paints a picture of a man who has almost no faults and who is universally admired. One of the few conflicts she mentions is a running battle with the legendary Scottish soprano, Mary Garden, who, in addition to her role as a singer, was the boss of the Chicago Opera. Garden didn't like Johnson and he didn't like her! Everyone else, it seems, was a close friend or devoted admirer. In actual fact Johnson was a skilled administrator—how else could anyone survive for fifteen years as the manager of the Metropolitan Opera and not be—who had the advantage of being a famous performer in a former career. The description of his term as "the head man of the Met" was, for me, the highlight of the book. There is much evidence of excellent research throughout this work. Most interesting is Johnson's personal life. His wife, who was also his singing coach, died a few years after they were married and the por-

trayal of their relationship is both moving and intriguing.

Other positives: a series of excellent photographs that show Johnson at various stages in both his personal and professional life, a comprehensive discography which lists all the known recordings featuring Edward Johnson as a singer and a detailed list of awards, decorations, honours, etc.

Mercer is a capable writer but two irritants in her style are the use of quotations in certain instances when she couldn't possibly know what words were actually uttered. The other is the concealing of the identity of individuals who played a part in Johnson's life. For example: "He had eyes for only one woman at the time, however, his "anonymous friend" who they both realized, would probably never be free to be-

come Mrs. Edward Johnson..." Now this book was written in 1976, before the time when the First Amendment had become the Golden Rule, but if an author is referring to a person why not name him or her. Mercer knows who it is. Shouldn't her readers also know!

This is a good book but Edward Johnson deserves better. And he certainly deserves to be remembered as more than someone who has his name on a building. His definitive biography remains to be written but until that happens this book will serve as a good introduction to a great talent and a remarkable man. *THE TENOR OF HIS TIME* is available at the Ottawa Public Library.

— Tom McCool

The Importance of Being Sir Ernest

To read the biography of Sir Ernest MacMillan by Ezra Schabas (*Sir Ernest MacMillan: The Importance of Being Canadian*, University of Toronto Press) is to explore the development of classical music in Canada in the first two-thirds of the 20th century. One of the fine photographs in this book shows Sir Ernest in 1967 with Morley Callaghan, Kate Reid, A.Y. Jackson, Glenn Gould and Marshall McLuhan. Sir Ernest's contribution to Canada is rated on a par with these cultural icons, and rightly so.

It seems hard to believe that musical life in Toronto and Canada generally started from such a low point as depicted in the twenties and thirties. Educated in the British Isles, Sir Ernest dedicated his life to the advancement of music in Canada in many ways: as a great organist specializing in Bach, as educator heading various musical faculties, as adjudicator throughout Canada, as composer incorporating Canadian folk-music into his compositions, as conductor of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra developing this orchestra into a first-class one, as promotor of concerts reaching out to capture radio audiences and to promote music in schools and directly to children.

These are serious accomplishments; but the biography portrays Sir Ernest as an amiable, fun-loving person always willing to demonstrate his dedica-

tion to music but in the most pleasant and charming way possible. One revelation was that enthusiasm for Wagner got him incarcerated first in a prison, then in a prison camp, in Germany in World War I.

Ezra Schabas does not try to present Sir Ernest as perfect. He was a good, rather than a great, conductor. His role in the dropping of Canadian musicians (the Symphony Six) from a tour of the U.S. in the McCarthy era was an unfortunate one. He was not always at his best in dealing with rivals such as Heinz Unger and Edward Johnson. But no man of his period has received such praise from so many Canadian musicians and deservedly so.

Anyone like myself who have heard Sir Ernest conduct (from memory) Bach's *St. MATHEW PASSION* with soloists Lois Marshall, Jon Vickers and James Milligan can never forget the genuine emotions inspired by the performance. Today's performances of this work may be much more accurate musically and stylistically correct but they are often sterile and detached compared with those moving performances in Toronto so many years ago.

Sir Ernest was not an opera conductor, but his influence on opera singers and musicians was immense. To quote Maureen Forrester: "Anyone interested in the musical life of Canada will find this book fascinating."

— Murray Kitts

Opera Within Reach

OTTAWA

Festival Canada

THE MIKADO by Gilbert & Sullivan
July 17, 18, 21, 22, 24 & 25
Information: 755-1111

Opera Lyra

THE MAGIC FLUTE by Mozart
Oct 17, 19, 21, 24
Information: 233-9200

COOPERSTOWN, New York

Glimmerglass Opera

FALSTAFF by Verdi
July 2, 5, 11, 19, 24, 30 Aug 3, 8, 11, 17 & 22

TOSCA by Puccini
July 3, 6, 12, 23, 27 Aug 1, 4, 6, 9, 15, 21 & 24

THE MOTHER OF US ALL by Thomson
July 18, 20, 26 Aug 1, 7, 13, 15, 18 & 23

PARTENOPE by Handel
July 25, 28 31 Aug 2, 8, 10, 16, 20 & 22

Information: (607) 547-2255

TORONTO

Canadian Opera Company

NORMA by Bellini.
Sept 24, 27, 30 Oct 3, 6 & 9

TOSCA by Puccini.
Sept 25, 29 Oct 1, 4, 7 & 10

All performances are at the Hummingbird Centre.

Information: 1-800-250-4653

MONTREAL

L'Opéra de Montréal

LA TRAVIATA by Verdi.
Sept 26, 28, Oct 1, 3, 7 & 10.

DON CARLO by Verdi.
Nov 7, 9, 12, 14, 18, 21

All performances are in the Salle Wilfred Pelletier
in the Place des Arts

Information (514) 985-2258