

Newsletter • Bulletin

Spring

2002

Printemps

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

Tribute to Canadian Singers



Members and friends who went to St. Anthony's Soccer Club on Friday, January 25th were greeted by President Bobbi Cain and guided through the evening by CBC's Dave Stephens. Some great finds were available for bidders at the silent auction helping us to raise a considerable amount of money for the society. Tables were splendidly decorated by Gerda Ruckerbauer and were soon laden with the excellent food St. Anthony's is noted for. Of course, the highlight of the evening was the performance by three young singers, Pascale Beaudin, Miriam Khalil and Pierre-Etienne Bergeron accompanied by Frédéric Lacroix. All in all, a delightful evening!

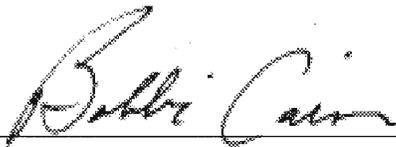


From the President . . .

They tell me that spring is here, and certainly the calendar says it is; however snow seems to want to visit, and I hope that we can wait patiently for the sweet breezes of spring. Did you attend Opera Lyra Ottawa's production of *La Bohème*? What a pleasant production, with some very fine singing. The National Arts Centre will announce the 2002 Great Composers Festival on May 8th, and while we will enjoy the summer's programming, our memories will harken back to what a joy an opera component brought.

Much of the remaining part of the year will be spent in planning celebrations. What, you may ask? Well, in August, September 1983 the first meetings of the Society were held. Thus we will begin our twentieth year of activity in September 2003. Want to have a great party next year? (One that attracts money). Secondly, in January 1993 the first Brian Law Opera Scholarship was awarded in St. Andrew's Church. Our work leading up to the next BLOS competition to be held on January 25, 2003 at the Unitarian Congregation will mark the tenth year of the scholarship, and we wish to make this a very special event. We are honoured to announce that G. Hamilton Southam, OC and his wife Marion will be Honourary Patrons for the evening. We are working on special fund raising to enhance both the winner's and runners-ups' prizes, as well as asking all our friends to make a tenth anniversary contribution. Won't this be exciting? Put that date on your calendar now, and plan to be with us, adding your voice to the cheers.

Best wishes for a pleasant spring as it wafts into summer.



Italian Week

June 6 - 16

Opera in Piazza

"All your Opera Favorites"

Main Stage - Preston St. at the Queensway

Friday June 14, 7:30 P.M.

NATIONAL CAPITAL OPERA SOCIETY

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

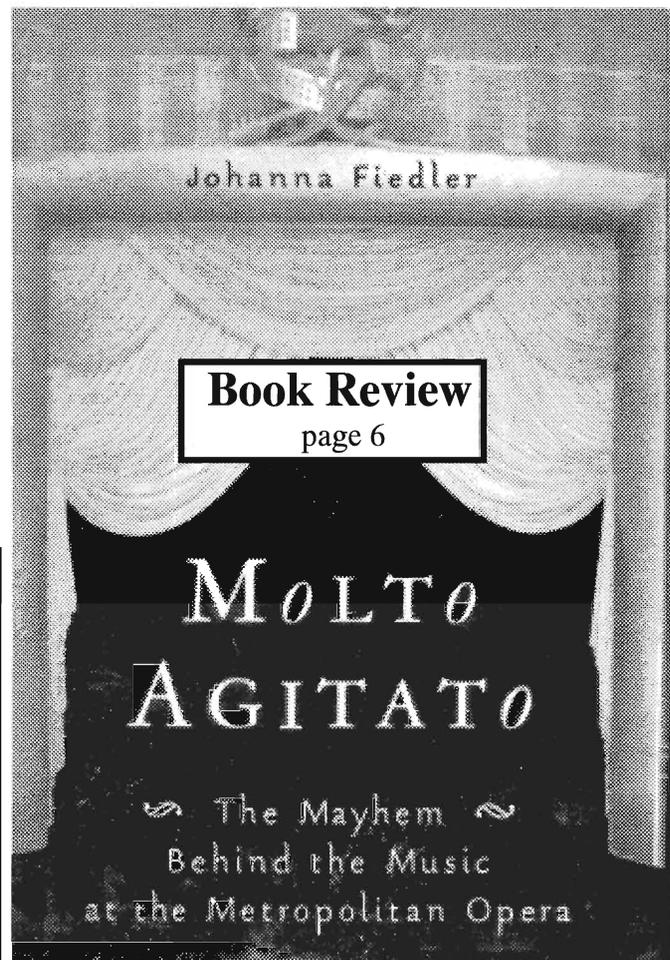
June 9, 12 Noon

Green Valley Restaurant

Reservations: 225-0124 by June 6.

Welcome New Members

Elizabeth and Jim Reicker



LA BOHÈME – OLO's FINE PRODUCTION

by Murray Kitts

Right from curtain rise I knew I was going to like this production. There was a door through which people could come and go (in contrast to the last OLO performance of this opera). The sets from the Canadian Opera Company were excellent, although the guard house in Act 2 looked almost as big as the inn. Costumes were fine except for the male principals who at times were indistinguishable on account of similar dress.

All the principals were in good voice, although no one had a great voice. (My objectivity has been ruined forever by the de los Angeles-Björling recording). Andrew Richards as Rudolfo was particularly impressive given the short time he had to rehearse with this cast. Sally Dibblee was outstanding as Musetta. Both Monique Pagé as Mimi and John Avey as Marcello gave convincing performances. Stage direction was very good – I particularly noted the astute staging of the last act.

The NAC Orchestra under Tyrone Paterson played beautifully but at times too loud, drowning out the singers.

Opera Lyra has made a very good case for presenting a familiar opera in a traditional setting. The audience enjoyed the performance very much and I'm sure will be back for more next season.

My objectivity has been ruined forever by the de los Angeles-Björling recording.

Once more I would like to plead for curtain calls at the end of each act. Some of the minor characters didn't get to bow at all. The chorus received no applause. What of all these children who didn't get a chance to witness the audience appreciating their performance. Audiences love to applaud when they have been entertained. I know it prolongs the evening a bit but I think it is worth it.

MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS

by Murray Kitts

No, this is not a new opera based on Agatha Christie's famous novel. The murder does take place on the Orient Express. What is murdered is Mozart's opera *THE ABDUCTION FROM THE SERAGLIO*.

He decided to make nonsense of the plot and to interfere with the audience's enjoyment of the music.

The Houston Grand Opera Company hired James Robinson to stage the opera. He decided to make nonsense of the plot and to interfere with the audience's enjoyment of the music. Elizabeth Futral is a first-rate Konstanze, but during her great aria "Marten aller Arten" the Pasha, looking like a sleazy rug salesman, is plying her with jewels, furs and even rugs, getting cheap laughs from the audience. If this does not hold your attention, you might be diverted by Belmonte, in his underwear, shaving in the next compartment at the same moment.. Because the opera is really set on a train. How the ladder is to be

used to escape from the pasha's clutches I will leave to you to try to figure out.

Eric Cutler as Belmonte was quite good, as were the studio artists who played the minor roles, with the exception of Joshua Wingrade who just does not have an adequate bass voice to sing the rôle of Osmin.

I have always found the duet between Konstanze and Belmonte in Act 3 to be one of the greatest moments in all opera. In this production how can one believe that there is any real danger of death, which is what motivates the ecstatic nature of the duet? At the same time we see Blonde and Pedrillo doing a slow dance and guzzling champagne in the next compartment which detracts from the focus of the scene. Have you any idea how annoying it is to have people sliding open and sliding closed doors between compartments during the whole opera?

The audience seemed to like this production, but I say it was murder.

Il Viaggio a Toronto

by Shelagh Williams

One of the joys of opera-going in Toronto is attending two operas at the Canadian Opera Company in a single weekend trip. The 2002 January-February pair — *SALOME* and *IL VIAGGIO A REIMS* (The Journey to Rheims) — were a striking contrast in operatic styles, productions and moods.

SALOME was directed by the Canadian film director Atom Egoyan, in a remount of the famous 1996 COC production. Egoyan brings a filmmaker's sensibilities and methods to the opera, trying to update and interpret the situation. Thus Herodias' page is played surprisingly as a female, clad in miniskirt and cleavage, with designs on Narraboth, captain of the guard. Narraboth, dressed as a secret service agent, of course loves Salome, and uses the gun in his underarm holster to kill himself when she ignores him. Salome herself pads around in a white swimsuit and long, open dressing gown. The five Jews are white-coated doctors who actually sedate Herod at one point. Jochanaan is pushed on-stage and hauled off on a luggage trolley. When it comes time to remove his head, Herodias rolls the oranges in a glass fruit bowl down the stage and uses the bowl to receive the very visible gory trophy. To help tell the story and add his spin on the proceedings, Egoyan has added film and still projections throughout the opera. Did I mention that the set itself was a plain box with no level playing surfaces? — though by the end of the evening it seemed most appropriate!

Musically, the production was of the high calibre we have come to expect of the COC. The cast was strong, with British Helen Field as Salome. A former dancer with the Royal Ballet, she also looked the part, and could probably have given us a wonderful Dance of the Seven Veils. However, there was no traditional dance, just some projected pictures of a young girl and then a short dance behind a backlit scrim. In fact, no one really seemed to relate to anyone else in any meaningful way, which is perhaps what Egoyan wished to convey — the dissociation among the participants, which led to the destruction/corruption of Salome's innocence. To many, this was a stunning production, with Salome's abused childhood posited as the psychological basis for her behaviour, but to this reviewer it was more distracting than believable.

In fact, to this reviewer, the Opera Lyra Ottawa's *SALOME* was far better than the COC production and was even superior to one that we saw at the N.Y. Met some years ago.

And now for something completely different! *IL VIAGGIO A REIMS* was a joyful, music-filled, glorious, visual delight! You say you've never heard of it? There are two reasons for this.

First, it was composed by Rossini as a festival piece for the 1825 coronation of Charles X of France, and to advertise his outstanding stable of singers at the Theatre Italien, of which he had just been made director. It was not meant for repertory, and he withdrew his score and reused much of it for *LE COMTE ORY*, so that it was lost for 150 years until it was pieced together again for its modern premiere in 1984. Second, it requires assembling not 3 or 6 or 8, but 14 solo voices, a difficult and expensive task, but one at which the COC/Richard Bradshaw succeeded by combining Canadian star Michael Schade and other Canadians with several East European voices.

The story is very simple. A group of European aristocrats arrive at an inn/spa on their way to the coronation at Rheims, only to find that there are no fresh horses to be had. After resolving to go later to Paris for the festivities, they divert themselves with amorous intrigues and then a banquet at which they provide their own entertainment. This provides everyone with an opportunity for several arias, plus ensembles, on topics as diverse and important as having nothing to wear, romancing a member of the opposite sex, and presenting their national anthems/songs. All the while such diversions as a naval battle in the spa pool and a battle of toy soldiers with cannon keep the participants (and audience) amused.

The sets and costumes come from the New York City's triumphant 1999 production, with an elegant spa setting and colourful, period costumes, and the same director, James Robinson, in charge. Along with the aforementioned superb (and funny) cast, the orchestra under Richard Bradshaw completed this most successful production.

Such a combination of vocal display and comedy would be hard to find. Even the title is a joke, for of course, they never do get to Rheims!

We were both proud and pleased to note that Shannon Mercer, winner of the 2001 Brian Law Opera Scholarship, sang in both operas. She is a member of the COC Ensemble Studio and had the named role of a slave in *SALOME*, and in the performance of *VIAGGIO* that we saw she replaced the mezzo-soprano originally cast to sing Delia. Shannon acted and sang both parts very well, and will have the role of Xenia in the upcoming COC production of *BORIS GODUNOV*, which alternates with *JULIUS CAESAR* in the April operas at the COC.

A HIT and a MISS in TORONTO

by Murray Kitts

Handel's *GUILIO CESARE IN EGITTO* is his most popular opera. It has all sorts of memorable arias and extraordinary musical effects. The production of this opera by the Canadian Opera Company was a great treat. Four outstanding singers were featured. Two of them are well established: Ewa Podles's magnificent voice allowed her to properly portray Caesar; while Brian Asawa gave a convincing and very musical portrayal of Sesto, son of the murdered Pompey. The other two can only be characterized as skyrocketing to fame. Isabel Barakdarian as the seductive and charming Cleopatra could well become the most sought-after soprano in the world for this rôle and for others as well. Ottawan Daniel Taylor as Tolemeo proved that he is an excellent actor and that he has learned to use his voice to heighten a dramatic situation. To hear these singers singly and interacting was delightful. The small orchestra (including a thorb) was elevated so that it was more audible to the audience. Kenneth Montgomery's conducting was superb.

True, there was a silly ballet. Some of the other soloists were not on the same musical level as the ones mentioned. The costumes were a bit of a mish-mash of styles and periods. Cornelia's dress with the bustle was ridiculous, especially since her part was not at all amusing. The Mount Parnassus scene in Act 2 was not well done. At least part of the audience couldn't see Cleopatra during her long aria. But these are minor points given the truly tremendous performances witnessed and heard. This was a real triumph for the COC.

The production of this opera by the Canadian Opera Company was a great treat. Four outstanding singers were featured.

For years I have almost felt guilty because I enjoyed so much the production of Mussorgsky's *BORIS GODUNOV* performed by the Bolshoi in Montreal in 1967. The trouble with that production (I was told) was that it was the Rimsky-Korsakov version of the opera. Scholars were busy unearthing Mussorgsky's original version which was considered much superior to the one I had seen.

So I was looking forward to seeing the COC production of the original (1871) version.

Unfortunately what I did see was very disappointing. Of course the music is wonderful, although I missed the entire act set in Poland which was added later by Mussorgsky. The soloists were all excellent, especially Gidon Saks as Boris. Not only did the chorus sing well but their movements on stage were extremely well managed.

It would take a very long article to describe all of my objections, but the following are some: *BORIS GODUNOV* is firmly based on the liturgy and music of the Russian Orthodox Church – it seemed to me that this production did all it could to downplay this connection – little or none of the pageantry was there; at the same time it is a very irreligious work when it comes to itinerant monks – they should be portrayed as comic characters.

The constant presence of Boris on stage is confusing and this criticism applies to the presence of other members of the cast, although not to the Fool (very well portrayed by Benoit Boutet).

It would take a very long article to describe all of my objections.

The Inn Scene was particularly badly done; an affair between the Inn Keeper and a policeman was invented, the monk Varlaam who was supposed to be 50 years old looked younger than the Pretender who was supposed to be 20; the appearance of a knife in the early quarrel between the two above didn't make sense; all the participants had to climb onto a platform when merely carrying out a table would have sufficed – that the police goons could not read was not credible nor was the Pretender's escape.

Having a boy to sing the part of Feodor was visually all right, but probably 80% of the audience couldn't hear him (this is opera after all and females are regularly used in this rôle) – his murder after his father's death was particularly revolting and gratuitous.

In general, so much action was put into the superimposed modern staging that it left the audience confused and distracted from the real worth of the opera – an historical drama with magnificent music.

Fiedler, Johanna *MOLTO AGITATO: The Mayhem Behind the Music at the Metropolitan Opera*. (New York: Doubleday, 2001)

If you are interested in opera, especially the Metropolitan Opera in New York, you should read *MOLTO AGITATO: The Mayhem Behind the Music at the Metropolitan Opera*. If you need confirmation concerning the power struggles, rivalries, machinations, backstabbing etc. that you always suspected, then you must read *MOLTO AGITATO*. And, if you are intrigued by romantic escapades, extramarital affairs and other sexual shenanigans, as well as gossip and rumours of all kinds, *MOLTO AGITATO* will be compulsory reading for you.

This book is a survey of the history of the Met from its inception in 1883 up to 2001, the date of publication. (In many respects the early part of the story is more interesting, probably because it is less familiar.) Naturally, one emphasis is on the great singers who have performed at the Met. And they are all here, from Caruso to Callas, and beyond. Conductors also are prominent in this narrative. Mahler and Toscanini are the most famous but in terms of longevity and power the present conductor, James Levine, is a fascinating case study. In recent years the role of the director in opera productions is enjoying increasing importance and Dexter and Zefferelli are just two directors whose work is described in this book. Always important at the Met is the management. Johnson, Bing, Bliss and Volpe are four individuals who are featured. (In fact, you will learn more about the all-powerful but ultimately unfortunate Sir Rudolph here than you probably want to know.) Mix together all these people (and many more, too) and what you get is a combination that is guaranteed to result in an absorbing and volatile account of the premiere operatic institution of the day.

Johanna Fiedler, the author of *MOLTO AGITATO*, is also the author of *ARTHUR FIEDLER: Papa, the Pops and Me* and for 15 years was the press representative of the Metropolitan Opera. This was an excellent position to become familiar with the inner workings at the opera house and over such a period of time she undoubtedly accumulated a number of friends and enemies. Although she has probably more of the latter after the publication

of this book, it seems to me that this is an unbiased, very balanced presentation. Here you will find heroes and villains, winners and losers, triumphs and tragedies. It is definitely a “warts and all” picture that emerges. Few, even such luminaries as Sutherland and Domingo, are spared. You might even come across a bizarre Kathleen Battle story that you haven’t heard before. Fiedler writes from an insider’s perspective in a bright and breezy style that makes the book very easy to read and difficult to put down.

“Molto Agitato” means, in Italian, “very agitated”. Is this an apt title for this book? One suggestion is that a more appropriate name would be “The Dirt Behind the Gold Curtain”. In my opinion this goes too far because, while this is a tale of ambitious social climbers, strong egos, clashing personalities, questionable tactics and dirty tricks - even rape and murder - it is also a story of great triumph when even survival seemed unlikely. While there is no lack of salacious detail, you will also find a comprehensive account of the artistic, personal, social and financial history of the Met. To her credit, Ms. Fiedler has covered all the bases. And in a most entertaining fashion!

Because of its roster of superstar artists, its vast repertoire and its lavish productions, New York’s Metropolitan Opera is probably the greatest opera house in the world. Like many of the operas that are presented on its stage the Met is bigger than life. That operatic quality is captured in *MOLTO AGITATO*. SO, if you enjoy opera you will enjoy this book. The retail cost is \$45, but it can be had for less on the Internet through either Amazon or Indigo. Unfortunately, this title is not listed in the catalogue of the Ottawa Public Library.



Book Review

by Tom McCool

SATURDAY AFTERNOON AT THE OPERA

2002 SCHEDULE

May 18, 2002 THÉÂTRE DES CHAMPS-ÉLYSÉES
Pénélope (Fauré)

May 25, 2002 ROYAL OPERA HOUSE, LONDON
Il Trovatore (Verdi)

June 1, 2002 CANADIAN OPERA COMPANY,
Julius Caesar in Egypt (Handel)

June 8, 2002 VANCOUVER OPERA
Of Mice and Men (Floyd)

June 15, 2002 L'OPÉRA DE QUÉBEC
Don Giovanni (Mozart)

June 22, 2002 CALGARY OPERA
Dialogues des Carmélites

June 29, 2002 CANADIAN OPERA COMPANY
Il Viaggio a Reims (Rossini)

July 6, 2002 VIENNA STATE OPERA
La Sonnambula (Bellini)

July 13, 2002 LA MONNAIE, BRUSSELS
Kát'a Kabanová (Janáček)

July 20, 2002 GRAND THEATRE, GENEVA
Maria di Rohan (Donizetti)

July 27, 2002 CONCERTGEBOUW, AMSTERDAM
Lakmé (Delibes)

August 3, 2002 THÉÂTRE MUNICIPAL, LAUSANNE
The Nose (Shostakovich)

August 10, 2002 BAVARIAN STATE OPERA, MUNICH
Manon Lescaut (Puccini)

August 17, 2002 THÉÂTRE DES CHAMPS-ÉLYSÉES,
Il Matrimonio Segreto (Cimarosa)

August 24, 2002 LA SCALA, MILAN
Samson et Dalila (Saint-Saëns)

August 13, 2002 GRAND THEATRE, WARSAW
King Roger (Szymanowski)



Tuesday, June 11, 2002 at 9 pm ET on PBS

Nabucco

Music by Giuseppe Verdi
 Libretto by Temistocle Solera

Cast

Abigaille: Maria Guleghina *Ismaele:* Gwyn Hughes Jones *Zaccaria:* Samuel Ramey
Fenena: Wendy White *Nabucco:* Juan Pons *Conductor:* James Levine

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