

## IS OPERA COMING OR GOING?

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My first Quest Club Paper was delivered October 1, 1999. Its topic was also musical: "Remembering Duke Ellington on His 100<sup>th</sup> Birthday." I knew nothing about the topic, typical of Quest, and listened and read and amassed a sizable Bibliography. My current Quest topic is also musical, but I have spent half a century listening and watching and reading - programs, reviews, mostly in The New York Times and in The Metropolitan Opera News. So though in this case the Bibliography is limited, the experience is not only extensive, but unique. "Is Opera Coming or Going?"

As a child, I was certain that Opera was not only going, but gone! This was due to my mother's tales of her childhood home, where the only scratchy 78 RPM records were Operatic. Her father sang in the chorus at the Lyric Opera in Chicago. Her mother, to keep an eye on her handsome and talented husband, sewed costumes at the Lyric for Galli-Curci, a famous diva of the time. The only popular record my mother recalled being able to play was "Whispering." That all changed when she married, when I was a child, when there were no operatic 78RPM records in our house. Opera was gone! Imagine my surprise to find that outside our house, Opera was still going.

Fast forward to my 1<sup>st</sup> year as a teacher at North Shore Country Day in Winnetka, Illinois.

The music teacher there had left a profitable career in chemistry to pursue his first love, to teach high schoolers to appreciate and perform Benjamin Britten's "Ceremony of Carols," Gilbert and

Sullivan, among other treasures. They were all new to me. That Spring I had a stack of Final

Exam blue book essays to grade and in the spirit of adventure ( and multi-tasking), I decided to make a foray into Opera. I chose the biggest box of Opera recordings at the library to listen to while I was grading. Alas, the biggest box was "*Tristan und Isolde*," by Wagner, and the longer I listened the lower the grades I awarded.. Finally, I stopped the turntable, put the LP's back in the box, and started grading the blue books again at the beginning. So much for my first foray into opera and Wagner.

A year later, Dick and I decided to try a different dining experience at The Kungsholm on East Ontario Street in Chicago. A limestone edifice, now owned by Lawry's, it then housed the most extensive smorgasbord imaginable, and for dessert, a puppet opera. This was the owner's hobby and delight, housed in a gilded and red velvet replica of an opera balcony, with puppets operated from below at just the right dimensions to keep the balcony view realistic and convincing. Puccini's "*Madame Butterfly*" was performed, with its unforgettable arias and the Humming Chorus to close the 2<sup>nd</sup> act.

Four years later found us on one of those 21 day European tours, with a stop in Rome. Who could miss an outdoor opera at the Baths of Caracalla? This time it was Verdi's "*Rigoletto*," complete with gelato vendors hawking their wares, and rain - pouring rain- just before the famous 3<sup>rd</sup> Act quartet. The singers' wigs dripped with rain, their hands extended, their heads tilted, begging for an excuse to exit. The audience was undeterred and would brook no exit, rain or no. We took shelter under an arch while the singers continued with the quartet - not once, but twice at the audience's insistence. These were fans to rival anything known to Baseball in America. Always in search of wider horizons, different cuisines, We found ourselves at the Bocce Bal in San Francisco. Coffee and wines were served by a staff who would

pause to sing entire arias, duets. The patrons not only waited patiently but sang along! So, feeling decidedly ignorant, we decided to see Verdi's "*Don Carlos*" being offered the next day at the San Francisco Opera House.. Long and dark. Very long and very dark We attributed our less than amazed response to too much wine, too much food. Later, we would realize that this could often be the case with Grand Opera.

A few months later, we called our friend and local expert, Dick VerWiebe, for his suggestions as to what might be brighter for our trip to New York, where we would explore not only French and Northern Italian cuisines, but the Metropolitan Opera. Dick immediately recommended "*Don Pasquale*," by Donizetti, a comic and highly musical romp that was not to be subdued by wining and dining. Even before the opera began, we were astonished by the Chagall Murals visible from the courtyard fountain. And on entering, the red plush staircase, the gilt walls, the rosewood, and the amazing Austrian chandeliers, raised up out of sight with the curtain. Right Dick VerWiebe was! And we were hooked ! It felt like we were at the center of the cultural universe.

On every subsequent visit to Manhattan, we revisited the Met. I am sure we were the only people in the audience not waiting for the famous arias in the operas we attended.. The sextet from "*Lucia di Lammermoor*," again by Donizetti, out of his manic and into his depressive phase, an opera that is all hits, and is still our favorite. No matter that the soprano was a last minute replacement and missed a few notes. No matter that we sat in turned back coveted subscription seats next to a lovely woman whose chauffeur accompanied her down the aisle. Waiting for the chandeliers to rise, we spoke with her and, of course, mispronounced the conductor's name. She so gently remarked that she thought he preferred James Levine and not Leveen..

We sighed aloud as the curtain rose on the 2<sup>nd</sup> act set of "*Der Rosenkavalier*," by Richard Strauss; indeed, the audience burst into applause before a note was sung. We watched Beverly Sills swing back and forth like Tweety-Pie in the first act of "*Barber of Seville*," a caged bird to be sure just waiting for her lover to rescue her.

Oh, it wasn't all onward and upward. Dick had to shake me awake with a reminder of the cost of the tickets when the dark and wine descended in the 1<sup>st</sup> Act of Wagner's "*Die Walkyrie*." It was election night and not even the promise of champagne in the intermission to revive the spirit after the shadows and staves and bear skins, Placido Domingo in the bear skin notwithstanding. "Not to worry," The man seated in front of us tried to reassure us as we re- settled in our seats : "Not to worry ! The next act is the big Discotheque scene." Sure! So much for my second foray into Wagner. It would be decades before we tried again.

Sherrill Milnes was a dashing "*Don Giovanni*," bold and vigorous. We wished, however, Mozart had saved some of the music for the next opera; it was like too many desserts, marvelous but in the end, stupefying. We did not miss a glorious note sung by Leontyne Price as "Aida," even though we sat in the last row; but even there we could sense that she took stage and sang, acting was evident only in her voice and in the music. She was a standing and singing log.(Indeed years later, Joan Goldner and Anita Cast and I had the same complaint with the famous tenor, Ben Heppner, in "*Turandot*," at the Lyric Opera in Chicago. Not even the marvelous "*Nessun Dorma*," could shatter his stony exterior.)

This was surely not the case on New Year's Eve at the Met, with a rousing cast having glorious fun with "*Die Fledermaus*," by Johann Strauss. One could hardly resist singing along. And the surprise appearance of Dom DeLuise as the drunken jailor, speaking his role in his inimitable Brooklyn accent. He brought down the house!

As you can tell by this time, opera had us going and coming. Again, at Dick VerWiebe's insistence we took our children on an IPFW bus trip to Chicago's Lyric Opera. Again, Donizetti in his manic phase, "*Elixir of Love*," with no less a cast than Kathleen Battle and Luciano Pavarotti. Again, the entire audience knew what was coming when the single spotlight found Pavarotti downstage and he sang the famous

"*Una furtivo lagrima*." We weren't waiting for it then, but have ever since. It was a short opera and our children did not sleep until we got back on the bus. I should add that we tried that opera again with our grandchildren, just a few years ago, this time in Bloomington, Indiana for a splendid production. ( In our estimation, IU in Bloomington always presents splendid productions ) When Dick asked our grandchildren if they wanted to stay for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Act, I insisted that it was a short opera and they would love it. I am not sure that either our children or grandchildren will revisit this art form soon. One does what one can..

One does what one can. The perfect phrase with which to end the tour down memory lane and switch to a discussion of the history, the financing, and the future of Opera. Opera, from its origins in the Renaissance, was meant for royalty and the court. And it is not called "Grand Opera, " for nothing. It is perhaps the Olympics of the arts, the birthplace of ballet, home to the spectacular, processions that included trained elephants, horses. It is home to preposterous plots which include blood feuds, babies exchanged at birth, feckless lovers, dying maidens, sword fights with dragons, Home to voices that could fill the vibrant public opera houses of 17<sup>th</sup> century Venice and the grand bourgeois palaces of culture built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century..

One of modest means could not afford the lofty prices for performances, except as my grandfather did, by performing. The opulent Opera Houses were built for the elite in society. It was not only the price which determined who could attend. "In 1880 William Vanderbilt tried to buy one of the 18 coveted boxes at the New York Academy of Music on 14<sup>th</sup> Street by offering \$30,000 for it. Vanderbilt represented new money, and to the old families controlling the academy his attempt to buy his way into a place reserved for them was a crass affront to their dignity. Money may be king in certain parts of New York society. But not everything can be bought. Or so it seemed. After his bid was rejected, Vanderbilt joined other nouveaux riches families like the Goulds, Rockefellers and Whitneys and founded the Metropolitan Opera House Company. With 122 private boxes, there was plenty of space for the city's expanding elite."

"The story of opera has been one of persistent democratization, constantly seeking to widen its audience ." Today, one can have the worst seat at the Lyric Opera House in Chicago for \$34. That is in the last row of the upper balcony. The best seat, in a box or in the first 22 rows on the main floor would cost \$275. At the Metropolitan Opera in New York the usual range for single seats is \$440 to \$20. An aisle seat in row S for "Aida" at the Met last November went for \$360. It was \$1450 for the opening night gala performance of "Elixir of Love." Just last August, the Met struggled to preserve rush tickets, where 200 prime seats will be available for \$20 each for performances Monday through Thursday; three quarters will be on sale at the box office two hours before the curtain, and the rest available to those 65 and over by phone. When the benefactor of this program died last year, a group of trustees stepped up to help with the program's \$4 million cost. The Met points out that only 55% of its annual operating budget is provided by ticket sales. It, like many arts organizations, has always depended on private contributions to meet its costs.

One does what one can. That line has ramifications in the present, where Opera Companies all over the world are facing difficult economic times. "This art form with its enormous casts sets and orchestras, and its armies of stage hands and administrative staff, was a dubious financial proposition even before the most recent down turn." Zachary Wolfe in the New York Times states: "I was once told that the good opera company directors are those who lose money responsibly." So much so that one writer states that in "ten years, there will be fewer small and regional opera companies. Organizations will close, as did Baltimore Opera in 2010, or merge and consolidate as did two companies in North Carolina the same year. Tickets will be harder to come by at major opera houses, where what is offered will deviate less from the warhorse repertory that sells out the house."

Noel Coward stated in his play, "Design for Living," "People are wrong when they say opera is not what it used to be. It is what it used to be. That is what's wrong with it." " Opera moves slowly, with programs mapped out years in advance. ...the stagnant repertory, the necessity of big stars , like [Placido] Domingo to sell almost anything, the focus on escapism over innovation and relevance. There is a lot of "Aida," lots of "Turandot," even at companies , like the Minnesota Opera, that use their limited resources to advocate for new work and thoughtful theatre. ...The Lyric Opera of Chicago, historically one of the most important companies in America, has a 2012-2013 season of astounding conservatism: a tour through the

standards. The only opera from the last century, the Renee Fleming vehicle "A Streetcar Named Desire," by Andre Previn, hardly pushes the boundaries. Worse, tickets for [ it] are available only to subscribers, in an anxious ploy to retain the company's traditional base." Seattle Opera has reduced 2014-2015 to a four production season. And most ominous, that company's well-regarded Young Artists program will not survive after that season.

One does what one can.." The New York City Opera opted in this last season for just 16 performances of four operas, albeit all new productions, from Telemann's "Orpheus," to Rufus Wainwright's "Prima Donna." All sixteen performances sold out, but the offerings (like the operating budget) had been drastically cut. , This from a company begun in 1943 and proclaimed by Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia to be "the people's opera." This from a company which began literally in the shadow of the Met at Lincoln Center, and introduced Sherrill Milnes, Beverly Sills, Placido Domingo. This from a company that is now itinerant.. Its new offerings reflect the strategy employed by many companies to entice expanded audiences and revenues. "Doubt," made famous by the play and the film, will be produced this next season, as will the new operas adapted from "The Grapes of Wrath,"and " The Secret Garden." The Santa Fe Opera Company presented "*Maometto II*," and restored this seldom performed Rossini masterwork to its original 1820 version to great acclaim.

Opera companies have combined forces and finances to produce difficult works, like "*Les Troyens*," by Berlioz This five act epic opened at the Royal Opera, Covent Garden, London this past June; it was a co-production with the Vienna State Opera, Teatro Alla Scala in Milan, and the San Francisco Opera.

And it included one of the new superstars Jonas Kaufmann, a tenor that refuses to be typecast and so has performed in Gounod's "Faust," and Wagner's "*Die Walkure*," at the Met. . These new superstars are groomed to attract new and loyal fans. They include Marina Poplavskaya,, Natalie Dessaye, Anna Netrebko, Simon Keenlyside, Dmitiri Hvorostovsky, Mariusz Kwiecien.. Many of these new superstars have and will perform in productions by radically varied composers and styles, not to mention languages..Little wonder that Opera seems the Italian national sport: they alone could understand the librettos. Hope does spring eternal in the arts. The promising fledgling company, Opera Moderne, performed Britten's "The Turn of the Screw," at Symphony Space in New York.this past May. The reviewer applauded "the outstanding use of limited space,." as well the voices of the cast. The great soprano Martina Arroyo offers a program called Prelude to Performance, where groups of 35 young singers are given instruction in role development, language, and analyzing librettos at Hunter College in New York. The Glimmerglass Festival in Cooperstown, New York, presented new productions of 4 operas for a total of 42 performances. The productions included the warhorse, "Aida," "Lost in the Stars," "The Music Man," and Lully's "Armide," a co-production with Opera Atelier, the Toronto company that has specialized in Baroque.

Opera houses are being constructed all over the world. Victoria Newhouse in her book Site and Sound, tells us that high profile opera houses and concert halls are replacing museums as linchpins of urban expansion, as tools of global politics and cultural economics. But rather than the "tedious neoclassic modernism," of Lincoln Center, there is a new demand for intimacy, transparency, and a greater openness to the City. So the Opera House in Beijing, China, is located close to Tiennamen Square and the Forbidden City, with definite political implications. Prominent architects build these houses all over the world: Zaha Hadid in Baku, Azerbaijan, Rem Koohaas buildings in Taiwan, Rio de Janeiro. But once some of these great buildings are constructed, there are no funds left for production or promotion. Even the director of the Santa Fe Opera has this complaint. And often, while the new houses boast highly inventive and appealing architecture, acoustics, what Frank Gehry calls, "the mystical magic straight out of Alice in Wonderland ," too often plays second fiddle.. In some houses in China, everything is amplified, no doubt inherited from Madam Mao's pervasive loud speakers.. In a recent operatic production at Gehry's hall in Los Angeles, "the orchestra was placed far above and behind the[ scenery] and the singers, which was fine for balances, but disastrous for coordination. ...not a minute of the score went by wit the singers and players firmly in sync.:

One does what one can to reach new audiences. Perhaps, the most startling attempt has been the Live in HD transmissions from the Metropolitan Opera, said to be the most important thing to happen in opera since the advent of translated super titles. One is able to go to a local theatre for a live Saturday matinee performance at the bargain price of about \$20, popcorn is extra at the Concession Stand. One has not only the best seat in the house at a bargain price, but interviews with the performers, the costumers, the scene changers, backstage during the intermissions, not available for those at the Met itself. The series began 6 years ago, and now reaches 1,700 theatres in 54 countries. "If all 17 performances of this season's new production of "Don Giovanni" had sold out the 4000 seat Met, it would have accounted for a total audience of 68,000. The broadcast of the opera in October [2012], reached 216,000 worldwide in one fell swoop, and the Met expected 50,000 more to see it in delayed showings in Asia, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, and in 'encore' broadcasts [usually Wednesday evenings] in North America and Europe." It won't be long before you'll be able to stream the Met's performances... live on your computer, smartphone or tablet.

The closeups demand emotionally charged performances by performers more attractive, more diminutive than those of the past- the past, when Luciano Pavarotti and Renata Scottò in Puccini's "*La Bohème*" were described as "dumplings in love." Discussing Michael Grandage, his director in "Don Giovanni," the baritone Mariusz Kwiecien said, 'He came from the dramatic theatre. He wants to see the real things in our eyes, in our gestures, smiles. So obviously people in the last rows in the balconies probably will not see those small details. That's why we have to keep some operatic, bigger gestures, but still, it should bridge outside and inside." Critics, however, suggest that opera is being rigidly interpreted for us by the lens, limiting peripheral perception and the multiplicity of musical and dramatic events happening simultaneously. The Met again offered its "Summer HD Festival," 10 free screenings of live HD broadcasts selected from the last few seasons. These were shown at Lincoln Center Plaza on consecutive nights through September 3<sup>rd</sup>. Democratization, indeed! Doing what one can and should.

Most adventurous of all, live or live on HD, was the Met's production last season of Wagner's 4 opera, 16 hour Ring Cycle, a masterwork about the creation and destruction of the world. The Met commissioned a set designed by Robert Le Page, at the cost of \$16 million. Mr. Le Page based his production on the theory of plate tectonics, in which pieces of the earth's crust are continually shifting, to suggest the majestic flow to match a score roiling with fire and thunder. And so the creation of a platform of 24 moveable planks onto which computer generated images are projected. Whirling and flipping, rising and falling, in unison or separately, the planks and the video suggest the banks of the Rhine, the mountain keeps of the gods, the underworld, caves, forests. This set has been described as the Met's 45-Ton Diva, with initial glitches of groans and grinding during the transformations, of transformations that never took place. Those flaws being surmounted, the set has been called kinetic sculpture enhanced by video's stage painting, especially suited to the way Wagner's narrative roams through time and space. For me, it was a way to keep my attention during the interlude music that heretofore I had found not only interminable, but sleep producing.

In August 2021, Philip Kennicott wrote about the future of Opera. "There is probably no tension greater, more volatile and more likely to have an impact on the future of opera than that between what technology will bring and what must be served in the opera house, lest the form be warped into something unrecognizable. Which is to say that the future likely holds a sharp conflict between the ubiquity of opera in some electronic or digital form and the atavistic craving to hear it live, sung without amplification, by singers trained in the art. ...Very likely, it will be a best-of-times and worst-of-times future, with opera advancing yet further on its historical trajectory toward greater and wider audiences yet moving ever further away from its roots in live theatre ... Technology transforms permanently and absolutely. Which is why the art form stands at a crossroads, even if we can't quite see it yet."

Which brings us to the original question: Is Opera Coming or Going? My answer is YES. It is going electronic and coming to theatre near you! Don't miss it!

END NOTES

