



Giuseppe Verdi, in an 1886 painting by Giovanni Boldini

***Rigoletto:* Light in the Darkness?**

Having signed a contract with Teatro la Fenice (Venice, Italy) in 1850, Giuseppe Verdi became taken with the idea of writing an opera based on Victor Hugo's controversial play, *Le Roi s'amuse*. Such a choice, however, did not ensure a smooth road to the opera's debut in the conservative political circles of the time. A story that showed

a French king and his court as morally corrupt was not deemed appropriate for public display. The actions of the characters were roundly criticized for their "depravity" and "abundant immorality." This is, after all, a story where the henchmen of a libertine Duke help him take advantage of an innocent young girl. Where a court buffoon lashes out at others with such a malicious tongue and mean manner that he is despised and cursed. And where the bitter Rigoletto plots revenge against the Duke for his daughter's assault only to end in having her killed instead.

By all accounts, Verdi was enthusiastic and persistent in pursuing the opera, determined to explore the intimacy of the drama and complexity of the characters. The composer and his librettist, Francesco Maria Piave, were able to modify the story line enough to satisfy the censors by making the king an unnamed duke, and the opera made its debut in March 1851.

The basic story has become, perhaps unfortunately, less shocking in modern times. However, the opera's plot remains fundamentally dark – a story of pathological behavior in which there are few glimmers of light. How do audiences connect with such a story today? What has kept *Rigoletto* consistently in the top ten lists of operas produced worldwide?

The Dark Side

"There really are no nice people in this opera," observed artistic and music director Michael Morgan, in announcing Festival Opera's upcoming season. Although there are glimmers of real

... continued on page 3

Making It in Opera

Young Artists Build Their Careers One Role at a Time

When a singer steps on stage to audition, it can be the beginning of a lifelong career. Or not. Pursuing a career in opera is exceptionally challenging. Today, in the United States alone, there are more than 120 regional opera companies providing a range of opportunities for young artists to exhibit their skills. But the competition is stiff and the attrition rate high. Making it in opera takes a unique combination of talent, hard work, resilience and sheer luck.

For mezzo-soprano **Jessica Deardorff**, standing on the brink of her career is like waiting in the wings for the show to begin. "I don't feel as if I've truly started my career yet. I know it will take time to grow, but I'm ready!" She received her master's degree from the University of Arizona more than a year ago and began to establish herself, but moved back to the Bay Area hoping to find more opportunities to sing. Where there is work, however, there is also significantly more competition.

Deardorff goes on every audition she can, combing company websites and magazines for announcements, talking to her personal network of other singers. She is well aware that auditions and competitions are important opportunities to become known by directors and judges. In between, she works with her voice teacher to refine her skills. She practices at least an hour a day and frequently sings more than that, as she teaches voice and piano and sings in a choir.

... continued on page 4

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From the Chair

It is with pleasure that I am able to report that we are starting off 2004 in a far more stable financial position than a year ago.

Through generous year-end donations from friends of Festival Opera, we were able to meet our 2003 fund-raising goal. Just after 1:00 p.m. on the deadline date, December 31, our donations topped the \$395,000 challenge goal set by a private foundation. Reaching the goal allowed us to retire significant debt, and with the challenge grant, begin to fund our 2004 season.

Last July's dramatic production of *Aida* was well appreciated by audiences. We sold out every performance, including an invitation-only event at Meadowood Resort in Napa, and generated momentum that carried us through the remainder of 2003.

Not that the year was without difficulty. Grants and corporate donations have yet to recover to former levels. We are encouraged by what we see, however, and believe a professional opera company can enjoy wide support in this community.

Festival Opera is looking beyond 2004. We

understand that a successful company requires a long-range business plan, and are actively building for our future. Our mission, as it has been for the past 13 years, is to continue to make opera accessible and affordable to a wide audience. By introducing opera to as many people as possible, we are not only able to sell tickets, but grow the appetite for cultural arts in our community.

Our efforts to achieve these goals are multi-faceted. We are focused on celebrating the rising young stars of opera, providing them with opportunities to try new repertoire and gain valuable production experience. We will maintain our emphasis on artistic excellence in every aspect from artist selection and creative direction, to technical and production values. We strive to find new ways to provide young people a broader exposure to music. And last, but not least, we are thrilled to be able to bring stellar, sophisticated productions to those who love opera – and to those who are new to it. It is our privilege to add the rich and vibrant colors of the operatic tradition to the fabric of our community.

— Susie Hanson ■

Alumni Notes



Hope Briggs

Soprano **Hope Briggs**, unseen but impressively heard last season as the High Priestess in *Aida*, will make her debut this June with San Francisco Opera. Realizing the dream of many young artists, Briggs so impressed SFO at her audition that she won a leading role as the Duchess of Parma in *Doktor Faust*. She will also make her European debut in this co-production with Staatsoper Stuttgart.

Since Festival Opera's 2000 production of *L'Elisir d'Amore*, tenor **John Bellemer** has made his debut with Boston Lyric Opera as Don José in *Carmen* and sang the role of Alfredo in *La Traviata* with Calgary Opera. This year will see his debut at Opera Royale de Wallonie in Liege, Belgium, as Don Ottavio in *Don Giovanni*.

Mezzo-soprano **Buffy Baggott**, last seen at Festival Opera in the title role of *La Tragédie de Carmen* in 2001, is beginning to establish a Wagnerian career. She will be singing with the Canadian Opera Company in *Die Walküre* this summer and, later in the fall, returns to Lyric Opera of Chicago for their Ring Cycle.

Last heard with Festival Opera in 2002 as Norina in *Don Pasquale*, soprano **Kristin Clayton**

took an unexpected but well-received turn as Nedda (*Pagliacci*) at San Francisco Opera when Catherine Naglestad became ill last fall. Earlier in the summer she sang her first Mimi in Chautauqua Opera's *La Bohème*.

Soprano **Peggy Kriha Dye** will make her debut at Washington Opera in May as Stella Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Last heard with Festival Opera as Susanna in *Le Nozze di Figaro* in 1999, Dye had appeared the prior year as Musetta in *La Bohème* and Zerlina in *Don Giovanni*. Her recent credits also include the First Lady in *Die Zauberflöte* at Opera Atelier and Drusilla in *L'incoronazione di Poppea* for her debut at Houston Grand Opera.

Described as "radiant" in her debut as Violetta for Festival Opera's *La Traviata* in 1998, soprano **Niccole Foland** will sing Mimi (*La Bohème*) this month with Arizona Opera. In 2002 she made her debut with New York City Opera as Kitty Hart in *Dead Man Walking*, a role she sang at the work's world premiere in San Francisco.

See us on the Web at
www.festivalopera.com

Rigoletto: Light in the Darkness? ... continued from page 1

affection between Rigoletto and Gilda, their relationship is clearly dysfunctional. Gilda has been overly protected and Rigoletto has held his life and lifestyle separate from her. And there is certainly nothing excusable about the Duke's behavior. Stage director David Cox describes the Duke as "a desperate sociopath ... someone whose morals have been corrupted by his extreme wealth and social position."

Cox, an accomplished baritone who has also sung the role of Rigoletto several times, sees a depth to Rigoletto's character that makes him more sympathetic than he is sometimes portrayed. "You have to think about what made him the way he is," contends Cox. "As a physical, and perhaps intellectual, misfit within his society, Rigoletto has had to live on his smarts. He's not in a position of power so he uses what tools he can, such as spiteful gossip and backbiting." In his first act soliloquy, *Pari siamo*, Rigoletto acknowledges that his tongue is his weapon. He compares himself to the paid assassin Sparafucile, singing, "We are equals. I have language, he has a dagger. I am a man who mocks men, he is one who kills them." [English translation by James Fenton.] As Cox says, Rigoletto's position as underdog makes him sympathetic and adds a level of pathos to the opera's cruel ending.

Seeking the Light

Despite its dark and ostensibly depressing story, *Rigoletto* continues to reach audiences. "This is a story about basic human emotions," contends Cox. "It's about love, betrayal, jealousy, and hate. That's the beauty of opera, if done correctly. It shows what is real in life – and this story, grim as it is, can happen anywhere. Think about when someone gets kicked around for so long they begin to dream about getting even. We've seen it in news headlines – situations like [the] Columbine [school shootings.]" Whether it is comfortable or not, audiences relate to it on some level, even if only as a response to the results of a character's behavior. Says Cox, "As director, I tell the singers to treat what's happening as if it's real, because this is something that could happen."

Above all else, however, there is the music. From Morgan's point of view, the transcendent beauty of the music provides balance to the darkness. "It's true, the ending is sheer tragedy – there is no silver lining – but Verdi's marvelous score

for *Rigoletto* serves as a dramatic contrast to the darkness of the story. I want people to leave the theater feeling that the beauty of the music has somehow mitigated their experience of the tragedy. The staging of the production should visually express this theme of darkness contrasting with beauty."

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It has been said that, once approval from the censors was secured, Verdi completed the score in a 40-day burst of composing genius. Whether there is truth to that or not, the opera was immediately embraced by audiences. As a Venetian critic wrote after the work's opening night, the music "speaks to you, weeps for you, transfuses passion. Never was the elo-

quence of sound more powerful." That power has held *Rigoletto* fixed in popular opera repertory for more than 150 years.

Judging the Balance

Cox believes that opera is the most powerful performing medium there is. Perhaps only in opera could a story as outwardly sordid and depressing as *Rigoletto* become a compelling and beautiful experience. Audiences respond to the director's and singers' abilities to connect them with the story through its music. Opera is a rich environment that provides opportunity to debate whether the characters have redeeming qualities or deserve the fate that befalls them. When the curtain opens on David Cox's vision of *Rigoletto*, audiences will once again evaluate this tragic story while being "transfused" by the passionate music of one of Verdi's most famous operas. ■

Buy Season Tickets and Save

For the first time, Festival Opera will offer reduced season ticket prices to patrons attending both operas. Combined with Early Bird pricing before June 1, season packages can be purchased for \$10 less than the cost of individual tickets.

But don't delay. Last year all four performances of our acclaimed production of *Aida* sold out. In order to secure both the special pricing and the best seats for both operas, plan to order tickets when they go on sale March 25. For more information, visit www.festivalopera.com. ■

Making It in Opera ...continued from page 1

Auditions can be both the most rewarding and the most frustrating experiences. “When I have an audition, it’s so exciting I can get almost giddy,” she says. “[After an audition] I have a pretty good idea of how I did in terms of my abilities. But when you leave thinking you sang the best you ever have and you still don’t get the role, it makes the letdown even harder.”

Given the challenges of becoming an opera singer, what is the allure? “I find it fascinating to be able to create your own instrument from scratch,” says Deardorff. “Each voice is different, it’s unlike anyone else’s. And a voice is always developing – no matter how much you study, there is more to learn.”

But the big break a young singer needs means getting a role that showcases their voice. It is a break that may require an auspicious combination of outside forces. Regional companies must choose to produce operas that will fill their houses, but the role a singer needs might not be in the popular repertory.

Deardorff takes a pragmatic view. “I’d be satisfied to be a working singer. I don’t need to be on the cover of *Opera News*. I’d be happy to be someone who gets hired at least once every ten times I audition. I love teaching and helping others develop – I’d just like performance to be instrumental, not supplemental, to my income!”



Photo: courtesy of San Francisco Opera

Marnie Breckenridge as Papagena in San Francisco Opera’s production of Die Zauberflöte.

For soprano **Marnie Breckenridge**, it has taken nearly a decade to reach a point where she feels her career has come into focus. A serious car accident the week of her college graduation proved a wake up call and led her to “follow her talent.” She enrolled in a master’s program at the San Francisco Conservatory. “I knew [building an opera career] was going to be hard.

But I felt I was honest enough and practical enough, that if I found I didn’t have what it takes, I would quit.”

She stuck with it and, about three years ago, felt her career begin to accelerate. “I think I finally started to understand what I was doing. In the beginning, I mostly copied the sounds opera singers make until I learned the proper breathing technique for singing.”

Developing the voice is a process and experts caution against rushing it. Says Breckenridge, “I was worried because at first I didn’t get into any apprenticeship programs. But I think it turned out to be for the best at the time. In many programs, they have you singing all kinds of things all the time. Unless you’re prepared, you can really hurt your voice.” Once her vocal technique really came together, things began to take off. “I got into Santa Fe’s [apprenticeship] program a few years ago,” she relates. “Eventually San Francisco Opera heard me and began to know who I was and I got some small roles there.”

“I’ll always be studying and working on my technique,” she says. “But I’ve learned that you have to sing who you are, you can’t be everything to everybody. You want to please people, but in the end you have to be true to your skills.”

So when has a singer really “made it”? According to Breckenridge, making it just means getting to a place where you’re truly satisfied with what you’re doing. “I feel I can say I’ve already ‘made it’ because I’m so happy in what I’m doing at this moment. I’m glad I took the risk to pursue this. I’m now past wondering if I can be an opera singer – I am one.”

Today’s young singers are a realistic crowd. They know they don’t require a leading role at the Met to be successful – although they wouldn’t mind the chance. With so many regional houses available and so many smaller companies doing adventurous things, there are many chances for them to shine. Young artists who are catapulted to international stardom may enjoy the ride, but the standard by which they are measured may become too hard to sustain. For Breckenridge being right here, right now, provides plenty of excitement. “I know I have something to share and I hope that people will gain something – joy, peace, musical enjoyment, pathos, drama – from what I have to give. I still have so much to learn and so many things to look forward to.”

Making it in opera means accepting that the numbers are against you. But for these talented singers, getting to step out on stage and use their very individual instruments can be reward enough. And for those fortunate enough to be in the audience, hearing them can be sheer magic. ■

Mezzo-soprano Jessica Deardorff will be introduced to Festival Opera audiences at the benefit concert on May 23. Soprano Marnie Breckenridge will make her debut as Gilda in Rigoletto, opening July 10.

Who Introduced You?

A recent report for Opera America found that over 50 percent of the opera patrons surveyed were first encouraged to attend by a friend or family member, often their mothers. Others said they gravitated to opera after hearing it on the radio, in school or elsewhere. As opera enthusiasts, we play an important role in introducing others to this treasured art form. Who introduced *you* to opera? Here is how a few Festival Opera fans answered:



Marjorie Appleton, Festival Opera Guild Member and Volunteer

“My mother and grandmother began taking me to San Francisco Opera when I was about 12. At first

I was reluctant, but I was expected to listen quietly anyway and it eventually grew on me. The first opera I heard was *Madama Butterfly*. Soon I was listening to Wagner, and after hearing Kirsten Flagstad, that was it!”



Clifford (Kip) Cranna, Music Administrator, San Francisco Opera

“I first saw opera around 1960 when a traveling company did a student matinee at my junior high school in Devils Lake, North Dakota. It was *The Barber of Seville* in English with piano accompaniment. I enjoyed it tremendously – it never occurred to me at the time that there were other operas. I had a lot to learn!”



Bill Pollacek, Contra Costa County Treasurer

“Both my grandparents were on Broadway; my grandmother was a singer and dancer and my grandfa-

ther worked as a stage hand. I grew up hearing all kinds of show music and opera. As a young kid I preferred rock music, but around my mid-30’s I heard opera again and found I really liked it.”



Al Covaia, Classical Radio Host

“Even though I came from a non-musical family, as a kid growing up in the city, opera was an accessible form of theater. Tickets were inexpensive and the singers unforgettable – even for an inexperienced youngster. I heard Ezio Pinza in *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Lotte Lehmann in *Der Rosenkavalier*, Paul Robeson in *Otello* and so many others. I was fortunate indeed!”



David Cox, Stage Director

“I have always been a singer. When you grow up as a preacher’s son, you sing! In my late teens, I went to an opera with a girlfriend but I

didn’t see myself singing it. After performing in musical theater for several years, I attended San Jose State in voice and choral conducting. My voice teacher suggested I audition for what was then San Jose Opera Theater. I have since sung more than thirty roles and now I’m directing.”



Susie Hanson, Festival Opera Chair

“I probably first heard opera on the radio or TV, but it never had much impact on me until I saw it live. In 1981, my husband and I were new to the area and decided to explore the nightlife in San Francisco. We bought tickets to San Francisco Opera and it just happened to be *Carmen* with Placido Domingo. We were hooked!” ■

Mark Your Calendar!

Festival Opera Guild Spring Events

Wednesday, March 17, 6:00 p.m.

FO Salutes the Irish. Join your Guild friends and “Irish” tenor Joe O’Meyers for a “bite and a pint” on St. Patrick’s Day.

Saturday, May 15, 11:00 a.m.

A Walk in the Rose Garden. Reserve early for this popular springtime tea among the roses at a private home.

For reservations or more information, call Barbara LaGrandeur at (925) 944-9610

2004 Gala Event

Join us on Saturday, October 23, 2004 for a festive evening of fine dining, music and laughter at Festival Opera’s biggest fund raising event of the year. This year’s event will be held at the elegant Oakland Rotunda and will feature live and silent auctions, as well as lighthearted arias and scenes from favorite comic operas. Last year’s event at Teatro ZinZanni was a resounding success and this year’s gala promises to be another great evening. If you would like to help on the event committee, or have auction items or resources to donate in support of this effort, please call the Festival Opera office at (925) 944-9610. ■



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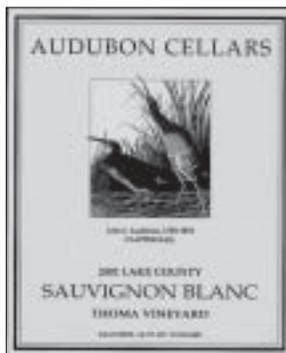
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