

## Cincinnati Opera Memories - The Middle Years

I was raised an opera lover. My mother took great pains to introduce me to all forms of classical music, but especially to opera. There wasn't that much opera in Baltimore in those years, But the Metropolitan came to town on tour every Spring, and we seldom missed a performance.

As I grew in my appreciation of the art form, trips to New York to hear opera at the Old Met became an annual event. During my college years, the Met was only an hour's train ride away, and I went whenever I could.

The years flew by, and in the course of time my wife and I found ourselves in Cincinnati, courtesy of P&G... and what to our wondering eyes should appear but glorious summers filled with Opera at the Zoo! We attended as often as we could afford tickets. I became totally committed to the Zoo Opera, and presented myself to the General Manager, Styrk Orwoll, as a volunteer. And this led to a long-term hands-on involvement, a seat on the Board, and a commitment which has lasted to this day.

For those who did not have a personal experience with opera at the Zoo, let me share some memories and impressions of what I think of as Cincinnati Opera's middle years, when it outgrew the Zoo and found a new home in wonderful Music Hall.

First, opera at the Zoo. It was a lot of opera: typically six or more productions in a season (nine in the 1960's), drawn from a surprisingly wide-ranging repertory; with as many as 27 performances in a season: it was much, much more than the beloved staples Aida, Boheme and Carmen.

The singers were almost always good and often outstanding, for a simple financial reason: today there are summer opera festivals in cities all across the United States... but in those days (the 60's and early 70's) there was pretty much just Cincinnati. If you were a singer (or conductor or musician) and wanted summer work there were precious few jobs available anywhere except Cincinnati. Our lead roles were sung by some of the finest talent from the Met. Elizabeth Schwartzkopf, Roberta Peters, Montserrat Caballe, Eleanor Steber and countless others: new young voices destined for stardom like Beverly Sills, Sherrill Milnes, James Morris and Placido Domingo were regulars at the Zoo. Our orchestra was conducted for years by the Met's own Fausto Cleva, and our chorus drew trained voices from New York.

The pavilion was under cover, but open on the sides to allow summer breezes through (sorely needed on hot July nights). Rain could blow into the pavilion in a thunderstorm and the seats closest to the edge of the pavilion were often at risk on a stormy night. Smoking and cups of beer were welcome at your seats in the pavilion. It was not a

particularly dressy affair, though many ladies arrived in fine fashion.

Picnicking was, for many, an important part of the Zoo Opera. There was keen competition for the finest locations, and quite elegant cloths, linens, and dinners were laid out in all the best grassy corners.

Much has been made of the animal voices raised in competition with the singers: this was indeed a regular occurrence, typically starring the sea lions and the peacocks. The singers took it in good part. Not so pleasant was the hazard of the nocturnal insects attracted by the brightly lit stage: more than once, a singer filling his or her lungs for the next notes inhaled a moth and was reduced to coughs and splutters.

The Opera was generally well supported by loyal audiences, but with a serious downside: only about one quarter of the seats were presold by subscription, and the great majority of tickets were sold at the box office (housed in an old white trailer) in the hour before the performance. This meant that the audience could be disappointingly thin on an uninviting hot or stormy night, and some of the best planned performances with the finest singers might be under attended at the last moment if the weather threatened. Each night, the management looked nervously at the ticket line at the box office.

And then came the disaster of 1967, with riots - serious civil unrest - in the Avondale area, which many Opera patrons had to cross to reach the Zoo. There were armed National Guard soldiers mounted on combat vehicles blocking the way as tensions rose. It was possible to thread this needle and navigate through to the Zoo, and a few patrons managed, but many opera goers chose not to try. The season was a financial ruin.

In the late 1960's, two wonderful new patrons appeared on the scene: Pat and Ralph Corbett were destined to have the greatest imaginable impact upon Cincinnati Opera. In 1968 they gave their first complete production: a glorious Tales Of Hoffmann that surpassed anything previously seen at the Zoo: the singers (a radiant young Beverly Sills in all three soprano roles teamed with a splendidly demonic baritone Norman Treigle) were simply superb: the direction, the sets and costumes were breathtaking. Those who were there that evening (including the Board) had their eyes opened wide with a new vision of just how good opera at the Zoo could be!

At about that time, perhaps inspired by the Hoffmann production, the idea of relocating the opera in Music Hall gained momentum. There were a number of arguments in favor:

- Better opera would be possible on the Music Hall stage

- Freedom from the vagaries of hot and rainy weather at the zoo, and its impact on attendance
- People had not forgotten the disaster of the 1967 civil unrest, and feared it could happen again.
- And the Zoo wanted the real estate occupied by the Opera for other attractions.

But Music Hall as it then existed was little more than an empty shell and would require breathtaking renovations to make opera a possibility. Against all odds, support grew for the idea. One by one, major donors stepped forward, including the City. And driving the concept from start to finish were the Corbetts.

The biggest single improvement was surgically opening the Music Hall roof and installing an enormous steel grid above the stage from which sets could be flown (that is, raised, lowered and stored). This alone required major surgery on the grand old building for a massive installation. But there was so much more to come: There followed two extremely high tech new lighting systems... completely new rehearsal space... new green room... new set construction facility... new escalators... new seats throughout the auditorium... new white and gold paint throughout... air conditioning... the list went on and on. And whenever forward momentum faltered, or funding ran low, Ralph Corbett stepped forward to help overcome the

obstacles. (It is worth noting that all these amazing innovations are now more than 40 years old, and overdue for replacement).

There came a time when a move from the Zoo could become a reality, and June 1972 was picked for opening night.

I will never forget standing in the gorgeously repainted auditorium, bathed in air conditioning, surrounded by a sea of new red velvet seats, with several Board members and Ralph who was surveying it all like an Old Testament Jehovah. “Boys,” he said, “It’s not bad, is it?” I had been prepared for the moment: “Ralph,” I replied, “It’s almost perfect!”

He was stung: “Whaddaya mean, almost perfect?”

“Ralph, it’s all so beautiful and the paint and seats are so splendid that it makes the old curtain seem kind of shabby. Don’t you think we need a new red velvet curtain to finish it off?”

He did not welcome the notion. “Well I don’t know what a new curtain would cost,” he said.

“Actually, Ralph, I have an estimate here in my coat pocket.”

“All right, he said, I’ll talk to Pat about it tonight: call me tomorrow morning.”

I was picked to call him the next day. I got him on the phone: “Ralph, this is Gibby Carey calling...”

“I know, I know,” he replied. “I talked to Pat last night, and we have decided to go ahead with a new chandelier. We’re commissioning it in Czechoslovakia, it will have a thousand pieces of crystal, and it will go up and down with the curtain.”

I was stunned: I could hardly believe my ears. “Ralph,” I stammered, “We were talking about...”

“I know, I know, you want a damned curtain. Well maybe Nippert will give you a curtain... we’re doing a chandelier!” And so they did: it hangs in Music Hall to this day, though it no longer goes up and down with the curtain. And we did eventually find a wonderful donor for a new curtain, and with that final commitment (which took a number of years to put in place), Music Hall was done!

No one wanted to wait for the new curtain in place: the whole community was impatient for opera in Music Hall! But what opera could possibly be grand enough for such an occasion? Once again, the Corbetts came to the rescue: they had just commissioned a truly spectacular production of Boito’s Mefistofele, starring Norman Treigle,

for the New York City Opera which had set New York's music world on its ear: the Corbetts offered to bring the entire production, including sets, costumes, music director Julius Rudel with a full cast and crew numbering almost one hundred, to Cincinnati for Opening Night at Music Hall! They picked up every expense, even including costly dental work by Cincinnati dentists for some of the Italian cast's family members, who came along for the ride!

It was, truly, a night to remember. All Cincinnati turned out to celebrate the new Music Hall, and they heard an evening of opera to cherish for a lifetime. And so began an entirely new phase in the life story of Cincinnati Opera. The next ten years - our first decade in Music Hall - were a time of problems, learning and growth unmatched in the Company's history.

The first crisis happened on Opening Night in year two, 1973, when the General Manager literally disappeared within hours of Opening Night... and with him went virtually all knowledge of the casting and planning for the entire season. The situation was truly desperate. Into the breach stepped a talented young director named James DeBlasis who bravely volunteered to pick up such pieces as he could reconstruct, and keep the season alive. He did a masterful job - his first of many - and the Board gratefully offered him the position of General Manager, which he filled with distinction for 23 years until he retired in 1996.

The Company could not have survived these years without Jim DeBlasis.

It soon became apparent that the company's extensive inventory of sets and productions from the Zoo years were simply not good enough for Music Hall. The Music Hall stage was cavernous compared to the Zoo, and so grand, that the Zoo productions frankly looked shabby. It became clear that we were going to have to build, or rent, completely new productions for every opera we presented in elegant Music Hall. A staggering expense no one had foreseen.

But once more, the Corbetts came to the rescue. They picked up the tab for at least two new productions every year... and one year as many as four: half the entire season. And they did not cut corners: that was not the Corbett way!

During these years, the Board worked hard to explore new ways to capitalize on the wonders of Music Hall. One objective was to grow our audience beyond the customary two houses of ticket buyers (a maximum of about 7,000 in all for a given opera). The Board focused for a number of years on light opera as a means of attracting new patrons to Music Hall and then, hopefully, converting them to Grand Opera.

Starting with The Merry Widow, which sold out every performance we could schedule, the Company stirred in one light opera per season: Gilbert and Sullivan, Rogers and Hammerstein, and many others from Broadway. These generally sold well, but did not seem to increase the audience base for Grand Opera. The light opera initiative was abandoned after eleven years.

Music Hall made possible another way to grow audiences that could never have worked at the Zoo: an educational program introducing opera to school age children. For the first time, it was now possible for the Company to produce opera while children were in school, and available for special student performances in Music Hall.

This meant reshaping the year's production schedule to include performances in the Spring and Fall. It was a good idea, and it quickly gained momentum, with generous financial support from caring donors, and enthusiastic acceptance from area schools. The opera's principal season remained in the summer, but now there were also performances in the Spring and Fall for the general public in the evenings and matinees for students, with children bussed in from schools across the community. Music Hall was filled for the special student performances, and they loved it!

The educational program was an unqualified success, but it soon became apparent that it was a too-heavy

administrative and financial burden to assemble the many artists, production staff, orchestra, sets and costumes needed for a single production in the Spring, and again in the Fall. With deep regret, the program was canceled after seven years, and the opera season returned to its traditional summer festival schedule, where it has remained ever since.

Today, the Opera is recognized as one of Cincinnati's premier and most responsibly run arts organizations. New donors have stepped forward in the wonderful tradition of the Corbetts and Louise Nippert. The Opera has an enviable track record of financial responsibility, finishing with just one deficit in the past 25 years, while bringing to the Music Hall stage productions of the highest artistic excellence in the Company's 94 year history. Credit for this goes to a finely tuned management team led by General Director Patricia Beggs, at the helm since 1997, and Artistic Director Evans Mirageas since 2005, who have together built the second oldest opera in America into a company that is the envy of other Operas, and a primary point of artistic pride for Cincinnati.

And now, on to the future... with another much-debated renovation of Music Hall in the offing. A new challenge for an organization that has survived and grown through many such challenges. The next will be no exception!

G G Carey

With kind assistance from COA General Manager Patricia  
Beggs

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