



Opera and the Golden West

The Past, Present, and Future
of Opera in the U.S.A.

Edited by

John L. DiGaetani and Josef P. Sirefman

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江苏工业学院图书馆
藏书章

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Rutherford • Madison • Teaneck
Fairleigh Dickinson University Press
London and Toronto: Associated University Presses

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Associated University Presses
440 Forsgate Drive
Cranbury, NJ 08512

Associated University Presses
25 Sicilian Avenue
London WC1A 2QH, England

Associated University Presses
P.O. Box 338, Port Credit
Mississauga, Ontario
Canada L5G 4L8

The paper used in this publication meets the requirements
of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper
for Printed Library Materials Z33.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Opera and the Golden West : the past, present, and future of opera in
the U.S.A. / edited by John L. DiGaetani and Josef P. Sirefman.
p. cm.

Based on a conference held at Hofstra University, sponsored by the
Hofstra Cultural Center.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8386-3519-9 (alk. paper)

1. Opera—United States—Congresses. I. DiGaetani, John Louis,
1943– . II. Sirefman, Josef P.

ML1711.064 1994

782.1'0973—dc20

92-55065
CIP
MN

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

for my parents, Romeo and Theresa DiGaetani

—J. L. D.

for my parents, William and Gussie Sirefman, and
for my wife Carol

—J. P. S.

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Acknowledgments

This book grew out of a four-day conference at Hofstra University on the topic of Opera and the Golden West, or opera in America. The original focus of the conference was to celebrate the anniversary of Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West* at the Metropolitan Opera on 10 December 1910. From the desire to commemorate that premiere, the conference grew to the more general topic of opera in America.

We would like to thank the Hofstra Cultural Center for sponsoring this conference, in addition to Hofstra University for providing funding. We would particularly like to thank Natalie Datloff, Alexei Ugrinsky, and Athelene Collins of the Cultural Center for their help. In addition, we appreciate the support of Texaco, Inc. and W. M. Keenan, Manager of Corporate Advertising for Texaco. Regina Fiorito of the Metropolitan Opera Archive Dept. made a substantial contribution to the conference. The conference was enriched by the presentations of composers Bruce Adolphe, Leonard Lehrman, and Robert Starer of excerpts from their operas and a musical lecture by Eve Queler. Finally, we acknowledge the contribution of Lucine Amara of the Metropolitan Opera to the success of this project.

Introduction

On 10 December 1910 the Metropolitan Opera presented the world premiere of Giacomo Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West*. Of course there were previous operas where some of the action occurs in the United States, ranging from Louisiana in Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* to a mythical Boston in Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera*. But *La fanciulla del West* was different. This was an opera set entirely within the United States—indeed, set in California, quintessence of the shining Golden West, a metaphor for the whole country and its noble ideals.

The ensuing century has witnessed the performance of the traditional repertory and a continuing fascination with foreign artists and conductors. Alongside these representatives of the Old World has been the development and outstanding success of homegrown singers and conductors. To a lesser but nonetheless significant degree, American composers have had their works based on American themes performed in major American opera houses as well as in regional and local theaters. The Metropolitan Opera's 1992–93 season included the world premiere of an opera to commemorate the five hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America: Philip Glass and David Henry Hwang's *The Voyage*. The season before, the Met premiered another highly successful American work, John Corigliano and William Hoffman's *The Ghosts Of Versailles*. Time will decide whether these works will become a part of the standard operatic repertory in America—as has, arguably, Douglas Moore's *The Ballad Of Baby Doe*. Business and economics will also prove their powers in the operatic field. We have experienced the expansion and contraction (and disappearance) of our opera houses with ever-changing phases of the business cycle and government arts funding.

This book is a celebration of opera's development in America. It focuses in part on early repertory and how European operatic masterpieces became part of American culture. This book also calls attention to the efforts of American composers as they continually tried to make original contributions to a foreign musical

form. Throughout this anthology the authors, using a variety of approaches and styles, analyze the place of this art form imported from Europe.

In addition to where opera has been in this country, this anthology also has an eye on the future. Opera presentation in the coming century may be very different from the current experience. Economics, always a critical factor, may well dictate a different scale of production. Changing tastes in directorial and production values and the expansion of television and video into the home indicate evidence of a new era. As a result, this book is not only a celebration of the past and the present, it also anticipates what opera may be like in the years to come.

This anthology begins with a look at the earliest experiences of opera in America. Edith Borroff, in her "American Opera: An Early Suggestion of Context," argues that we have more of a tradition of opera than we may have thought. Thousands of American operas have been performed in the history of the art in this country, and that constitutes a tradition. Julian Mates's "Early Managers of the Repertoire" analyzes how impresarios governed opera at its beginning in America, often founding their own troupes. June Ottenberg's "New York and Philadelphia, 1825-1840: European Opera American Style" shows how these two cities soon dominated the presentation of opera in the nineteenth century, and how this tradition continued throughout the century and influenced opera all over America.

The second part of this anthology studies how opera gradually became a part of American culture, and how Europeans viewed this new country. Phillipa Burgess's "Popular Opera and Bands in the American Civil War" tries to prove that, ironically enough, the military bands in the Civil War did much to make Americans fans of opera. Mario Hamlet-Metz's "Old World Libretti for New World Settings," on the other hand, looks at how European composers first presented the new world on the operatic stage. Emanuel Rubin's "American Opera in the Gilded Age: America's First Professional Touring Opera Company" looks at a failure in American operatic history, the American Opera Company, and how that failure indicates much about how opera can succeed in this country.

Part 3 of this book focuses on the western United States, the Golden West as Puccini might have called it. Michael Dougan looks at the fascinating career of the tenor Pasquillino Brignoli, one of Walt Whitman's favorite tenors, and follows that career as Brignoli traveled throughout the United States, singing in both

its major cities and its provinces. "Opera Activity in Texas before the Twentieth Century," by Gary Gibbs, examines Texas and its surprisingly early and yet significant operatic past.

In Part 4 this book looks at Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West*, which occasioned one of the most famous premieres in the history of American opera. Shelby Davis's "David Belasco and Giacomo Puccini: Their Collaboration" shows how these two geniuses worked together at the Metropolitan Opera Company, and how this joint effort resulted in one of the most successful premieres in the history of opera. Roxana Stuart's "Uncle Giacomo's Cabin: David Belasco's Direction of *La fanciulla del West*," on the other hand, studies the unique directorial methods of David Belasco and how he applied his method to this important premiere. Thomas Warburton, in his "Puccini's *Fanciulla* as Exemplar for American Composers" shows how Puccini's opera became a model for a series of American operas early in the twentieth century.

The influence of the European model on American opera, and America's continuing obsession with European opera, is the subject of Part 5 of this book. Michael Saffle analyzes America's early fascination with Wagner's final opera in "Parsifal Performances in America, 1886–1903: Changing Taste and the Popular Press." Zoltan Roman discusses the profound influence of Gustav Mahler, despite his short stay in this country, in "Gustav Mahler and Opera in America, 1907–1910." Nadine Sine's "Selling *Salome* in America" looks at the American public's shocked reaction to Strauss's opera, and how the press capitalized on the sensation. Jean-Francois Thibault's "Debussy's Unfinished American Opera: *La Chute de la maison Usher*" analyzes one of the most interesting fragments in operatic history, a product of Debussy's fascination with Edgar Allan Poe. Martin Chusid's "Verdi, America, and Adelina Patti" provides a historical context for a soprano who can be called the first American diva.

Part 6 looks at three modern American attempts at opera, attempts that succeeded to a degree. Alice Levine's "Kansas City Composer Meets Regency Dandy—Virgil Thomson's *Lord Byron*" analyzes the Virgil Thomson opera and its uses of its European subject matter. Marjorie Mackay Shapiro's "A Strange Case: Louis Gruenberg's Forgotten 'Great American' Opera—*The Emperor Jones*" looks at the very successful opening of a native American opera at the Metropolitan Opera. This essay also discusses why this successful premiere did not produce a standard repertory opera in America, though the opera was based on one of Eugene O'Neill's best plays. Giulio Gatti-Casazza staged