

INAUGURAL PERFORMANCE:  
OPERA COMPANY OF BROOKLYN  
A TRIUMPH!  
(Friday, December 1, 2000)

This evening we had the distinct pleasure (and honor) to be present at the opening of the brand-new Opera Company of Brooklyn. With plans to perform at various venues in Brooklyn Heights and downtown Brooklyn, this venture is the brain-child of Jay Meetze, a young (27) conductor and music educator with international experience. Not only is Mr. Meetze (pronounced Metz), a Midwesterner, the originator, artistic director and conductor of the company, he is also the fund-raiser, impresario and general factotum. Meetze's combination of talent, enthusiasm, drive and faith in his dream have been sufficient to carry him through what must have been an extremely grueling period of time preparing for tonight's opening. Yet he does know how to delegate responsibility, and will be able to do so more and more as people experience this young and exciting company's level of artistry and achievement. Furthermore, he is a talented conductor who creates a sense of balance in his orchestra and supports his singers without ever drowning them out.

This evening's operas, were directed by Ned Canty and conducted by Jay Meetze, were Mozart's *The Impresario* and Gian Carlo Menotti's *The Medium*. Brought up to the present, the Mozart, though generally following the story line of the original, featured a new book by Ned Canty and Ira Siff, and a new translation by Marcie Stapp. Singing the title role as Stephen Vogelsang, Artistic Director of the Opera Company of Coney Island, Enrique Abdala displayed a very sweet tenore leggero with a good comic sense. He has just learned that the soprano he engaged to sing Cho Cho San in *Butterfly* has cancelled a short time before the performance; he needs a new *Butterfly*, and this is the impetus of the opera's action. Though still in his 20s, Mr. Abdala should excel in the same repertoire so expertly performed by the late Alfredo Kraus. Baritone Terence Murphy acquitted himself well in the short and nearly thankless role of Agent "Buff" Bufferson, but impressed as Mr. Gobineau in *The Medium*.

Emily Breedlove, as Madame Herzegovina Arbuss reached her stratospheric high notes and performed her coloratura passages with ease. She also regaled us with a fine sense of comic timing and what eventually revealed itself to be a great ability of self parody. Kelli Estes portrayed her competitor, Eugenia Belle Silverman, with an earthiness rarely called for by a lyric coloratura soprano. This character comes to opera from having won a hog-calling contest, and performs all her coloratura turns in a hilarious hog-calling crouch, her *derrière* moving in rhythm with the coloratura.

The surprise addition to this opera is the appearance of Madame Vera Galupe-Borszkh who wishes to sing the role of *Butterfly* for Mr. Vogelsang's company. She auditions with *Condotto era al cepo*, Azucena's aria from *Il Trovatore*. She proceeds to explain the story of the opera because, "No-von knows da story of *Trovatore*, even dose who tink dey know da

story done know da story of *Trovatore*." What a delightful interlude in this already comic singspiel! Ira Siff, originator and creator of *Mme Vera*, bases his character on the Mittel-European divas of the first half of the twentieth century. "She" hilariously talks in broken, mis-pronounced English and kicks her train very much like Zinka Milanov, among others. *Mme Vera* gets the role (only in opera can one get a lyric/spinto role by auditioning with a mezzo/contralto aria) and leaves. Siff is, by the way, also the founder of *La Gran Scena*, a company of all males who sing only soprano and mezzo excerpts from opera. *Vogelsang* engages the two earlier divas to take minor roles in *Butterfly* and the singspiel ends with a charming quartet.

After intermission, the two acts of *The Medium* were performed without intermission. In this opera, the mute role of Toby, usually performed by a dancer, was taken by Enrique Abdala, who sang *Vogelsang* of *Impresario* and, in so doing, demonstrated both his dedication to the art form and his sterling dramatic talent. His silence was both moving and eloquent.

As Madam Flora, mezzo-soprano Rosemary Alvino was certainly not in the blowsy, frowsy mold created by Marie Powers, the original Flora. I am sure her glamorous good looks serve her well in *Carmen*, another of her roles. Although beautiful, Ms Alvino played a neurotically intense Madam Flora who is gradually losing her touch with reality as she "knows" it. The spirit world she created for her clients with the help of her daughter, Monica, is becoming more real than she wants it to be, or can even bear, and she is made ugly by this change. Yet her strong and beautiful voice never became ugly nor did it exhibit any strain with the intensity of her acting. Ms. Alvino's strength of presence when on stage caused all the other characters with her to fade. Hers is truly a masterful vocal and histrionic portrayal. Ms Alvino, who has sung major roles all over the world, returns to the Seattle Opera for her third season there.

Julie Ness has a lovely soprano voice and portrayed a Monica whose quest for normalcy and beauty draws her further and further into the world of literature. Part of her quest results in her feelings of love for Toby, but she does not yet have the strength of character to do anything about it.

Madam Flora's clients, Mr. And Mrs. Gobineau and Mrs Nolan had such fine voices that I wish I could have heard them to more advantage in larger roles (*i.e.*, other operas). Mrs. Gobineau was sung by soprano Alison Chaney, who has appeared with the Glimmerglass Opera, NYCO, and will soon appear with the Opéra de Montréal. Mezzo Barbara LeMay was most touching as Mrs. Nolan. She has appeared at Glimmerglass and will make her début at NYCO this coming year.

The small orchestra was comprised of graduates and graduate students of this area's major music conservatories, including Manhattan School of Music, Juilliard, New England

Conservatory, and the like. Most a free-lancers in New York City, while several also teach in both public schools and music conservatories. All are beginning their careers. I have never heard such a small orchestra sound so professional and polished. Certainly, they have sufficient talent as individual musicians and ensemble players, but I think Maestro Meetze plays a major role in how well they sound.

Jay Meetze has put together an exciting group of young professionals who promise to become major presences in the world of opera as their careers progress. To me, this is the sign of an insightful impresario who can choose and engage greatness before it even recognizes itself. More power to the Opera Company of Brooklyn and to Jay Meetze!

*Howard Levin*