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Opera Viva: Canadian Opera Company: The First Fifty Years (review)

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barely afford to put food on their table, never mind buy a $250 ticket to a Three Tenors concert. Which is to say that Marsh might profitably have exercised some tactful, even ironic distance from his subject matter, sparing us maudlin excesses like the passage quoted above. There may be an operatic aria (in Cilea's *L'Arlesiana*) beginning "It's hell to be a mother," but "It's hell to be a well-paid, superstar conductor" is never going to make a hit tune.

While the Levine of this book may have pulled a vanishing act worthy of Lewis Carroll's famous feline, he can be captured on the page, as David Hamilton and Bernard Jacobson have shown.[2] Perhaps one of them can still get the substantive Levine out into the open. What it will require is someone of their ilk, more interested in posing substantive questions and hearing the answers than in basking in the sound of his own voice. Besides, Marsh fails to ask the one really burning question, in re *Fantasia 2000*: Did Levine get to shake hands with Mickey Mouse? I'd have it written into my contract, if I were he.

David McKee

NOTES

1. Michael Walsh and Barry Hildenbrand, "Maestro of the Met," *Time Magazine*, January 17, 1983, pp. 52–61.

2. The short list of required reading on Levine includes Hamilton's dialogue with him, "Leading Moses to the Met," *Opera News*, vol. 63, no. 8 (February 1999), pp. 33–35, and a chapter on performing Mozart and Verdi in Jacobson's *Conductors on Conducting* (Frenchtown, N.J.: Columbia, 1979). Another excellent colloquy was conducted by Gordon Gould for *Chicago Magazine*, vol. 34, no. 7 (July 1985), pp. 140–53.

Opera Viva: Canadian Opera Company: The First Fifty Years

Ezra Schabas and Carl Morey

Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2000
312 pages, $49.99

A rather unconventional measure of the success of an opera company is the number of glossy coffee-table tomes documenting its history. These volumes are commonplace for the greatest opera houses in the world: Covent Garden, La Scala, Wiener Staatsoper, Paris Opéra, Metropolitan Opera—the list goes on. If one were to use such a criterion of success, however idiosyncratic, then the Canadian Opera Company has finally "arrived," after fifty years in the business. Originally scheduled for publication in conjunction with the company's fiftieth anniversary celebrations in April 2000, *Opera Viva* arrived a few months later, in September 2000, to coincide with the start of the new season.

Given that the Canadian Opera Company is the oldest and arguably the most important of the opera companies in Canada, it is surprising how little has been

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written. To be sure, there were a few "in-house" publications, the most recent one, called *Remembered Moments of the Canadian Opera Company 1950–1975*, having come out in 1976 to commemorate the company's twenty-fifth anniversary.[1] Despite a nice paperback cover with a generous number of black and white photographs and plenty of company statistics, it lacked author, date, or any other publication details. Therefore *Opera Viva* must be considered the first and only definitive work on the COC.

The co-authors, Ezra Schabas and Carl Morey, are respected figures in Canadian music. Schabas is professor emeritus at the University of Toronto and a former principal of the Royal Conservatory of Music. He is best known for a biography of the late Sir Ernest MacMillan, conductor of the Toronto Symphony.[2] A retired professor and former Dean of the Faculty of Music at the University of Toronto, Morey is an expert on the early history of opera performance in Toronto.[3] They are eminently qualified to write this volume, which is dedicated to the memory of Joan Parkhill Baillie, the late archivist of the Canadian Opera Company.

The book is divided into a foreword, prelude, seven chapters, bibliography, and five appendices. The prelude and the first three chapters cover the early history of opera in Canada and the early years of the COC, which began in February 1950 and was more or less "established" by the end of the decade. Chapter 4 deals with the 1960s when the company underwent a period of steady growth, signified by the move in 1961 to the O'Keefe Center (now renamed the Hummingbird Center), where the company continues to perform. Separate chapters are devoted to Lotfi Mansouri, Brian Dickie, and Richard Bradshaw, the three general directors of the company after the death of Hermann Geiger-Torel, the COC's first general director. The five appendices list all COC mainstage and touring productions, including information on conductor, director, set and costume designers, as well as complete casts.

In a book of this kind, it is not easy to balance the desire for a "popular trade book" that will have a large readership with the need to provide comprehensive and in-depth documentation of the institution. There are lots of pretty pictures to satisfy the casual reader interested in purchasing a colorful coffee-table book, but the accompanying text is one of substance, insight, and scholarship. It is written in a straightforward narrative style, with frequent quotations from the more than forty individuals interviewed and from occasional media reviews of performances. Particularly interesting is the "prelude" section devoted to the early history of opera in Canada, dating back to 1825 with a performance of the English opera by Samuel Arnold, *Mountaineers, or Love and Madness*, in the town of York, as Toronto was then called. Not much is known about this event except the scenery and decorations appeared to have been imported from a theater in Rochester, New York.

The first fully staged opera in Toronto was *Norma* in July 1853. From that point on, ensembles (including the Metropolitan Opera) touring in the United States with abridged versions of operas would make stops in Toronto. Standard

fare of the time included mostly Italian operas, such as *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Il trovatore,* and *La traviata*. But Torontonians also saw productions of what are now considered rarities—Rossini's *Otello* and Meyerbeer's *Le prophète*. Local operatic initiatives came and went, and it wasn't until after the end of the Second World War that a group of dedicated individuals at the Toronto Conservatory (namely, Arnold Walter, Ettore Mazzoleni, Nicholas Goldschmidt, and Hermann Geiger-Torel) started Canada's first opera school, and in 1950, the Royal Conservatory Opera Company was born.

For followers of the COC, the chapters devoted to the four general directors make for a fascinating read. On balance, the authors are fair-minded and even-handed in their assessment of the four administrations, assigning praise or blame as warranted, while carefully avoiding any mud-slinging. They have kind words to say about the Mansouri era, during which the company initiated the COC Ensemble that helped nurture the careers of many young Canadian singers, including the likes of Ben Heppner and Theodore Baerg. But unlike his predecessor Hermann Geiger-Torel, who cast Canadians in lead roles, Mansouri tended to hire imports, including stars like Joan Sutherland and Tatiana Troyanos, to bolster box office. The authors remain silent on the oft-heard mumbling at the time from Canadian artists who felt they were unfairly shut out.

But Schabas and Morey pull no punches when it comes to recounting the demise of the Brian Dickie administration, which was cut short due to his disagreements with the board, management, and supporters of the company. Despite a rise in artistic standards under Dickie, his managerial style rubbed many the wrong way, and his reticence at being the "front man" in publicity and promotion proved his downfall. Since his successor Richard Bradshaw is still in the middle of his term, the authors correctly refrain from any assessment, preferring simply to document the many triumphs—and some failures—that have occurred since he took over. But despite the artistic successes and the increase in attendance, the quest for a suitable home for the company remains elusive. One reads with a sense of sadness and frustration over the twists and turns on the road to the building of an opera house, the idea of which first surfaced in the early 1970s. After numerous optimistic announcements, false starts, and ultimate disappointments, the opera house is still only a dream thirty years later.

The exhaustive research and thoughtful writing in *Opera Viva* are matched by the high production values. The copyediting is very well done, with a minimum of errors, a few misspelling of names, such as soprano Helena "Does" instead of "Doese," notwithstanding. There are many photographs, including rare historic snapshots of the early years as well as beautiful color photos of memorable productions. But given the modest dimensions of 9 by 9½ inches for a "picture book," squeezing four photographs onto the same page in some instances gives it a very cramped look. (Interestingly, the very few full size pictures include those of the four general directors.) The statistics in the appen-

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dices are very useful but, alas, incomplete. For touring performances with multiple casts, who sang which performances is not specified, nor are the tour cities named. Other useful information found in the 1976 book, such as attendance figures, is not available. Also missing in Appendix 1 is a performance count by opera. A list of all radio broadcasts and telecasts and a discography of the company would have been useful as well. Since this volume will likely serve as the only definitive work on the COC in the foreseeable future, it should include more extensive appendices in the style of the *Annals of the Metropolitan Opera*, which is a complete chronicle of performances and artists.[4] But today's economics of publishing being what it is, such an undertaking would have been financially prohibitive. These reservations aside, Schabas and Morey are to be commended for producing a work that is an important document and indispensable reference book on Canada's oldest opera company.

Joseph K. So

NOTES

1. *Remembered Moments of the Canadian Opera Company 1950–1975* (n.p., n.d.).
2. Ezra Schabas, *Sir Ernest MacMillan: The Importance of Being Canadian* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).
3. Carl Morey, "Nineteenth-Century Opera in Toronto," in *An Opera Sampler: Miscellaneous Essays on Opera*, ed. Carl Morey (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1998), pp. 73–81.
4. Gerald Fitzgerald, ed., *Annals of the Metropolitan Opera: The Complete Chronicle of Performances and Artists* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1989).

BOOKS RECEIVED

Inclusion in this listing does not preclude review in future issues.

John Ardoin. *Valery Gergiev and the Kirov: A Story of Survival*. Portland, Ore.: Amadeus Press, 2001, 296 pages, $34.95

Jeffrey L. Buller. *Classically Romantic: Classical Form and Meaning in Wagner's "Ring."* N.p.: Xlibris, 2001, 221 pages, $25.00 (cloth), $16.00 (paper)

Anne Edwards. *Maria Callas: An Intimate Biography*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001, 351 pages, $27.95

Dana Gioia. *Nosferatu: An Opera Libretto (Based on the Film by F. W. Murnau)*. Saint Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 2001, 108 pages, $12.95

Johann Adam Hiller. *Treatise on Vocal Performance and Ornamentation*. Translated and edited by Suzanne J. Beicken. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 208 pages, $64.95

J. K. Holman. *Wagner's "Ring": A Listener's Companion and Concordance*. Portland, Ore.: Amadeus Press, 1996, 440 pages, $19.95

James Keolker. *Last Acts: The Operas of Puccini and His Italian Contemporaries from Alfano to Zandonai*. Napa, Calif.: Opera Companion Publications, 2000, 598 pages, $29.95

Elise K. Kirk. *American Opera*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001, 471 pages, $34.95

Jacqueline Letzter and Robert Adelson. *Women Writing Opera: Creativity and Controversy in the Age of the French*

Revolution. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, 359 pages, $48.00

Judith Milhous, Gabriella Dideriksen, and Robert D. Hume. *Italian Opera in Late Eighteenth-Century London*. Vol. 2, *The Pantheon Opera and Its Aftermath 1789–1795*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001, 913 pages, $125.00

Katherine K. Preston. *Opera on the Road: Traveling Opera Troupes in the United States, 1825–60*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2001, 496 pages, $39.95 (cloth), $22.50 (paper)

Anne Siberell. *Bravo! Brava! A Night at the Opera: Behind the Scenes with Composers, Cast, and Crew*. Introduction by Frederica von Stade. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, 64 pages, $19.95

John Warrack. *German Opera: From the Beginnings to Wagner*. Cambridge Studies in Opera. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 463 pages, $64.95

Zitkala-Ša. *Dreams and Thunder: Stories, Poems, and "The Sun Dance Opera."* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001, 195 pages, $22.95