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Worth Their Salt Too

Colleen Whitley

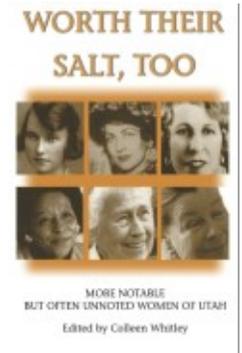
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ORA BAILEY HARDING

Making Music

Marianne Harding Burgoyne

For Marianne Harding Burgoyne this essay was a personal as well as an academic endeavor. All her life she had heard that her grandmother, Ora Bailey Harding, had been instrumental in organizing musical performance groups in Price, Utah, so she set out to discover just how influential Harding had been. Newspaper reports offered ample evidence that Harding's efforts had significance far beyond her own lifetime: her initial productions were the fountainhead for many of the musical and theatrical groups still operating in Carbon County. Burgoyne was born in Hayden, Colorado, and educated in public schools until her junior year in high school, when she became a boarding student at Rowland Hall-St. Marks in Salt Lake City. She received her bachelor's degree from Brigham Young University and has completed her master's as well as her Ph.D. course work in English at the University of Utah. Widely published, she has written poetry, magazine articles, a novel, and, with her husband, professional articles in medicine and psychiatry. She is also a popular public speaker, currently conducting in-house symposiums for the Utah Opera Guild.

“Her hobby was music. She started taking piano lessons at seven years when her little hands could barely reach an octave,” writes Nellie Cluff Bailey in her personal history, about her daughter Ora, whose short life was a sustained dedication to making music. “Not only did Ora play the piano, but she had a lovely voice as well,” continues Nellie. “She was always willing to give of her talents to the joy of others. She sang in the Mormon Tabernacle Choir as a soloist when she was only a young



Ora Bailey Harding promoted musical productions in Price. From her efforts have come many of the performing organizations still active in Carbon County. Photo courtesy of Lurean S. Harding.

girl, and after her marriage, moved to Price, Utah, and there established a studio and taught voice and piano to many, many students. She was music director of the LDS Carbon Stake Mutual, and conducted a chorus of two hundred voices. The service she rendered will never be forgotten by the people.”¹

I am happy for Nellie Bailey’s history, written in 1949, extolling the talents of her daughter. This history details essential facts about Ora Bailey’s life and is all I have ever known about her until now. I am Ora’s granddaughter, who never met her. She died at age forty-five in 1939, a year before my parents were married. I was, then, never a beneficiary of her talents, except perhaps genetically. I don’t even remember many family stories, only that she taught voice and piano lessons to pay for her son Edward’s, my father’s, tuition for two years at the University of Utah. When she died, my father could no longer afford college. He married and went to war for his country. Getting to know my grandmother, therefore, became a matter of research. I was motivated by the KBYU advertisement which asks, “One hundred years from now, will anyone know who you were?”²

I have since learned from Ora’s obituaries that her mother’s journal did not record several of Ora’s most outstanding accomplishments, among them producing and directing the operas *Martha* in 1937 and *Carmen* in 1938 for the Carbon Stake Mutual Improvement Association (MIA) of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church). Both productions received “church-wide acclaim.”³ She directed the *Messiah* as well for many years in the Carbon Stake. Ora sang solos and also soprano in quartets she organized for countless church gatherings, including weddings and funerals, a familiar presence whenever a performance was requested.

Civic-minded, Ora’s interests extended beyond church callings. A second obituary further informs that she was state chairman of music for the American Legion for nine years and filled the same office for the Utah Federation of Women’s Clubs, compiling the music book used by both organizations. Included in the book were many of her compositions. Her American Legion chorus and trio received recognition at the state convention in 1938, and the trio went on to place third at the national convention in Los Angeles.⁴

All of this Ora did because she loved music. Her daughter Virginia Carnavali, of Scottsdale, Arizona, told me that other than for

her private voice and piano lessons, Ora never accepted money for the countless hours of service she rendered, directing music for every civic organization in town. Producing *Martha* and *Carmen*, Ora trained every solo part herself.⁵ Virginia speaks of her mother with awe, a bold reverence, unable quite to articulate what was so inspiring about this woman who ultimately spent so much energy doing what she loved that she died doing it.

Ora was born to Nellie and Oliver W. Bailey on 7 October 1893, their first child.⁶ Apparently, she came into a happy home. Nellie writes in her history that a day after her wedding, “We moved into our own little home built by my lover husband. Happiness seemed our crowning glory. We lived there eight years where three of our children were born. The experiences of those days were precious. . . . Opportunities came to my husband and his ever ambitious efforts were rewarded, so we built another home, ten rooms, located near my old home, on Fourth East, between First and Second North in Provo, Utah.” Nellie writes of her duty and pleasure to encourage and help her husband with “my love and confidence, thrift, and sacrifice.” She writes that she even gave up a trip to the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis, to finish the upstairs and put in a bath. “Then room by room we bought the new furniture.” She exclaims, “Oh! the satisfaction and joy of those efforts. Those stairs were always a joy to me, for down them came each morning my children, happy and content.”

Nellie’s glowing account tells of what mattered to her: spouse and children, material possessions, things of beauty. She cared that her home was nurturing and secure. The young couple seemed very much in love. The blissful state described captured what the couple’s early years of marriage must have been like. Then, too, they had money on their side.

Ora’s father, Oliver William Bailey, was financially affluent. He owned a saloon, Bailey and Vincent, in downtown Provo, and prospered, providing stability for his family. In the 1910 edition of *Pictorial Provo*, mention is made:

Bailey and Vincent—Liquors

In a city the size of Provo there is always to be found a number of institutions whose business it is to furnish liquid refreshments to her citizens, and a first class institution of this

kind is owned and conducted by the above named gentlemen, in their own building, at No. 22 West Center street.

The bar and the interior are handsomely furnished in cherry, decorated with French double plate mirrors.

The goods handled are the choicest imported and domestic wines, liquors and cigars, and the standard brands of whiskeys, making a specialty of the celebrated Old Crow and Sherwood Rye brands, several employe[e]s are required and in every way the house denotes a first class gentlemen's resort.

The proprietors, Mr. Oliver W. Bailey and Mr. David J. Vincent, are both natives of Provo, and are well liked and respected throughout the community.⁷

Nellie was embarrassed that her husband ran a saloon and wouldn't talk about it. She didn't mention it in her personal history. Nor did she mention that in later years she and Oliver had their share of marital problems involving another woman.⁸ When that liaison ended, Oliver and Nellie had their fourth and final child, born nine years after their third, which event Nellie called "another supreme happiness." She writes, "My husband was so proud and happy, he went downtown and bought a cradle, a buggy, and a high chair, all for our darling son." Oliver and Nellie remained married until Oliver's death on 7 July 1923.

Nellie writes, "My hobby was refinement and culture, and I never failed to grasp the opportunity to improve the shining hours." According to her daughter-in-law, Merlene Bailey of Provo, Utah, Nellie was a member of two prestigious literary clubs and gave numerous public book reviews.⁹ One of her foremost investments was in the upbringing of her only daughter. Nellie was intent on ensuring Ora's cultural success. She likely arranged Ora's solo debut with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.¹⁰ She also would likely have been the driving force behind Ora's continuing schooling.

Ora grew up in the Provo schools, attending Brigham Young High School beginning in 1909, receiving a diploma in music in 1913. Her transcript reveals she was a dedicated student, achieving more A's than B's, taking piano and/or voice classes all four years.¹¹ Since she was nearly twenty at the time of her graduation, it is likely she completed a special two year's course in public school music from 1911 through 1913.

According to the 1911 yearbook, the *Banyan*,¹² this course was first instigated in 1909, while Ora was still in high school. The course was under the general direction of the Music School at Brigham Young University, first begun when Dr. Karl Maeser was the entire faculty, developing by 1911 into a department with nine special departments with special teachers in each. The university music department's four-year course gave general culture in addition to special music training.¹³ The two-year course followed suit.

The *BYUTAH* (replacing the name *Banyan* that year) 1913 yearbook features Ora singing with a girl's quartet, as a soloist in a practice room, as a member of the 13HS (high school) executive committee, as well as her individual and class group pictures. She burst actively on the scene, busy and productive, extensively involved in her music. She received A's in both her piano and music classes that year, as well as in history and theology, receiving a B+ only in English.

In the 1913 yearbook, an anonymous author prefaces pictures of students engaged in music activities with an introduction entitled "The Music School," where he campaigns against "rag-time music," the nemesis of his age. He writes:

Many people of the twentieth century wonder and even go so far as to ask, why is music spoken of as being sacred, as being a supplication unto God. Is it any wonder that such a question could be asked by the uneducated class, when we hear nothing but rag-time music at all of our modern places of amusement? This condition among our people is deplorable, and every effort on our part as individuals should be used to put a stamp of unfitness upon rag-time music, and to bring ourselves and neighbors into closer touch with music of a higher class.¹⁴

The author is likely a faculty member or at least a senior student influenced by a faculty member who believes this ragtime—all bad, classical—all good dichotomy. Something of an idealist, he continues:

Very few people have the ability to render selections from Wagner, Beethoven, Liszt, Mozart, Tan[n]hauser, Mendelssohn, etc., but we all have the capacity to enjoy and appreciate these selections when rendered by capable men and women. . . .

Imagine, if you can, after hearing a selection from one of the famous composers, the joy that they received while their minds were in a condition to write such themes. We cannot all become great composers, but we can train ourselves to appreciate a high standard of music, and to be able to offer simple supplications unto God with but a very limited musical training.¹⁵

The quest of this music department, then, was a noble one, with a commending stamp of approval sealing classical music as perhaps the single worthy investment. This thinking permeated the environment of Ora's impressionable years. She was being trained to render sacred music unto God, to learn and propagate only the best that is known and thought in classical music, and to go forth with a mission, educating the masses to appreciate the greatest musicians who had composed.

In one more significant point of this introduction, "The Music School," the author tells us: "For a number of years the choir, under Professor Lund, has put on an opera each spring. These have proved successful and educational from every point of view. We are very sorry that we were not favored with a production this year. Instead, Professors Lund and Johnson are working up a male chorus and also a ladies' chorus, consisting of twenty-five voices each; they will render selections from Wagner."¹⁶

Mentioned in a preface, again entitled "The Music School," in the 1911 *Banyan*, are some of the best remembered operas: *Daughter of the Regiment*, *Priscilla*, *Beggar Student*, *Princess Ida*, and *Maritana*.¹⁷ These productions introduced Ora to the planning, work, and joys experienced by bringing a cast together to put on a performance. Likely, she participated in these and knew the joys of being on stage. Of particular interest is the opera *Priscilla*. Years later, in February 1927, when Ora was a young mother living in Price, Utah, she sang the lead in *Priscilla*. According to the *Sun*, the Price newspaper, the production was staged at the Star Theater 31 January and one evening the first week of February. The cast then toured the coal-mining towns Hiawatha, Castle Gate, and Sunnyside. The *Sun* reports, "Packed audiences greeted the cast at all performances."¹⁸ The article lists Mrs. Ora B. Harding as Priscilla, along with ten other principals. Professor E. M. Williams from the high school faculty directed the production. *Priscilla*, then, is a link to Ora's schooling. Her years at Brigham Young directly shaped

her career. And a decade after this performance, when she staged her own productions, she again copied the pattern of her formal training: she chose the spring every year to perform them.

Ora matriculated to attend Brigham Young University, taking science, two vocal classes, piano, pedagogy, and gym, and achieving a perfect A record her freshman year. Because Ora was enrolled in the pedagogy class, she was likely a part of the Normal Training School, which purposes were “to help students appreciate educational theory by themselves putting it into practice, and to train them in those practical adjustments which constitute effective teaching.”¹⁹

The 1914 *Banyan* includes in its “High Lights of the Year,” written by Professor A. C. Lund: “The B.Y.U. Music Department has twenty-six representative students teaching school music. A similar number of choir leaders are doing splendid community service. It numbers among its singers several in important places in opera in Europe and America. Its weekly recitals by teachers and pupils have disseminated as much culture as any organization in the West.”²⁰

So solid a member of this music department was Ora, I visualize her student teaching in the public schools, supervised by professors; leading choirs in the community to fulfill service projects; and giving solo recitals on campus to earn her A grades. She learned “to serve, to accept responsibility, and to produce results socially valuable,”²¹ again the aims of the Normal Training program. These very skills became her great assets once she left the cocoon of her training and surfaced as the music butterfly in Price, reenacting the highlight of her training.

One more article in the 1917 *Banyan* is of interest with respect to Ora’s college training. The article is a small write-up entitled “B.Y.U. Symphony Proves Great Success,” which begins: “While the B.Y.U. team is in Chicago contesting for world honors in basket ball, an event quieter, but perhaps more significant in the long run, was taking place in Provo Wednesday night [14 March 1917]. This was the symphony concert by Professor Gudmundson’s orchestra. The presentation represents the third season when the organization has attained to this high musical achievement.”²²

Its significance is this: Ora was enrolled at Brigham Young when its music department blossomed like a rose. The new special departments included vocal, instrumental, wind instruments, harmony, violin, band, and orchestra. She was enrolled when the symphony put on

its first performance. As a newlywed still living in Provo in 1917 and taking classes sporadically at the university, she may have heard this third symphony performance, which included among its selections Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, Schuman's *Aria* from the F-sharp Sonata, and Nicolai's Overture to the *Merry Wives of Windsor*.²³ What is most certain is that she fell under the spell of great minds whose governing philosophy was this: train students well, send them forth, and they will produce what is socially valuable, what is classical, what is beautiful.

This 1917 *Banyan* article ends meaningfully with this: "The months of study necessary to this recital served only to heighten their [the performers'] appreciation of the masterpieces presented, which fact is always a characteristic of classic art, be it literature, painting, music, or what-not; whereas a similar period devoted to rag-time music would satiate and disgust." Here's the deprecation of ragtime again. The crusade against it had not yet abated. "Long after our basket ball heroes shall be forgotten, these young people will be organizing orchestras and stimulating the beautiful in music throughout the hamlets, towns, and cities of the entire intermountain region."²⁴

From this high-minded influence, Ora emerged, a woman capable, a woman schooled to sing Mozart and Wagner. Perhaps she had even fantasized by then that she could stage operas much like the ones in which she had surely performed. When she settled in Price, a coal-mining town and melting pot of race and culture, she had the education, inspiration, and audacity to bring the music of Bizet, von Flotow, and Handel with her. One wonders if she ever allowed anyone under her tutelage to sing ragtime.

In 1916, Ora married George Belt Harding,²⁵ whom she had met in high school sometime before 12 June 1912, when he left Provo for a Mormon mission in England. He mentions her name on what seems like every page in his two-volume, 410-page journal, sometimes desperately speculating whether or not she will wait for him. Ora was not an easy catch, however, and nearly married a young attorney-to-be. Even the 1916 *Banyan*, in a caption next to her name, claims, "She sets a spring to snare them all."²⁶ Ora's brother-in-law, Thatcher Jones, said, "The attorney would have been a better match for Ora intellectually, but George was beautiful and he won out."²⁷ In fact, Ora's daughter, Virginia, admits, "Ora was no beauty, not as beautiful as George, but she was classy and carried herself like an aristocrat. She dressed well,

even elegantly, and liked wearing the Bavarian crystal beads George brought her from Germany.”²⁸

Ora and George had two children. Edward was born 25 May 1919 and Virginia on 24 November 1920. Ora’s daily responsibilities undoubtedly changed to the domestic. Having two children eighteen months apart would have kept her tied to household chores. In 1923, the young family moved from Provo, Utah, to Price, her final home.

Once established there, Ora didn’t waste any time. She immediately organized a community choir. News of its genesis appears in the *News-Advocate*: “A community chorus has been organized under the direction of Mrs. George B. Harding that will probably bring together the greatest number of talented singers ever assembled in Price. At a business meeting of the singers last Friday evening Henry Gibbs was elected president of the new organization and Mrs. Rulon Bryner secretary-treasurer. Mrs. Harding was given the privilege of selecting her own assistant director . . .” (24 May 1923). This choir performed for numerous celebrations under her direction for nearly two decades. By 1933, the *Sun-Advocate* reported the chorus boasted 150 voices when it performed on July 4th (6 July 1933). Ora also quickly became a soloist at important events around the community. The *News-Advocate* reports she sang a solo, “The Mighty God Hath Spoken,” pleasing her audience, at the dedication of the LDS Tabernacle (5 July 1923).

Because Ora served as stake MIA choir director in the Carbon Stake after moving to Price, I searched the LDS Church Archives beginning in 1923 for reference to her. There is no mention of her until 1927. Neither, curiously, is there much mention of any event involving music. Then, on 12 May 1927, a mention is made that the Ladies Chorus of Carbon Stake won first place in an interstake contest.²⁹ Less than a month later, on 16 June, the record reads, “A motion was made to write a letter of appreciation to Sister Ora B. Harding for taking part in the stake chorus.” Recently acclaimed for her successful run as the lead in *Priscilla*, Ora quickly became the driving force behind future stake competitions and music productions.

The next year, again in May, the Ladies Chorus of the Price Ward won first place in an interstake contest, and by 22 August 1928, the minutes show that Ora Harding was accepted as the music director on the Carbon Stake MIA board. Ora served the next eleven years in this capacity, until she died.³⁰ The church records are filled with references

to her, citing her busy at work on competitions, plays, Gold and Green Balls, and musicals. Quotes like “Ora talked on the duties of a music director and on contest work for November” (24 October 1928), “Ora discusses community singing and gave suggestions for [music] to be used during December” (25 November 1928), “Ora talked on music in contest work” (25 February 1929), “Ora urged executives to get busy and begin contest work now in wards. Once a month she will visit the wards and help all she can” (24 November 1929) suggest the gusto with which she went about her church calling.

It is not hard to visualize her at work at any given time of the year. Early spring brought the Gold and Green Balls. She served on the organizing committees, generally to choose the queen. The spring performance followed—plays in the early years, and later musicals, the May and June stake music competitions, community singing at the Union Meeting at the Stake Tabernacle, stake and general conference meetings, mixed quartet performances in the fall, the *Messiah* in December. Often, the *Sun-Advocate* named the choruses performing simply as “Mrs. Ora B. Harding’s.” (19 July 1934)

Nona Stevens Smith, of Salt Lake City, grew up in Price and recalls one such MIA competition when Ora took her and a group of young people to the June conference in Salt Lake, “the highlight of their year.” There, they competed in a music contest held at the McCune school of music. Nona writes in her book, *Nona Is Another Name for Love*: “Mrs. Harding was the director of our chorus and she had us doing a beautiful job. The judge for the contest was Evan Stephens. Later, it was rumored that the chorus that won was from Nevada, and their director was a personal friend of Even Stephens. She [the Nevada director] was no more like Ora Harding in her directing than anything! She just didn’t act like she knew what she was doing when she directed. We were really disappointed that we lost.”³¹ In a personal interview, Nona affirms, “Ora was the best.”³²

All this while, Ora taught private piano and voice lessons. Her niece, Barbara Hess, of Salt Lake City, remembers that once a week Ora drove from Price to Soldier Summit, twenty-four miles, to teach piano.³³ Students also drove from surrounding communities to take lessons. One such piano student was Mae Lemon Barton, who lived in Ferron, Utah, but drove forty miles every week while she was in junior high and high school to study under Ora. Ora’s daughter, Virginia,

describes Mae as Ora's finest piano pupil. Mae describes Ora as one of her "very best" piano teachers, recalling that Ora taught her "good technique." When Mae was a senior in high school, she gave an all-Chopin recital, and she remembers when Ora encouraged her to play in a Provo, Utah, competition, at which time Mae memorized Chopin's *Scherzo* in B-flat minor, all twenty-five pages. She doesn't remember that she won first place, but remembers doing very well.³⁴ It was Ora who encouraged Mae to continue her piano studies and helped her get into the Sherwood Music School in Chicago. There, Mae was praised for her fine technique, which, again, she attributes to Ora's tutelage. Mae even remembers that while Ora was teaching her, Ora went to California and studied under a well-known pianist, coming home only to pass on to Mae all that she had learned. Mae says, "Ora was energetic and competitive, driving her students to outdo themselves. Her vision of what we could achieve encouraged me to pursue my studies nationally. Ora was a wonderful part of my training and has, therefore, always meant so much to me."

Ora had big plans for her own dreams as well. As early as January 1930, the word "opera" is first mentioned in the Carbon Stake MIA records: "Ora talked on places for opera and suggested plays that could be given" (26 January). In February of 1930, "Ora read a paper on 'The Life of Schubert and Beethoven['] and demonstrated how music could be put over in words." There is evidence in these stake minutes that the two major operas Ora directed were not her first opera projects. On 18 September 1932, "Brother Arvel Stevens [of the stake MIA presidency] gave out copies of the opera. Sister Ora Harding talked on the music project." On 28 January 1933, "Sister Ora Harding explained plans made for musical to be held on March 4th." Another entry on 21 November 1935 cites "the stake board meeting held at the home of Ora Harding. Sister Ora Harding discussed the opera." Unfortunately, these minutes never specify which opera.

Opera was not foreign to the community either. The *Sun-Advocate* reports that during those years, staging light operas was a project of public schools. Ora may have been a major force in opera, but others were clearly engaged in the cause. Carbon High School presented *Don Alonzo's Treasure* in March 1937 (reported 11 March 1937),³⁵ Columbia sixth grade cast the operetta *Autumn Gold* in 1937 (2 December 1937), the Price Central School performed *Spring Glow* and *The Wedding of the*

Flowers in 1937 (11 March 1937) and *The Palace of Carelessness* in 1938 (3 February 1938), and Harding School staged the operetta *Betty Lou, the Dream Girl* in March 1938 (reported 24 February 1938). Opera was not as removed from the common school child as it seems to be today. For one thing, no legislature had disbanded music programs in the elementary schools, and music was a solid part of the curriculum in all phases of public schooling.

Anne Ewers, the very successful and charismatic general director of Utah Opera since 1991, graciously granted an interview and speculated with me how a woman of Ora's capabilities could have accomplished what she did. She recalls her own experience coming to opera: "I can go back to when I was six years old and was directing plays in my parents' garage. It was something that was part of me from the beginning and there are those of us in the business who experience it. There is a passion and it's not that you want to do it; you have to do it. And so you put yourself in a position to gather the resources, you believe in it so strongly."³⁶

Remembering the training that brought her to her present position, Ms. Ewers explains, "When I was in graduate school at the University of Texas, if I wanted a good production, I designed the lights, the costumes, the set, and directed it. It was a marvelous learning experience which I have never regretted. And the same thing with the early years of running a tiny company in Boston—I almost killed myself doing it, but the desire, the passion to make it happen moved me, and I'm sure that's what your grandmother possessed."

Ms. Ewers speculates that Ora must have started moving the community toward performing opera long before she attempted her major performances. Says Ms. Ewers, "You couldn't march in and do a *Martha* or a *Carmen* without some kind of ground work both in terms of audience education and doing smaller works to get people intrigued." Ms. Ewers also surmises that if Ora were directing operas in Price, she was dealing with some pretty young, green, and inexperienced singers. "So there is that challenge of teaching them to put one foot in front of the other," says Ewers. "She was quite a neat lady to have accomplished all of this."

The first notice of a community opera appears in the *Sun-Advocate* on 11 March 1937. Under the heading, "Community Opera Plans under Way," with a subheading, "Talented Group Is Preparing for Presentation," the article reads: "A musical treat is in store for Carbon

County residents in the near future when the Community Opera Company presents the opera 'Martha,' under the sponsorship of the Carbon Stake Mutual Improvement Association. . . . The production, the date for which has not been definitely chosen, is under the direction of Mrs. Ora B. Harding, who reports that all members of the chorus as well as the leading performers have been chosen by tryouts."³⁷ By this time in her career, Ora had long since assumed the music chairs for the American Legion and Utah Federation of Women's Clubs. Her music calling was not simply a church appointment; she was directing music for the entire town. She drew from all her resources, reaching outside her church to cast her productions, making *Martha* a major community project. Ora thought big, at least for a small-town girl. Then, too, she drew from the resources of her community choir.

On Thursday, 15 April 1937, notice is again given in the *Sun-Advocate*, "Delightful Entertainment Is in Store for Music Lovers":

One of the most ambitious operatic undertakings in the country's history will be fulfilled Thursday (tonight) and Friday with the presentation of the musical classic, "Martha." . . . A matinee performance Wednesday afternoon in the high school auditorium served as preview for the evening show and demonstrated the high quality of the entertainment offered music lovers.

A star cast of local singers, elaborate costumes, beautiful scenery, and expert direction combine to make the opera one of the most outstanding productions of its kind ever attempted in Price.

Comedy, drama, romance, and melody are delightfully blended in the ever-popular vehicle that has thrilled audiences throughout the world. . . . The cast includes 12 principals and a chorus of 37 selected singers. The score will be played by a full orchestra featuring string instruments.³⁸

The coverage of the opera in the *Sun-Advocate* reported *Martha*, a light comedy of mistaken identities, to be a success:

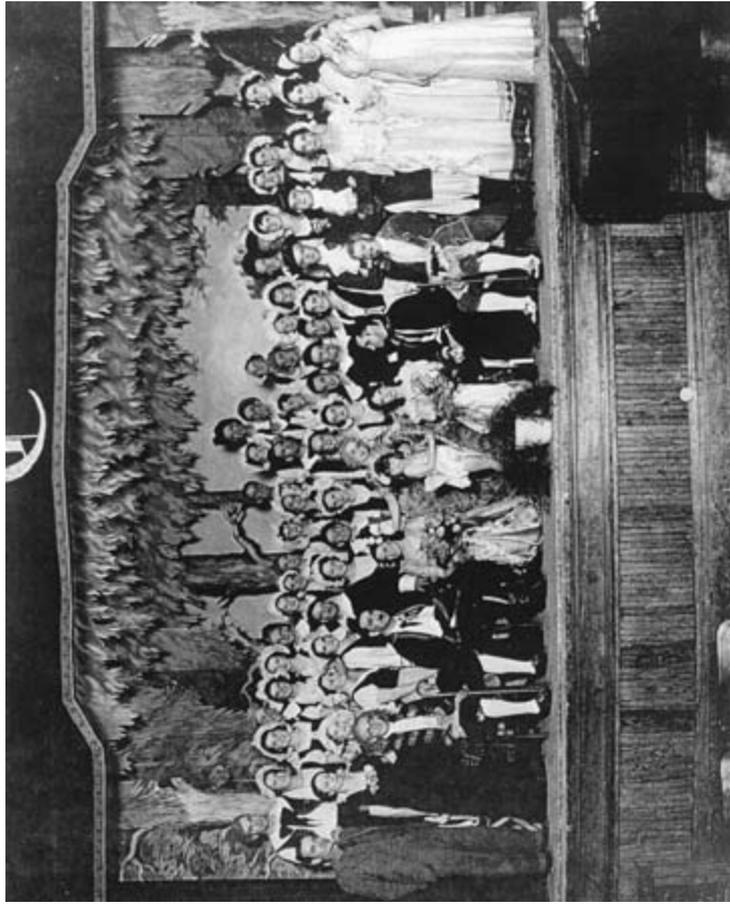
Fully living up to advance promises and justifying further activity along the same line, the Community Opera's presentation of

Flotow's famous opera, "Martha," was enjoyed by large audiences Thursday and Friday evening in the high school auditorium. The select cast of Carbon County singers scored a pronounced success. . . . The leading roles were portrayed by the following: Verda Beck, Natalie Bean, Murray Mathis, John Harmon, Willard Harmon, Rollan Gardner, Jack Redd, Kell Grange, Veloy Powell, Mazel Harmon, E. R. Hansen, and James Anderson. . . . Mrs. Ora B. Harding was musical director of the opera, with Mrs. Grace Harmon as piano accompanist, Clark Wright as director of stage and scenery, Allan Ramsey as concert master and Gunda Anderson and Lucian Reid as dance directors.³⁹

A cast picture exists of Ora's *Martha*.⁴⁰ Ora is on the far right in formal dress, tall and thin, a baton in hand. The lead singers, Murray Mathis and Verda Beck, are seated in front, with the cast of sixty in peasant costume. The stage is decorated with trees to resemble a country fair setting. The achievement is apparent. The cast is professional looking. The click of the camera has sealed forever one of Ora's crowning moments.

With her first major success accomplished, Ora moved on to something even bigger: *Carmen*, the famous tragedy of the ruthless gypsy. I asked Ms. Ewers what it would take to produce *Carmen*, one of the most difficult of the grand operas in the classical repertoire. Ms. Ewers herself directed Utah Opera's production of *Carmen* in the fall of 1996. Says she, "The biggest thing you are dealing with is the huge cast. I am including chorus, supernumeraries, the whole lot. You are dealing with anywhere from eighty to one hundred fifty people on stage. And so 'traffic cop' is a big issue in terms of how to move the people, how to move them convincingly, how to give them individual characters and make the piece come alive."

Ms. Ewers notes that another challenge is the interpretation of the piece. She has seen *Carmens* that were pretty, not so pretty, glitzy, abstract, even esoteric in their approaches to *Carmen*. Ora would have had to decide from a broad range how she was going to interpret the piece. Then, too, Ora would have to choose whether to perform the recitative or dialogue version, and have an ability to translate the libretto, word for word.



The cast of *Martha* assembled on the stage of the LDS ward in Price. Director Ora Bailey Harding is at the far right, baton in hand. Photo by Rice Studios, no longer in existence; this print from Bruce Bryner; copy by Cherrinda Beck Gardner; used courtesy of Nona S. Smith.

Ms. Ewers points out that there are a lot of dramatic holes in the opera. "If you read the novella, you can begin to tie them together. It's not like Puccini that works by itself. You've got to do things to *Carmen* to help the plausibility and to help the piece flow." Ms. Ewers notes that although Bizet was brilliant, he hadn't had a lot of experience and unfortunately died before he achieved success. "He didn't," she says, "have all of the tricks down in terms of the composition."

Ms. Ewers thinks that the character of Carmen is one of the most demanding roles in the repertoire. She explains, "You've got to have a Carmen who, for me, is utterly free. And to find a woman who can portray that on stage—it's not grinding the hips; it's a total sense of self, a total sensuality, but you have to be it, not act it." Of course, Ms. Ewers had the wonderful opportunity to work with a natural, Ms. Adria Firestone in 1996, but she has had other Carmens who were not innately tuned into the character. She says, "They can sing it beautifully, but they can't necessarily act it, and that's the challenge for a stage director."

Ora's Carmen was Edith Olsen, a woman who had sung opera all of her adult life, including *Norma* and *La Bobeme*. She was forty-four when she performed the title role in Ora's production. Her daughter, Dorothy Whitney, of Scottsdale, Arizona, informs me that her mother was an eager Carmen. Mrs. Whitney says her mother was an innate actress who threw herself into her roles. When asked if her mother were "sensuous," she answered, "Oh no, she wasn't sensuous, but she loved the thrill of doing something as racy as *Carmen*."⁴¹ These leading roles, which included the town's prominent tenor, Murray Mathis, were covered by the best singers Price had to offer. And although they may not have just stepped off the plane from New York, having previously performed their role dozens of times, they were talented and ripe enough to succeed with the production.

I asked Ms. Ewers about the work it must have required for Ora to train all of the solo parts herself: "Certainly her own knowledge and study. But the bigger issue is the energy and stamina required to do that. With an opera like *Carmen*, she's not just coaching a Carmen, Don Jose, Escamillo; she's also doing the tiny roles, the ensembles, the quintet. The piece is very tricky musically, so you've got to envision someone who is working hours a day to get the cast to achieve this. Any time you coach, you pull from your own emotional experiences to help

the singers get it. You drain yourself completely. When you are at the keyboard, the notes you are playing must be second nature so that you can focus on what the singers are doing vocally and stylistically. Because Ora was producing something in a community theater setting, she had probably been coaching her principals for months and months and months.”

Ora's daughter, Virginia, attests to this. “Edward [her brother] and I were so sick of the ‘Habanera,’ we thought we would shoot ourselves if we ever heard the piece again. That’s not to say that we weren’t proud of our mother on opening night.”

Ms. Ewers says that anyone who chooses to do *Carmen* isn’t just competing on a level with everybody else; she wants to be better than everybody else: “You don’t just go for the A; you go for the best A.” Ewers adds, “She’s a real risk taker because she could have gone with *Così fan tutte* or *Don Giovanni*, smaller, more intimate pieces, but she chose one of the biggest challenges in the repertoire. She could have fallen flat on her face.”

The first notice of *Carmen* in the *Sun-Advocate* is made 10 February 1938, informing us that the choice of twelve leads had been chosen by four judges:

Mrs. Ora B. Harding, opera director, made the announcement.

“Don Jose,” principal male part, will be played by Murray Mathis; “Escamillo, Toreador” by Merlin Nielson, Kenilworth; “Zuniga,” Oris Simmons, Spring Canyon; “Morales,” Rollan Gardner; “Lillas Pastia,” innkeeper, LeGrande Mathis; “Carmen,” gypsy girl, Edith Olsen; “Micaela,” village maiden, Pauline Olsen; “Frasquita,” Ida Seekmiller, Kenilworth; “Mercedes,” Natalie Bean; “Dancairo,” James Anderson; “Remendado,” Max Thorne, Spring Canyon; “Guide,” Bob Carnavali, Kenilworth.

Rehearsals are held almost every night. Choruses for the opera have been organized for several weeks, and it is expected that the entire presentation will be ready for public appearance the latter part of next month.⁴²

Ora did not do this production alone. First of all, she reached into neighboring communities (as the above list indicates) to find singers. She set up committees in finance, advertising, costumes, and properties,

consisting of prominent men and women of Price. She also had two assistant directors, Harold Bithell and Clark Wright, who were in charge of the dramatic actions. Her piano accompanist was Mrs. Grace Harmon, and the concert master was Alvin Duke.⁴³ The community orchestra was enlisted. By all indications, this production was a major community event.

News of the opening made the front page of the *Sun-Advocate* Thursday, 31 March: "Grand opera, considered an almost unattainable pleasure in this section and for the general population, will lead the entertainment program of most of Eastern Utah's music critics and enthusiasts next week, this opportunity having been made possible by Carbon Stake M.I.A. under direction of Mrs. Ora B. Harding, in presenting "Carmen" Wednesday and Thursday, April 6th and 7th at Carbon Theatre in Price. . . . A chorus of fifty voices, choice singing talent of this region, will support the principals."⁴⁴

The *Sun-Advocate's* article reporting the event gives a mixed review, without elaboration. In an article entitled "County Singers Display Talents in Famed Opera," the coverage begins:

Opinions differ, but all agree that *Carmen* . . . was one of the most outstanding musical productions ever given in Eastern Utah.

Talents trained for co-operative rendition by Price's prominent vocalist and music leader, Mrs. Ora B. Harding, were joined together smoothly, affording the audience a treat seldom available to the public.

Realistic stage effects, designed by S. A. Olsen, Lynn Fausett and Carl Olsen, with colorful costumes worn by the characters proved additionally attractive, while Mrs. John Harmon and Alvin Duke furnished principal instrumental accompaniment for the singers.

Mrs. E. K. Olsen and daughter, Pauline, who took the leading female roles, and Murray Mathis, tenor principal, gave splendid interpretations of Georges Bizet's most famed composition.⁴⁵

"Opinions differ, but all agree," is ambiguous at best. It is interesting to speculate how Ora fared with the subject of *Carmen*. *Verismo* opera, *Carmen* offered "a slice of life," focusing on the lives of common

people instead of aristocrats, and tackled low-life, even seedy, situations. *Carmen*, for example, allows her fate to be determined by a card game. Its subject indeed may have been shocking to some Carbon County residents, as it had been when it was first performed in 1875 at the Opera-Comique, the Paris theater that catered to a particular kind of family audience.⁴⁶ And Ora's production was church related. It's hard to imagine any LDS ward today choosing to produce *Carmen* or even garnering the resources necessary to produce it.

In that same paper (7 April 1938) is an article offering viewers' comments following the opening night performance: "A very high class entertainment and a credit to the community. Congratulations to Mrs. Harding, the cast, and the M.I.A." (W. E. McIntire); "I think the opera is by far the best I have ever had the pleasure of seeing in Carbon County" (Mrs. Leo Clark of Spring Canyon); "A splendid rendition of an opera of highest quality. Congratulations to Mrs. Harding and the whole company. The orchestra deserves special mention" (Melvin C. Wilson); "In the production of 'Carmen,' a big thing has been well done" (Mr. and Mrs. J. W. Liddell and Mr. and Mrs. D. Christensen of Columbia).⁴⁷ These comments provide at least enough insight to say Ora and her cast pleased many in the audience. The opera did not fall on its face. By all indications, it was well received, and its subject matter was not an issue, at least publicly. Instead, Ora realized her greatest achievement. That moment came not any too soon.

Ora took ill in February 1939, at her younger brother, Harold's, wedding. She never gained her strength back. She died in her home on 21 July 1939. Elaine Jensen, a former vocal pupil of Ora's, said she worked herself to death.⁴⁸ Not having professional resources at her fingertips, and carrying the "buck stops here" burden of the enormous productions, she was undoubtedly exhausted. It is sad to speculate when she must have realized she did not have the vitality in her to do it all again.

Her obituary reports that she died of "heart trouble,"⁴⁹ but the family remembers that she died of a bowel obstruction.⁵⁰ In either case, her son came home one July afternoon to a silent house. His mother lay dead in the front bedroom. Had Ora kept her health, she probably would have continued to put on an opera each spring. Piano and voice lessons would have continued, at-home auditions and opera rehearsals. Making music would have, as always, been the central focus of the household.

Ora's husband, George, married five or six times (his children lost count) after she died, never finding the same happiness he had found in loving her. Ora's son, Edward, married Lurean Stevens, one of the cigarette girls in *Carmen*, and Ora's daughter, Virginia, married Bob Carnavali, who took the small part of the guide. Edward had four children, two sons, two daughters; and Virginia had two daughters. Ora's legacy of *Carmen* was greater than she lived to realize.

I witnessed my father, Edward, who was a tough, worldly, unsentimental man, cry only twice: once, when he told me my best friend Pat had been killed in a fall from a horse, and, covertly, when we sat together in the Mormon Tabernacle (a rare experience), listening to the choir. He must have been overwhelmed by memories of his mother, who died when he was barely nineteen. And any music of *Carmen* must have been nostalgic, even the once hated "Habanera." *Carmen* is my favorite opera. It is the one opera about which I can say I enjoy almost every minute of its lucid and sensuous French music. I like to sit back in my lounge chair, close my eyes, and listen to my compact disc of it, so deeply imbued with a Spanish spirit that I imagine myself transported to some Basque countryside. And if I imagine a little harder, I can position myself in the Carbon Theatre, 6 April 1938.

In my mind's eye, I can see Ora walk from the side of the stage, hear the audience warm to her appearance, watch her as she steps up onto the podium, takes a deep breath, waits, waits still, and then raises her baton. The "Toreador Song" bursts forth with overpowering force, dazzling, exotic, exhilarating, a melody so universally recognized as one of opera's greatest "hit tunes" that it is hard to believe Bizet himself once called it "trash."⁵¹ But then, artists often fail to recognize their achievements. I wonder if, at this moment, Ora realizes what she has accomplished. She undoubtedly experiences overwhelming emotion as the opera unfolds, her cast singing back to her: Carmen's seductive "Habanera" and taunting "Seguidilla," Don Jose's poignant, heart-rending "Flower Song," the inebriating frenzy, dizzying *accelerato* of the bohemian dance, Escamillo's swaggering entrance, the chorus's jubilant "Toreador Song." I experience Ora's quintessential moment. She is as glorious as Bizet's chorus, as brilliant, as passionate, as triumphant. She is vibrant, so fully alive in this magical moment. She is happy. And one hundred and seven years after her birth, I certainly fathom who she was.



Algie Ballif models the new uniform for BYU's dance department, ca. 1920. Photo courtesy of Georganne Arrington.