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Opera

FESTIVALS 2005



WHAT IS AN OPERA FESTIVAL ... REALLY?

Nicholas Muni

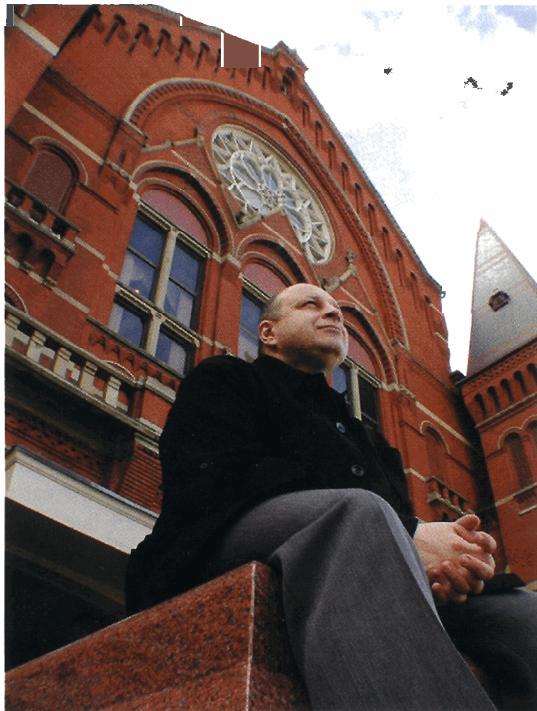
Beyond the operational aspects of the three kinds of opera presentation systems (stagione, repertoire and festival), I have long been fascinated by the comparative atmospheres and experiential energies of each, having been artistic director of both a stagione house and a festival (of sorts) as well as having closely observed numerous repertoire houses as a guest stage director and opera-goer, both in the US and in Europe.

In a stagione company, each individual production has its own complete energy flow, and this event occurs however many times over the course of a season. The season's repertoire is chosen to provide contrast, but the arc of each production remains unto itself: within the run of performances there is the premiere peak, the dip, and the ramp up to the final performance of the run. The same is true in the PR and marketing effort. The other interesting thing to me about the stagione system is that there is time to 'digest' the production: the time between each individual production and the next offers the opportunity for reflection on the part

*Nicholas Muni outside Cincinnati's Music Hall,
home to Cincinnati Opera*

of audience and company alike. This reflection time can be a useful tool in developing attitudes within the community to opera in general and to the direction the company wishes to take, in particular.

The repertoire system demands an incredible ability to sustain energy over a very long period, on the part of the audience but much more so on the part of the company itself. Therefore it is difficult, if not impossible, to sustain the phenomenal level of excellence and intensity required to make each and every performance 'special'. This often results in 'brown nights' when everything is in order but there is not much spark. The energy flow of the repertoire system





■ Muni's first American production of Bengtson's *'The Maids'* at Cincinnati last summer, with Allyson McHardy as Solange

has something to do with 'public service': the theatre is always there for the inhabitants of the city, performing night after night—some refer to it as 'factory opera'. The first nights of the season offer spikes in intensity, to be sure, but the *Wiederaufnahmen* offer the chance to experience art as a part of the everyday fabric of life, not so much as a special event—and I find this aspect very interesting because, almost by necessity, it removes the 'sell' aspect from art-making. The performance is simply the performance; it is not 'special' in any razzmatazz marketing sense. It is simply *La traviata* in an old production, performed by house singers and with the Second Kapellmeister on the podium. I don't mean this in a disparaging sense; rather, the focus then falls much more on the music itself, the art-making experience, because there are no expectations for news of any kind that can be 'spun'. So there is a kind of relaxation on the part of everyone. In the worst cases, this results in boredom, complacency and sloppiness of execution. But I have also witnessed performances that rise to a kind of wonderful excitement as the magic of the piece takes hold, infusing an 'ordinary' performance with a very special kind of magic, quiet and deep.

The festival experience is a supernova. Unseen, pent-up pressures build for many months and explode in a relatively short time span (most commonly anything from one to ten weeks), engulfing audience and company member alike. This experience takes all the participants into a kind of twilight zone, an artistic retreat where the sole focus, night and day, remains on the festival. In this case the totality of the offerings in a given season has its own personality and in this sense each festival is a one-of-a-kind event that can never come close to being duplicated. Because of the extreme intensity within a short time-span, the festival can deliver a unique

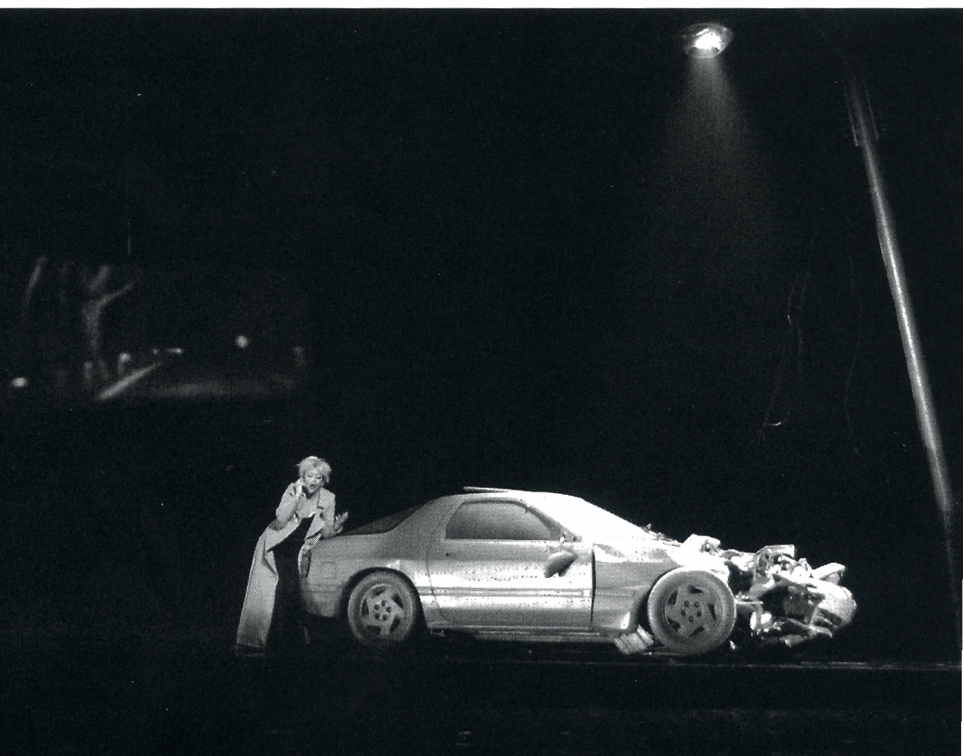
kind of spiritual quality that neither the stagione nor the repertoire systems can achieve. It is similar to the feeling one gets in experiencing a *Ring* cycle: an artistic super-inundation over days.

From 1996 to 2004 I served as artistic director of Cincinnati Opera, and it is a curious case in point, because this company doesn't fall clearly within the definition of any of these operating systems. At its inception (1920), and through its first few decades of existence, it was a kind of summer repertoire house offering as many as 16 different operas between June and August each year. Most of the productions were *Wiederaufnahmen*, and there was a resident company of artists. Gradually it evolved into a summer stagione house, with as few as four productions offered over a much shorter time period, most recently a four- to five-week performance span. Yet it also has a festival atmosphere to a certain extent. So it is a company that at one time or another has touched upon all three atmospheres.

One of the mandates during my tenure there was to help define exactly what Cincinnati Opera was. Clearly it was no longer a repertoire house. But was it a festival or was it a stagione house—and why was it important to answer that question? It was determined that the lack of clarity on this issue was possibly limiting the overall growth and impact of the company, so we set off on a quest to define it more precisely—with a bias toward making it more of a true festival.

We found that while we could alter the performance schedule slightly to approach a festival structure (multiple, simultaneous offerings), in the end the question that became most central was: who is our audience? Of course the answer always is, to

*Catherine Malfitano in Muni's production of 'La Voix humaine' at Cincinnati
two years ago*



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some great extent, the local audience. But early on we came to the conclusion that a true opera festival also has the obligation to reach out beyond the local audience, to create programming that will also stimulate the art form in a broader sense and therefore be attractive to opera lovers beyond the local audience, to be *unique* in some sense. And so, we included this idea in our mission statement.

For the first few years it seemed like we had hit upon the answer. The growth was truly phenomenal in terms of audience, subscriptions, contributions and budget. We offered a mix of standard works and, as a first step toward the ultimate goal of creating and presenting new work, first company performances of such operas as *Jenufa*, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, *Erwartung*, *Nabucco*, *Elektra*—indeed, the company had never before presented work by Janáček, Debussy, Schoenberg or Bartók. Of course, these pieces are standard fare in most of the opera world—but for the Cincinnati audience at large they were fringe repertoire pieces. In combination with the repertoire exploration, we sought out debuts of significant emerging artists: the US debuts of Peter Mattei in *Don Giovanni*, Lado Ataneli in *Nabucco*, Stéphane Denkve for both *Pelléas* and *Bluebeard/Erwartung*, which was presented in the Robert Lepage production, and the US professional opera debut of the conductor Xian Zhang. Each season since 1999 had at least one new production and sometimes two; several of these were designed by Dany Lyne, a very talented Canadian designer (she made her US debut in Cincinnati). We also mixed in some interesting (and controversial) role debuts: Denyce Graves in her first Amneris, Lauren Flanigan's first Norma, Catherine Malfitano's first Carmen (with Denkve conducting the opera for the first time in his career), and the operatic directing debuts of two

noted American theatre directors, Leonard Foglia and Kenny Leon. We presented a wonderful *Elektra* cast with Deborah Polaski, Anja Silja, Inga Nielsen and Robert Hale, conducted by Sebastian Weigle, also in his US operatic debut, and were fortunate enough to experience Susan Chilcott as a stunning Governess in *The Turn of the Screw*. All of these efforts *together* began to create a festival atmosphere and to put Cincinnati Opera on the festival map.

By 2002 we felt ready to take the next step, and this is where it got interesting. We began to push farther afield in terms of repertoire and production style: *Dead Man Walking* (the first company outside of California to present it); *La Voix humaine*, *Die sieben Todsünden* and the stage premiere of William Bolcom's *Medusa* in a triple bill evening—again, the first company exposure to the work of Poulenc, Weill and Bolcom; *Der Kaiser von Atlantis*, in an updated setting, on a double bill with the first North American performance of Peter Bengtson's *The Maids* (a local theatre company presented the Genet play in repertoire). The culminating point of this second phase will be *Margaret Garner*, the first mainstage commissioned work in the company's history (in a co-commission with Detroit and Philadelphia), which will be presented in Cincinnati this coming summer. In addition, we went into high gear in terms of collaborating with other local cultural organizations, most significantly with the Hebrew Union College Ethics Center and the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. All of these projects were high risk and somewhat controversial, but they generated great excitement both locally and beyond.

With the economic downturn, the company began to question the relative value of programming, in part, to appeal to a non-local audience. Who is this phantom, non-local audience? Would they come to Cincinnati in greater numbers? And an increasingly pressing question: would they help foot the bill?

And here is where the definition of 'festival' comes into play. In my view, a true opera festival operates with a deep belief in and a desire to present a programme that is unique enough in the broader world of opera to attract interest and participation from that sector. Additionally, it is with the full understanding that interest and even attendance on the part of the broader opera world will probably not generate the income necessary to produce the components of the festival that appeal to that broader audience.

While I would like to think that every opera company involves itself in 'pushing the envelope' to some degree, I have gradually come to the conclusion that for a

Malfitano again, in 'Die sieben Todsunden' at Cincinnati, 2003



festival it is more or less *de rigueur*. This needn't be only in terms of repertoire. It could be in terms of production style or the artists the company engages or in the latest critical thinking about the work of a certain composer or through synergistic collaborations—or some combination of all of the above. A true festival atmosphere goes well beyond the structural definition of X number of



■ *'Pushing the envelope': 'Der Kaiser von Atlantis' at Cincinnati Opera last summer*

performances in X time span, produced in repertoire mode. It must embrace, in some measure or other, genuine artistic risk-taking as defined not by the standards of the local audience but by more universal operatic standards.

I look back upon my time in Cincinnati with great satisfaction and pride in what was accomplished in a relatively short time span in a notoriously conservative city, all while never going into the red—no mean feat. Overall, I found the local audience very impressive in the way it embraced our efforts to push the boundaries, and, with their support, I believe we had taken great strides toward becoming a festival of the type described above.

What does the future hold for Cincinnati Opera? Colleagues in the field and some journalists have voiced concern that the company will return to a more traditional' artistic posture. The recent press release announcing the 2006 and 2007 repertoire and casting choices does indicate a move away from the kind of artistic risk-taking of the past few seasons—but the company is not alone in doing this, given the economic environment we continue to experience. Largely missing from the announcement are the production teams for the standard repertoire pieces—and this will be very telling, as will, of course, the naming of the next artistic director. The local audience, having developed an appetite for somewhat edgy work, has made known its desire that at least one of the four operas presented each season be from the non-standard repertoire, and it is clear that the company intends to fulfil that desire. Given a wonderful staff of top professionals and a supportive board of directors, my hope is that the company will continue to programme projects that keep it on the festival 'radar scope' of the opera world at large.

We should treasure all those festivals (and opera companies of every type) that maintain a primary goal to push artistic boundaries, often in the face of financial risk. In providing such leadership, these companies celebrate what makes opera such an extraordinary art form in the first place—thereby also helping to guarantee its future existence.