

£3.70 June 2003

Opera

'The Handmaid's Tale' at ENO
Lord Harewood at 80
Making new opera matter
Muni—frontier-line direction



NICHOLAS MUNI

Erica Jeal

Muni is artistic director of Cincinnati Opera, where he directs a triple bill this month



Cincinnati, deep in mid-West America, just across the Ohio river from Kentucky, is a very conservative city—or so pretty much any Cincinnati will tell you within minutes of your arrival there. So it's something of a surprise to find that its yearly summer opera festival is headed by one of North America's most unconservative stage directors, one with strong, even outspoken views on almost every aspect of opera.

Speaking to Nicholas Muni, one senses that, initially at least, he was a little surprised to find himself in Cincinnati too. 'I had never seen an opera there before I was hired. I knew they had had good singers, and that they had the Cincinnati Symphony in the pit, so I assumed musical values were probably very solid. But I'd heard it was a very conservative company that did instant opera very quickly. The board had hired a consultant to search for a new artistic director, and he knew me from another job. I said, "Why are you calling me about Cincinnati? You know my work, and it's not what you'd think would fit in with them." But he said no, they really wanted to change. If I had a dime for every company who said they wanted to change ... But he said they were serious. They wanted someone who would live in Cincinnati, because they wanted more of a connection with the community—and, with a young family to think about, the idea of having a stable base was very attractive to me. And I was really impressed with the search committee—they'd done their homework and were looking at their company in an objective, self-evaluatory way. It didn't match up with what I'd expected.'

Seven years on, Muni is vindicating the board's expectations on all fronts. Under his tenure, Cincinnati Opera has grown into one of America's most forward-looking companies. This year there will be ten performances of four programmes; the schedule now includes two 'festival weekends' with performances on consecutive nights, encouraging out-of-town and indeed international audiences. The repertoire has been broadening steadily, and several of the productions have been Muni's own; in his first full season (1998) he introduced the city to *Jenufa*, since when he has presided over the first local performances of *The Turn of the Screw*, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, *Nabucco*, *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, *Erwartung* and, last season, both *Elektra* and Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*. 'If anyone had said to me when I started that in six years we'd be doing a season with those two back to back, I'd have thought they were crazy. But I'm thrilled with what the audience is bringing to this—it's very capable and willing to go into some different territory.'

Muni may have taken many in the audience a long way since he arrived in Cincinnati, but the company itself has a long history—having been founded with a performance of Flotow's *Martha* on 27 June 1920, it's the second oldest in the US after the Met. For more than half a century, performances were given each summer in the Pavilion at Cincinnati Zoo; long-standing opera-goers still reminisce, dewy-eyed, about prima donnas having to compete with growling lions. In 1972 the animals finally got their peace and quiet, and the company moved to its present home, the sprawling, red-brick, 3,417-seat Music Hall, located in Over the Rhine, a neighbourhood built by German immigrants in the 19th century.

If being tied, so far, to such a large auditorium has limited Muni in his choice of repertoire, he's kept it to a minimum. 'Would it be my first choice as a space for *The Turn of the Screw*? No. But as multifaceted as that piece is, if you boil the dramaturgy down it's about good and evil, and that is a big-scale subject. But I wouldn't do, for example, *The Rape of Lucretia* there—to me that's infinitely more subtle dramaturgically.'

Music Hall is far from being the only venue in Cincinnati—the College Conservatory of Music has an abundance of different halls and theatres, there's the Playhouse in the Park, and the newly built Contemporary Arts Center has its own, intimate performance space. Muni has plans to bring some of these under the festival's wing, while still keeping Music Hall as its main base. And next spring the company's new Corbett Opera Center will come into service, built in a wing of Music Hall previously incarnated as a convention centre, a sports arena and, latterly, a storage space. The fact that this centre has been built there rather than in a better-heeled part of the city is, Muni says, a sign of the company's commitment to the sensitive and inclusive regeneration of Over the Rhine, one of Cincinnati's most troubled areas—it was the flashpoint of the 2001 riots.

Muni may be surprised to end up in Cincinnati, but until his late 20s he didn't think he would become a director either. He grew up on a farm in New Jersey; his father was a Sicilian immigrant who worked himself most of the way through medical school but ran out of money before he could complete the course. 'My father was very enlightened—he felt that education, the arts and music were very important. So I and my two brothers all learned an instrument—

Muni's first milestone: his 1989 Seattle 'Trovatore', revived in Toronto ten years later, with Yevgeny Dmitriev (Luna), Eva Urbanová (Leonora) and Richard Margison (Manrico)



I learned piano and, don't ask me why, accordion. There was a lot of music in the house. Not a lot of opera *per se*, but we did listen to the Met broadcasts. There was a critical point when I was around ten, when my father told me I had to join the school choir. I was very interested in athletics and American football, and had the typical young kid's attitude that choir was definitely not what I wanted to be doing. He said if I didn't want to join the choir that was fine, but then I wasn't playing football either. Of course I joined immediately, and pretty quickly fell in love with it. The same thing had happened to my older brother, who was a state champion wrestler. It changed the way all the athletes in the school felt about music.'

Muni went on to study at Oberlin in Ohio, during which time he sang, acted and conducted, but directed only occasionally. He then spent a few years in Washington and New York as a professional singer—he describes his voice as a high lyric baritone—and studied with Todd Duncan, the first Porgy, whom he extols as 'a tremendous mentor'. But his voice was too gentle for opera, and a career in Lieder wasn't really an option back then for any but a tiny handful of singers. 'Then I reached a point where I thought, "What am I doing?"' was working at all these different things, but not really focusing on any.'

The decision he came to was to concentrate on directing. He began this part of his career with an appointment to Kentucky Opera in 1983, before moving to a five-year tenure at Tulsa Opera in 1988. But the first production he considers a milestone was his *Trovatore* for Seattle Opera in 1989, for which he worked with John Conklin as designer. An unusual Freud-inspired co-production, it has been successfully mounted already by five companies; it comes to San Francisco this month and returns to Houston in two years' time. 'That job was critical, it was a new production for a company that was quite a jump from where I was at the time. In America there aren't that many new productions—it's a part of our system that's

Muni outside Music Hall, home to Cincinnati Opera



not conducive to training directors. Often you just get to direct your production on an existing set. I recently worked with a German designer who asked me how things happened in America, and I was trying to explain this concept to him, and he literally couldn't understand what I was saying. So I got someone to translate, and he still didn't understand. Rightfully so—how can you direct on someone else's concept? It's bizarre. But for a young director in America, 99 per cent of the time that's exactly what you do. You're not trained from the beginning in the dual functions of *Konzeptregie* and *Personenregie*.'

Following that *Trovatore*, he was engaged by Brian Dickie to direct the three-act version of *Lulu* in Toronto, conducted by Lothar Zagrosek and with Rebecca Caine—fresh from starring in *The Phantom of the*

Opera—in the title role. Two other important Toronto productions followed: *Rigoletto* in 1992, working with the designer George Tsybin, and the 1996 staging of *Jenufa* which, two years later, he chose for his debut production at Cincinnati.

Then in 1995 came a project that brought out Muni's adventurous side—a chamber version of *Wozzeck*, staged jointly by the Banff Center for the Arts and Montreal's

Nouvelle Ensemble Moderne. 'The idea was to play with the audience's expected sympathies. We set it in Germany just after World War II, a time of tremendous disorientation. Wozzeck was a German soldier—and thus part of Hitler's machine, whether he was a Nazi or not—and Marie was German too, but all the people around them were occupying American forces. So we'd flipped it so that the audience would be grappling with very unsympathetic characters from a sympathetic viewpoint, and vice versa. It was performed in a mixture of English and German. I'd probably have some different thoughts now if I brought *Wozzeck* to Canada, but it did work very well.'

By this time Muni was already working in Europe; he made his debut at the Stadttheater Giessen with *La Fille du regiment* during the 1993-4 season and continued there with *Idomeneo*, *Zauberflöte* and *The Rake's Progress*, and has also worked in Innsbruck and Dublin. He has yet to make his UK debut; he was set to direct *Nabucco* in 2000 in ENO's Italian season, but handed it over amicably to David Pountney when he realized that his ideas and Stefanos Lazaridis's design concept were unlikely to meet in the middle. But in his own dramaturgically-led style of direction he's perhaps more a European than an American at heart, and he feels keenly the differences between the way things work on the two continents. 'In America, the system promulgates a certain directorial approach, a kind of generalized opera, which is just as bad as or worse than the *stagione* system. The whole customer-service-oriented structure means that, even in the more progressive companies, there is always a sense of caution—and if you enter into any production with an awareness that there are boundaries, a certain level of your work dies, right then and there. The things that excite me as a director are the normal boundaries of time, space and money. Those are cool, you can deal with those. But when there's a fourth dimension of an attitudinal or aesthetic limitation, that's the problem. What I enjoy especially in Europe is that there's not that fourth limiter. It's all in the way they ask the same question. In America it's a suspicious "What are you going to do with this piece?"'. In Germany they say the same thing, but the tone is enthusiastic. In Europe they invite something that hasn't been done before.' Still, he's dismissive of the 'Eurotrash' school of directing, seeing it to some extent as a product of the lack of new works.



■ Muni's staging of 'Salome', seen at Cincinnati in 2000

Muni may feel at home in Europe but, buoyed by the receptiveness of the Cincinnati audience, he's still saving some of his most ambitious plans for his own company. 'I would say that where we could excel in terms of the fundamental tools we have—our theatre and our orchestra, though I'm not sure we have the financial foundation—would be the big, difficult works. I'm dying to do *Oedipe*. It's a brilliant, massive score, and our orchestra would just knock it out.' Other works he cites are similarly adventurous—Hindemith's *Cardillac*, Zemlinsky's *Der Traumgöрге*. Could he lead the audience in where so many companies would fear to tread? 'I believe we could. There's this whole body of work that our audience hasn't, for whatever reason, been exposed to, and we are exploring those pieces. Once you get through those you need to go further afield. Given what's happened in this first period, I would see our next goal as being *Wozzeck* in maybe three or four years' time.' And with new, smaller venues coming into play, the possibilities for exploring Baroque opera open up, as do those for more contemporary work. 'It's my theory that an audience can more successfully absorb something completely unfamiliar the more intimate the space is.'

Not that Muni is shying away from presenting new work on the main, Music Hall stage—far from it. Following the success of *Dead Man Walking* last year, this month sees the stage premiere of William Bolcom's *Medusa* as part of a triple bill with Weill's *Seven Deadly Sins* and Poulenc's *La Voix humaine*, all three starring Catherine Malfitano. And the company has recently announced its first co-commission: a piece commemorating the National Underground Railroad, the network of safe houses through which so many were transported from slavery in the south to freedom in the north before the Civil War. *Margaret Garner*, based on the highly emotive story of an escaped slave who killed her daughter rather than

■ *Muni's staging of 'Norma', which he brings to Cincinnati this summer, with José Cura as Pollione and Susanne Mentzer as Adalgisa*

see her recaptured, set just a few blocks away from Music Hall, is to be written by Richard Danielpour to a libretto by Toni Morrison. With Denyce Graves in the title role, it will be seen at Cincinnati in July 2005, two months after its Detroit premiere.

Muni himself is no stranger to staging contemporary opera—he created the premiere productions of Michael Daugherty's *Jackie O* in Houston and, for Minnesota Opera, Libby Larsen's *Frankenstein, the Modern Prometheus* and Robert Moran's *From the Towers of the Moon*. But he's not afraid to say he finds a lot of new opera underwhelming, largely because of what he sees as a startling lack of dramaturgical know-how on the part of composers and, especially, librettists. 'There are existing operas where the dramaturgy is creaky, no question, and because their music is so great they survive. But with new





Muni's 1991 staging of 'Lulu' for the Canadian Opera Company, with Rebecca Caine in the title role

opera there's no real excuse for that any more. The values have been different for a long enough time. Still, the decisions that are made with a lack of awareness of how dramaturgy functions are amazing. You need really good dramaturges to act as concept police, to say, "If this is your premise, then when you get to the third act how on earth can your character be saying that?". The important thing is consequentiality, the idea that action B has to be an inevitable result of action A. Once you get that worked out, whether in a new work or a new production of an existing one, however it looks or sounds, it takes on a real power. I'm almost obsessive about this.'

Muni's own dramaturgical signature will be stamped over half of the festival performances this year: as well as the **Weill-Poulenc-Bolcom** triple bill, he's reviving his 1994 Seattle Opera production of *Norma*, with Lauren **Flanigan** making her debut in the title role. But how much longer will the company be able to hold onto him? 'There's been a lot to work on and reshape at Cincinnati, but that's now settling down. So I'm entering a phase where there's more possibility to work outside. I want to go back to working more in Europe. I've also been directing other things. I recently did a couple of projects with Cincinnati Ballet, in which my role was to create the dramaturgy, to work on the designs, to work with the dancers. Something else I'm really into is designing symphony concerts. But it's fascinating directing art for a community, and what's great about Cincinnati is that between September and May there's all this flexibility for me to go out and do other projects.'

While Europe may beckon, America isn't about to lose Muni just yet. 'I'm between these two systems and continents. On one hand there is limitation in America, but what it has going for it is a relatively fresh audience, and I've seen tremendous growth in the last decade or so. I'm much more committed now to working there, playing whatever my part in it is, moving it further forward—because I see that potential. In a strange way, America is actually a very fertile frontier.'