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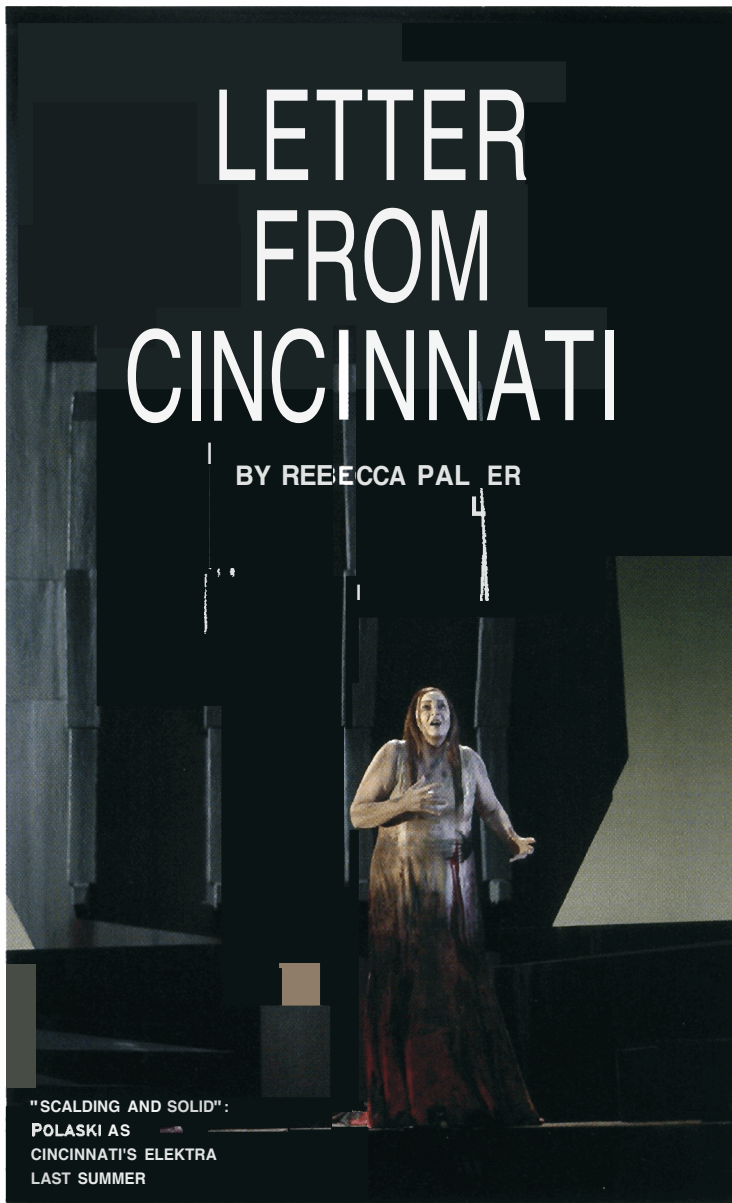
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IS "PRIMA DONNA" A DIRTY NAME? TODAY'S STARS SING OUT!

LETTER FROM CINCINNATI

BY REECCA PALMER



"SCALDING AND SOLID":
POLASKI AS
CINCINNATI'S ELEKTRA
LAST SUMMER

Cincinnati has a

—decorum— of the surface at least. But the sprawling town on the north bank of the Ohio River, long known for its conservative politics, today continues to reel from the events of April 2001, when the police shooting of Timothy Thomas, an unarmed black teenager, sparked protests and street riots.

By the middle of this year, many of the issues behind the riots (including racial profiling) remained insufficiently addressed, and a coalition of clergymen and other prominent members of the African-American community continued to butt heads with Mayor Charlie Luken and to call for a boycott of Cincinnati by conventions and high-profile performers. Bill Cosby canceled a concert appearance earlier this year, and the boycott already has cost the city more than \$10 million in canceled conventions. Another blow was dealt this past summer when the Jazz Festival, an annual event for forty years, was canceled after its promoter declared it "untenable," citing the boycott and underlying racial and social tensions in the city.

When I traveled to Cincinnati on a sultry day in July (temperature 95 degrees, with humidity to match), I wondered what to expect. I spent two years there, as a student at the University of Cincinnati, and I have vivid memories of some thrilling May

Festival concerts conducted by James Levine, and of my first live opera, a 1973 *Barber of Seville* at the College-Conservatory of Music, with a radiant Kathleen Battle as Rosina.

Downtown Cincinnati as I remembered it is gone. The baseball stadium, home of the Reds, is still there — though it's about to be imploded and rebuilt

by an insurance company called Great American (whose name it will bear). Nearby, ground has been broken for a new museum, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, scheduled to open in 2004. The former site of one of the city's fanciest clothing stores is now a T.J. Maxx.

I checked into the Netherland Plaza — an Art Deco hotel that's been designated a National Historic Landmark — and headed uptown to another landmark building, Music Hall, home to the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and Cincinnati Pops, the May Festival and Cincinnati Opera.

Music Hall, a majestic 3,417-seat, red-brick theater built in 1878, looks exactly as it did twenty-five years ago. But the surrounding Over-the-Rhine neighborhood (named by the German immigrants who settled there two centuries ago) also looks just as it did in the late-'70s — desolate and impoverished. This is the area where the disturbances began last spring; the shooting of Timothy Thomas occurred just two blocks

south and east of Music Hall.

Amazingly, Music Hall's attendance has not suffered during the past year, and in many ways it has proved a beacon of light for the city. The Cincinnati Symphony's new music director, Paavo Jarvi, has been winning raves from the critics. (Janelle Gelfand, music critic of the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, praised his inaugural concert, which took place just days after September 11, 2001, as "a testimony to the uplifting power of music.")

This spring, the May Festival — the oldest continuing choral festival in the U.S., established in 1873 — offered a series of five concerts entitled "Beethoven, Bernstein and Brotherhood." Black composers were represented on each program (in works including Jonathan Bruce Brown's *Legacy of Vision: Martin Luther King* and William Grant Still's *In Memoriam*, a tribute to African-American servicemen who died in battle) alongside more standard fare with an inspirational bent: Bernstein's "Kaddish" Symphony and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony — with the May Festival Chorus and the all-black Central State University Chorus. "I was very much aware of what happened last April, and I wanted to make an artistic statement that the African-American tradition is a very fundamental part of our culture," says James Conlon, music director of the May Festival since 1979, who plans to include more music by black composers in future seasons.

Cincinnati Opera is making a renewed commitment to revitalizing Over-the-Rhine: with a \$1.5 million grant from the Corbett Foundation, the company is combining its offices and rehearsal spaces into a central location at the north end of the hall, which will provide the company with a street-level presence. (Currently, the administrative offices are located in cramped spaces beneath the stage area of the hall.)

Music Hall is still referred to by those with long memories as Cincinnati Opera's "new home." The company, the second-oldest in the U.S., performed from 1920 to 1971 in the 900-seat Cincinnati Zoo Pavilion — the beloved "Zoo Opera," where Ezio Pinza brought his celebrated Boris Godunov and Elisabeth Schwarzkopf her Marschallin, and where Beverly Sills made a sensational company debut in 1965 (to the counterpoint-like squeals of seals) as the three heroines in *The Tales of*

Hoffmann. Although people fondly remember attending the enormously popular Zoo Opera, it was a rustic operation that often fell prey to weather-related downturns at the box office.

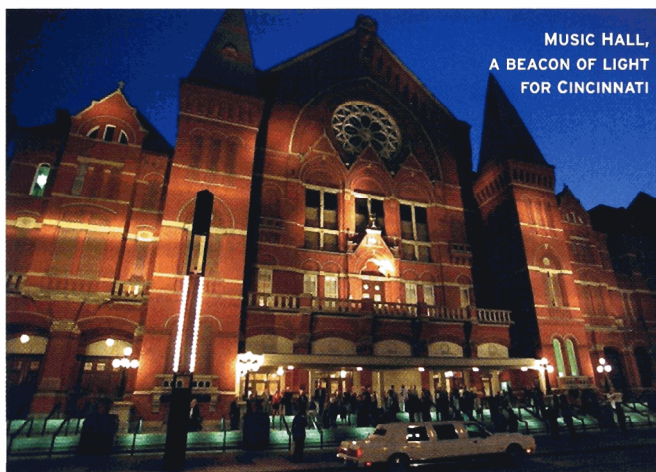
By the 1960s, there was a pressing need to move the company into larger, modern (air-conditioned) facilities. The opera's move to Music Hall in 1972 was made possible by Patricia and J. Ralph Corbett — his company, NuTone, manufactured the first musical doorbell — who contributed \$2 million to refurbish the building. (The contributions of the Corbetts to the cultural life of the city cannot be overemphasized; their gifts of more than \$21 million to the College-Conservatory of Music — which received a complete makeover in the late 1990s — have helped turn it into one of the biggest and finest performing-arts complexes in the country.)

The move to Music Hall coincided with the arrival of James de Blasis, general director — later, artistic director — of Cincinnati Opera from 1973 to 1995, who raised production values of the company and continued to hire stars and rising young talent but favored traditional repertory and stagings (with a few exceptions, including Franco Alfano's *Resurrection* and de Blasis's much-praised Wild West *Elixir of Love*). The last time I visited Cincinnati, in 1976, I saw a rather plodding, old-fashioned production of *Aida*. This time around, there was not an elephant in sight.

The 2002 summer festival comprised ten performances in June and July of repertory including *Roméo et Juliette*, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Dead Man Walking* and *Elektra*. Every year since 1998, Cincinnati Opera has featured company premieres; this season, *Dead Man Walking* and *Elektra* are new to the repertory.

The pièce de résistance was *Elektra*. The production, staged by CO artistic director Nicholas Muni and designed by Dany Lyne, was stark and expressionistic, with the palace of Agarnemnon looming like a ghostly mausoleum (one that occasionally dripped copious amounts of blood from four scary-looking "drainpipes"). Muni provocatively explored the complexity of human motives in perceptive flashbacks of the child Elektra and her abusive mother,

and in a sneakily chilling moment when the reclining Klytämnestra poured out her heart while Elektra sat in a chair, looking like a smug New York City psychologist who had heard the same story of fear and sleepless nights one too many times. And, in an eerily



The 2003 Cincinnati Opera Summer Festival (June 19–July 19) includes performances of a double bill featuring Catherine Malfitano (*The Seven Deadly Sins* and *La Voix Humaine*); Turandot, with the new Luciano Berio ending and starring Eva Urbanová; *La Traviata* (with Hasmik Papian); and *Norma* (featuring Lauren Flanigan and Kristine Jepsen). For further information, contact the company at 513-241-2742 or www.cincinnatiopera.com.

It is about a twenty-minute drive from the airport to downtown Cincinnati. Information on hotels, restaurants and visitor information can be found at 513-241-8696 (www.gototown.com) and 800-246-2987 (www.cincyusa.com).

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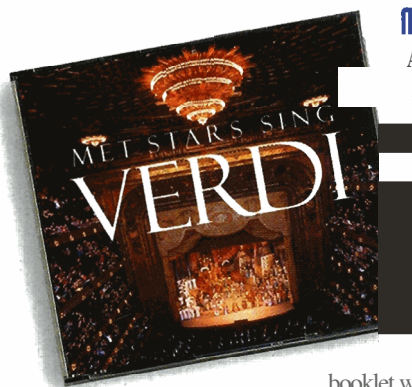
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effective reference to 9/11, Orest was brusquely frisked by guards before entering the palace yet somehow managed to smuggle a knife in under his clothing.

Deborah Polaski as Elektra, grimy and bedraggled and looking like Anjelica Huston on a *really* bad hair day, gave a scalding performance that never sacrificed solid vocal technique for depth of feeling. Anja Silja as Klytämnestra, in a slinky white dress and armfuls of crimson bangles, stormed and raged like a 1930s German film star but somehow made it all seem and sound believable (a few shrill notes notwithstanding). Inga Nielsen's Chrysothemis, an ethereal vision in white, sang beautifully and with abandon, and Robert Hale was a strikingly handsome Orest with a powerful, noble voice. Each performer moved and sang in accordance with dramatic necessity, and there was not a weak link in the cast. Although the reduced orchestration was used, Strauss's sumptuous, jarring score was exceptionally well served by conductor Sebastian Weigle, in his company debut, and the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra.

Dead Man Walking is a coproduction of seven opera companies, including Opera Pacific, New York City Opera, Austin Lyric Opera, Michigan Opera Theatre, Pittsburgh Opera and Baltimore Opera, each of which paid a "buy-in price" of \$65,000. (Cincinnati Opera originally had planned to borrow the impressive production, designed by Michael Yeagan, that was used for the 2000 world premiere at San Francisco Opera, but that plan was stymied by the technical requirements and the projected cost of \$1 million for three performances.)

The performance I attended was preceded by a press reception and buffet supper — of Louisiana cuisine — with Sister Helen Prejean. The gumbo was all but ignored as a few hundred guests gathered around Sister Helen at the podium. Standing alongside composer Jake Heggie, she talked with grace and humor about the journey her book — detailing her experiences as an adviser to prisoners on Death Row — had taken to the opera stage ("When Jake called and told me that San Francisco Opera wanted my permission to make an opera out of *Dead Man Walking*, I said, 'I don't know boo-scat about opera!'", and she spoke of the opera's message of love and redemption.

For this final performance of *Dead Man*



MUNI CHANGES EVERYTHING:
CO'S NEW ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Walking, Music Hall was nearly full (with only eighty seats unsold). The audience was attentive throughout, and the evening ended with cheers and a lengthy standing ovation. I seemed to be one of the few people who were not completely satisfied with Margaret Jane Wray as Sister Helen. The soprano has a robust voice but lacks the natural warmth and compassion of Susan Graham, who sang the role at the San Francisco premiere. On the plus side, the performances of John Packard, as convicted killer Joseph De Rocher, and Frederica von Stade, as his mother, had deepened and were even more gut-wrenching than they had been in San Francisco.

Afterward, it was encouraging to see groups of young adults standing in the foyer of Music Hall, talking excitedly about the performance — and to learn that many of them were returning the following evening to see *Elektra*.

The day after I saw *Dead Man Walking*, I interviewed Muni in his office at Music Hall. Now fifty, he started out as a singer and conductor and, prior to his arrival in Cincinnati, spent five years as artistic director of Tulsa Opera (1988–93). Though the "fit" between Muni and his constituents was not quite right in Tulsa — the town never warmed to his daring work (which included a *Traviata* set in modern-day Paris, with Violetta a prostitute dying of AIDS) — Cincinnati has embraced him from the get-go. During his first five seasons in Ohio, he has galvanized the company and the city with his thoughtful, minimalist productions of lesser-known fare, beginning with a reve-

latory *Jenůfa* and continuing with *The Turn of the Screw*, *Pelléas et Mélisande* and *Nabucco*. He and managing director Patricia K. Beggs (the company's former marketing director, who created CO's zany advertising campaigns) have also spearheaded outreach and education programs in some of the city's poorer neighborhoods and schools, as well as a series of lectures to help prepare Cincinnati Opera patrons for new productions. (A record number of people — more than 500 — showed up for an "Opera Rap" conversation with Muni and Prejean at a downtown church in April.)

Of his accomplishments to date, Muni (whose current contract extends to 2005) is quick to mention the successful "visual and acoustical tune-up" undertaken upon his arrival in Cincinnati, to the tune of \$1 million: the extension of the stage halfway over the orchestra pit to improve the acoustical balance; the addition of a black border around the (white and gold) stage — which lets the audience look inside a "clean, black neutral space," says Muni; and the purchase of powerful, single-source lighting.

His greatest source of pride is "the way the Cincinnati audience has received repertoire unfamiliar to them," he says. "The turning point occurred last season, when nobody walked out of *Erwartung* [on a double bill with *Bluebeard's Castle*, in the Robert LePage production] — a very positive indicator of the willingness of the audience to stay with it," says Muni.

The company, which has been financially sound for the past thirteen years, has seen its budget rise to \$6.1 million (from \$2.5 million five years ago), and performances this season played to 90 percent capacity. The fact that Cincinnati has embraced Muni is a promising sign. This is, after all, the town that prosecuted *Hustler* publisher Larry Flynt and indicted the museum managers who exhibited Robert Mapplethorpe's sexually explicit photographs.

Yet this same city has welcomed operas such as *Elektra* and *Dead Man Walking* — which debates the death penalty and has an extended nude scene — and Cincinnatians seem eager to go wherever Muni will take them. □

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