

## The Met

In 1962 when I was in my second year at Columbia University in New York City, I enrolled in the required "Music Humanities" course. Believing my skills and interests ran to the visual arts (I was, after all, an architecture student), I was not looking forward to this course very much.

After dabbling in Gregorian Chants and motets for a few classes, the instructor introduced us to a very early opera, Monteverdi's Orpheus and Euredice. It was the first opera I had ever



heard, and outside from Italian pasta commercials, I was totally unfamiliar with the genre. I was also unprepared for impact that this musical form would have on my life. I found myself tearfully engulfed in the profound sadness of lost love for the dead Euredice, now a spirit of the gloomy underworld prisoner of the terrifying Charon. This is odd, I thought. There must be something to this mix of music and drama.

We were required to attend several live musical events as part of our class work. These would be reviewed by us the uninitiated and untrained. I chose to see an opera. There was no choice as to where that would happen: The Metropolitan Opera House.

This was not the glitzy showy Met of today, the jewel of Lincoln Center. This was The "Met", the same theater of the golden age of opera, the Met where Caruso, Galli Curci, Geraldine Farrar, Nellie Melba, and countless other gave their utmost to adoring audiences. This was the Mecca of opera, the holy grail of all who ever sung or listened to the form.

But the Met did not look the part in the fall of 1962. It was a dark, brooding, fortress, with generations of New York soot embedded in its brick facade. It was more than a bit worn around the edges, a relic, well loved but tired in spite of the best efforts to keep it up. Wood work was thick with a hundred coats of paint. Windows were thick with dust. Tile floors were worn through to the concrete below. Thick velvet drapes were yellow where the threads were exposed. The gold leaf was splotchy and more faded than

glittering. One in twenty lights in the grand chandeliers was in need of replacement. Even the uniforms of the ushers were a design of the thirties and looked to be as old.

An inquiry told me that an impecunious student such as I could gain entrance to the Met at a much reduce price by viewing the opera from the "Standing Room" areas. There were two such areas: for \$2.25 one could stand at the rear of the Orchestra surrounded by mink and dinner jackets. Or for \$1.25 one could stand at the sides of the top ring in the very upper reaches of the theater, mere feet, it seemed, from the ceiling. Being in dire straits financially, I, of course, opted for the least expensive ticket and was, even at that, generally put out by having to pay as much for one performance as I did to eat for an entire day. Further, I discovered, when I bought that first standing room ticket, that the top ring had its own separate entrance on 41st street, well set back from the main entrance around the corner on Broadway. It was a deliberate effort, it seemed, to avoid having the top ring and balcony patrons mingling with the better sorts who could afford more expensive seats.

Standing room was not preassigned. There were good places and poor places. The locations furthest from the stage had the best views of the stage, although from any position one saw more of the top of the performers heads than their faces. Therefore there was much pushing and shoving to get the good places. Also one had to lay claim to the maximum amount of real-estate to avoid being cramped by one's neighbors. The best locations were available to those first in line, by virtue that they could rush up the five flights of stairs and arrive first to stake out ones claim. As a 19 year old student, I was much more agile than many of the regulars, and could count on overtaking at least five other standees during the cattle stampede up the stairs, elbows, umbrellas and overcoats flying in the tactical battle for position and social dominance at the head of the standing area.

It took some time to learn the rules of competition and the etiquette of the race. And I saw my first few operas with a view limited to the front third of the massive stage area until I learned the tricks. Arrival at least 45 minutes before the door was opened at 7:30 pm was adequate for average casts or unpopular operas. When Ceseri Siepi or the young Joan Sutherland performed, several hours head start was often not enough to guarantee entrance, much less a worthwhile position. One had to gauge the value of the performance to estimate a suitable arrival time.

I began to know the "regulars" in the top ring standee line. There were no regulars for the orchestra standee area, since everyone who knew anything knew that the acoustics at the lower site were far inferior, muffled as they were by the overhanging dress circle. For the most part, they were middle aged, middle class New Yorkers for whom the opera had become a ritual in their life. The conversation on 41st street, continued during each intermission, was apparently the mainstay of their social life. I listened curiously, as a youngster, I was not included or invited to participate. I learned all the gossip of the opera star fan clubs. I learned the correct attitude toward each opera, composer, artist, conductor, musician, stage designer, director, and toward Rudolf Bing, the managing director of the Metropolitan Opera House. I learned what was good or bad in the eyes (or

ears) of the speaker. There was occasional debate, but for the most part social harmony and same-mindedness among all the standees. I was tolerated, and occasionally given a scrap of wisdom in a friendly gesture. For the most part I was left to my own thoughts.

I was slowly drawn in to the ritual of the top ring standing area. I began to attend once a week, then twice a week, and when school work was light, three or four times per week. It was a major part of my life, and continued through 1962 till I graduated in the fall of 1964. I estimate I saw 150 opera performances of perhaps forty different operas in that two year period. My favorites were by Verdi, Gounot, and Bizet. But I acquired a taste for Russian and German composers too.

I remember that first performance, the one I reviewed for my Music Humanities class, *La Boheme* by Puccini, an old favorite I was told. The faded beauty of the theater was truly enthralling as the theater slowly filled. I was being lured and tantalized by the sights of the people and the sounds and whispers of those around me. The lights dimmed. The crowd noises faded. The conductor appeared and was warmly applauded. The curtain rose onto a darkened stage. All was absolutely quiet.

DA-da-da DA-da-da went the orchestra. My mind flinched from the closeness and clarity of the unexpected notes. The tones, the rhythms, the melodies, the palpable texture of the music went right to the center of my brain. I had no defense, no time to prepare, to protect myself. I could not interpret the notes in the context of my regular experience. It just happened. The music was pumped into my very being.

The singers, apparently students, poor like me, complained and cavorted in a language I couldn't understand, playing out a story I barely knew. I was in a trance, a trance of happiness and love, then a trance of utter sadness and despair. I was not in control. I had surrendered myself, without effort, without choice, to the moment, the music, and the place.

And then the performance was over. I realized that something profound had happened to me. A once in a lifetime event to be treasured and remembered, preserved, and protected.

I spent much time in the Met in the next two years. I looked forward to each return. Plotted my visits. Made sacrifices. And I was rarely disappointed. Up in the top ring, the musicians and artists seemed to be right there, next to you, or more exactly, emanating from the great ornate plaster ceiling. I had many emotional moments that I shall remember all my life.

But then I moved on in my life. I graduated, got a job, married, became a parent. I left the Met behind. I never again used standing room, and for many years rarely attended the opera at all. But I never lost it. It had bonded with me for life, and the notes and artists pass through my mind from time to time and bring a smile to face that others may wonder about.