

THE B.A.S.

The Boston Audio Society
P.O. Box 7
Boston, Mass. 02215

SPEAKER

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February meeting. The featured speaker at the February meeting of the B.A.S. will be Mr. Roy Allison, the noted authority on loudspeakers and former Vice President of Acoustic Research. The meeting will be held in Room 314 of B. U.'s Sherman Union at 775 Commonwealth Avenue on Sunday February 18 at 5:30 pm. Enter the basement corridor from Commonwealth Ave. or from the rear access road and use the elevator to rise to the third floor. If you have never met Mr. Allison, you have a treat in store for you.

WCRB Marathon. This year's Musical Marathon to raise money for the Boston Symphony Orchestra will be held on WCRB, 24 hours a day, March 8 - 11. The goal is \$65,000 to be raised by playing your requests at the rate of \$1.00/minute.

The Marathon Catalog is available. Get yours free at Symphony Mall or at the February BAS meeting. Unlike previous editions, which had selective listings, this year's Marathon Catalog lists nearly all of the tapes in the BSO Transcription Trust -- 2000 performances by the Symphony and 300 selections by the Pops, all with playing times listed. (It is a priceless guide to keep permanently for planning off the air recording!) Performance tunes range from 90 seconds (Leinsdorf conducting the BSO at Tanglewood in "The Star-Spangled Banner" while the first astronauts were landing on the Moon) to 3 hours 37 minutes (Wagner's "Lohengrin"). Performing artists range from Koussevitsky to Copland and from Bernstein to William F. Buckley.

Opera records. Attached is a fine article on opera by Dennis Boyer, a singer himself and a committed operaphile. This is the first of several articles which have been commissioned especially for BAS publication, to introduce you to the recordings of various kinds of music. We hope that this and the following articles will induce you to explore-areas of music which you may have ignored or been put off by. Opera, for example, is a broad field encompassing many composing styles and with lots of room for varieties of taste and preference. If you've just heard one or two operas, you haven't heard 'em all. For instance, some operas are primarily lyrical with relatively trivial drama but lots of good tunes (examples: Carmen, Bohème, Magic Flute). Others are primarily dramatic (examples: Tosca, Otello, Fidelio) in which the music supports the drama but you don't tend to go out whistling the tunes. Then there are the bel canto operas (Bellini, Donizetti) in which half the excitement consists in hearing a great vocalist sing ornate and difficult arias which you couldn't whistle if you tried. Also there are wide-screen Hollywood spectacles (such as Aida) with dramatic large-scale symphonic writing, big songs, and huge casts. Take your pick.

If you are just getting into opera recordings for the first time, you will also face the question of whether to buy complete operas or highlights discs. Here are some pros and cons:

Pro: (1) Highlights records have the advantage that if you find that you really are not interested, the lost investment is minimal. \$15 - \$20, the price of many complete recordings, is a lot of cash to gamble on a recording of a work that you may finally not care much for. (2) Highlights records tend to single out the best tunes, arias, and choruses, omitting the recitatives and stage business. So they are good for people who mainly like good songs.

Con: (1) Highlights discs give only a one-dimensional view of opera. By slighting characterization and plot development, they deprive you of the pathos and excitement of the opera as a whole. (2) Also highlights discs trivialise the music by depriving the arias of the meaning which they have in the context of the character or plot. One of the distinctions of a great performance is how the artist illuminates the meaning through his performance of the music, but out of context the meaning tends to get lost in the "hit song" approach. So, finally, whether you will benefit from highlights records depends on whether you like opera mainly for its songs or as a multidimensional art form.

For the raw beginner in opera who would like an introduction to the variety of vocal and orchestral styles in opera history, two superhighlights collections can be recommended. "The Seraphim Guide to Grand Opera" (3 Sera. SIC-6062) presents 36 selections, from Monteverdi and Purcell to Berg and Britten, with good introductory notes and translations of the lyrics. "The Royal Family off Opera" (3 London RFO-S-1) presents 31 hit arias, mainly from the 19th century; no notes or translations, just sheer great vocalism.

REPORTS AND REVIEWS

January Meeting. The BAS met on January 21 with about 60 members attending. The evolution in Scotch recording tape formats was discussed. 3M is discontinuing then 150 and 203 families of tape, to be replaced by similar tapes in "R-60" and "R-90" lengths, each a couple of minutes shorter in running time than the current 1200 and 1800 foot tapes. So the recent extraordinary bargain prices of certain Scotch tapes (e. g., \$ 2.00/reel for 3M 150 and \$2.50/reel for 3M 203) are valid only until current inventories are exhausted; the new versions will cost more. Buy now.

Richard L. Kaye, General Manager of WCRB and Manager of the Boston Symphony Transcription Trust, gave a highly entertaining and informative behind-the-scenes talk on how the BSO is recorded, both commercially and for Transcription Trust broadcasts. Selected highlights:

In recent weeks the BSO has been recorded by DG (Jochum conducting), Columbia (for a collection called "Bernstein at Harvard"), RCA (Fiedler and the Pops). DG use a large multichannel mixer, mixing many mikes down to four channels for recording; the four-channel tape is then mixed in Germany for two-channel release. Their main monitor speakers are the old Altec 604B coaxial speakers mounted in open-back cabinets! Columbia farms out some recording jobs to independent outfits. They use lots of mikes, recording a 16-track tape (with 16 Dolbys stacked up), later mixing down to two or four channels. (The resulting frequency-dependent phase cancellations among adjacent mikes doubtless contributes to Columbia's Alka-Seltzer string sound.)

The BSO Transcription Trust recordings and broadcasts use condenser microphones: a main array of four omnidirectional mikes, plus a cardioid accent mike for soloists when concertos are played, plus a super-cardioid accent mike for the woodwinds (especially flutes). The accent mikes are mixed in at a typical level of 15 dB below the main mikes. Of the main mikes, the front pair are Neumann SM-23s and the rear pair are KM-56s; the soloist mike is a KM-54 and the woodwind mike is a Sennheiser "shotgun." As of February 1973 the rear main mikes and the soloist mike are being changed to Neumann KM-S4s. The rear mikes are about 10 feet from the front mikes (diagonally back and up). Concerts are dubbed simultaneously on several recorders: 4-channel discrete with Dolby A on an Ampex 440; 4-channel discrete without Dolby on an Ampex 440; 4-channel SQ matrixed on a 2-channel Revox and 4-channel QS matrixed on a 2-channel Revox. Also straight 2-channel dubs are done on a Revox. The sound is of course also relayed via phone lines to WCRB (whose phone line is Dolbyized) and to WGBH. The quality off the phone lines is typically poor in the fall, better later in the winter and spring.

Mr. Kaye also discussed WCRB's sound. The station is in the midst of a long-term upgrading of equipment. A new transmitter, both electronics and broadcast antenna, was installed last May. (WCRB's antenna is just under Channel 5's on the same tower in Needham.) New turntables will be installed soon: Panasonic electronic servo-drive tables with SME arms and Shure V-15/II cartridges. Also planned is a new announcer's mike, a acoustical treatment of the studios, a microwave relay instead of phone lines from studio to transmitter, and a new limiter. Incidentally, WCRB and WGBH use similar CBS Volumax limiters, with BSO broadcast levels set so that the limiters compress only the loudest peaks.

Mr. Kaye pointed out that with WCRB's new transmitter, SCA interference is very slight when a good tuner is used with a good antenna installation. (For example, BSO broadcasts are monitored off the air at Symphony Hall, using AR tuners, AR amps, and AR speakers, with a Finco antenna on the roof, and SCA noise is no problem.) However, the SCA is extremely sensitive to multipath interference. So a poor reception area, an inadequately directional or badly aimed antenna, or unshielded lead-in can severely increase the SCA interference and co degrade the useful signal-to-noise ratio in stereo by 20 to 30 dB. When rotating an antenna, aim for minimum multipath rather than maximum signal strength. With the AR amp, use the null mode to hear the L-R subcarrier signal; this permits very, precise aiming for minimum multipath noise and distortion.

A Publication of the B.A.S.

SELECTING OPERA RECORDINGS

or

Getting involved with a medium where
90% of the time somebody dies

by Dennis Boyer
Producer/host, "Sunday Opera"
and "FM in the PM," WBUR

"What's the best way to introduce myself to opera?" Because this question occurs regularly, I would like to discuss in much greater detail than is possible during a casual conversation how I would recommend one proceed.

After the above query, the next to arise is "Which opera(s) shall I begin with?" Something a bit lighter than *Götterdämmerung* from Wagner's Ring cycle is in order. The beginner should choose a work with an involving yet followable plot, and tuneful arias and ensembles. He might also do well to begin with works somewhat briefer than the Wagner epics. Most often, you will find dramatic devices such as magic, mistaken identity, forsaken love, jealousy, and revenge will play the central part in such a drama, be it opera buffa (comic opera), or opera seria ("tragic" opera).

With literally thousands of operas in existence, we must give the beginner a fighting chance by restricting our discussion to an admittedly arbitrary but well-intended list of "basic" repertoire. Of course, the term "basic" is relative to taste, and I apologize for undoubtedly omitting several favorite works of already-committed operaphiles. You will find, I hope, that there is a method to my madness. I have chosen for my beginners' basic list works which, from perennial performance in opera houses and multiple recordings, have shown themselves to appeal to large numbers of people over long periods of time. The inference to be drawn is that there is some enduring quality which accounts for the popularity of the works:

Mozart	Don Giovanni, Marriage of Figaro, Magic Flute, Abduction from the Seraglio
Beethoven	Fidelio
Verdi	La Traviata, Il Trovatore, Aida, Rigoletto, Un Ballo in Maschera, La Forza del Destino, Otello, Don Carlo
Puccini	Tosca, Madama Butterfly, Manon Lescaut, Turandot, La Bohème
Rossini	Barber of Seville, Semiramide, La Cenerentola

Bellini	Norma, La Sonnambula, I Puritani
Donizetti	Don Pasquale, L'Elisir d'Amore, Lucia di Lammermoor, Daughter of the Regiment
Offenbach	Tales of Hoffmann
Gounod	Faust
Delibes	Lakmé
Bizet	Carmen
Massenet	Manon, Werther
Leoncavallo	I Pagliacci
Mascagni	Cavalleria Rusticana
Ponchielli	La Gioconda
J. Strauss	Die Fledermaus

There are differences among these works in terms of symphonic vs. vocal writing, how dramatic they are, size of the performing ensemble, conventions of the times, and of the composers, etc. It would require inappropriate length to describe every work as to each category. However, I feel I owe the beginner some sort of general indication of what he is likely to find:

Magic Flute, Marriage of Figaro, Abduction, Cenerentola, Barber of Seville, Don Pasquale, L'Elisir d'Amore, Daughter of the Regiment, and Fledermaus are in general lighter, happier operas. Each is a masterpiece of its time and kind.

Fidelio is a more symphonic, heroic work in a class by itself, as are most Beethoven works. Equally apart from the rest of the field is Don Giovanni, a serious Mozartean work called by musicologists of many eras "the perfect opera" because of its great balance of all operatic devices.

All listed works of Verdi are relatively heavy-weight, but melodious human tragedies of forsaken love and/or trust, ending inevitably in death (with large orchestra and chorus). The Puccini works are the tear-jerker fare of opera. They are not written on so grand a scale as the Verdi, and their orchestration is more condensed and light (save for Tosca, which is a more dramatic work with larger orchestra). By and large the works of Puccini and Verdi are best remembered for beautiful arias and duets.

Semiramide, Norma, Sonnambula, Puritani, and Lucia are serious works of the "bel canto" period. That is, great vocal embellishment and pyrotechnics, which are usually associated with the operas of Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti. That this is achieved within a dramatic framework is to the credit of the composers (and the singers). Don Pasquale, L'Elisir d'Amore, and Daughter of the Regiment are of the same vocal mold, yet operatic farce.

Faust and Carmen are French grand opera at its best. They are dramatic works with ballet, spectacle galore, good-sized orchestras, and great arias.

Lakmé is a tragic French opera set in the orient, and best known for its demanding coloratura title role. Manon and Werther are sentimental, melodious late-19th century French works. Tales of Hoffmann is another beautiful French love story whose keynotes are its beautiful melodies and its possibilities of casting the three different stories to the same singers doing different roles in each section.

Cavalleria and Pagliacci are late-19th century Italian verismo with great arias. Both are short, and are usually performed as a double bill.

Just in passing, let me point out that the preceding list is comprised almost exclusively of 19th century Italian opera, with some German and French representation. Also, I would advise those to whom this is new material that there are more works by most composers named, or to be named in this article, and that you should investigate further the works of any composer whose work interests you. Their contemporaries would also be of great interest as well.

Now, for a second group of works. I consider this group to be of a more specialized nature. Each has its own high degree of importance in opera history, yet commands a smaller, though devoted following:

Händel	Giulio Cesare, Rodelinda, Alcina
Monteverdi	Orfeo, Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria, L'Incoronazione di Poppea
Gluck	Orfeo ed Euridice
Berlioz	Les Troyens, Benvenuto Cellini

Wagner	Lohengrin, Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg, Tannhäuser, Der fliegende Holländer, Tristan und Isolde, Der Ring des Nibelungen, Parsifal
R. Strauss	Salome, Elektra, Der Rosenkavalier, Ariadne auf Naxos, Die Frau ohne Schatten
Mussorgsky	Boris Godunov
Rimsky-Korsakov	Coq d'Or
Tchaikovsky	Eugene Onegin, Queen of Spades
Borodin	Prince Igor

The passage of time and changes in style of opera had thrown Handel's operas into relative oblivion. They are now undergoing a fairly wide-spread revival. Not many people realize that this composer, known for his oratorios, wrote over 40 operas.

Monteverdi's works are just now coming to the attention of the public-at-large due to the scholarship of such conductor-performer-musicologists as Nikolaus Harnoncourt and Gustav Leonhardt. Monteverdi and his colleagues in Venice invented the modern opera form.

Gluck's work is a landmark. He removed extraneous material, such as elaborate ornamentation, subsidiary plots, flowery language, etc., in order to heighten the importance of the drama. Although his music is beautiful, his contribution to opera is this emphasis on the single grand dramatic subject.

The following composers form a continuum of change which leads right through to the twentieth century: Berlioz, Wagner, Strauss. Berlioz's works are just now coming of age. His operas involve large orchestra, ambitious stage effects, and orchestral innovation. They are also relatively lengthy. They are so costly to produce on the stage that the best way to have repeated exposure to them is through the recording medium.

Wagner marks the culmination of the Romantic period. The first four works listed were the last operas written by him. Even they, with arias, etc., tended toward being through-composed -- that is, with no break in the whole opera. It was becoming a symphonic synthesis in which the singers were secondary. The formal break came with the Ring cycle, comprised of four music-dramas (Wagner's term), with texts by Wagner. There were monologues, but no overtures, arias, or set pieces as such. The Ring cycle is fantastically complicated, yet highly rewarding.

Another landmark is Wagner's Tristan and Isolde. This work represents, perhaps more than any other, a tangible statement of the culmination of Romanticism. Its chromatic writing and almost purely symphonic form set it apart from anything which has been written before or since. Pardon the over-simplification, but volumes have been written on the subject.

Richard Strauss takes Wagner one step further. The, large orchestra is retained, and even expanded. His early works become more condensed until reaching Salome and Elektra, each being one large act for a dramatic soprano, and, yes, auxiliary characters as well. The chromaticism becomes even more extreme. Deciding that these works take him as far in this direction as he can go, Strauss returns to more or less conventional opera with Der Rosenkavalier, and the other works mentioned. The philosophies of Strauss' plots are, for me, the most interesting aspect of the operas. His expressionistic abilities are so supreme, the music seems a natural outgrowth of the stage action. His operas are highly individualistic and beautiful.

The Russians, along with their countrymen Glinka and Boito, form a nationalistic body of literature which is heavy in Russian sentiment. They, too, are classics of 19th century opera. They use conventional opera form with arias, choruses, etc.

As composers such as Strauss pushed the limits of chromaticism further and further, it wasn't long before composers devised systems based upon chromaticism itself, rather than upon diatonicism (major and minor keys). Alban Berg's Wozzeck is a lyrical 12-tone opera which itself conforms to classical movement arrangements within its various sections. Igor Stravinsky's The Rake's Progress is such good fun, it makes you forget you're listening to a neo-classical form of modern music. I have singled out these two works because they are classics of the twentieth century. Among the many other contemporary composers, you should investigate the works of:

Tippett	A Midsummer Marriage, King Priam
Britten	Peter Grimes, Albert Herring, Billy Budd, Turn of the Screw, Midsummer Night's Dream, Rape of Lucretia
Henze	Elegy for Young Lovers, Der Junge Lord
Penderecki	Die Teufel von Loudon

Prokofieff	War and Peace, Love for Three Oranges, The Flaming Angel
Janacek	Jenufa, Cunning Little Vixen, Makropulos Affair, House of the Dead
Floyd	Susannah, Wuthering Heights
Barber	Vanessa
Busoni	Doktor Faust
Hindemith	Mathis der Maler, Cardillac

I cannot urge strongly enough that you listen to as many performances as possible. Certainly you should have some idea of what you are to buy before making a purchase. Repeated exposure to the various types of operas and singers will help you to sharpen your evaluative skills.

The best way to experience opera is to attend live performances. There are also recordings available from a number of sources. Libraries often have a lending program for recordings. Mugar Library of Boston University, however, has a large collection which can be audited only on the premises. Other large educational institutions might offer such services as well. Of course, you can also borrow recordings from friends and listen to broadcasts on the radio of live and recorded opera. Not to be ignored are televised performances on public television.

Finally, let's discuss the matter of selecting recordings. I feel that the most important contribution I can make to your recording selection process is to list certain criteria which I recommend be considered

Probably the central issue is that of the singers. Let's face it, this is a singer's medium. You might choose a recording on the basis of the lead soprano or tenor. However, you might opt for the better-balanced cast for a stronger overall performance.

The issue of recorded sound also looms large. For example, will you choose the London or DGG Ring cycles over the Seraphim re-issues solely on the basis of recorded sound? Perhaps additional criteria will aid your decision.

The performance, if rehearsed honestly for any length of time, is a function of the competence of the conductor, and the compliance of the recording engineer or producer. Some will give preference to his approach, since, after all, the piece stands or falls on the basis of

whether it is successful musically and dramatically. Style, phrasing, pacing, and interpretation all have much to do with any performance. Will you put this before or after considerations of casting and technical recording perfection?

Next is the matter of scholarship. There are many versions of non-French opera that have a "Paris" edition due to the French penchant for spectacle and ballet. This is only one example, but you should be aware of the fact that these variations do exist from recording to recording. Often, original scores are re-orchestrated by other composers, or by the original composer. Some versions may make more sense than others. This can influence your purchase. Our earlier discussion of the works of Monteverdi enters in here. What if further performance practices are theorized by musicologists? Will today's already-important work in the field pale by comparison? Will different embellishments change the character of contemporary editions? Most of all, what is the impact of the differences on you?

I cannot tell you which of the above criteria to select. That is inevitably a matter of personal preference. As I stated before, my hope is that you consider them all, and decide upon the basis of those factors which are most important to you. Very few recordings get high ratings in all of the categories mentioned, so there will be compromise in many of your choices. However, an informed decision is far better than a blind buy, considering the of any boxed multiple set of recordings.

To those intrepid souls who are about to embark upon an operatic discovery tour, good luck. I hope that the foregoing will serve to give you some aid, if not comfort on your tour. By weighing your decisions carefully you can go to your record dealer and then Ritorna Vincitor!

NOTES: Good reference source on the history of opera which will acquaint you with a myriad of composers and their relative importance in the medium's history:
A Short History of Opera, by Donald J. Grout (2nd ed.) New York: Columbia University Press, 1965, 852 pages. \$8.95 (bibliography alone will last you a lifetime)

A different type of opera guide:

Opera Guide, by Gerhardt von Westerman (Harold Rosenthal, ed.), E.P. Dutton & Co., 1968, 584 pages. \$2.95, paperback. In addition to act-by-act summaries of over 200 operas, this book contains brief, but scholarly notes on the history of opera.