

# 'Sister Angelica': Everything you could hope for

By TIM RICHARD  
An opera during Lent? Giacomo Puccini's "Sister Angelica" couldn't have been more appropriate for the season and for the day the snow melted.

It was performed Sunday with both musical and religious care by the Oakway Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Francesco DiBlasi, and the Birmingham Musicale Opera Ensemble, directed by Alice Englem.

The most often performed of a trilogy of one-acts, "Sister Angelica" fea-

tures 14 voices, all female, so it becomes an appropriate effort for such a group as the Birmingham Musicale.

The scene by which you judge such a work is the middle one between the Princess (mezzo Arleen Koenig) and Angelica (soprano Marilyn Hedquist).

THE CONTRASTS are everything you could hope for.

Ms. Koenig, in heavy, severe black with blue, is unforgiving in rich, dark tones that are underscored by the orchestra's lower woodwinds and

Puccini's minor keys.

Ms. Hedquist, in soft white and beige, is contrite, soaring in major keys accompanied by soft strings. Angelica had been sent to the convent seven years earlier, after having a child whose illegitimacy dishonors her patrician family. She has heard nothing of them in all that time.

There are a surprising number of good voices in the remainder of the ensemble. Beyond Carol David as the Sister Monstress, it would be unfair to single out any.

I would quibble with the staging of the miraculous entrance of the Madonna and the ghostly Child. It didn't seem quite right that they emerge from the

same door where the other nuns are standing. But being unfamiliar with the staging problems of Birmingham Seaholm High School, I probably don't appreciate the director's problems.

MAESTRO DiBlasi was in his glory, conducting Italian opera. He does many things well, but he does this best.

Dealing with a large orchestra that is only off stage and not even in a pit, DiBlasi had to exert the most precise control, at times whispering beneath the singers, at other times shouting almost above them.

The task is to stand in the middle of the orchestra and hear it and the singers as if you were in the back row. DiBlasi can't tell you in words how he does it. He just does it. A disappointing note has been Oakway's small audiences this season. The orchestra is easily the strongest it has been in five seasons, but the audiences are smaller, and live performers need a good audience in order to do their best. Otherwise, we might as well listen to studio-made records.

One would think that in Birmingham, known for its monetary patronage of

the arts, and with Birmingham Musicale performers in the featured roles, relatives alone would fill the place. Not so. OSO's Audience Development Committee has its work cut out.

THE CONCERT opened with a work that couldn't have been in greater and more delightful contrast — J.S. Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 5.

The OSO's Peruz Zerounian, violin; Roger Welton, flute, and Paul DiBlasi, cello, were joined by Martha Welton on harpsichord for this energetic and even exciting performance.

I wonder a bit at displaying the delicate 17th century sound of the harpsichord against modern versions of the other instruments. Bach wrote for violins which had gut E and A strings and soft bows with nothing like the brilliance of the Italian violins we know today.

Second guessing aside, it was a satisfying and enlightening performance. Ms. Welton's fingers flew with Lisztian fervor in the highly exposed first movement cadenza, and one must always marvel at the lush sound Ms. Zerounian draws from a fiddle, even when the score is Baroque.

## m.m.memos

I should have known when I went outside to pick up the morning newspaper last Saturday.

There was a bit of grass no longer covered by snow and the air didn't have the icy quality we've come to consider normal. But I was intent on other matters and didn't think much about it then.

I didn't even catch on when I sat down at the kitchen table to read the paper and instead found myself looking out the window to admire a nuthatch hopping down the trunk of the pine tree. Haven't seen many nuthatches in recent months.

But when I walked uptown to take care of a few errands, there was no missing the obvious glad news.

It was the first day of spring. Not the one that shows in a block-lettered calendar square at vernal equinox time. (Depending on which calendar you want to believe, that's either March 20 or 21 this year, and that's still a ways down the road.) This was the first day that spring moves into the bones and lets you know that winter isn't forever, after all.

The signs were all over the place as I moved about the shopping center. Kids in winter jackets had them zipped open and pushed back. I found myself remembering back to that glorious day that came each year, the one when one abandoned heavy winter stockings in favor of ankle socks.

Groups gathered on the sidewalks to talk instead of hurrying into stores to escape icy blasts. People paid real heed to the store displays of spring fashions.



By MARGARET MILLER

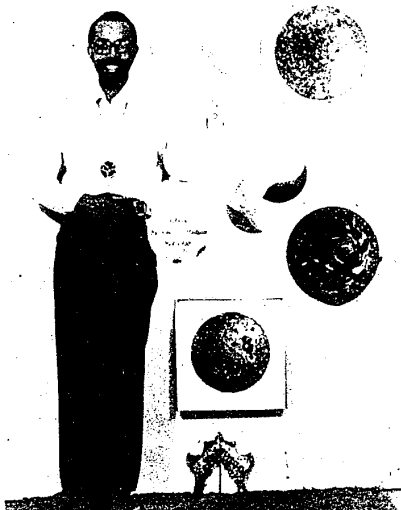
Back on my street, I didn't mind jumping across the mud that had replaced the ice and snow. At home, I renewed acquaintance with the back quarters and carefully lifted a leafy garden cover to see if anything was sprouting underneath. (Not yet.)

Inside, I found the cat waiting anxiously at the door for the first time in months, and she leaped right out to the portions of the yard she has been denied too long because of a snow cover.

And when it was time to go out, I slipped the heavy coat in favor of a light jacket and found everyone else was doing the same.

When the weekend ended it was cold and windy again, and when I picked up the paper the wet spots on the ground were refrozen into ice.

But that's all right. The calendar on my desk and on the wall tell me that vernal equinox and official spring is not far off, and my inner calendar gives me the same warning news. Once more, we've outlasted winter.



### Lumen Essence

"Lumen Essence," a one-man show of the works of Charles S. Hudson, opens with an artist's reception from 2-6 p.m. Saturday, March 10, in Spectrum Gallery, inside Chatham Mall, on Middlebelt and Eleven Mile. The show of art creations in metal and glass is described as a uniquely significant approach to light and color, and will remain at the gallery through April 10.

### Volunteers

Henry Ford Hospital West Bloomfield Center asks for volunteers to perform a variety of services at the outpatient center on Maple.

Volunteer leader Kay Wilson will take inquiries from potential volunteers by calling her at 626-0410.

### Open swim hours

Mercy Center, 28600 Eleven Mile, will hold open swimming Mondays from 8-9 p.m.; Wednesdays from 8:15-9:15 p.m.; Fridays from 7-9 p.m.; and Sundays from 4-5 p.m.

Lanes will be blocked for distance swimmers. Children younger than 10 must be accompanied by an adult.

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