Opera audiences behave poorly

By Gene Barnes
special writer

review

The Metropolitan Opera of New York gave seven different operatic offerings during Met Week at Detroit's Masonic Auditorium last week.

This reviewer saw two, Thursday's concert performance of Verdi's Requiem and the Saturday matinee of Saint-Saens' "Samson et Dalila."

Though, of course, not an opera at all, the Requiem (performed because am earlier musicians' strike truncated the Met's season and caused a cancellation of some planned opera productions) was nevertheless infused with all the grandeur and pathos of any Italian romantic-era opera. In fact, it is a little uncomfortably reminiscent of the same composer's secular masterpiece "Aida," written just three years before.

There had been some concern that the forces utilized to bring off the Requiem wouldn't be large enough for optimal effect, but they were altogether adequate.

THE MET'S HOUSE chorus proved to be one of the best in the country for pitch accuracy and unstinting commitment to the conductor's beat. This is important because the chorus is the star in the Requiem, not the soloists. And if the Met chorus occasionally erred on the side of businesslike professionalism, it could be readily excused.

Soprano Renata Scotto and mezzo Florence Quivar tended to outclass their male counterparts, tenor Giuliano Ciannella and bass Paul Plishka, though there were never any real problems in any of the sections. The ladies' duets were just consummately beautiful. That's all there was to it.

New York wunkerkind conductor James Levine again showed himself to be generally overrated. Sure, the beat and the cues were there, clear as a bell. But hang it all, where's the profundity? Where's the soul?

CONVERSELY, "SAMSON ET DALILA" is an opera that barely qualifies as one. There is so little stage action, it might as well have been produced as an oratorio like the Requiem. Paul Paray led the Detroit Symphony Orchestra in a concert performance some 20 years ago, and nothing was lost as a result.

Guy Chauvet, as Samson, was really unstable during the first act, but as his voiced warmed up his tone improved greatly. Bruna Baglioni, Dalila, was downright weak all through the opera. She had trouble sustaining the long, melodic lines entrusted to her in the second act. All the other soloists were fair to good with the exception of John Macurdy's vocally brilliant Old Hebrew. Neeme Jarvi's conducting was unremarkable, if flawless, save for a real blooper in the Bacchanale.

But, what I find continually distressing about Met Week is the audiences. They can be nearly as unruly as rock-and-roll audiences, talking freely during the performances and coming and going as they please.

This situation keeps getting worse. Next year I wouldn't be surprised to see a few Frisbees thrown around to enhance the festive atmosphere. I honestly can't understand why people spend big bucks for tickets and then pull these shenanigans.

But, then I'm only a music critic, not a psychologist.

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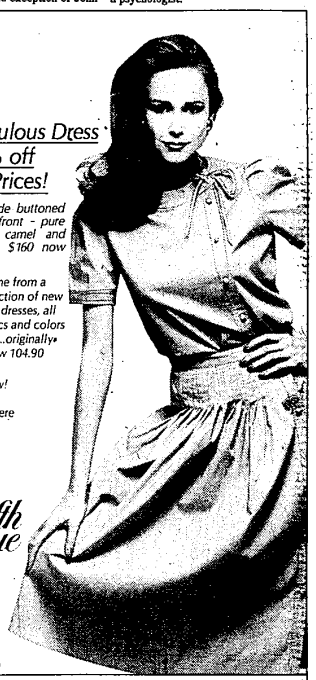

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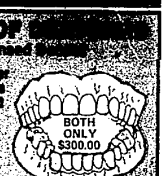

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Unwelcome visitor.

"Call the cops, I yelled to Sally as I jumped out of bed and grabbed a golf club.

I was dead tired and not very happy when Sally woke me up around 2 a.m. She was shaking me and whispering, but I couldn't make out what was happening at first.

She sounded scared still. "Steve. Are you awake? I hear something downstairs."

It wasn't the first time Sally had heard a strange noise during the night. So I turned over and muttered, "Aw, it's just the house. Go to sleep."

She lay there frozen. Propped up on one elbow. Listening. After awhile, I started to drift back to sleep. She shook me again.

Now I was getting mad. "Sally, knock it off. This is an old house and old houses make noises at night. Now, please give me some rest."

"But I heard someone down there." She got out of bed, tiptoed across the room, and stood listening.

By now I was wide awake and I heard it, too. It *wasn't* the house settling.

"Call the cops," I yelled to Sally as I jumped out of bed and grabbed a golf club.

I threw open the door and turned on the light in the stairway. As tough sounding as I could make it, I growled, "Hey! Who's down there?"

I don't know why people say things like that. I sure didn't expect any answer. But I did hear someone running for the back door. I started down yelling, "Come back here, you."

Detective Bruch, Sally and I were sitting around the kitchen table. Sally poured some coffee.

"What did they get?" he asked in a voice that had formed the same words a thousand times before. His pencil was poised over an old leather notebook.

"Near as I can tell, a portable radio, a gold cigarette lighter, and a steel box with all our Savings Bonds inside." Sally nodded in agreement.

He smiled for the first time. "Bonds, huh? You really are lucky. And smart."

"Huh?"

"You can get the Bonds replaced," he said. I shot a questioning look at Sally.

"That's right. We can. We have all the numbers. Ya know, Steve's been buying Bonds on the Payroll Savings Plan for years. For a down payment on our new house."

"Don't worry, lady. Bonds are safe. They'll replace 'em. But may be next time you oughta keep 'em in the bank," he said looking at the door. "And get dead bolt locks on your *new* house."

I poured another cup of coffee as I said, "You know, my biggest regret is I didn't catch up with that guy."

He didn't even smile. Just looked at me in a strange way and said, "Like I said, Mr. Kelly, you're a *lucky* guy. But I'm having second thoughts about the smart part."

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