

'Anna Bolena' tops opera list

By Mary Jane Doerr
special writer

Two weeks ago, the Metropolitan Opera proved that a lavish production can't make an insignificant piece of music into a great opera.

Last week the Canadian Opera Company (COC) showed that with the right music, money to build a new production is well spent.

The Canadian Opera Company didn't waste a cent on the production it built for Dame Joan Sutherland, "Anna Bolena."

The sets and costumes donned last week at the Masonic Temple under the auspices of the Michigan Opera Company (MOT), in collaboration with the COC, Chicago Lyric, Houston and the San Francisco Opera companies, made the Met offerings, even "Francesca da Rimini," seem dull and skimpy.

The most successful production of Met Week was the new production, "Rinaldo," a Canadian production which concluded the week.

Then four days later, the Canadians followed with Donizetti's forgotten opera about Henry VIII and Anne Bolena, another stunning production, which combined Sutherland's voice with magnificent costumes and grand sets.

We should have expected the great Sutherland to follow eventually in the tradition of Callas and Sills in this role. The Donizetti music in this opera is so high and the part of Anna so long that few sopranos have the power to sustain it.

SUTHERLAND has the power. But at 58 there isn't as much agility in her voice as there once was, although the grace and purity are very much present.

She was a little slow in warming up Wednesday evening but her final mad scene was gentle and magnificent in a very tender finale. It is a fine role for the queen of bel canto literature.

Sutherland isn't noted for her acting, but she is always dramatic in her regal appearance. She always managed to capture the attention on stage, especially when she swung her 100-pound train around James Morris, who sang the role of Henry VIII.

As always when she sings, her husband, Richard Bonynge conducted the orchestra. It was made up of musicians from the MOT orchestra as well as the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and the Canadian Opera Company.

Both orchestra and chorus were sluggish, especially in the first act, but their precision improved as the evening progressed.

Bonynge's habit of dropping his arms and head so the singers couldn't see him didn't help.

Besides being elegant and authentic in design, the costumes, characterized by predominant blacks, whites, reds accented with golds and silvers, enhanced Sutherland's look. Nearly every scene required a costume change for both Anna and Henry, offering different variations of red, white, and black with fur trim. The chorus wasn't overlooked either in the costuming.

THE CAST included Morris, a strong Henry VIII, Judith Forst, a powerful but uneven singer as Jane Seymour (though she was better in the second scene of the first act and the third act), Michael Myers, a convincing Lord Percy, and Gidon Saks, capable as Lord Rochester.

Detroit's Kathleen Segar was Smeton. It was another "part role" for the mezzo who sang with a great deal of confidence.

General director of COC, Lotfi Mansouri was the stage director for this production. He has worked with Sutherland before and did the opera scenes for Pavarotti's flop movie "Yes, Giorgio."

His excellent stage direction was enhanced by the costumes of Michael Stennet and John Pascoe's sets.

THIS CANADIAN cast was strong. They blended their voices well in the ensembles for which Donizetti is noted, especially during the second and third acts where Donizetti used the opera technique of each singer expressing his or her emotions at the same time.

The English "Surtitles" were used for the first time in Detroit. Developed by the COC, these translations of the Italian were flashed above the stage during the opera.

The gray-blue lettering faded in and out with each musical phrase so unobtrusively, it was hardly noticeable, but even as distracting as the subtitles on television.

While our American Metropolitan Opera is spending over a \$1.5 million on failures such as "Francesca da Rimini," the Canadians have succeeded in several ways. They developed the Surtitles system for sale to American companies. They produced the Met's most acclaimed success this year, "Rinaldo," and now they have produced what will probably be Dame Joan Sutherland's last new role, for four American opera companies. Pretty impressive.

Michigan Opera Theatre was smart to join with the Canadians.



Mary Jane Doerr

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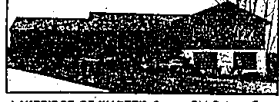
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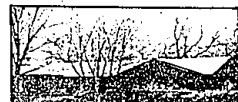
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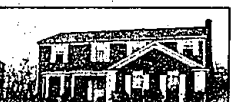
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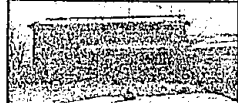
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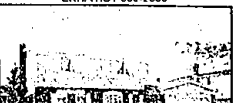
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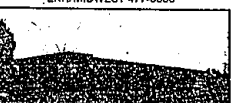
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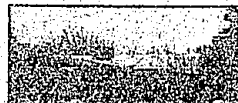
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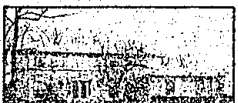
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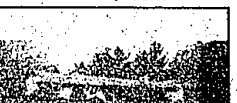
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