

MOT opens with unusual 'Orpheus'

By Mary Jane Doerr
special writer

Michigan Opera Theatre starts off its 16th year Friday, Oct. 10, at the Fisher Theater with Jacques Offenbach's "Orpheus in the Underworld."

The pre-season ticket sales of \$1 million, a record number of performances at \$1 and a \$4.7 million budget put the company among the top 10 in United States.

With so many opera companies in the U.S. reporting deficits and cutbacks, it is an even greater credit to this relatively young company to be able to move so quickly into the realm of international grand opera, fulfilling the void left by the departure of the Metropolitan Opera.

"Orpheus," a co-production of MOT, the English National Opera and Houston Grand Opera, opened in London in September of 1985 at the English National Opera. It was so popular with audiences, it helped save the English company from financial disaster.

With critics though, the reaction was mixed because of the grotesque and garish sets of the controversial cartoonist Gerald Scarfe, known in America for his papier-mache depiction of the Beatles for the cover of

"Time." Some writers were delighted with Scarfe's sets. Others thought they detracted from the music and humorous plot.

"Orpheus in the Underworld" is a spoof on the mythology, the mores in France and certain classical traditions. In the original French version, the show satirized the 19th century sexual and social mores and became known for its can-can dance.

In this English version, Margaret Thatcher and the Victorians are the target. Since the original 1858 version is satire that has since lost its humorous references to that French society, it will be interesting to see how director Peter Mark Schiller interprets the plot to satirize American values.

THE ENGLISH CHOREOGRAPHER, Ferry Gilbert and Houston Grand Opera music director John De Min are also part of this creative team.

On Oct. 24, Maria Spagnola opens with "Madama Butterfly." MOT general director David DiChiera said recently (and many agree), "Madama Butterfly" will probably be Spagnola's greatest role. She was a phenomenal success in it at La Scala last December, and in 1987 she is re-



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turning to Milan to open in the part because Italian audiences voted this young American singer the most popular last year. In 1985, audiences had a brief introduction to this beautiful voice when she sang Liu opposite Dimitrova in April in "Turandot."

If her fourth act performance in "La Traviata" at the Canadian Opera Company in Toronto last June is any indication of how she will affect audiences as Madame Butterfly, it should be a moving production.

Alternating in the part is a Korean soprano, Young-Ae Cho, whom DiChiera found in California and whose voice he called simply beautiful. Detention Korean singer, who got her start at MOT, is returning for her work at the New York City Opera to sing the role of Suzuki.

The newly expanded Spring International Grand Opera Series is opening May 9 at the Masonic Temple with "Tosca." Originally, Mara Zampieri was scheduled to sing the title role, but last April 1, she canceled MOT, the same day she canceled her debut at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Since all of MOT's publicity materials had gone to print, her cancellation wasn't announced until a replacement was found.

According to MOT, it was a scheduling conflict. According to Donal Henahan in the New York Times, she wasn't able to manage the role of Elisabetta in "Don Carlo" and Aprile Millo had to be called in to sing for her. (No one had a scheduling conflict for their debut at the Met.)

Italian soprano Adriana Morelli, the winner of the 1978 Italian Spoleto Festival vocal competition has been cast in the role with Giacomo Aragall and familiar baritone



Sets and costumes designed by Sunday London Times political cartoonist, Gerald Scarfe, for "Orpheus in the Underworld" met with mixed reaction from critics. But the production was popular with audiences.

Charles Long. In "I Pagliacci" as Tonio last fall, Long was ill and didn't sing well, but in 1980 he was spectacular as Rigoletto.

LAST SUMMER at the Santa Fe Opera, Judith Forst was elated to find out that she is singing the role of Rosina with Southfield Metropolitan Opera star, Ann Berberian, who is singing Don Basilio in MOT's Italian production of "Il Barbiere di Siviglia" opening May 23.

Forst was Giovanni Seymour in "Anna Bolena" with Joan Sutherland in 1984 with MOT. Berberian has

sung at Masonic Temple with the Met, but this is his MOT debut for the company his sister, Alice Haidoutian, helps raise large sums for each year.

On June 3, MOT cooperates with 14 other American opera companies to present Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess." The leads, Donnie Ray Albert and Cynthia Haymon, have both sung with MOT before.

"My Fair Lady" is set to open Nov. 14. As is the case with these musicals, the show has not been cast. Last year "West Side Story" wasn't cast until two weeks before opening.

Guarneri shines in Smetana work

By Avigdor Zoromp
special writer

The Chamber Music Society of Detroit opened its new season last Friday with the Guarneri String Quartet. This outstanding group, which has been in existence for 21 years, still has all of its original members. They are violinists Arnold Steinhardt and John Dalby, violist Michael Tree and cellist David Soyer.

Dr. Z ("Tiny") Konikow, president of the society for almost as many years as the Guarneri has been in existence, has seen to it that this group would be one of the regularly featured events of the series. This marked its 14th appearance.

The three works on this program were the Quartet Op. 18 No. 6 by Beethoven, the Quartet No. 2 in A minor by Arensky and the Quartet No. 1 in E minor by Smetana.

The Beethoven quartet, which is probably the best known work among these three, turned out to be the most wanting in terms of performance, in my opinion.

It is one of the early Beethoven quartets, composed around 1800, before the onset of Beethoven's deafness. Stylistically, it still has considerable Haydn and Mozart influences, but yet enough of the Beethoven touch to make it distinguishable from the earlier masters.

IN THE ATTEMPT to emphasize the latter characteristics, the tonal center of gravity tended to shift toward the viola and cello. This, however, was overdone, masking the

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shiny and tender themes in the violin. In the final movement, the first violin was noticeably flat. There was inspired playing, however, in the adagio movement and in the slow introduction to the final movement.

The two other works have a programmatic content, a fact that possibly could explain the greater emotional involvement, which resulted in a more convincing performance. The Arensky work was written in 1894, the year following Tchaikovsky's death and is dedicated to his memory.

The nostalgic, flowing Russian themes have elevated, at least temporarily, the stature of this seldom performed composer. The theme of the second movement, based on a Tchaikovsky melody, is well known. The articulated variations were performed with impressive conviction.

One of the themes in the final movement may also sound familiar to some listeners, possibly due to the fact that fragments of this Russian folk song are also present in Beethoven's last "Razumovsky" quartet. This is a subtle link between these two composers, who otherwise have little in common.

The deafness of Smetana during the last years of his life is far less advertised than that of Beethoven. Smetana is primarily known for his collection of tone poems "Ma Vlast" ("My Fatherland"), in particular, "The Moldau."

THE STRING QUARTET on this program is autobiographical, written in 1876, when the symptoms of his impending deafness were already pronounced. Titled "From My Life," the work recalls the happier aspects of the composer's earlier period, culminating with the dramatic musical description of his ordeal, manifested by the piercing high E in the first violin, in imitation of the ringing sound in the composer's afflicted ears.

The meticulous, clean performance

with its convincing depiction of the events described constituted the high point of this program. The dialogue between the cello and the first violin in the slow movement (symbolizing a lover's duty) was breathtaking in its intense emotions. The concluding dramatic depiction of the final movement couldn't fail to leave its impact on the audience.

Following the intense applause, the group played the scherzo movement from the Debussy string quartet.

Next program of this series, on Oct. 18, will feature the Cleveland String Quartet.

Avigdor Zoromp, born in Poland, educated in Israel and the United States, has a doctorate in math and has studied piano, music theory and math.

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