

Joyful opera belies bittersweet history

By Mary Jane Doerr
special writer

The conditions of the first 59 performances of Hans Krassa's opera "Brundibar" are so extraordinary, they tend to obscure the compos-

tion's musical quality and libretto. First written in 1939 for the children of a Czech orphanage in Prague, the opera became a source of hope for prisoners in Terezin-Theresienstadt, a World War II German concentration camp.

review

creative impressions

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to be used for this performance of the requiem.

The musical director and conductor of the Plymouth Oratorio Society is Robert Pratt, conductor for the First, United Methodist Church of Ann Arbor.

He is former chairman of the music department at Ann Arbor Pioneer High School and former music director of the Youth for Understanding Choral.

For more information, call Mary Bozell: 455-6512.

GARDEN WALK

Docents at the Matthaei Botanical Gardens in Ann Arbor will lead a

winter walk in the woods at 2-4 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 6.

Docents will emphasize winter tree identification, pointing out the many clues woody plants have, even though the leaves are gone. Also they will be searching for color.

If weather and temperature permits, the walk will be along the Blue Trail, stretching to the far reaches of the gardens through a Scots Pine Grove, old fields and the woods along Fleming Creek. Wear warm dress and footwear.

Meet in the lobby of the Gardens Conservatory. The gardens is at 1800 N. Dixboro Road, a half mile south of Plymouth Road.

Composer Krassa; director Rudi Prudenfeldt and the members of the 59 different casts that performed it over a three-year period perished in Auschwitz.

If it were not for a German nun, Sister Veronika Gruters, O.S.B., this delightful opera would have perished too. Her non-Jewish relatives had been deported to Theresienstadt (many of them died at Auschwitz) simply because they had Jewish family members.

In 1985, she found the opera's original score and orchestration and mounted it in Freiburg, West Germany. Sister Veronika is herself a musician and related to the famous Adolf Busch family (Rudolf Serkin's wife is Irene Busch).

Sister Veronika was in the audience last weekend at Temple Israel in West Bloomfield, along with the sole surviving cast member, Ela Weissberger, now from upper New York state, to witness a full-scale production. While interned in the camp for 3½ years, Weissberger

performed the role of the Cat 59 times.

IN THIS production, some 46 children, (two choruses of 18, and 10 leads from the Civic Youth Chorus of Detroit) under the direction of Deborah Smith, music professor at Wayne State University, sang the appealing music and acted out the story.

Organ grinder Brundibar (Glenn Carlos) is an evil man keeping Little Joe (Gary Monger) and Annette (Tabitha Cross) from getting milk for their sick mother. The little animals in the forest, Sparrow (Bridgett Reed), Fido (Susan Doyle), and Cat (Crystal Tyler) come to their aid.

The children of the village sing a lovely lullaby and are richly rewarded with gifts of money from the townspeople. The final chorus adds, "We won our victory because we march along singing our happy song" as the children extend the hand of friendship to the audience.

WITH A simple backdrop in greens featuring a village, using simple hand props, the children were costumed in black and white. Four microphones carried the sound to audience but hampered the children's acting and staging.

The eight member (mainly wind) instrumental ensemble offered varied solos that enhanced the children's solos and carefully avoided overpowering them. Interesting because that accompaniment projected the feeling of the story.

Krassa's music is descriptive, not contemporary or particularly romantic, but evenly constructed, and rightfully within the children's vocal range.

THE PLOT has exciting moments with tremendous staging possibilities if the story line were to be elaborated. Jack Kaub's illustrative black and white photographs needed a darkened stage to accommodate the massively large screen. The pre-

opera scenario by Evelyn Orbach, Saul Wineman and Stacie Basson oriented the opera historically but was difficult to understand without the microphones.

This is not only an opera for children but it is composed for children to perform. The Civic Youth Chorus of Detroit proved that the art form is certainly within the reach of children, a noteworthy accomplishment in a city that is home to the largest producer of children's opera in this country, Michigan Opera Theatre community programs.

Mary Jane Doerr of Troy is a full-time teacher and free-lance writer who specializes in opera and musical theater.

Classics appeal to kids

Susan Hammond of Toronto has done the impossible. She's produced three tapes (and CDs) for children that parents and grandparents will enjoy.

Hammond was in Detroit to promote her award-winning "Mr. Bach Comes to Call" and "Beethoven Lives Upstairs," based on the opera, "The Magic Flute," will be released next year.

The first two tapes are available in the metro area at Harmony House, Toys "R" Us and other outlets. They are on the BMG label.

They are currently the bestselling children's tapes in Canada. "Both have gone gold," Hammond said. The Beethoven tape won the Juno award, the Canadian counterpart of the American Grammy.

"I like to think of them as anti-educational. I want children to fall in love with the music and the era."

Hammond, a trained classical musician, teacher and mother, said too often classical music is presented to children like medicine. "You should like it because it's good for you."

She said she married the music to drama because "I'm a firm believer that where the heart goes, the mind will follow."

It was after she had her own children she discovered how little there was out there in classical music for children. In addition to a goal of entertaining rather than purely educating through these tapes, she sees challenges in the stories, which are about heroes of the past.

"Beethoven took 22 years to get the right notes for 'Ode to Joy.' If that isn't a lesson in perseverance, then what is?"

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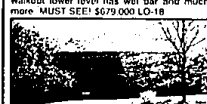
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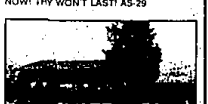
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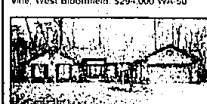
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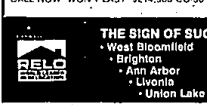
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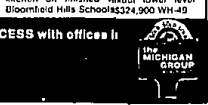
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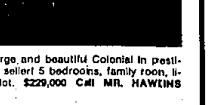
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