

Annals of the Metropolitan Opera

Gerald Fitzgerald

Few books in recent years have been as eagerly awaited as the new Annals of the Metropolitan Opera, and few books will be as welcome. The primary purpose of these Annals is to document the performances at the Metropolitan by the resident company, and this is done superbly. All the casts are there-in great, unsurpassed detail and including tours.

There are two major improvements over the Seltsam volume published many years ago, and updated periodically:

- The performances when the company toured are included.
- There is a second volume of tables which lists every artist, opera, director, tour city, etc. This volume is a significant help to researchers trying to compile a history of, e.g. a given singer or opera.

Yet, in spite of this mass of information, I have some reservations about these two volumes--they could have been done better, much better.

For one thing, presumably because these volumes are a history of the company rather than the house, only performances by the so called resident company are included. However, in the minds of some opera fans, the term Metropolitan Opera connotes the house as much as the company, and a performance at the house by a visiting company is of great interest to them. In the early years, many such touring companies visited the house and performed there. Some of these are very important. For example, Henry Abbey, the impresario of the first season came back in late March 1890 for several weeks with Francesco Tamagno, Adelina Patti, Emma Albani and others. On March 24 they gave Verdi's *Otello*, for the first time within the confines of the house. But the "resident" company did not give it until Nov. 23, 1891, at which time they were in Chicago, and did not give it in New York until Jan. 11, 1892. Then, in 1898 the Ellis company with Nellie Melba, Johanna Gadski and lesser stars gave a five week season of opera while the "resident" company was on tour. In 1902 Pietro Mascagni conducted a few performances of his operas. Still later, the Chicago-Philadelphia company sang there Tuesdays while the "resident" company sang in Philadelphia. These visitors frequently provided New York City with major musical events. For instance, on Nov. 19, 1912 Titta Ruffo was introduced to the New York public in a stellar performance of *Hamlet*. Incidentally, these Tuesday performances were included in the same newspaper advertisements with those of the regular company. Since there is no documentation of most of these other performances outside of the backfiles of the New York City newspapers, I would strongly urge the Metropolitan Opera Guild to commission a companion book or at least a series of articles in *Opera News* on performances at the Met by other companies.

Another significant gap is the names of the houses used by the company while on tour. As an example, they sometimes sang at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia, on other occasions they were at the Metropolitan Opera House in that city. Similar situations occur in just about all of the tour cities visited by the organization. Even if this information was not available for every single tour performance, its inclusion, where known, would have been very useful.

Then, there is a problem of presentation in that the tour cities are not sufficiently set off in the book, and you have to look closely to see whether a performance was in New York or elsewhere.

An additional annoyance is the insistence of the compilers on using the original text for the listings of arias sung in concerts. Even though the singer may have thought he sang "M'appari" (from Flothow's *Martha*) the book identifies it as "Ach so fromm". This is not even totally accurate--Although *Martha* was first given as a German opera, it also exists in a later Italian version, which is more than just a translation since some additional music was composed expressly for it. This version was premiered in Paris in 1858. *Martha* can thus be regarded as both a German and an Italian opera. But "Ach so fromm" is easy to recognize--many excerpts from Russian or Czech operas are not. In many cases it might also have been interesting to know whether or not the aria was actually sung in the original language. To imply that "Dormiro sol" from Verdi's *Don Carlos* was sung in French if it wasn't is misleading. And this opera also exists in French and Italian versions, both sanctioned by the composer.

Finally, during three seasons there were second companies utilizing different artists: A *Fledermaus* company in 1951-52, and a touring company in the 1965-66 and 1966-67 seasons. Unfortunately, these second companies are interspersed with the "regular" company, rather than being listed separately. This results in a jumble of information which is very hard to follow.

I was also disappointed by the short descriptive blurbs which opened the documentation of each season. They add little to the volume, and are not necessarily correct. As luck would have it, the very first one I looked at, on page 97, for the 1900-01 season, talks about the U. S. premiere of Puccini's *La Bohème* as being on Nov. 9, 1900. This performance, which took place in Los Angeles, was not even the local premiere, which had been on Oct. 14, 1897.

Looking at the overall importance of this monumental work, all of the above negatives are quibbles--mentioned only in the hope that if these books are ever reprinted and updated, for which the technology is now certainly available (and they really should be, perhaps to commemorate the millenium or the 500th anniversary of the landing of Columbus) that these suggestions could be taken into consideration. The inclusion of such additional information, and the few minor changes referred to above could render a nearly flawless title perfect.

It is a cliché to say that a certain book belongs in every library, but in this case it is the absolute truth.

Tom Kaufman