

large theatre. The ground floor had space for six shops, which was usual in most theatres. The first floor held the stalls, circle and stage while the second and third floors were the balcony and gallery. At the front, just one entrance. I've no idea how long it stood, but the site is now a parking lot. It was here in 1892 that the Emma Juch Opera Company gave Houston its first Wagner opera, *Tannhauser*. Emma Juch had been born in Vienna in 1863, studied at Detroit and made her debut at Her Majesty's Theatre in London as Philine in *Mignon*. Her first American appearance was in the same role in 1881 at the New York Academy of Music. In 1889 she founded her own company and toured America, Canada and Mexico.

In 1901 two events took place which would change Houston. The first was the discovery of oil - which eventually made the small town a major port and the fourth largest city in the United States. The second was the visit by the Metropolitan Opera under the management of Maurice Grau to give one performance of *Lohengrin* on 4 November at the Old City Auditorium. This building was not in the centre and the lighting had been linked to the Citizen's Electric Light plant, but plumbing was not thought necessary. As a result, Ortrud shrieked "No vessel, no performance!". After a house-to-house search an official returned with the necessary convenience and much to the relief of all (certainly that of Ortrud) the performance went ahead.

The Metropolitan's next visit was not until 1947 when they gave *Madama Butterfly* and *Aida*; it was observed in the Houston "Post" that "*Aida was given in Egyptian temperature and that while the orchestra played in their shirtsleeves many patrons, attempting to live up to Metropolitan fashions, sat sweltering in formal dress.*"

For the first hundred years Houston had to rely on visiting opera groups, that is, until the foundation of the Houston Grand Opera in 1955, which now has an international reputation and is one of the leading opera companies in the USA. In 1966 the Jones Hall opened; this was the city's first multipurpose arts centre and as such helped the growth of Houston Grand Opera and Ballet companies, also the Houston Symphony Orchestra. Eventually problems arose with regard to the scheduling of the different groups and the Lyric Theatre Foundation was formed to study the problem. The answer was: a new theatre or opera house. The Foundation, later named the Wortham Theater Foundation, chose a local firm of architects to design the new building. In 1980 the city gave two square blocks of land near to Jones Hall for the site. The Wortham Foundation gave \$20 million towards construction, and the centre had its name; two other foundations: Cullen and Brown gave respectively \$7.5 million and \$6 million, now the two auditoriums within had their names. Work began in August 1984. Completed at a cost of \$70 million but well under budget and four months ahead of schedule, the Wortham Center opened in May 1987. Built of rose-coloured brick the massive block is decorated with bands and circles of carmine red granite. The main facade and entrance is most impressive; it is dominated by a huge arch, Romanesque in style, which must be nearly 100ft high. Filled with glass, it reflects the nearby skyscraper office blocks. The large glass doors have heavy, intricate bronze handles which are mirrored by the bronze and steel sculptures inside which line the escalators that lead to the main foyer. The Brown Theater is horseshoe-shaped and consists of orchestra stalls and three tiers, it seats 2,170 people and is home to the Opera and Ballet companies. The smaller Cullen Theater is rectangular in shape with stalls and one tier, seating just over 1,000, and is used for Chamber Opera, concerts and recitals. The season is usually between October and the beginning of May.

The repertoire is adventurous. Apart from the standard fare, the HGO has given a number of American premières of earlier operas, including *La donna del lago* and Vaughan Williams' *Hugh the Drover*. The company has also given the world première, among others, of Adams *Nixon in China*, Tippett's *New Year*, and in conjunction with the Kennedy Centre of Washington and La Scala of Milan, Bernstein's *A Quiet Place*. The company also holds a Spring Festival. It was in this festival that they gave Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha* in 1975, and Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* the following year. Both of which were seen on a nation-wide tour culminating in a very successful run on Broadway. Also, under their management, is the Texas Opera Theater and the

Opera Studio for Young Singers, this last activity being sponsored by Houston University. The season of 1997 included *Macbeth*, *Billy Budd*, *Arabella* and *Hansel und Gretel*. The singers included Renée Fleming, Catherina Malfitano and Sergei Leiferkus. The Opera Studio also is giving a new work on the Louisa Alcott novel, *Little Women*. Unfortunately, when I was there, the opera season was over and no performances were scheduled, thus I was unable to see the interior, Nor were there any post cards on sale.

A friendly Texan told me that Texas is a State without culture. If that is so (which I doubt) it certainly was not in the past. Leaf through a copy of the State Travel Guide and you will find listed opera houses and theatres in small communities which are still in use. For instance, in Anson the opera house was built in 1907; Bastrop in 1889, Columbus in 1886, Cranby also in 1886, and in Ulvade the Grand Opera House was built in 1891. Austin, the capital, has a number of theatres but its opera house, I understand, is now a gentleman's club. Dallas also has its share of theatres including the only contribution to the stage by the architect Frank Lloyd Wright. The home of the Dallas Opera is the (State Fair) Music Hall which opened in 1925 and seats nearly 3,500 people. San Antonio had a Grand Opera House, unfortunately razed to the ground in 1948. I hope to be able to tell its story later. South east of Houston is the island port of Galveston. This attractive Victorian-style town once boasted two opera houses. Of one, the Tremont, I could find only a one-line comment in a book which read "*the magnificent Tremont Opera House now long gone*"; the other, the Grand, was built in 1894 but was partially destroyed in the hurricane of 1900. It was rebuilt and over the years underwent a number of changes and uses. In the mid 1970's the building was rescued from demolition. Over a period of 12 years, and at a cost of \$7 million, it has been restored to its original grandeur; it is now designated the Official Opera House of the State of Texas. Artists who have appeared there in the past include Sarah Bernhardt, Pavlova, Paderewski, Sousa, Modjeska, Otis Skinner, Helen Hayes and Dorothy Kirsten. Nearer to our time has appeared the Vienna Boys Choir. When I took a tour of the building the Houston Ballet were rehearsing for an opening later in the week. In Houston itself there are a number of venues for all aspects of the performing arts. Apart from the Wortham Center the most prominent are the Alley Theater, the Coliseum, the Music Hall, Jones Hall and the Miller Outdoor Theater, and north of the city there is the Woodlands Pavilion, an open-air auditorium, seating 10,000.

I found Houston a strange but interesting city. Sir Thomas Beecham's remark deserves repeating; he said "*Houston would be a beautiful city if they ever finish building it*". My impression is that it was finished, now they are pulling it down. My Texan acquaintance said "*If its over twenty years old we pull it down and rebuild*". Even so, there is still a lot they could pull down which we can enjoy, from the first bakery, built in 1860 by a John.F.Kennedy who had emigrated from Ireland in 1842, to the old Rice Hotel (now being converted into appartments) where a later JFK spent the night before leaving for that ill-fated appointment in Dallas. Or the Sam Houston Park with its open-air museum of early homesteads, to the beauty of the Water Wall fountain where over 1,000 gallons of water spill over a 60ft high wall every second.

The city deserves to be visited, something I intend to do, hopefully when the opera season is running and the weather more clement...

Donizetti has had a fair share of productions, from *L'elisir d'amore* in 1962, and *Lucia* in 1971 and *La Fille du régiment* in 1973 - both with Beverly Sills. 1975 saw *Lucrezia Borgia* with Sutherland giving three performances in Italian and Faye Robinson in English another two. *Don Pasquale* in 1980. Sutherland returned in 1986 to sing *Anna Bolena*; all but *L'elisir d'amore* were given in Jones Hall. The only Donizetti given in the Wortham Center so far has been *Lucia* with Tiziana Fabbicini in the title role.