

Musical Treasure Chest #5

This week I had planned to write about musical repertory that I associate with special audience members who I have met over the years, but with the announcement on Tuesday of the cancellation of the 2020 Glimmerglass Festival, my focus has completely altered.

I have mentioned in earlier MTCs that I play in the Glimmerglass Opera Orchestra, a job I have proudly held for more than thirty years. I started playing “in the pit” in 1987, the first year that the beautiful Alice Busch Opera Theater opened. For me, this job was a dream. In my first season we performed Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin*, Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Pirates of Penzance* and Britten’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, as well as a wonderful gala that featured Frederica Von Stade and Dwayne Croft. I relished every moment of playing. During the spring of 1998 I officially auditioned for the orchestra and won a position. In many ways my professional (and personal) life has been defined by Glimmerglass ever since. Before I married and had children, I lived with an amazing couple, Don and Mary Ellen Fenner, who owned a gigantic Victorian house almost across the road from the opera campus. They love opera and their “mission” was to house opera personnel. That first summer was just incredible: they had a full house with staff from scenic design, costumes, and administration, as well as singers. Wonderful family style dinners, wine and snacks after performances, tons of laughs and also minute analysis of each performance were our daily fare. I lived with them each summer (and they welcomed my husband once he was part of my life), with equally marvelous experiences, until I had children. My summers with Don and Mary Ellen were some of my most special.

In 2001 we bought our own house in Cherry Valley, just a few minutes from the opera. Our goal was to do what the Fenners did, and make our home a place for opera people. We have had many nights sitting on our porch by candlelight with opera colleagues. I relate all of this to show how much the opera has been such a part of my life. I still love playing in the pit, and I can hardly wait as spring comes

for the opera season to start. The schedule is grueling and, as I “mature,” the physical toll of playing four productions in about ten weeks is more taxing, but the experience is still musically satisfying and rewarding. I enjoy the truly unique marriage of voice and instrument that is thrilling. In each performance you can find yet another brilliant instrumental line or turn of phrase to marvel at. And there are moments when the energy is just right and all of the performers on stage and in the pit sort of merge and musical magic is made. The audience knows, you can feel their rapt attention.

This spring has been difficult for everyone. For me, all of my work for the spring pretty much vanished on March 12th. I had many performances I had been greatly looking forward to (and was already in the midst of preparation) including a recital at Union College, a Musicians of Ma’alwyck subscription concert and a concerto with a local choral society. I was pretty resilient when life shut down. I reached out to First Reformed Church and began to offer weekly mini-concerts, volunteered for several non-musical charity activities, and decided to tackle some house projects that have been ignored for too long. This was all fine, there was light at the end of my musical tunnel. When Francesca Zambello (the General and Artistic Director) made the announcement to cancel (I can only imagine how agonizing this decision was), I was devastated. While intellectually I knew this had to happen, deleting the opera from my life seemed inconceivable. In my thirty plus years of association with the opera orchestra, I have only missed one summer (when I had my first child in 1997). But even I was surprised at the depth of my sadness about the cancellation. I realized as I have pondered it this week, that I find playing there artistically rejuvenating. There is great talent all around, everyone is completely invested in making the opera productions of such high caliber and there is the youthful energy of the Young Artists that adds a level of excitement to each performance.

I have been reminiscing about some of my favorite productions over the years and want to share these opera moments with you. I hope that you too will find them to be special.

In 2011 Glimmerglass programmed **Cherubini’s Medea**. I was excited, I have always been a fan of the composer and feel that his music is under-represented in

today's concert halls. He wrote two marvelous Requiems and a large number of operas. Beethoven respected him greatly and modeled *Fidelio* after Cherubini's rescue opera *Lodoïska*. I love all of *Medea*, but there are two moments that particularly stand out for me. One is the entra'acte to Act 3, just an incredible piece of orchestral writing, the build up of the storm and the musical structure is fantastic. And the other moment is actually for a secondary character Neris. One of the joys of being in the pit is listening to your colleagues play solos. This Act 2 aria has a fabulous bassoon solo. Our principal bassoonist is Fred Phillips. He is a wonderful musician and his performance of this difficult solo was inspired. I waited each night to get to this spot in the opera to hear what he would do. I give you a few links below. One is to an interview with the director of the Glimmerglass production, you will get to hear a bit of our brilliant *Medea* soprano. I also give you links to both Neris' aria and to the opening to Act 3. But I encourage you to seek out a full performance. Maria Callas left a great legacy in this role.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5XJUebt7lwQ>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=addztqWBPWY>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3JnZhvsp4k&pbjreload=10>

Another favorite opera production of mine at Glimmerglass was the 2004 **Puccini *Fanciulla del West***. As you know from earlier MTCs, I love Puccini, but this opera has not enjoyed quite the popularity of *Tosca*, *Madame Butterfly*, *Tosca*, and *Turandot*. To me, this work, written for the Metropolitan Opera, and really an unlikely topic for the composer (an opera about the American west!), is a true masterpiece. The flow of the story, the wonderful melodies, they character development is all remarkable. I like this opera so much that I asked to go see its 100th anniversary performances at the MET for my 50th birthday present.

There are many wonderful interpretations of this great piece. If you subscribe to the MET you can see the production I saw. Here is one with the great tenor Jonas Kaufmann and Nina Stemme as Minnie at the Vienna Staatsoper.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2pDwwt9JOns>

In 1993 Glimmerglass staged **Rossini's comic opera *Le Comte Ory***. This is another one of those not-so-often performed masterpieces, with a great, truly funny plot and wonderful, bravura arias. Living in the Fenners house with us that summer

was the great baritone David Evitts, he was singing the role of Raimbaud. He was hysterically funny and engaging and a fabulous singer on stage, and in person he was kind and personable and warm. After that summer, he went on to a truly spectacular career singing at the MET and around the world. He, sadly, passed away in 2018.

I offer you this great production from Glyndebourne. No subtitles, but the music is fantastic. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F3_zvRyjors&list=RDF3_zvRyjors&index=1

And finally, one of my favorite Glimmerglass productions was our 2018 ***Silent Night***. This modern opera by Kevin Puts is entirely accessible and tells a gripping, powerful story with great musical conviction and intensity. I can only find small clips of it. But if you click on this link you can continue to access more clips from this Minnesota Opera production.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OgZGunWmdf0&list=PL80E6E5EDF3B38A62>