

BROCKVILLE COMMUNITY CHOIR'S AN EVENING AT THE OPERA WAS SHOW BUSINESS AT ITS BEST

Last Saturday evening we had the pleasure of hearing and seeing the most ambitious concert the Brockville Community Choir has so far offered. To everyone involved in the venture, from the sell-out audience to the performers, organizers, venue managers and financial supporters, the concert was another exciting success in what looks like a developing pattern of achievement for this lively band of choristers..

To celebrate the Choir's 25th anniversary, the artistic director, Dr. Heather Eyerly, created a program of seventeen famous grand opera choruses, a daunting challenge. Daunting, because operatic music is difficult and demanding of singers and musicians. To meet the challenge, Dr Eyerly created an orchestra with the St John Strings from Ottawa, under concertmaster Janet Roy, from the Brockville Concert Band, and additional musicians. In general, music is an expression of the most profound emotions people feel about life. It appears to be irrational in its motivation and effect, but it is very rational in its production. Opera is considered the most refined and elaborate form of the discipline because it is drama in words and music with exacting vocal and instrumental standards. Choruses have to mirror the mood or comment on the situation in the drama. This little choir, made up of amateurs, some of whom don't even read music, pulled off as enjoyable a show as any we pay big bucks to see in the commercial cultural arena.

The program expressed the important feelings of the human spirit : excitement (March of the Toreadors from *Carmen* by Bizet), unfettered love (Habanera from *Carmen*), caring friendship ('Chorus of the Wedding Guests' from Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*), blissful joy (Chorus of Enchanted Islanders from *Alcina* by Handel, youthful love (Brindisi from *La traviata* by Verdi), sorrow (Dido's lament and Final Chorus from *Dido and Aeneas* by Purcell), fun-filled companionship ('Chorus of the Peasant Girls' from *Eugene Onegin* by Tchaikovsky), physical exhilaration (Anvil Chorus from *Il trovatore* by Verdi). The artistic director set the stage for each piece, and the choir consciously conveyed the mood and sentiment of these beautiful pieces using strong crescendos, tempo variation, softness, and rich melody.

Mid-way in the program, two brilliant lights on the operatic horizon, from Brockville, sang solos that attracted everyone's attention. Megan Quick's rich mezzo-soprano voice filled the hall with 'Mon coeur s'ouvre a ta voix' from *Samson et Delila*, and Iain MacNeil's pleasing baritone resonated in a well modulated account of his master's conquests, 'Madamina, il catalogo e questo', from *Don Giovanni* by Mozart. The audience recognized something special in the talent of these young singers.

The second half of the program continued with the magical conjuring of human sentiment out of the memorable music of operatic genius. Romantic bliss was captured by soloist tenor Dr. Lionel Woods (whom we saw in the Choir's wonderful presentation of *Messiah* last December) with 'De' miei bollenti spiriti' from *La Traviata* by Verdi. Woods has a rich resonant voice which carries well. Parental anxiety was piped to children in the ringing Bell Chorus from *Pagliacci* by Leoncavallo, followed by the haunting, hoping Humming Chorus from *Madama Butterfly* by Puccini. The witches' Chorus from *Macbeth* by Verdi painted the frightening atmosphere which underlies the moral tale of that opera. This was contrasted with the solemnly romantic Bridal Chorus from *Lohengrin* by Wagner. Deep longing for home was represented in the Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves from *Nabucco* by Verdi. The final piece was the full Waltz Scene from *Eugene Onegin* sung by Dr. Woods, Iain MacNeil and the choir celebrating the joy of the surprise party.

Apart from interesting information about the performers, a welcome section in the well designed program brochure was the English translation of the libretto for each chorus. Opera benefits from understanding what is being said in the songs.

As with the Brockville Choir's performance of *Messiah* last Christmas, **An Evening At The Opera** was a dazzling show business. We were treated to some of the most beautiful music in the lyrical repertoire, the sort of music we all come away humming to ourselves long after the show. By presenting it in the acoustically powerful Chapel of the Good Shepherd at Brocks Landing in Maitland, the sound was doubly enhanced. However, some people on the ground floor of the auditorium found the orchestra a bit loud relative to the choir. This is something the technical people will have to resolve as they gain experience using such a sensitive facility. The well lit venue showed off the colorful gowns and tuxedos of the performers, including the glittering instruments and arboreal decorations of the elegant hall. All in all, the skilful integration of the show's components generated an impressive presentation which was deservedly rewarded by an enthusiastic standing ovation.

Behind the scenes, the coordination of the many elements required to pull off such a quality show was both exact and complete. The performers evidently spent many hours learning their parts, linguistically and musically. The instrumentation and timing of the orchestra matched the singers' needs, each group enhancing the quality of the other. The wide range of talent, from amateurs to highly polished professionals, stretched everyone's effort to deliver their brilliant best.

Behind the scenes, many people had to have worked hard to create such a well managed show. Pianist Malcolm Gillis was the workhorse of rehearsals. For three months Marilyn White spent many hours in production coordination and problem solving.. Ticket management, floral arrangements, physical plant management including extra seating, music scores and copyrights and arrangements, orchestral design and contracts all had to be worked out. Several community businesses and institutions donated equipment. Grant applications to government supporters like the Grenville Community Futures Development Corporation and fund raising to local businesses and professionals had to be initiated and followed up. Ticket sales, a steal at \$25 for a production of this quality and sophistication, had to be managed with precision. Advertising was well planned. People came in large numbers. Communications must have been a nightmare across so many portfolios. A delicious table of food and drink was served after the show. The performance was videotaped and should be available on DVD later this year, well worth acquiring if you want to remember the good time you had or to show those that missed a great evening.

It is clear the Brockville Community Choir has embarked on a program to raise the quality of its music and performance. It is obvious that the community it serves appreciates the effort and is willing to support it. No doubt the choir will attract more talent in the process. It needs more men in the ranks to balance the overall sound. We are fortunate to have the people in our midst who volunteer to create such inspiring cultural events. Not only does such showmanship make us feel better, it augurs well for our economy as the baby boom generation looks to retire somewhere gracefully. Experiences like this remind us that we live in better times than we think.