

Opera? Get Real

By Natasha Regehr

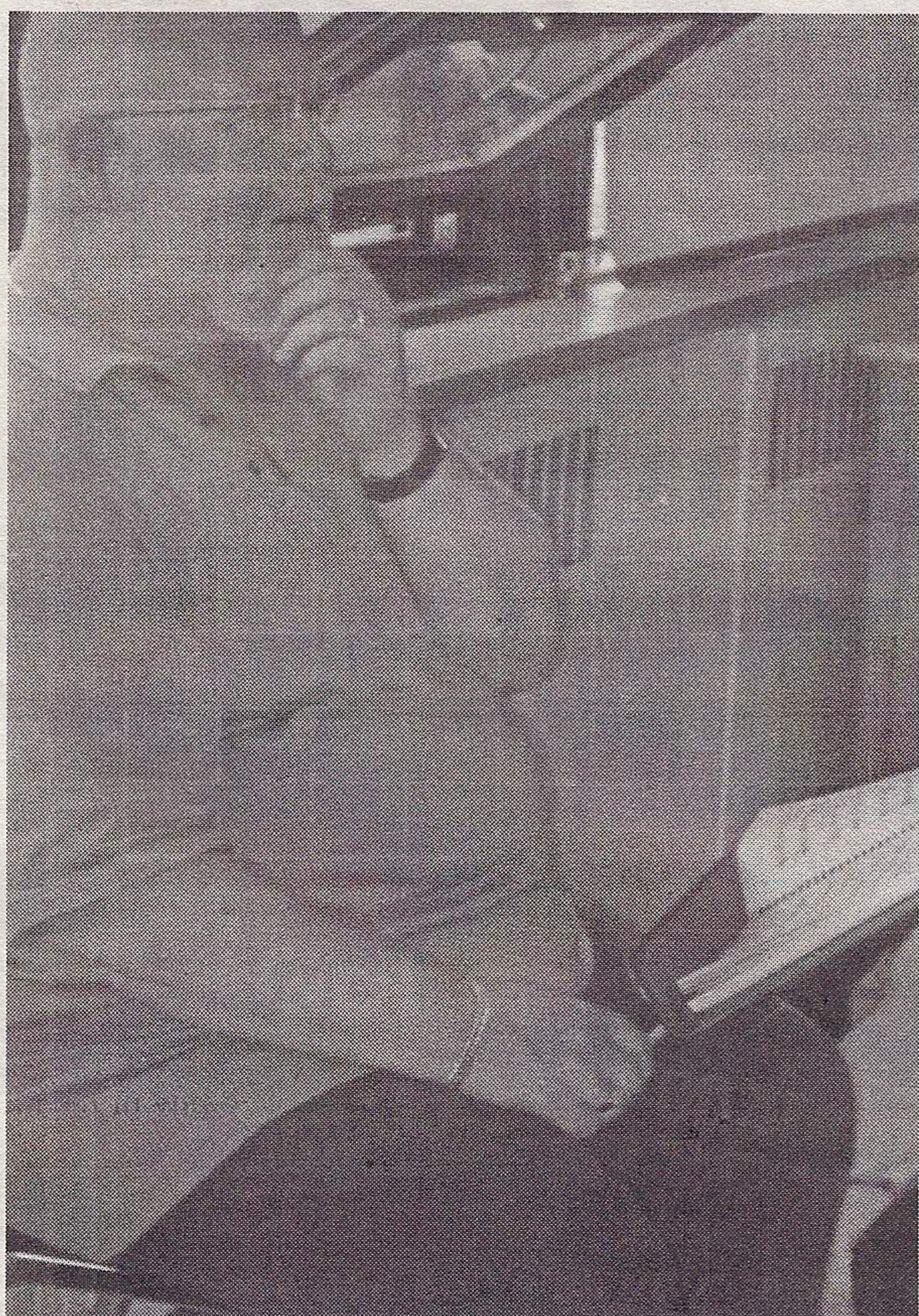
Despite my otherwise unwavering loyalty to CBC radio, I confess that I have always avoided those Saturday afternoons when Radio 2, that last bastion of 24/7 access to soothing classical music, played hour after hour of opera: loud, confusing singing about who-knows-what, executed in a manner that was anything but soothing. Granted, the announcer did let us in on the plot from time to time, but I always seemed to be pumping gas or checking the weather at those crucial moments, and thus was almost always lost in a bewildering eternity of shrill and incomprehensible vibrato. Why anyone would want to listen to "Saturday Afternoon at the Opera" voluntarily was beyond me.

Things began to change for me last summer when I went to the Highlands Opera Studio's production of Johann Strauss's "Die Fledermaus" – an opera with a silly name and a silly plot, which, I commented afterwards, really didn't feel like an opera at all. It felt more like a musical to me, and I have no issue at all with musicals. I think they are splendid ways to spend an afternoon, especially if they are in English and I have friends in the chorus. "That," I thought to myself, "cannot have been a real opera. Number one, I understood it. Number two, it was in Haliburton. Number three, I liked it."

However, my curiosity had been piqued, so when my chorister friend invited me to attend Opera Atelier's production of "The Marriage of Figaro" at the Elgin Theatre a few months ago, I jumped at the opportunity. "What shall I wear?" I thought? "Should I study first? How will I ever understand it?" Surprise! The surroundings were posh enough for royalty, but the building was inhabited by real people wearing real, everyday clothes. I was glad I'd left the floor-length gown at home. The props, costumes and choreography were impressive, and the singing was natural, accessible, and really quite lovely. "I get it!" I thought. "This is entertainment! People listen to this to be entertained! I'm entertained!" I had spent a Sunday afternoon at the opera, and liked it.

So it was with pleasure and excitement that I accepted the opportunity to cover the Highlands Opera Studio's opera production this summer. Not only would I get to attend another opera, I would get to see the whole process, from beginning to end, with unrestricted access to everything that was to happen behind the scenes. "This," I thought, "is going to be awesome."

And it was. I entered the large room where a staging rehearsal of "La Boheme" was about to begin. The pianist was sitting cross-legged on the piano bench. Participants were wandering around singing to themselves, or to whomever, as they transitioned from down-time to up-time, and they were up! They sang as they changed their shoes, as they cooled off in front of the fan, and as they





*At left: Olenka Slywynska, Lindsay Barrett, and Colleen Skull rehearsing *The Old Maid and the Thief*; below, Collaborative Pianist Brahm Goldhamer rehearsing *La Boheme*; Below, left, co-artistic director Richard Margison.*



moved into their appointed places. The anticipation was tangible. The singers on the extensively blue-and-red-taped stage area were engaged in strategic pacing, gesturing, turning and stopping, while others sat off to the side, studying their scores and making notes as the stage director spoke. There was laughter over the improvised props, and there was an undeniable atmosphere of comfort, camaraderie, and, well, entertainment.

Off I went to see a rehearsal of Menotti's "The Old Maid and the Thief" in another room. Again, there was much strategizing as the actors planned how they would wear and remove their coats, and how they would pour and serve their tea. When to stop, when to look, when to clink, when to sing – every detail was meticulously planned. You'd think it would be tedious. It wasn't. The people in Room 4 were having what I referred to in my notebook as "a hoot." I wanted in. "If only I could sing like that," I thought, "then I could have the fun they're having, too. Not being an opera singer sucks." What?! Did I just say that?

I went off to Room 1, where a young lady was singing ee-a, ee-a, ee-a, ee-a, ee-a in a series of never-ending descending pentascales. She smiled when I accidentally interrupted her. She was beaming. She was not in pain. Neither was I.

My last visit was to Room 24, where John Fanning was beginning a voice lesson with a singer who was still jetlagged from her flight from Europe. Her music wasn't hole-punched because apparently Europe doesn't have any reasonably-designed instruments for the job, and I wished that I had the sort of life where I worried over foreign paper instead of wet basements. "How marvelously glamorous," I thought. What, more jealousy? More "if only I were an opera singer, too?" Unbelievable.

Even more unbelievable was the recognition that this wasn't some quaint arts-and-crafts-with-a-bit-of-singing-thrown-in affair. Although these refreshingly down-to-earth people were clearly having a blast, this was in fact a very serious undertaking. To begin with, some of the biggest names in the world of opera were running the show. Faculty members include co-artistic directors Richard Margison and Valerie Kuinka, as well as Giselle Clarke, Rosemary Thomson, Brahm Goldhamer, Christopher Mokrzewski, Leanne Dixon, Timothy Noble, John Fanning, Christiane Riel, Jeff Mitchell, John Fisher, David Speers, and David Briskin.

If those names aren't familiar to you, perhaps these are: The New York Metropolitan Opera, Carnegie Hall, Roy Thomson Hall, the Canadian Opera Company, Opera Atelier, the National

Arts Centre, Juilliard, Eastman, and Tanglewood. In fact, these faculty members have performed, directed, accompanied, recorded, or instructed in Vienna, Berlin, Brussels, Amsterdam, Sydney, Madrid, Hamburg, London, Venice, Paris, Rio, Salzburg, and Cardiff, as well as in every major centre in North America.

"What brings them here?" I wondered. It turns out that it was actually Margison's and Kuinka's idea. Four seasons ago, they approached the organizers of the Highlands Summer Festival from their cottage on Mountain Lake with their proposal. "I think it's their way of giving back," says Melissa Stephens, who co-organizes the program with Jack Brezina.

And what a gift they are bringing to the emergent Canadian stars under their tutelage this summer. Eighteen applicants were selected from the 102 hopefuls who auditioned in Vancouver, Montreal and Toronto; several have already held major roles in other productions, and they are all here to further their professional careers through advanced vocal training and practical advice from the best in the business.

These young talents and their mentors are indeed bringing "real opera" to the Highlands, and it is not the opera that you may have been expecting. If you're looking for singing that leaves you in the dark, then turn on your radio; but for light, colour, action, and unmatched sound, you need to come to Haliburton.

On August 14th, Richard Margison and friends present a Faculty Fund-Raising Concert at the Minden United Church at 8 PM. Seating is limited, and tickets are \$75.

The Opera Studio's Excerpts Concerts take place on August 13th, 19th and 21st at the Northern Lights Pavilion at the Haliburton High School at 8 PM, and on August 24th in Bracebridge. The Chamber Opera, the Old Maid and the Thief, will be performed on August 20th and 22nd at the Northern Lights at 8 PM. And La Boheme will be at the Northern Lights August 29th at 2:30 PM: and at 7:30 PM on the 30th, 31st, and September 1st at the Northern Lights. ■