

**Opera Viva: The Canadian Opera Company: The First Fifty Years.** By Ezra Schabas and Carl Morey. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2000. 312 pp. Hardcover. ISBN 1-55002-346-2 \$49.99

For many people, the lavish illustrations that accompany this account of the Canadian Opera Company will come as a surprise. There have been few books that deal exclusively with Canadian artistic matters that also have such visual splendour. Can Canadians finally be getting over their sense of cultural inferiority? This book would appear to signal the affirmative.

The Canadian Opera Company had its origins in a festival of three operas presented by the Royal Conservatory Opera Company in February 1950 at the Royal Alexandra Theatre. The success of this festival and those of the early 1950's led the artistic team of Arnold Walter, Nicholas Goldschmidt and Herman Geiger-Torel to establish a more permanent opera company. This took place in 1957 with the Opera Festival Association of Toronto, a group that became the Canadian Opera Association in 1960 and, subsequently, the Canadian Opera Company in 1977. Ezra Schabas and Carl Morey have written an account of the company in its first 50 years that successfully balances historical fact and entertaining reading. The resulting book consists of two parts: 229 pages of history and a final section of some 75 pages, which is given over to appendices. Included are the cast lists of every production from 1950-2000 given by both the main-stage and the touring companies. The authors have drawn upon the company's archives founded by Joan Baillie (1923-97), who volunteered as the company's first archivist to 1994. It is fitting that the book is dedicated to her memory. Without her efforts, much of the COC's history would

have been difficult, if not impossible, to recreate.

The writing is divided in such a way that Schabas discusses the first 25 years, and Morey the second 25. Their styles are complementary, although Schabas likely got the more interesting part of the job. The enthusiasm of the pioneers makes for more engaging reading than does some of the financial and artistic doldrums of the later years. The authors state that their work "is not hagiography. It is a critical study of the COC, good and bad." They further maintain they were under no pressure from the current COC administration to write only a positive history. That said, the book is obviously informed both by the authors' love of opera and their belief in the COC. They write as enthusiasts, rather than academics, and the book should enjoy a more general readership as a result.

Wisely, the book opens with a chapter, entitled "Prelude," which presents a concise overview of the history of opera productions in Toronto from the performances of *Mountaineers, or Love and Madness* in 1825 (when the town still called York) until the late 1940's when the Conservatory instituted an opera school, and the CBC began to broadcast performances of complete operas. These two institutions did much to develop an audience base for the genre, without which the professional company of the 1950's would not have survived. The enthusiasm and drive of both Goldschmidt and Geiger-Torel emerge clearly, as do some of their legendary

eccentricities: Torel's bursts of temper and Goldschmidt's occasionally imprecise conducting patterns. This chapter clearly describes the foundations on which much of the later history of the company was built.

Subsequent chapters objectively chronicle the company's varying fortunes, including such uncomfortable events as Geiger-Torel's resignation in 1976, the break with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, and the debacle over the building of an opera house. Still, the descriptions of individual productions over such a long period can wear thinly, a situation which is only partially alleviated by the many photographs. Throughout, the book strives to substantiate the company's claim to be truly national in scope, and considerable emphasis is placed upon the radio and television broadcasts of the company's productions, and the tours which began in 1958 and ended in 1991. The cast lists for these tours read like a veritable "who's who" of Canadian singers, often in roles they no longer portray. Given Ben Heppner's current preeminence as Tristan, it is unlikely that he will return to singing Rodolfo in *La Bohème* or Camille in *The Merry Widow*.

I cannot help but feel there was an opportunity lost to explore in far greater depth the issue of whether the company remains a truly national company, especially given the emergence of other companies across the nation and the cessation of the COC's tours. Indeed, should this remain the aim of the COC? Although the topic is discussed at various points, a chapter on the subject might have pulled the threads together and allowed the authors to suggest future directions. Certainly, their collective backgrounds and love for the genre would have given credibility to their views.

Finally, much credit is owed to Dundurn Press for undertaking to produce this handsome volume. One can only hope that the publisher's faith in Canadian culture will be amply rewarded.

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