

When Geography Met Opera

By John Loveridge (Geography, 1967-89)

This article was originally published in *Voice*, the student-published magazine that flourished from October 1976 until February 1978, resulting in 11 editions. The first editor, **Robin Graham (1971)**, collected some excellent material. This was from a bumper 30 page edition in May 1977. The photo (which did not appear in the magazine) was taken at around the same time by **Mark Robson (1971)**.



OPERA AND GEOGRAPHY have, as far as I'm concerned, one thing in common - they're both fun! Unfortunately Geography has to be taken seriously - real things happening to real people in real places - but Opera doesn't and when the two worlds collide the result is chaos, confusion and violence in exotic surroundings.

Operatic characters, particularly the ladies, do outrageously impossible things and the deeper you delve into the operatic repertoire the more ridiculous the situations become and, what's more, they're sung! However I have an infinite capacity to suspend my disbelief with a willingness which defies imagination so that, in a single evening's records I can range practically the whole world without learning a single piece of geography.

I can begin by watching those two celebrated Japanese ladies, Butterfly and Iris come to sticky ends (the latter quite literally in an open sewer) and the former committing Hari-Kari, meanwhile in British India the Hindu priestess, Lakme, eats a poisonous flower while in neighbouring Ceylon (sorry - Sri Lanka) love and jealousy are blossoming among the Pearl Fishers, though nobody actually gets a single pearl in the whole lyrical affair. In Africa, Selika (somehow involved in an opera about Vasco da Gama discovering the conti-

nent) is dying under a tree which exudes poison and Aida is being buried alive in an Egyptian tomb with Radames. How they manage to sing all those high B flats in a subterranean vault without a trace of air I shall never know but they die ecstatically and we all clap like mad at the end!

In America, Minnie, owner of the "Polka Saloon" is cheating the sheriff at cards to save her bandit lover's life in Puccini's "Girl of the Golden West" (the original Spaghetti Western?) In Russia, Peter the Great's wife Catherine is

going mad to the accompaniment of two flutes in "The Star of the North" while you would never believe what's going on in old GB. Lucia di Lammermoor's just gone mad (for twenty three excruciatingly pathetic minutes) and has stabbed her husband on their wedding night - what a shame, blood all over her nightie which must have cost a fortune and her brother's terribly cross 'cause he hasn't any money! Alfredo il Grande (you don't need a translation for that) has beaten the Danes in the mountains(?) of Somerset - surely Donizetti didn't mean Cheddar George! Mind you his geography was never worth an "O" level as he left poor old Emilia in a convent outside a well known and incredibly picturesque Merseyside village called Liverpool!

The Middle East is simply revolting. Thaïs ("Courtesan" of Alexandria) is trying to seduce a Cenobite monk called Athanael but she dies in the desert (Sahara?) which serves her right. Salome is still drooling over the severed head of John the Baptist (which isn't very nice) and even though Herod thought she looked absolutely super without her veils he thinks that this is a bit "off" and has ordered the guards to crush her beneath their shields which is going to leave a dreadful stain on the patio. Samson has just brought the house

down and Sappho of Lesbos, whose boy-friend jilted her, has thrown herself from the cliffs into the Aegean. Elektra and her brother are having a whale of a time at home murdering their mummy with the same axe that mummy used to chop up daddy while he was having a nice quiet bath to get rid of the dirt he'd picked up in a terribly boring war at a town called Troy. This is not the way to treat a mother but they are a very "funny" family who should have been locked up years ago.

Talking of domesticity, Lucrezia Borgia in Italy has "given her last banquet" and has poisoned simply everybody including her own son and I told Adriana Lecouvreur to have nothing to do with that posy of poisoned violets (it wouldn't do her asthma any good at all) but she wouldn't listen. The "Dumb Girl of Portici" (what a relief, the only operatic heroine who doesn't sing a note) has just broken Bob Beaman's world long jump record by throwing herself from a window in the palace of the King of Naples into the crater of Vesuvius - a magnificent six mile leap! What an athletic lady! That's going to cause an eruption you mark my words!

Meanwhile in Paris the Catholics are having a Field Day murdering every Protestant within miles on the occasion of the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre. Poor Esclarmonde doesn't know where she is poor thing floating (literally) between Constantinople and the "forests of the Ardennes" but though she's lost she does sing the prettiest tunes.

You might think that all would be well in Germany, such an efficient country, but it's probably worse there than anywhere else. The Gibichung's hall is in a frightful state. Somebody was sensible enough to kill a stupid arrogant and wildly overdeveloped hero called Siegfried but his wife (who had once been a goddess and therefore had aristocratic pretensions) insisted on burning him. When the fire was at its height she rode into it on a big white horse which started a more general conflagration and

the whole place came tumbling down. As if this wasn't enough the Rhine overflowed its banks (a good example of "flash flooding") which caused rising damp in the rubble. The fire (which, oddly, wasn't in the least bit put out by this), flared up even more and burned the gods' little celestial cottage called Valhalla. It's obviously going to take months before everything returns to normal and rumour has it that the Mark is going to fall against the Pound.

After an evening of such desperately tragic events I always feel ever so sad. Still, it's midnight now so I suppose I'll switch off the amplifier, go to bed and laugh myself to sleep.

What shall it be tomorrow? I know - I'll write my own opera, a political one - real life drama.

Jim Callaghan (Bass) is having an affair with Margaret Thatcher (Mezzo) whom he meets in the Lobby at midnight. Unfortunately, Shirley Williams (Soprano) loves Jim and determines to poison Margaret by putting the juice of the deadly Manta berry in her tea. However, Michael Foot (Baritone) who also loves Margaret substitutes a love potion... but the first person she sees after drinking it is Edward Heath. Jim overhears her frenzied avowal of love and in the great Quintet Jim, Margaret, Shirley, Michael and Edward express their differing emotions. Jim steps forward to smother her with the wool-sack but at that moment the Division bell (the signal for the massacre of Conservatives and Liberals by Labour) rings and Jim rushes away in despair. Unfortunately the bell rings too loudly and the Tower of Big Ben, whose foundations have been undermined by the KGB, crumples, crushing all the politicians. In the powerful epilogue the transfigured forms of Margaret and Jim are seen rising heavenwards as a celestial choir led by Sir Winston Churchill (Bass) sings that, through the example of their love, parliamentary democracy has triumphed.

It should be a "wow" at Covent Garden; I might even get a knighthood.