

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
*A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society*

Building Permits—  
Oh the Stories  
They Can Tell

Page 19

Winter, 2005

Volume 39, Number 4

*Curtain Up in 1933*

The Legacy of the St. Paul Opera Association

—Page 4



"Attending the Opera," a gouache by painter Miriam Ibling (1895–1985). This was a 1938 study for a WPA mural at St. Paul's Galtier Elementary School. From the Minnesota Historical Society archives.

## RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 39, Number 4

Winter, 2005

the mission statement of the ramsey county historical society  
adopted by the board of directors in July 2003:

The Ramsey County Historical Society shall discover, collect, preserve and interpret the history of the county for the general public, recreate the historical context in which we live and work, and make available the historical resources of the county. The Society's major responsibility is its stewardship over this history.

## CONTENTS

- 3 Letters
- 4 *Curtain Up in 1933*  
The Legacy of the St. Paul Opera Association  
*Steve Trimble*
- 19 RCHS's Collection of Building Permits and  
The Story of the DeLoop Parking Ramp  
*Bob Garland*
- 25 *Union Park in the 1880s*  
Band Concerts, Balloon Ascensions Once  
Lured 10,000 People in a Single Day
- 26 Book Reviews

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## A Message from the Editorial Board

Beginning in 1933, the St. Paul Civic Opera Association played a vital and enriching role in the city's arts and cultural life. When in the mid-1970s financial problems caused the St. Paul organization to merge with the Minnesota Opera, local pride in the city's ability to stage and present this grand art form gave way to the realities of what it actually cost to deliver any sustained program in the arts at the end of the twentieth century.

Historian Steve Trimble tells the story of the St. Paul Civic Opera Association with insight based on substantial research, interviews with a number of individuals who were involved in the Opera Association, and sensitivity to the complexity of opera as an art form. Despite the differences of opinion on whether operas should be done in their original language or in English; use homegrown talent for key roles or hire outside, professional voices; or select works for a given season that include Grand Opera, light opera, or musical comedy, the depth of commitment of opera supporters in St. Paul was steadfast until funding problems made all other issues secondary. What shines forth from Trimble's account is how hard many people worked to sustain their belief in the importance and value of the arts as an integral part of civic life in St. Paul.

Juxtaposed to the fantasy and delight of Grand Opera in our winter issue is a detailed examination of the birth, life, and death of the DeLoop Parking Garage on Cedar Street in downtown St. Paul. On the surface, Bob Garland's analysis of the paper trail left by a deservedly forgotten and otherwise unremarkable St. Paul building whose life span paralleled many of the same years when the Opera Association flourished seems not only mundane, but also incongruous.

Yet the painstaking research Garland did in this case study makes a powerful point: the proper preservation of the paper records of the city of St. Paul is essential if historians are going to be able to recount the city's history accurately and in detail. Just as families need to learn how to preserve their own letters, photographs, and other paper records, so cities need to learn how to properly archive their many records. Fortunately, in the case of St. Paul's building permits, in 2003 the city turned these records over to the Ramsey County Historical Society and the Society is working hard to make them more accessible to all who want to search them for answers about St. Paul's built environment.

*John Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board*

## Curtain Up in 1933

# The Legacy of the St. Paul Opera Association

*Next Friday will mark the opening of a new and highly important chapter in the musical history of St. Paul . . . Operatic silence has been overspreading the country as a whole . . . and it probably needed such an experience to make people realize that... they really wanted to hear the grand old scores. . . . A nationwide revival of activity is the result of this awakening and St. Paul's share in it bids fair to rank high among resident enterprises everywhere.*

—Frances Boardman, December 3, 1933

### Steve Trimble

On a blustery December evening in 1933, a near-capacity crowd of 3,000 was filling the St. Paul Auditorium. Groups of men and women flocked to the balcony floor, to a German Beer Garden that was decorated with huge posters created by students from the St. Paul School of Art. Junior League members were dressed in "peasant costumes" to play the role of "barmaid." It was the opening night of *Samson and Delilah*, the first production of the newly-formed St. Paul Civic Opera Association.

There had been opera in St. Paul before, but it had been performed by touring groups or during occasional visits by opera companies from larger cities. This time people were coming to hear a home-grown production. A section of the *Samson and Delilah* program clearly stated the group's goals: "St. Paul as a self-respecting music center, needs good opera," and a local company "gives the public what it has shown it wants: opera, presentable stages, well sung and acted, at moderate prices." There is a definite need for opera, it continued, and "the time is psychologically ripe to fill it. We believe the local company . . . can and will fill that niche."

The *Pioneer Press* wrote that "St. Paul demonstrated Friday night that grand opera is what it wants for entertainment." It probably was correct in its evaluation of the audience. Many came for the music, it said, but there were also those who, frankly, came to see "what opera is like and then there were those who came to see a daughter or son who danced in the ballet or who trilled a note in the large chorus."

The opera itself was discussed, but much of the article focused on lengthy descriptions of what people were wear-

ing. "Like opera as it is done abroad, the audience came dressed in varied taste," the paper reported. "There was the street-suited and fur-coated matron alongside a satin-frocked woman with brilliant jewels." Mrs. W. Homer Sweney (known to family and friends as Mary Glyde Griggs) displayed "a long black velvet gown worn with a short jacket of velvet and held with a brilliant pin and a single orchid," the paper said.

What might have been mentioned instead, was the fact that the opera might never have existed without her leadership. "A trained musician herself of much ability," she always had hoped St. Paul could be the musical center of the Midwest. While on a European trip in 1932, a man involved in the Paris Opera pointed out to her that "you do nothing for music's sake in the United States outside New York City. Go home and give your young people a chance to sing and act opera."

She took the advice seriously on her return. The original plan was to create an organization known as the Twin City Civic Opera Association and to create a permanent opera foundation in each city, with an interchange of singers and productions several times each season in

## SAMSON AND DELILAH

OPERA AT POPULAR PRICES

25c 50c 75c \$1.00

**ST. PAUL AUDITORIUM**  
DECEMBER 8TH - 9TH

ALL LOCAL ARTISTS

Miss Ella Ostrom - James Allan - Edward Qualen  
Gordon Martin - Edmund Cronon - Robert Rowell  
Melvin Erickson - Edward Spielman

100 Voices - - 40 Dancers  
Orchestra Under Direction of Mr. Thure Fredrickson

TICKETS ON SALE AT

**St. Paul Civic Opera Co.**  
649 Hamm Building

*From the University of Minnesota Performing Arts archives.*

St. Paul and Minneapolis. Minneapolis already had an opera company but that was all, so Mrs. Sweney and her friends launched a group that would rely on their own city's talent and resources.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, American opera was shaped into what one historian has called "high-brow" culture. The upper class claimed the art form as their own, a means of elevating themselves into a social elite. This was done in a variety of ways: high ticket prices, expectations about audience behavior, formal dress codes, and emphasis on Grand Opera performed in foreign languages. Opera patrons acted less like missionaries trying to spread the gospel



Cast members for *Martha*, including "stars" Roy Irons (center) and Antoinette Bergquist (fourth from left). Photo from the St. Paul Opera Association Papers at the Minnesota Historical Society.

of good music and more like curators trying to preserve an almost sacred musical art form for the favored few.

While this surely was the situation in larger cities, at least until the 1930s, some medium-sized urban areas approached this differently. During the depression, they planned to develop "civic opera," which would present quality music in an entertaining manner, made accessible to the general public by low ticket prices and performances in English. Another aim, at least for the St. Paul organization, was the showcasing and development of local talent and a serious effort to introduce young people to opera.

It would be inaccurate to say that there

were not highbrow aspects to their local approach. Many of the city's social elite were supporters of the fledgling Civic Opera. "Boxes have been reserved by prominent St. Paul citizens for the opening performance," the *Pioneer Press* had reported, "and there are several large dinner parties being given before the opera." But from the outset, there was an effort to make the performances accessible to a large audience.

To help attract a varied audience, the Association had special labels for different nights. Opening night was considered the "Society" evening, while the Friday performance was "Civic Night." On "School Night," they hoped to fill the

Auditorium with teenagers and college students. There was even a Saturday matinee, with seats going for as little as a quarter. To help out, a few businessmen gave special "box parties" that day for needy youth.

The new organization's articles of incorporation give a feel for the new organization's direction. It was formed for "the general promotion of civic and public interest in music, musical education and culture, and the sponsoring and production of musical entertainments, operas and the like, thereby providing education and recreation for all classes." The "civic opera movement" and its activities were thought to be "the only way

that opera in America can be developed on a permanent basis."

There was a great deal of enthusiasm and pride in the St. Paul effort. Mrs. George (Harriet) Campbell felt that "the success of this opera may mean the beginning of a new musical development in the Midwest." The group was "making an effort to reach every organization in the city," and "sincerely hoped that through them we can spread the gospel of good music enough to make the opera company a permanent civic institution." She even added that it was "a patriotic gesture to support our opera group."

### English and Local Talent

While there was a small financial loss on the first production, supporters pitched in to cover the deficit and soon were making plans to present *Martha*, an opera considered a good choice because "it holds the unique position of appealing to the most sophisticated of music lovers without being over the heads of others." Live dogs would be on stage for the hunting scene, but no cow. (When *Martha* was produced in Chicago, the cow had belled at a vital place in an aria, startling the diva.)

The performance would once again be in English, an approach the Civic Opera almost always took throughout its history. Some national writers welcomed the use of English as a way to make opera more appealing to the general public. "What is happening here is the beginning of what we are going to have in many communities throughout the country," said *Music News*, a publication that for years had carried on a campaign for opera in English. "This production will do a lot to sell the community on opera."

A national opera star who visited in 1934 expressed his strong support for the use of English, feeling that it "widened the scope of the music and made it closer to the public." This was not always easily accomplished. Minutes of the board reported that "every effort is being made to secure English translations" for *Manon* but they were hard to find. It therefore was decided that "if this is impossible" then the "words will be written in scores from the one English version now in our possession."

The Civic Opera also wanted to be a



Sweethearts surrounding Walter Cassel in the opera's 1942 production: Left to right: Elaine Baldry, Patty Leavitt, Donna Marie Ohm, and Ruth Eggers. Photo from the St. Paul Opera Association Papers, Performing Arts Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

showcase for local talent and to provide a place for singers to hone their craft. When St. Paul portrait painter Carl Bohnen returned from an extended stay in Europe in 1935, he praised the group's approach. "What is particularly striking about your opera unit here," he said, "is that you are developing your leading singers directly from the ranks of your chorus." The extent to which local talent was to be used in performances was a subject that was debated on various occasions throughout the life of the company.

The chorus was the main conduit for emerging talent. When *Rigoletto* was staged in 1935, the opera was happy to announce that it was "following the policy of the organization to develop young singers for Grand Opera careers." Four of the eleven principals were "graduates of the group's chorus." Opera President Henry Soucheray said "we have been able to give these people thorough operatic training under competent direction. We sincerely believe that some of the important opera voices of the future will be developed in this organization."

Besides promoting the development of local talent, *Rigoletto* also provided some comic moments. At the opening, a society patron walked into the Auditorium with a small dog on a leash. An usher rushed over, saying that she could not bring a pet into the performance. "I certainly can," she was reported to have said. "I've got a ticket for him. He's crazy about opera," and rushed past the man to her two seats.

*Robin Hood* officially opened the 1936 season in the newly remodeled St. Paul Auditorium. The building had been under repair for more than a year. According to the St. Paul paper, there were improved acoustics, better seats and new colors, and the "changes in the structure have made it one of the finest opera houses and concert halls in the United States." The production was also somewhat new. It was a "comic opera," the first performance that included dialogue, some of it humorous in nature. The newspaper informed readers that "informality of dress will be marked at its first performance, because of the advent of the summer season."

The production, under the direction of Thure Frederickson, did not go exactly as planned. "During the climax of the third act, the spirit of Verdi's music caused the maestro to swing his arms with unusual vehemence," a newspaper later reported. "The wand which keeps the orchestra under way flew out of his hand and back into the sixth row among the audience." He continued directing without the baton for a few minutes until one of the men in the orchestra climbed out of the pit to retrieve the flying stick.

Later that evening, after a well-sung aria, the violinists tapped bows on their music stands—a traditional sign of applause. The conductor decided to join in. Unfortunately, as a newspaper described the event, "Mr. Frederickson followed the event, "Mr. Frederickson followed the event, "Mr. Frederickson followed the event with such enthusiasm that his baton broke neatly in half. From that point on he used the half stick." The contrite con-

ductor promised that in the future there would be at least two emergency batons at the podium.

The following year *Il Trovatore*, chosen for its broad appeal, was listed as an official event of the 1937 Winter Carnival. One newspaper declared that the opera would try to maintain "the prevalent carnival spirit in the foyer and lobbies of the Auditorium theater," and that on this opening night, formality was being cast aside. It appeared that many people adopted the suggestion and, as one article reported:

Covering dinner jackets and tails and evening dresses were gaily hued carnival jackets and coats with perky hoods protecting the perfect marcel and great coats concealing dainty frocks. Among the younger contingent were many who came prepared for the Carnival as well as the opera for at

the close of the fourth and last act, a number of this group hurried around to the arena to dance to the music of Rudy Vallee.

### Move Toward a Star System

As the initial enthusiasm for the new Opera Association waned somewhat and the box office lagged, people began to re-examine the policy of using strictly local talent. Some board members suggested that outside stars would boost public interest. Frances Boardman, a St. Paul newspaper columnist, also supported engaging guest stars. "This is not in any way a reflection on local ability," she wrote, "but . . . it is true that the public wants variety, and that it is beguiled by the luster of distinguished names." In another column, Boardman said she was "more than ever convinced that the presentation of guest stars would not only be a wise move, but is almost a



Busy evenings at the St. Paul Civic Opera, as sketched by artist Virginia Hoffstrom in the December 5, 1948, issue of the St. Paul Pioneer Press. Rehearsing for *Mignon*, Glen Martin, Opera Association president, looks over the scene; Herbert Gehagen, property manager, rushes around with props; Hollis Johnson reviews his lines; David Lloyd and Barbara Cooper give out with one of the opera numbers; Philip Fein, stage director, looks on with approval; Mrs. Martin Giesen, who turns out the costumes, takes a stitch where needed; Leo Kopp, conductor, goes over the score; and Clarence Bunde, makeup artist, enhances a chorus member's eyelashes. Clipping from the author.

necessary one if public interest is to be sustained."

When the Civic Opera did bring in its first outsider, it was someone with a strong Minnesota connection. New York star Rosa Tentoni was hired to headline the October 1937 performance of *Madame Butterfly*. The daughter of Italian immigrants, Tentoni had been raised in the Iron Range city of Buhl. Because of this connection, it was decided to make special efforts to have Italians from the Twin Cities and northern Minnesota in attendance.

The Opera Association declared that the opening would be "Italian Night" at the opera. It was a highly successful idea and appeals to different ethnic groups were used again several other times. On opening night, the Italian consul had two center boxes that were draped in the colors of Italy's national flag. When Tetoni departed from the English version of the opera during the famed second aria and sang in her native tongue, hundreds of Italians at the performance rose to their feet with shouts of "bravo, bravo!"

Two other "outsiders" who performed at around the same time were Phil Fein and Leo Kopp of Chicago, both of whom became long-time associates and helped shape opera in St. Paul. Russian-born Fein came to America as a boy, joined a New York opera chorus, then became a stage manager and director for a number of operas. He arrived in St. Paul in 1936 just in time to direct a three-day run of *La Boheme*.

Kopp was an Austrian by birth who had been trained in music and had conducted in Europe. He came to the United States in 1935 initially to head the Chicago Civic Opera and establish the highly popular Grant Park concerts. Replacing a conductor who was noted for being difficult, his temporary assignment worked so well that the talented and patient Kopp remained with the St. Paul Civic Opera for more than three decades.

In 1938, lured by the possibility of both publicity and profit, the opera joined the St. Paul Skating Club and the Junior Association in sponsoring the summer Pop Concerts held on several nights in August in the St. Paul Auditorium. Thousands of people listened to singers and watched figure skaters from bleacher



Rosa Tentoni. University of Minnesota Libraries.

seats or at one of the dozens of tables surrounding the large sheet of ice. Some board members thought the affiliation inappropriate, but the majority felt the project was a good idea. Their share the first year was more than \$1,300 badly needed dollars. For the next twenty-four years the Pop Concerts were an important part of the Opera's operating budget.

In 1937 the Women's Opera Guild was revived and, according to the board minutes, "would act as an auxiliary to the opera association to promote the interests of opera in all its phases." The group's goals included raising money for a revolving fund, selling tickets, and building a membership they hoped would reach 1,000. One of the Guild's most successful projects was development of programs, including free tickets, to introduce youngsters to opera.

Special educational matinees attended by 2,800 St. Paul and North St. Paul school children were organized in 1937, with some hundred businesses funding events that allowed junior and senior high students chosen, on the basis of "merit," to attend a rehearsal or a performance free of charge. They were events that "permitted the younger generation to become opera-conscious" and gave the singers

and technicians an opportunity for a trial performance.

While information given to the press was almost always positive, a financial crisis forced the opera group to reveal, in the midst of its 1937 spring program, that the following year's season was in jeopardy. President David Shepard reported that "The next few days will determine the future of the Opera Association and of civic opera in St. Paul. We are appealing now to the people of St. Paul to indicate that they want these activities to continue by attending the presentation Friday and Saturday nights." Fortunately, tickets sales increased.

Especially in these early years, the opera had an active working board. Members were not content solely to set policy, but were also directly involved in its day-to-day operations. Lengthy discussions often ensued over the merits of or problems with possible productions. Debates that had begun in one of the many committees often were continued at one or more of the full board meetings.

In 1938, for example, Fein suggested Wagner's *Lohengrin*, while Mrs. Sweny was partial to *Martha*. After a straw vote, they decided to leave the matter up to the executive committee which decided to back *Lohengrin*. The discussion continued later at a special board meeting. Members were not sure the chorus could undertake the task. Others questioned "whether Wagnerian Opera can be presented at any time. Mr. E.B. Kirk spoke on the inadvisability of giving any opera with such divided opinion on the part of the board." The board then voted to reconsider the earlier decision. Some suggested *Merry Wives of Windsor* or *Martha*, but both suggestions were withdrawn. An ad hoc committee was appointed to choose the next opera. Finally, after hearing its report, *La Traviata* was substituted for *Lohengrin*.

Although a cash flow crisis was resolved in 1938 when a board member co-signed a \$1,500 bank loan to keep the group afloat, there remained concerns about the long-term financial health of the organization. "Through the judicial use of these funds," board minutes noted, "it is hoped that we will be able to see our way through the next opera. Any permanent betterment of our situation, however, must



Leo Kopp, left, with Ray Cutting and Philip Fein. Photo courtesy of Alexandra O. Bjorklund.

be based upon either the acquisition of pledge funds or a profit derived from putting on the opera which later can only be accomplished through a great ticket sale and holding expenses to a minimum.”

A group met with creditors, including the Giesen Costume Company and the *St. Paul Dispatch*. They agreed to payment after the next production and as much reduction of bills as possible. For its part, the Opera Association agreed “to work out a definite permanent financial program which will include payments to all the present creditors.” Some suggested they ask singers to reduce their fees. It was hoped the Pop Concerts held in late summer would make money and garner good publicity.

### Light Opera Arrives

Financial considerations led Phil Fein to suggest a production of *The Student Prince* as the third opera of the 1938-39 season. There was a need, he noted, to build the audience and an occasional departure from Grand Opera might help. The board, with some reluctance, accepted the musical director’s suggestion. This decision to enter the field of light opera was one of the most important turning points in those early years.

The newspapers were supportive, granting positive publicity to what they termed “one of the most popular musical productions of the American stage.” On opening night almost every seat was filled, and one of the newspapers predicted that

“the success of the opening Wednesday virtually assures the production of a light opera as a regular part of the association’s annual series.” The three performances of *The Student Prince* earned a profit and drew more people than any other production since the group’s formation.

As the St. Paul Civic Opera increasingly turned to light opera and later to musicals, the financial health of the group made a much-needed recovery. Up until that time, ticket sales generally had covered less than 70 percent of a production’s cost. The move into light opera and musicals from 1939 through the end of World War II allowed the company to cover almost 90 percent of its expenses through increased attendance.

Columnist Frances Boardman commented on the trend: “It is interesting to note,” she wrote, “that the St. Paul Civic Opera Association has committed itself to a 1940-41 schedule that is distinctly on the lighter side. There will be those, no doubt, who regret commitment to a program of this type, but there is no question about its appeal to the public ear.” The general public responded to the new approach. As one board member put it, “scheduling light operas exclusively has brought an increase in St. Paul Civic Opera season ticket sales which exceeds all previous records.”

Things were changing in the world of music and in an attempt to explain some of the difficulties facing the group, the ever-optimistic Phil Fein described for Civic Opera board members the increasing importance of movies with their own star system. He believed, he said, that the big news in current American opera lay with groups such as the St. Paul Civic Opera, which “were going to be the developer of the great opera stars of tomorrow.” The young people would lead the way, he said; “they are modern and can be taught the new methods of opera; opera can profit by using them, because opera today must turn modern.”

### Music on the Home Front

Male singers were always in short supply, but the wartime ramping up of the nation’s military intensified the problem. As the *Dispatch* explained it, “the draft has ruined the even tenor of the St. Paul Civic Opera’s tuneful ways.” The company was in pro-



duction on *Martha* when “the draft swept through the opera chorus, taking away three tenors.” In addition, many members of the group dropped out because the labor shortage meant increased work hours.

Some thought that the overseas conflict could help St. Paul’s opera. “Lack of railroad facilities will keep most New York shows from going on tour,” board President John G. Ordway predicted. “This will mean that each community must rely on its own talents to an even greater extent.” Phil Fein also predicted that due to the war American opera would flourish. Companies would use English versions of the great operas. “This will mean a revival

of interest in opera and it will also mean a feather in the cap of those in charge of the St. Paul Civic Opera for having pioneered this movement.”

The Civic Opera Company raised money to allow military personnel to attend performances without charge. On one occasion, the opera’s Soldiers’ Committee acknowledged “with thanks, the generosity of the patriotic citizens whose gift of tickets” allowed 350 soldiers from Fort Snelling to attend a 1942 Sunday matinee of *Rose Marie*. In the program, the Association laid out its current approach:

This year light operas, written in English to meet the demands of American audiences,

have been chosen exclusively, for they have proved to be the type the Northwest likes to hear, and they are well-adapted to a company made up of people who sing for the love of singing.

Not everyone was enamored with the move. In February 1942, after the season ended, Frances Boardman wrote a scolding column headlined “Civic Opera Strays From Its Original Objective,” suggesting that “the present course . . . cannot be seriously credited with advancing the cause of music.” The very title of the organization, she wrote, “is at considerable variance with the nature of its recent activities” which were given over “not even to operetta, but to musical comedy, or, if you like, comedy with music,” she said. The original objective of presenting “serious opera by such talent as is available here” was gone. “It is not worth more than one hour of anybody’s time,” Boardman concluded, “to acquire a working familiarity with ‘Indian Love Call.’”

The criticism struck a note with Stewart Campbell, whose family had been active participants in the opera since the beginning. He sent a letter to Boardman explaining how, during the last two years, his interest and enthusiasm had “been on the decline very much to my regret.” He chose not to be part of *Rose Marie* and *Sweethearts*, feeling that “while it may bring more money into the box office, it adds nothing to the advance of culture and the participants are no better off for having spent all of the necessary effort in preparation.” He urged Boardman to help lead “a crusade” to bring the group back to its original focus.


The Opera Association must have been concerned; at their next annual meeting, members spent a good deal of time discussing the situation. President Ordway admitted that there had been “a lot of criticism, and I think justified, against the number of light operas that we have had in the last two years, and I am sure that we are going to get a lot of heat on this question tonight. I want to say now, that if the consensus of opinion seems to be that we should have more Grand Opera, we will do it.”

However, light opera would continue to march along. One of the most elaborate



Three cast members, Oscar Backlund, Christ Wedes, and Byrd Frost Crowell, of the Opera's 1958 production of *Oklahoma*. Photo courtesy of Irma Wachtler.

*Saint Paul Civic Opera Association*



Presenting the Season's  
First Operas

A DOUBLE BILL

Hansel and  
Gretel

Cavalleria  
Rusticana

Metropolitan  
Theatre

November 4, 6, 7, 9  
1955

Double bill: Hansel and Gretel and Cavalleria Rusticana. From the Ramsey County Historical Society collections.

offerings during the era was *Desert Song*, which opened in 1943. Set in northern Africa, the story was based on the colonial warfare between the French and the Riff tribesmen. "On the stage," a newspaper noted, "combatants are depicted by two large male choruses with the soldiers of the Military Railway Service cast as the Legionnaires." It expressed pleasure that the leading role was sung by Private John Benjamin Myhers.

The war years also brought tight budgets; operas folded in many other places, but the dedicated St. Paul group continued to schedule performances. The board, its minutes declared, "felt that it was most important that these operas be continued. The easiest thing for us to do would be to close up shop, pay our bills and discontinue for at least the duration of the war. Trouble with this is that it would be very difficult to start again."

### Civic Opera, Civic Pride

There were high hopes for a revitalized opera after the war ended. The *Pioneer Press* looked for a return to more opera when it noted:

The war, of course, was a severe test . . . but it proved its stamina by being almost alone



Marian Smith, the sandman, and Eleanor George, the Dew Fairy, prepare for Hansel and Gretel. Photo courtesy of Irma Wachtler.

among civic opera associations to continue its program without interruption during that period. With armed forces demobilized, an abundance of male talent is once more available, and it should be possible from now on to offer the well-rounded seasons which patrons have been accustomed to in the past.

"Civic Opera-Civic Pride" was the motto of the Opera Association in the immediate post-war years. While the quality of the music was still paramount, there was a strong marketing focus on how performances added to the city's prestige. In August 1948, the *St. Paul Dispatch*, in an article on how local organizations

were helping the city "grow and grow," insisted that this development also would have "a cultural point of view," mentioning the opera's new season along with noting that Gene Autry would appear at a locally sponsored championship rodeo.

The civic pride theme also was used to justify opera policy. One board member said that even though some didn't like the Pop Concerts, "it will be very wise to play along and accept the situation . . . it is the public we have to consider and please." Julian S. Gilman, board president from 1950-1953, later said "it has become difficult through the years to give all Grand Opera, so a great deal of light opera was

given . . . We must try to broaden our scope and be as civic-minded as possible." Another board president, Glen Millard, explained that the star system provided "an opportunity for local singers to benefit from associating with more experienced talent" and also increased "the scope of publicity for the city of St. Paul and its musical life."

By late 1952, the newspapers were reporting that the Civic Opera was experiencing another financial crisis. *La Traviata* had not drawn well and its debt was growing. Many board members felt the only course was to abandon the remainder of the season, or at least to drop the upcoming production. However, after lengthy meetings, they decided that by pruning costs *Tosca* could be produced on a \$10,000 budget. "Now it's up to the opera staff," one newspaper observed, "and shortly it will be up to the people of St. Paul," a test of the city's vitality. "Can it still sit up and row," another paper asked, "or is it too languid to do anything but drift into a moss-lined backwater, dotted with the decaying stumps of the past?"

Two years later, the Opera Association was in debt again. After borrowing \$1,000 from a member and taking out a five-year, \$2,500 loan from the First National Bank, the board decided to proceed with *Brigadoon*, but to carefully "consider the rest of the 1954-55 operation." There was a feeling of relief at summer's end, when City Councilman Frank Marzitelli announced that the City of St. Paul would help support the opera with an annual grant of \$10,000.

### The Women's Opera Guild

A Women's Guild launched by Mrs. Sweney was a welcome event in 1954. The Guild, its membership chair announced, "was formed to support and build the St. Paul Civic Opera into one of the nation's leading opera organizations and to make the Twin Cities the unchallenged music center of the Northwest." Unfortunately, within a few months of the launching of the Guild, Mrs. Sweney died unexpectedly.

Still, the group got off to a fast start in its first year. They had promotional luncheons before each production, established committees to sell tickets, often

over the phone, and started a speaker's bureau. One of their most successful efforts was again a series of programs introducing students to opera and providing money so young people could attend special performances. In December of that first year, many Guild members took part in a "sewing bee" to make costumes for the *The Tales of Hoffman*.

Within a year, the Guild had 1,200 members, each paying \$1 a year to belong. They had been able to buy tickets for 110 student nurses from Miller Hospital, thirty patients at the Veteran's Hospital and 150 foreign students at area colleges. Another Guild project was the creation as a memo-

rial to Mrs. Sweney of a record lending library of various operas for use by hospitals, schools and homes for the aged.

Leona Scheunemann was one of the opera's success stories during this time. Born and raised in St. Paul, she graduated from Central High School and earned a degree in music from Hamline University in 1937. At the urging of friends, she went to New York after winning a Metropolitan Opera audition, then returned to Minnesota in 1944 for more experience. As an Association member said in 1951: "She came back to St. Paul to become our greatest leading lady. Now she has gained national recognition."



Opera Guild members Mrs. Donald Heng, Marilyn Erickson, and Mrs. John Williams preparing for a party on the *St. Croix*. Photo courtesy of Irma Wachtler.

Even today, people remember the excitement when she returned to St. Paul to perform on stage or sing over the radio. Children often were taken to see the star who had grown up in their city. Usually referred to as "St. Paul's first lady of opera," Scheunemann lauded the local opera as a leader in developing community opera companies throughout the nation. On one of her trips back to Minnesota, a newspaper reported, "She particularly emphasized the fact, that St. Paul was one of the first cities to present opera in English, an innovation that has done much to popularize opera throughout the United States."

### Professionalism Grows

Phil Fein died in 1957 and Glenn Jordan was tapped as the Company's new production manager. Jordan had a strong background in theater and had directed more than 150 productions for such groups as the New York City Opera, NBC Opera and the Kansas City Starlight Theatre. A cautious board insisted that his contract include an agreement that "present procedure and controls be retained by the board." To calm any fears, the board's president stated that Jordan "understands that ours is a civic operation and, therefore, he wants to cooperate with everyone concerned as well as with the community at large."

Even with continued board control, Jordan began to lead the Civic Opera into new directions. "We must initiate a new and dynamic program," he said in October 1957, and "in order to achieve this objective, it is necessary to present a completely professional production." This did not mean abandoning local talent, but it did mean strengthening the chorus and, it was hoped, begin paying them. "We can develop these young singers and in time use them to play parts, but until we have a fine nucleus to work with, we have an insurmountable problem in achieving first class production," he explained.

Jordan convinced the board to offer two separate seasons—one for operas and the other for musicals. This new approach paid dividends in growth in attendance and ticket sales. His plan also included a two-week playing schedule for each production, making them more profitable. Since St. Paul could not do this alone, some shows



*Glenn Jordan, who was named the Opera Company's new production manager in 1957, with Leona Scheunemann and Davis Cunningham, who sang the role of "Rudolfo" in a 1960 production of La Bohème. Photo from University of Minnesota Libraries.*

were taken on the road to surrounding cities such as Rochester and Duluth, and even to out-of-state venues including Eau Claire, Wisconsin, and Des Moines, Iowa.

As professionalism proceeded, financing of the Civic Opera Association began to change. They became part of the St. Paul Arts and Science Council and in 1959 began receiving money from the group. However, they had to agree to discontinue their own fundraising efforts, including their ongoing guaranty fund drive, a restriction that would become a major problem in later years.

Concern continued over the selection of performances. In 1960, the board of directors addressed some of the criticism, in one of its leaflets: "We are not remaining adamant in producing heavy opera. We are progressing down a middle road in combining classic and light opera.

"However," it said, "it must be understood that we will not attempt such productions as *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*."

Jordan was promoted to the post of general director in 1961, the first year the opera had a year-round, full-time position. He was given a great deal of latitude, but the board still insisted on retaining final approval for most matters. This was reflected in an addition to the bylaws, which stated that the director was given authority "over all aspects of a production," but "subject to the over-all supervision of the board of directors."

Jordan expressed his pleasure at the progress in the following year: "The Civic Opera has been going for twenty-nine years, but now, for the first time," he said, "we are presenting opera as a season, and not a patchwork of productions." Elegant dinners, a natural accompaniment to



Backstage at a rehearsal for *The Wizard of Oz* in 1959. In the background a technician checks the lights. Photo courtesy of Irma Wachtler.

opera, could become "one of the biggest social events of the year," he predicted, adding that "opera lends itself to the excitement of a dinner of this kind and because this is our first real opera season, it's a natural time to begin them."

\* \* \*

By the early 1960s, the development of a fully unionized opera company had pushed up the cost of performances. A series of events had led to increased unionization. For instance, the Union of Wardrobe Mistresses wanted an end to the "interference" of outside volunteers who often helped sew or alter garments. "This has not been met with the approval of the unionized women," the Costume Committee chair said, "and has been discontinued."

Even though opera's finances had taken an upward swing, there were concerns. In February, 1964 the board discussed the increasing competition from both the operatic and musical fields. A potential problem was the new Center Opera Company, which had begun producing operas at the Tyrone Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. Concentrating on avant garde produc-

tions, the company was not an immediate threat, but this would change.

### New Home, More Musicals

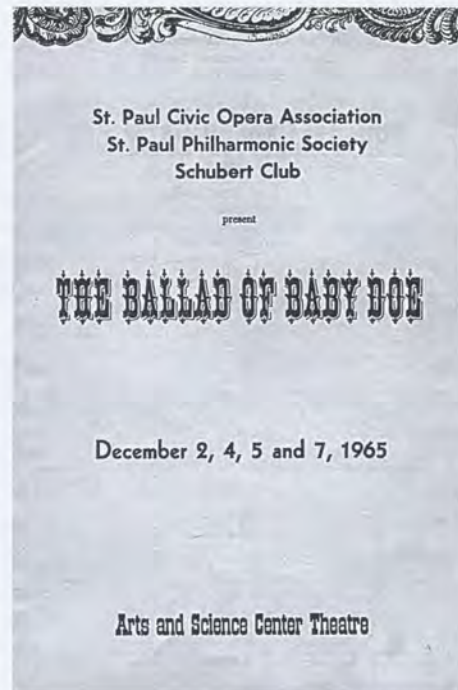
Competition may have led the group to once again evaluate what they were offering the public. At a 1964 meeting, Dr. Harvey O. Beek, the board president, said the opera company was acquiring a reputation for being more interested in musical productions than opera. "I defended the production of musicals," he said "as a means of keeping the name going," of helping to build a following and "as an attempt to find some way of picking up money."

When the new Arts and Science Center was completed in downtown St. Paul in 1964, the Opera Association and other groups moved into the building. From the outset there were problems. Dr. Beek even considered not taking part in the grand opening, because the opera would not be on the program. As the organization grew, it became apparent that there was not enough office space. There also was a struggle with a group called Theatre St. Paul, which did not want to share access to the building's auditorium.

According to board minutes, the Association saw the small theater as a good setting for chamber operas: "Mr. Schaefer stated that since the only area of opera production left untouched is the American opera field, the organization should fill the niche. Soon afterwards, the new American opera, *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, was performed at the Arts and Science Center Theatre. It was a critical success, but there was no school matinee. Not enamored with contemporary works, some St. Paul music teachers declared that "it was not the kind of music they would want their music pupils to hear."

However, people generally were pleased with the current crop of productions. Newspaper writer John Harvey was impressed by the 1965 production of *The King and I*, calling it "the most splendid production of a musical the civic opera has offered in its 33 years." In another column he expressed pleasure that the group's "professionalism has become the norm." *The Minneapolis Star* critic John Sherman told his readers that musical comedy "had become the St. Paul Opera's forte."

The increased quality was accompanied by constantly increasing costs. Productions once averaging around \$50,000, now



Program for the 1965 production of *The Ballad of Baby Doe*. Ramsey County Historical Society collections

often cost \$60,000. "We are employing all unionized [workers] at every level," the board minutes read. Higher quality productions, of course, brought higher costs. For a time, the increased quality of the shows drew larger crowds, and the deficits were manageable, but the board feared that budgets might get out of hand.

Even though the productions were well-attended and provided financial support for opera, some board members continued to be unhappy with the emphasis on musicals. Jordan, however, was willing to openly defend the economic benefit and artistic integrity of such shows. As he wrote inside the *Funny Girl* program:

Musicals have been called "modern American operas," and as such are a part of our cultural and musical heritage . . . Because of this wide appeal and larger potential, musicals are capable of making a profit. Grand Opera always needs subsidies, and we reinvest our profits from musicals into our operas to provide a well-rounded season of quality musical entertainment.

The debate over presenting opera in English re-emerged in the late 1960s. An editorial writer for the *Pioneer Press* thought the use of English in opera was absurd: "How silly it is to have a high-priced tenor flex his sternum and clavicles, tense his diaphragm and bulge his eyes, simply to sing out, ringingly, 'Close the Door' or 'Won't you come in.'" The board soon discussed the possibility of performing standard operas in their original languages and non-standard ones in English. Irma Wachtler, an officer of the Women's Opera Guild, challenged the idea and insisted that St. Paul audiences "preferred English versions." As the minutes summarized the decision, "the Board's basic desire seemed to be to continue producing operas in English."

### **New Name and Direction**

When Glenn Jordan resigned in December 1967, the board unanimously decided to hire George Schaefer, who was heading the Arts and Science Center. In addition to credentials as an arts administrator, he once had been a concert pianist, and his tenure would mark the beginning of a new era for the St. Paul group. "I

think the whole country is dying for more opera," Schaefer said in an interview. "I do favor opera and I'd like to see the Civic Opera do more of it. I think we do have an obligation to do those worthwhile contemporary works that we can present in representative fashion."

Schaefer had definite ideas on the direction the St. Paul Opera needed to take. The 1968 move to not offer Leo Kopp another contract was controversial, but the board reluctantly agreed to back the decision after voting to give the former conductor \$5,000 in severance pay. Afterwards, as stated in the minutes, the president "charged board members not to discuss this action outside of the board meeting."

John H. Harvey declared that Kopp's departure marked the end of an era. He told his readers:

It is not improbable that if it had not been for Kopp's unflagging zeal there might not have been a Civic Opera now. Throughout the thirties and forties the Civic Opera was a rickety organization, held together with paper clips, hope, and the enthusiasm of a few devoted supporters. The budget was almost microscopic . . . and the whole enterprise was frequently in danger of collapse.

Kopp's departure, however, did provide an opportunity for St. Paul native Ray Cutting to finally mount the conductor's podium. He had become the rehearsal pianist for the opera in 1939 but was drafted into the military two years later. He used the G.I. Bill to earn a degree in music from the University of Minnesota. When his big break came in 1969, he had been chorus director and assistant conductor for thirteen years, the workhorse for the group, getting musicians ready for Kopp's arrival. When it was announced that he would be the main conductor and musical director for *Finian's Rainbow*, Cutting said "I don't want to sound corny or naïve, but I do think it's some kind of a milestone in my career, and I must admit I'm very excited about the whole thing."

Even with a group that often proclaimed its interest in local talent, Cutting's road to the podium was not easy. There was a problem for performers living in St. Paul. "Whether you're talking about singers, conductors or soloists,

there's something more glamorous about people from out of town," Cutting told a reporter. "There's no question I've had a lot of trouble making it here. But I'm not bitter. I'm very excited." He went on to conduct several other productions for the opera.

Another action that reflected new developments was the September 1968 decision of the board to eliminate the word "Civic" in their name and to become "The St. Paul Opera Association." Although the association no longer received money from the city, the striking of "civic" reflected something deeper. As the national *Opera News* magazine put it, "the altered name signaled a change in company policy: total professionalism."

A new ticket sales program was launched one noon in August 1968, when women of the Opera Association took part in a publicity effort. "In the guise of 'dolls,'" the paper reported, they "paraded in the streets of downtown St. Paul escorted by paper 'Guys' . . . to distribute literature to people passing by," letting them know that the coming opera season would include performances of the musical *Guys and Dolls*. They also made the rounds in Minneapolis and a few suburban shopping centers.

### **More Financial Difficulties**

As often was the case, new directions for the opera often were accompanied by financial crises. The December 1968, treasurer's report detailed a "serious problem." The previous season had drained resources, eliminated all the reserves, so there probably would be another deficit near \$50,000. Three options were offered. The first was to cut the cost of operations, but such a reduction in quality likely would lower ticket sales. A second possibility was cutting back on the season, but even that would not produce the kind of savings that were needed.

The third approach, which finally was accepted, was to recognize that ticket sales and the money from the Arts and Sciences Center "aren't going to cover our costs either this year or in the years to come," and focus should be on gaining increased subsidies and foundation support. This alternative, the treasurer commented, could "assure a vital, growing Association

that can make a continuing and meaningful contribution to the cultural life of the community." It was "the only one that recognizes the economic facts of life in the case of performing arts of today."

Financial problems continued. This time they centered around \$40,000 in back rent owed to the Civic Center Authority. In a September, 1969 headline, the *Pioneer Press* reported that the "City Opera Group May Close Soon," suggesting that it might not even continue beyond its first production. Problems with the city had hindered the drive for season ticket holders. "In fact," Edward Clapp was quoted as saying, "ticket sales have stopped with a bang." The *St. Paul Dispatch* pitched in with an editorial urging the City Council to forgive the debt.

There was an emergency meeting. "If the picture doesn't change in season sales, we cannot go further into debt and this will cancel the remainder of the season," a board member exclaimed. The group passed a resolution stating that "unless the community of St. Paul and Minneapolis immediately and substantially supports through increased ticket purchases," the St. Paul Opera "must necessarily discontinue production after the first opera."

As usual, the Association managed to struggle through the crisis. A loan of \$50,000 was negotiated with the First National Bank. Many Twin Cities businesses stepped forward and bought blocks of seats. Season ticket sales more than doubled, totaling 1,400. The board's president also "reminded all members that Civic Opera tickets were appropriate gifts for mailmen, milkmen, second floor servants, chauffeurs, second cooks, etc."

After much discussion, the St. Paul Opera continued with a full season and affairs began to turn around. An agreement was finally reached with the city on the back rent owed for the Auditorium. The second show of the season was a big success, with the most ticket sales in years. "We had lines in front of the theater for the first time in many years," Clapp said proudly.

### Opera Without Musicals

The upcoming 1969-70 season generated much debate later that year. The Selections and Casting Committee recom-

mended "that the musicals be dropped from the program." As one board member put it, "we could live with a cultural deficit for something worthwhile. Guarantors can be found to support Grand Opera but it is difficult to raise money for musical comedy." There was some fear it might mean fewer season tickets than needed "if we are to survive." There also was a belief that more Grand Opera would help increase solicitations from patrons and foundations.

George Schaefer felt there needed to be a public explanation of why musicals had been eliminated from the Association's production list. "Practically the only ones that are available are the old ones and every community theater and high school is doing them," he pointed out. Almost all of the new shows were tied up in Broadway. He continued:

That's the reason we dropped musicals. The other is that we feel we can fill a definite need for opera in this community that's not being filled. The Met comes each spring with the big stars and traditional productions of the war horses. Center Opera, I think, is doing an excellent job of presenting contemporary opera . . . in between is a kind of a transition period and we'd like to do a lot of works to show it.

Schaefer recommended six Grand Operas in the Auditorium and four chamber operas at the Arts and Science Center Theatre for the 1969 season. "Apprehension was expressed by several members" at the meeting who felt the plan "would be more than our audience would like." Others, like James S. Lombard, strongly approved. He said that in sixteen years, "this was the first time he had felt that the organization was moving in the proper direction."

The season, which was marketed as "The New Era of the St. Paul Opera," was launched with great fanfare. "The shift in policy to a full opera season is the fulfillment of the St. Paul Opera's real purpose," Schaefer said in a press release. The six productions would provide "a unique cultural experience, with its unique mix of modern and traditional opera. New staging and fresh production concepts would provide a new operatic experience in even the traditional clas-

sics of opera." St. Paul Opera was not looking to be avant garde, but wanted to develop "original productions. . . utilizing the fresh, creative ideas of some of the country's young, talented artists."

A *Minneapolis Star* writer liked the joint bill of *LaServa Padrona* and *Venus in Africa* that was presented at the Arts and Science Center. However, he noted that the productions "unwisely opened the night the Minnesota Orchestra dedicated O'Shaughnessy Auditorium and they played their second performance Sunday afternoon in competition with the Twins and Vikings [games] . . . Not surprisingly there were only about 100 people on hand for the matinee"

In January 1970, the Arts and Science Council announced that their fundraising goal would not be met and there probably would be a 25 percent cut in the budgets of member groups. Corporate sales also had declined considerably and, while Clapp "expressed his disappointment" with the business support, he said he was sure "the change in direction from musical comedy to a program of all opera has been successful in terms of subsidy and artistic charity."

The Women's Opera Guild continued its efforts to boost attendance to gain new revenue. Members held a huge "sell-in" at a series of forty coffee parties in 1970 and were able to find buyers for more than 7,000 tickets. To increase interest in opera, they went outside the metropolitan area to give presentations. Newspaper writer and opera supporter Mary Ann Grossman followed them on one tour and later wrote:

I'll never forget our trip to Grand Rapids. Twice the car's radiator began to smoke and twice we had to be towed back to the garage on the edge of town. Finally we hitched a ride with a young Minneapolis man headed for Grand Rapids and we were only four minutes late for the performance.

### New Venue, New Repertory

It did look like the all-opera strategy was a wise one. Things were looking up. The group received grants from the Hill and Bush Foundations to expand efforts in chamber opera. The National Endowment for the Arts provided a \$25,000 matching grant. To promote regional opera in Eng-

lish, the Gamma Fisher Foundation sent \$100,000 to produce an English version of the Danish opera *Maskerade*. There were high hopes for a successful summer season at the new I. A. O'Shaughnessy Auditorium at the College of St. Catherine, which everyone predicted would be a premier venue for opera.

The Association also received \$50,000 from the National Opera Institute to develop an original work based on the play *Summer and Smoke*. The eagerly awaited world premiere on June 19, 1971, played to a full crowd. Among them was writer Tennessee Williams who came to see the adaptation of his work. It was a huge success. One New York paper said *Summer and Smoke* had "registered a significant contribution to American opera," and the performance "left an enthusiastic audience quite moved and obviously impressed."

There were increased efforts to broaden

the audience for the summer repertory season. The chair of the Sales Committee said that "what we're stressing in our ticket campaign is youth, family and reasonable prices." The committee wanted to "dispel the idea that opera is for the older affluent people. It can be fun." There would be several dinners open to ticket holders, evening dress will be optional, "and we do not care if anyone wears black tie. In fact, we'd love to see the younger people in hot pants and other fun clothes."

Each evening had a social hour followed by a special dinner. Those attending *Die Fledermaus* were greeted with hostesses in Swiss and Bavarian costumes and bratwurst, sauerkraut, and Vienna torte were on the menu. *Summer and Smoke* patrons dined on shrimp creole, biscuits, and pralines. *Girl of the Golden West* was preceded by a meal of ribs and barbecued

chicken served on tin plates, with miners' lanterns as centerpieces.

There were occasional glitches with the dinners. On one occasion, more than 200 ticket holders, many of them patrons, were denied admission when they arrived late from a pre-opera dinner in a campus hall at St. Catherine's. They had been told that the curtain would be held for them and it was, but only for fifteen minutes. Some were willing to wait until intermission to take their seats, but others demanded their money back. According to one writer, "most of them deserted *Butterfly* as effectively as did that Lieutenant."

It was not the last. "Financially hit St. Paul opera plans reduced summer season," a *Minneapolis Star* headline announced in 1972. There had been a downturn in attendance. The summer season filled only 41 percent of the seats, so the revenues were far lower than the expenses, creating more money problems. Investment banker Terrence O'Brien was appointed director of development, fund-raising was stepped up, and by the end of the year he proclaimed the opera to be \$150,000 in the black, something few other opera groups in the country could say.

The new approach was acclaimed both locally and nationally. *Opera Magazine* said the St. Paul Opera had matured in 1973, "its choice of repertory is challenging, and the challenge is being consistently met by a group of young well-trained and exciting artists with promise." A Minneapolis critic felt the music in *La Boheme* was almost as good as the Met's and the production was "vastly superior." *Time Magazine* sent out a critic who wrote, in July 1974, that he had "encountered imaginative programming, talented young singers, skilled management talent, and audiences as eager for the untried as the familiar."

Opera's 1974 press kit featured Sister Alberta Huber, president of St. Catherine's and the new head of the Opera Association. One item said she "sees her course of action as pursuing artistic excellence," and "having fun with it along the way." In a later interview, Huber also expressed the belief in "the release and the uplifting of the human spirit that can come . . . through the arts." Her vision



Sondra Harnes as Nellie and Mary Beth Peil as Alma Winemiller in Lee Hoiby's opera, *Summer and Smoke*. Based on the Tennessee Williams play, the opera had its world premiere in St. Paul in 1971. Ramsey County Historical Society collections.



was not a "highbrow" one, saying "opera is certainly one art form that is meant to belong to the people. If it is not now a popular art form, it is time we restored it to its proper place."

George Schaefer offered his own analysis in a *Music Journal* interview in May 1974. He told the magazine that the opera was trying to present works not usually done by the large touring companies, including *The Crucible* and *Summer and Smoke*. And, "despite the gloomy predictions of members of the old guard," all have been not only splendidly attended, but have received attention from the national and international press in glowing terms."

### Struggles and a Merger

During the summer of 1974, the Opera Association voted to leave the Arts and Science Council. Edward D. Clapp explained that they wanted the freedom to raise funds and conduct affairs autonomously. The St. Paul Opera, Clapp said, will "identify directly with the Twin Cities and regional musical community rather than contend with insulating conditions imposed by the umbrella organization."

The Arts Council had imposed restrictions on fundraising, and their allocations to member organizations had been shrinking. Unfortunately, during this time, the opera company was in a period of rapid expansion. Its largest budget as a civic organization was around \$500,000 but now was spending more than three quarters of a million dollars. They also had just embarked on a three-year project of raising a \$2,750,000 endowment.

A severe economic recession in the mid-1970s had made fundraising difficult for arts groups everywhere. Some of the Twin City groups began to give their grants to the Minneapolis group, which recently had re-named itself the Minnesota Opera. Area foundations said they no longer wanted to support two separate organizations. Sister Alberta Huber said the idea of a merger with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra or the Minnesota Opera had been discussed for some time and that business people liked the idea.

Things came to a head in the winter of 1974-75. The Opera Association had to close its offices in mid-December. George



1964 production of *My Fair Lady*. Ramsey County Historical Society collections.

Schaefer resigned and the staff was laid off. The organization was reported to be around \$300,000 in debt and having trouble raising money for the summer season. Contracts remained unsigned and the planning for productions was upset. Edward Clapp described the situation as a "holding pattern," and said the group was still seeking enough "definite commitments to enable us to go ahead."

Opera Association officers and a group of St. Paul business and civic leaders met to discuss the crisis. Various options were considered. Then, in late January 1975, the St. Paul organization voted to cancel the summer program, but agreed to continue as an organization and to explore merger possibilities. There were joint meetings of board members from both companies, often "unpleasant" and "highly political," according to some attendees, but no decisions were reached.

After more than four decades, the St. Paul Opera Association was facing its most serious crisis. It had been well-managed, but the situation and the economy now made fund raising difficult; some donors even held back pledges. Many local leaders said the Twin Cities could not support two such major organiza-

tions. Several of the largest foundations stepped in and agreed to help take care of the organization's debts, provided there was a merger with the Minnesota Opera.

And so it happened. Members from both cities were asked to serve on a new board of directors. Supporters of the St. Paul Opera began to raise funds for the hybrid organization. It was agreed that the older, more traditional operas, usually produced by the St. Paul group, would become part of a merged repertory. Minnesota Opera would have its headquarters and stage its productions in St. Paul, as it is now doing at the Ordway Music Center.

The legacy of the St. Paul Opera Association lives on. For the three decades following the merger, excellent opera has remained in the city. The Women's Guild has remained active, continually working to introduce young people to opera. Former supporters of the Civic Opera formed a small company—now the North Star Opera—to produce works and develop local singers. Dozens of area singers have gone on to successful careers in music. The curtain may have fallen on one organization, but the reverberations of the music it presented over the years still can be heard.

*Steve Trimble is a semi-retired college teacher and freelance historian who lives in St. Paul. He would like to thank Ron Davis, emeritus history professor at Southern Methodist University, for introducing him to opera.*

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*Mrs. W. Homer Sweney, known to family and friends as Mary Glyde Griggs, a founder of the St. Paul Opera Association. Portrait is by St. Paul artist Carl Bohnen (1871–1951), and is reproduced here courtesy of her daughter Pat Hart. Bohnen, an opera buff, was nationally known for his portraits, including seven governor portraits in the Minnesota State Capitol. Border taken from the Mary Molton Cheney Papers (1872-1950) in the collection of the Ramsey County Historical Society. See article on page 4.*

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