

*A Letter From Speight Jenkins*

Dear Friends,

Quality, variety, excitement. That is what we plan to deliver in every performance for our first season in Marion Oliver McCaw Hall. We will present five exciting operas, two new to Seattle; some of the greatest singers in the world, including both newcomers and old favorites; five important conductors, two of them new to Seattle Opera; five stimulating directors, two new to Seattle; and four new productions. Everyone at Seattle Opera—Board, staff, and artists—appreciates what each of you has done to make this wonderful new hall happen. Now it is our turn to fill the hall with a season worthy of our new home.

We announced in Summer 2001 that the house would open with a François Rochaix production of Wagner's *Parsifal*, with sets and costumes by Robert Israel. The Rochaix-Israel *Ring* Cycle launched our company into international orbit, and this *Parsifal*, a completely different approach from their *Ring* (1985–95), will inaugurate the new house. As a special subscriber benefit, you will receive our usual Season Preview CD with this brochure; in June you will receive a CD on *Parsifal*.

The title role of *Parsifal* will serve as the debut for Christopher Ventris, a young Englishman whom I first heard sing this role in Germany. He has since scored a big hit with it in San Francisco. The alluring Kundry, the most complex role in the piece, will bring Linda Watson, a superb California-born artist who has made her career in Germany, to the West coast for the first time. A Kundry in Bayreuth, Ms. Watson has sung both Isolde and Brünnhilde in Germany. The longest role in the opera will be entrusted to the Danish bass, Stephen Milling. I saw Milling's Gurnemanz in Copenhagen, and like his amazing Hunding and Fasolt in our *Ring*, it was unforgettable. Greer Grimsley, who has given so many major performances at Seattle Opera, returns as the wounded king, Amfortas, and Richard Paul Fink will play Klingsor, a role he has often sung in Germany. Kevin Langan returns as the old King, Titirel.

Making his conducting debut with Seattle Opera is Asher Fisch, from Israel, who has led this opera in Vienna, Berlin, and Dresden and who has already conducted at Los Angeles, Houston, and the Metropolitan Opera. It was when he was music director of Vienna's Volksoper that I first came to appreciate Maestro Fisch's abilities.

New opera is the life-blood of our art form. In choosing contemporary opera to present, my goal has always been meaningful music, then a good libretto. In recent years I have encountered many operas with strong librettos and weak scores. I found what I have been searching for in Marvin David Levy's *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Adapted from the O'Neill play, *Mourning* was not a great success in 1967 at its Metropolitan Opera premiere. Thirty years later, Lyric Opera of Chicago brought forth a revised version, which I had the good fortune to experience. I was literally on the edge of my seat the whole night, with my mouth open more than once. The story, a post Civil War adaptation of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, is a great one, but it was the music that sold me. This is a score that expands the libretto, giving rich meanings to the old text and making you part of the world's most dysfunctional family. One of my complaints, incidentally, about so much contemporary opera is that it simply sets a play to music without duets, trios, or ensembles; Levy does just the opposite. He knows what opera can do, and he does it. We will perform the third version of the opera at Seattle Opera. I thought that all the changes for Chicago, in 1998, were great, but that a few more could further enrich the piece. Levy has agreed, so the performances of *Mourning* here are a premiere of the work's final, two-act version.

Our cast brings back to Seattle Lauren Flanigan and Nina Warren in the critical roles of Christine (O'Neill's Clytemnestra) and Lavinia (O'Neill's Electra), respectively. Ms. Flanigan sang Christine, a staggeringly difficult role, so marvelously in Chicago that I could not imagine doing the opera without her. Ms. Warren, last year's Salome, will be her match, and the fireworks should light up the Space Needle. Jason Howard, a Welsh baritone who was last heard here as Don Giovanni, will repeat the role of Adam Brant

(O'Neill's Aegisthus), which he sang in Chicago, and Kurt Ollmann. Ollmann, last here in *Lakmé*, will sing Orin, the role equivalent in this story to Orestes. Gabor Andrasz returns to play General Mannon, comparable to Agamemnon in the Greek play. In the Friday/Sunday cast, Susan Marie Pierson, a superb Brünnhilde and Elektra, will sing Christine to the Lavinia of Rayanne Dupuis, who has specialized in contemporary music and has more than a few Lulus to her credit. Everyone else, including Morgan Smith and Frances Lucey, as a "normal" brother and sister who are connected to the Mannons, will sing all performances.

Returning to Seattle Opera to conduct *Mourning Becomes Electra* is Richard Buckley, once assistant conductor of the Seattle Symphony, a conductor of two of the National Series cast productions at Seattle Opera in 1976 and 1979, and a conductor in many major opera theaters in America over the ensuing twenty years. He conducted the Chicago performances with great aplomb. The new production, a co-production with New York City Opera, will be directed by Bartlett Sher, the artistic director of the Intiman Theater, and will be designed by Michael Yeorgan, one of America's most distinguished designers. Costumes will be designed by Elizabeth Caitlin Ward in her Seattle Opera debut.

After two operas new to Seattle, we return to an old favorite in a new guise, Georges Bizet's *Carmen*. This will be a new co-production with Colorado Opera, Pittsburgh Opera, and Cincinnati Opera and will be directed by James Robinson, a young director I have been eager to bring to Seattle ever since I saw his *Bohème* on television from New York. He has offered outstanding productions of a whole variety of works in more than a few American houses, including an acclaimed staging of Puccini's *Trittico* this fall at the New York City Opera. The set designer, new to Seattle, and a frequent collaborator with Robinson, is Allen Moyer. The conductor, music director of New York City Opera, is George Manahan. In 1987 our *Carmen* was in period; in 1995, it was set in the era of Franco's Spain; this production will again be in period.

For Carmen we are presenting Stephanie Blythe, whom I saw and heard in this role several years ago in Tulsa. She has to be one of the greatest mezzo-sopranos on the stage today, and her Carmen was in every regard performed at the highest standard. In the Friday/Sunday cast, Mary Phillips, one of the Rhine Daughters in the 2001 *Ring*, will offer her version of the gypsy. Don José will be portrayed by Paul Charles Clarke, our Pollione in *Norma*. The Friday/Sunday José is Thomas Studebaker, this season's Siegmund at Lyric Opera of Chicago. Carmen's final love, Escamillo, will bring Roberto Salvatori back to Seattle. Marie Plette, last with us as Madama Butterfly, will sing Micaëla.

For our fourth opera, we go to Central Europe for one of the most delightful and beautiful of 20th-century operas, Richard Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos*. Ariadne, an invention of Strauss's librettist, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, combines the two worlds of provincial Italian comedy and formal 18th-century opera. Strauss composed the work for a small orchestra of 37, but each musician must play in a virtuosic manner. Gerard Schwarz, music director of the Seattle Symphony, will bring his love for the composer's music to this challenging score. The careful interplay of the two worlds can make for a total delight onstage, but it needs the most expert direction. Chris Alexander, who this season will give us *Fidelio*, is, I believe, the right man for the job. Robert Dahlstrom, a distinguished designer whose work was last seen at Seattle Opera in last season's *Salome*, will design *Ariadne*. Bruno Schwengl has designed the costumes used for Act 1 in *Ariadne*.

*Ariadne* has four principal roles. In the opening Prologue, a backstage romp in which the trials of presenting the premiere of a new opera are laid out, the principal artist is the Composer, a role to be taken by the great Austrian artist Angelika Kirchschrager, who was last at Seattle Opera as Octavian in our 1997 production of *Der Rosenkavalier*. In the Friday/Sunday cast, Kimberly Barber will sing the Composer, returning for the first time since she was heard last season, as Suzuki in *Madama Butterfly*. The title role will be sung by Margaret Jane Wray, our Sieglinde in *Die Walküre* in 2000 and 2001, with the Friday/Sunday Ariadne, a young American soprano who has impressed me very much in

audition, Monique McDonald. The man who finally wins her heart, the god Bacchus, is one of the most difficult tenor roles in opera, an unremittingly high and demanding part. John Horton Murray, who has become justly famous for this role, will make his Seattle Opera debut as Bacchus; and in the Friday/Sunday cast, Michael Hendrick will come to Seattle Opera for the first time. The delightful lyric coloratura role of Zerbinetta, who has almost surely the longest and most demanding aria for a coloratura composed in the 20th century, will be sung by Jane Giering-De Haan, a soprano who will sing Marzeline in the upcoming *Fidelio*. There are many roles in *Ariadne*: Richard Stilwell will return for the Music-Master, and Doug Jones for the Dancing-Master. Harlequin serves for the debut of Philip Cutlip, a distinguished American lyric baritone.

For our final opera of the season, we go to Italy and Giacomo Puccini. This time it's not *La bohème*, *Tosca*, or *Madama Butterfly*, but a work that was created for and given its premiere in America at the Metropolitan Opera in 1910, *The Girl of the Golden West*.

*The Girl* was composed for three of the greatest opera singers of all time, Emmy Destinn, Enrico Caruso, and Pasquale Amato, so anyone who sings any of the roles must be a considerable performer. We have some great artists, most of whom will be singing their roles for the first time. In the title role of Minnie in *The Girl of the Golden West*, will be Andrea Gruber, who was Aida here in 1992, then Elsa in *Lohengrin* in 1994, and Chrysothemis in *Elektra* in 1996. Since then her career has virtually exploded, with great successes at every major international house. Her innamorato, Dick Johnson, will be sung by the Canadian tenor, Richard Margison, who will be our Florestan in *Fidelio* this season. And the lovesick, frustrated sheriff will be sung by Greer Grimsley. In the Friday/Sunday cast, Eva Batori, a successful *Tosca* in 2001, will return with the exciting and young Italian dramatic tenor Antonello Palombi in his American debut as Dick Johnson. Metropolitan Opera baritone Kim Josephson will sing Sheriff Jack Rance in the Friday/Sunday cast.

The production will be directed by Bernard Uzan, who gave us, among other works, a brilliant *Tosca* and *Andrea Chénier*. The conductor is a major addition to American opera, Oleg Caetani. The son of Igor Markevitch, Caetani has been music director in several German houses, has guest conducted in major European houses, including La Scala in Milan and Florence's Comunale, and has led some of Europe's greatest orchestras. I am really delighted to give Maestro Caetani his Northwest debut, shortly after his American debut next fall at the San Francisco Opera.

I hope you find this season as exciting as I do. It offers us many challenges, but the greatest challenge is to make all five operas successful for each of you and worthy of our remarkable, new Marion Oliver McCaw Hall.

Cordially,

Speight Jenkins  
General Director