



David H. Fishman

Martina Arroyo as Amelia and Piero Cappuccilli in the title role of *Simon Boccanegra*—"Alternately excellent and inept."

## Verdi for Openers

by Irving Kolodin

Chicago

Has it been 20 years for the Lyric Opera of Chicago since Carol Fox brought Maria Callas for her American debut in *Norma* in 1954? What was then only a gleam in the founder's eye has become a national institution, which well deserved the conjunction—in its recent opening with *Simon Boccanegra*—with the first biennial congress in America of the Istituto di studi verdiani.

Attracted to its discussions (which over a decade have produced some of the most searching material in print on the composer and his works) were reviewers, critics, and musicologists from the worldwide community of music, in-

cluding the U.S.S.R. They were "attracted," more precisely, by the generosity of Mr. and Mrs. Lee A. Freeman, Sr., who underwrote the invitations that brought them to Chicago. A Chicago lawyer whose interest in music has been closely identified with the Fine Arts Quartet, Mr. Freeman enabled the congress to join its discussion of *Boccanegra* with a new production of the work itself (underwritten by the Gramma Fisher Foundation).

Like *Macbeth* and *Don Carlos*, *Boccanegra* was revised and revived 20 or so years after its first, less than wholly successful, production in 1857. This invited a good deal of learned comment on (1) the obtuseness of the first audience—which was, perhaps, expecting an-

other *Rigoletto* or *La Traviata*—in not recognizing the new direction the composer had taken, (2) the manner in which Verdi, with the literary assistance of the brilliant Arrigo Boito, made a near-masterpiece from the prior failure.

If there is a slight contradiction in these contentions, such is the way of symposia. They deal, by definition, less with the pragmatic and the rational than with position papers designed to exhibit the insight, shrewdness, and persuasiveness of the speakers. They invariably make better reading in post-publication than they do listening. Indeed, after Massimo Bogianckino, artistic director of La Scala, had finished rehearsing—at great length and in boring detail—the critical reactions to the first and second versions of *Boccanegra*, there was some doubt that it was worth going to hear, two hours later.

Fortunately, there were some among his listeners who had heard it not merely once before but in a variety of productions since it was introduced to America at the Metropolitan in the Thirties. Indeed, *Boccanegra* has been so exposed to trial by fire in Chicago and San Francisco as well as in New York that its durable values have been fused in the lore of such singers as Lawrence Tibbett, Leonard Warren, and Tito Gobbi; Elisabeth Rethberg, Renata Tebaldi, and Zinka Milanov; Giovanni Martinelli, Richard Tucker, and others.

There wasn't one of these, of whatever range or persuasion, who wouldn't have been preferable to the performers offered by the Chicago Lyric in its new production. What was seen and heard from a cast headed by Martina Arroyo (Amelia), Carlo Cossutta (Gabriele), and Piero Cappuccilli (Simon) was alternately excellent and inept, and often so from the same performer. The organizational effort provided by Bruno Bartoletti as music director, Pier Luigi Pizzi as designer, and its chorus master Michael Lepore, was thoroughly professional. But the general ability of the principals was not the whole answer to the special problems of this work.

BOCCANEGRA IS AN ODDITY among the mature operas of Verdi in finding its center of gravity, not in the high tones of sopranos and tenors, but in the low range and artistic conviction of the baritones and bass required for several of its principal male roles. Crucial among the roles is that of Fiesco, who sings the famous bass aria "*Il lacerato spirito*" in the open-

ing scene and is later called upon to sustain the low line in the swelling ensembles for which the opera is celebrated. This cast provided, as Fiesco, Ruggeri Raimondi, an established Italian artist of vigor and considerable stage presence. But he is at best a bass-baritone rather than a true basso. He did not come close to glorifying the role's vocal opportunities as the Hungarian Mihály Székely did in the Forties or the Finnish Martti Talvela might today.

The Doge was performed by Piero Cappuccilli, who came to New York as a much younger singer in 1960, to pick up a schedule of *Boccanegra* performances left vacant when Leonard Warren collapsed and died on stage (during *La Forza del destino*). Cappuccilli was then admired for the breadth of his solid baritone sound and allowed the possibility of growing into the mammoth role of the imperious Doge, who lives dangerously and dies heroically for his belief that Genoa and Venice could learn to co-exist when the unity of Italy was still centuries in the future.

CAPPUCCILLI HAS PROTECTED WELL the richness of his sound, which is now darker and warmer in quality. But he lacks the power of dramatic projection possessed by the best of prior *Boccanegras*. One watches and listens, sometimes with admiration, often with appreciation, to his art as a singer—but rarely with the absorption that determines whether the inner life of a character is being re-created. It was no aid to dramatic credibility that the stage director, Giorgio De Lullo, decreed that Cappuccilli, as the poisoned Doge, stand on his feet for 15 minutes or more before he expired. Certainly one of his courtiers could have found him a chair on which to enact, humanely, the transition from painful life to mortifying death.

In one of the pre-performance discussions of *Boccanegra*, De Lullo expounded on the ways in which a man trained, as he was, in the dramatic theater could amend and extend the resources of those to whom singing is the main consideration. Some of what he did with the ensembles was intelligently conceived; but too much of what he imparted to the principals was derived from gestures and posture more suitable to the spoken word than to the musical stage. It left such performers as Martina Arroyo (whose ample voice is heavier than an Amelia's should be) and Carlo Cossutta (a conventional

tenor) very much as nature made them: primarily concerned with notes and words as the first and second priorities, with dramatic credibility somewhere down the line.

This is, of course, in the nature of the shallow pool of talent at present available to a company bold enough to venture *Simon Boccanegra*. Pizzi's admirably simple stage design included a towering, cathedral-like council chamber for the imposing spectacle at the end of Act I and properly pictorial arrangements for the other scenes (though, had I lived in Genoa in 1398, I would not have had, in my palace, the heroic equestrian statue that Pizzi preferred for the first scene of Act 2).

In the aggregate the real feat of Carol Fox and company was not so much the excellencies or unevennesses of this *Boccanegra*, but the preservation, through 20 years, of the will to continue. After decades, earlier in the century, when Chicago was dependent on the largesse of a McCormick or an Armour, or their wealthy equivalents, for intermittent opera seasons, Lyric Opera has developed a broad community base under the energetic leadership of Miss Fox and the architect of its subscription support, canny Danny Newman. They will persevere, one is confident, until there is again a worldwide source of proper operatic talent from which Chicago can annually draw the share to which its public is entitled.

At the Metropolitan, Schuyler Chapin, with one-tenth of the experience of Miss Fox, began his second season as general

manager with an opening week riddled with problems. Some—such as his opening with Verdi's *Vespi Siciliani*, in which it became necessary to replace the ailing Montserrat Caballé with Cristina Deutekom—were not of his making. Other problems—such as the performances in which Elinor Ross sang the title role of *Turandot*, Maralin Niska was offered as Tosca, and Judith Blegen ventured Juliette in Gounod's *Roméo*—were. The deviation, in emergencies, from the standard of “international opera,” on which the Metropolitan pitches its premium prices, can be excused if not condoned; the planning that results in the same deviation can be neither excused nor condoned.

There were, nevertheless, one or two causes for rejoicing: Plácido Domingo's return in fine form (which includes the trim figure he presented as well as the sound of his voice as Arrigo in *Vespi* and *Roméo* vis-à-vis Miss Blegen) portends a new level of quality in a quarter where it is most welcome. And Henry Lewis showed, in his direction of Gounod's score, the capacity to justify the new opportunities that have come his way. Sherrill Milnes, too, is steadily becoming the leading baritone for which he has all the natural endowment.

Chapin, incidentally, has been drawing more than prudently on the roster of the New York City Opera to support his own lax planning. Intelligent Metropolitan patrons cannot fail to question why they should pay premium prices for singers offered across the plaza for half as much. □



"Thanks for the apple, Buckminster—but what on earth possessed you to do that silly whittling on it?"

# Mime on the Streets

by Barbara Mackay

When the French aerialist Philippe Petit walked across a wire stretched between the twin towers of New York City's World Trade Center one day last summer, he was not literally performing on the Manhattan pavement, but it was street theater just the same: a free performance, intended to entertain anyone who happened to be watching.

An admittedly loose term, "street theater" these days embraces everything from circuses to puppet shows to drama to dance: The Theater for the New City, which offers farcical scenes from New York City life; the Incredible Journey, which tells ancient myths through music and dance; el Teatro Ambulante, which combines poetry and song to celebrate its Puerto Rican heritage; the Pilobolus Dance Theater, which combines modern dance, mime, and gymnastics to evoke states of mind, moods, or ideas; the PWIFS, which entertains children with African masks and mythology. Last summer these and countless other groups performed in the broiling sun or drizzling rain on street corners and in plazas and parks throughout the country.

Most of these groups don't get the kind of attention Petit did, though. Although many of them are funded by prestigious organizations, from the New York State Council on the Arts to the Chemical Bank, their performances usually go on unadvertised and unreviewed in ghettos, migrant camps, and culturally deprived exurban areas throughout the United States.

Unlike commercial theatrical producers, who spare no expense to induce audiences to pay their way into a theater, street artists spend what little money they have to bring their shows out-of-doors to the people who can't afford to pay for entertainment. In return, the artists may be booed; they may get the makings of a garden salad thrown at them; they may receive threats from offended ethnic groups. Or they may get shouts of "That's how it is!" and bursts of applause. Either way, performing in the streets before uninhibited audiences, competing with family quarrels, trucks, and portable radios is more challenging and—depending on one's boiling point—

more frustrating or more exciting than acting indoors.

Until about 1968 New York had no street theater. Professionals toured the city each summer, but the communities themselves were not involved in production. In an effort to change the pattern, actress Geraldine Fitzgerald and a Catholic priest, Brother Jonathan Ringcamp, O.S.F., went to Coney Island, got a small stage, and worked out an adaptation of the medieval play *Everyman*. They accepted anyone who wanted to work with them, and their mammoth Everyman Company still observes the same rule today: No one is auditioned; no one is turned away.

Most street theaters are mobile, just as the medieval pageant players were. They usually have a truck that can be converted into a stage by dropping three sides and adding a backdrop to the remaining wall. Although some groups use elaborate sound systems—electric instruments, tape recorders, amplifiers—and though the groups that perform at night require lights, the basic requirements for all street theater are simple: a raised platform and a curious public.

From the unknown mime in Central Park who attracts a crowd without using words, to the world-renowned drummer Olatunji, whose troupe creates a spectacle of African song and dance, the impulse of most street artists is to entertain. They may want to satirize current urban conditions, as does the Off-Center Theater, which last summer presented a 10-episode soap opera about a young girl trying to survive alone in New York City. Or they may be trying to build up ethnic pride, as do the Oriental Actors of America, the Puerto Rican Playwrights/Actors Workshop, and the Weeksville United Actors Company, a black workshop that runs a program for children and adults in Brooklyn. There is even one ensemble, the Theater for the Forgotten/Wildcat Workshop, that seeks to rehabilitate people on parole, in drug programs, and on welfare by letting them create an original show. That they are one of the most dynamic street theater groups after rehearsing together for only 13 weeks suggests that professional training and experience are not the most important factors in street theater. What counts is energy and the will to entertain.

To some street performers, though, enjoyment—theirs or the audience's—is not the main objective. Like the agit-prop (agitational propaganda) theaters



Barbara Mackay

*Living Theater—Combining drama and politics in street demonstrations.*

of the Thirties, they want to teach and are primarily interested in the political, not the artistic, impact of drama. Many of these groups—the radical guerrilla theaters—grew up in the Sixties along with the civil-rights and anti-war movements. Radical Arts Troupes (affiliated with S.D.S.) formed on campuses from Princeton to Berkeley and played anti-capitalist, anti-government, anti-war skits. Street theater, which depends on simple characters, fast dialogue, and clear plot line in order to grab and hold the attention of passersby, was a perfect vehicle for activists, because it lent itself so readily to their political distinctions between the bad guys (the military/industrial complex, the police, and the like) and the good guys (the enlightened worker, the Vietnamese peasant, for instance).

At one time, the best agitprop groups (The Teatro Campesino, The San Francisco Mime Troupe, The Free Southern Theater, The Bread and Puppet Theater) were tremendously important to the anti-war, civil-rights, and farm workers' movements. These days, though, political theater erupts only from time to time: for instance, in the Living Theater's demonstrations last summer against grocery stores selling non-union lettuce and grapes. Wearing tattered garments dyed purple and green, the group formed a picket line of continually shifting shapes, chanting in