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## Operation Santa Fe

HENRY SHULTZ

*Wolfgang and Igor in Santa Fe*

SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO'S ANCIENT SEAT OF GOVERNMENT, HAS BECOME during the summer also the seat of an opera festival which — if it continues to develop along lines already very plain to see — bids fair to become one of the biggest things the old capital has experienced in its three-hundred-forty-odd years of history.

With the establishment of the Santa Fe Opera Association by Mr. John Crosby and his associates, and the phenomenally successful presentation during its first season of top-quality opera three times a week through July and August, little doubt remains in anyone's mind that Santa Fe now has, in addition to its other well-known attractions, something on its hands that may outdraw them all.

There is no reason why Santa Fe should not become the Southwestern Mecca of music lovers. It is certainly no more off the beaten paths of tourism and musical pilgrimage than, say, Central City or Aspen — nor, as far as that goes, than Tanglewood or Bayreuth or Edinburgh. Its superb summer climate, the picturesqueness of the historic city itself, its location in an area abounding in things interesting to visitors, its complex and sophisticated cultural milieu, and its facilities for and experience in entertaining tourists, make it a natural headquarters for a music festival. All that was needed, apparently, was a man with an operatic "green thumb" like John Crosby.

Crosby, a professional musician — he is a violinist and a conductor and was, until recently, assistant director of the famed Columbia University Opera Workshop — who also happens to be a man of means, had spent a lot of time in Santa Fe off and on over the years. Full of ideas about the ideal production of opera, it seemed to him that Santa Fe might be just the place to try putting some of them into effect. To this end, he secured the seventy-six acre San Juan Ranch, a setting of great

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natural beauty four miles north of the city, as the location for an amphitheatre. Near enough to a four-lane highway to make the drive from town a matter of minutes, but far enough away to give a sense of absolute isolation (and to be free of highway noises); it could call upon the surrounding mountain ranges and the New Mexico evening sky to serve as backdrops and could provide such acres of free parking space as would make patrons of New York and Chicago opera houses imagine they were in Paradise.

The sizable nucleus of a reliable audience lay practically at hand. Santa Fe has long been a center of artistic activity and contains a large and stable population of people with the taste and means to support opera. Taos, an artists' colony and resort from the early years of the century, is little more than an hour away; while Los Alamos, almost entirely a settlement of intellectuals — scientists are notorious music lovers—is even closer. Albuquerque, the largest city in the area, the seat of the state university and well known as a “musical town,” is a major transportation center for railway, bus, and air lines, and lies at the other end of a broad highway on which it takes less time to reach the Santa Fe Opera than it takes a Scarsdale opera-lover to reach the Metropolitan.

These places could supply the hard core of a steady audience. But in New Mexico people think nothing of driving several hundred miles to dinner, and once the opera season actually got under way it soon became apparent that parties were coming regularly from such towns as Carlsbad, Roswell, Silver City, and other places at opposite ends of the state, for an evening or a weekend of opera.

Nearly all performances have attracted their share of the famous and the celebrated, especially from the world of music, who have called on Crosby and the other artists back-stage to offer congratulations and best wishes; and Crosby has been astonished by the number of ordinary tourists who have taken the trouble to hunt him up after performances to tell him how they happened to be in Denver, or El Paso, or somewhere, read of the opera in the local paper, or in *Time* magazine, or in the *New York Times*, and altered their itinerary to include a night in Santa Fe.

All of this was one of the things Crosby had hoped for but was genuinely surprised about when it came true. His initial planning was done without publicity and to the tune of a certain amount of scepticism from Santa Fe. He planned slowly, meticulously, and with great intelligence. (Patrons have even remarked on the efficiency with which cars are parked before the performances and started on their way again

afterwards.) He knew what he wanted and he spared nothing to get it. All the preliminary architectural and acoustical planning he placed in the hands of renowned designers, while to head his production staff he engaged two of the brightest young luminaries of the lyric theatre.

Retaining the original ranch house as headquarters for himself and his staff — and later as living quarters for the single artists of the company he was to engage — Crosby set about building his theatre. He economized where economy was possible, but didn't hesitate to spend lavishly when necessary.

What took shape, ultimately, was an outdoor theatre without parallel in America. Clearly the creation of a man of taste as well as a man with immense operatic know-how, nothing to enhance the beauty or the technical efficiency of the theatre was left to chance. A noted acoustical engineer was engaged — Jack Purcell of the famed Boston and Los Angeles firm of acoustical consultants, Bolt, Beranek, and Newman (who were also responsible for the fabulously successful Kresge Auditorium at M.I.T., as well as for the great Philharmonic Concert Hall at Tel Aviv, Israel, the Music Building at Florida State University, and other halls noted for their fine acoustics). After carefully going over Crosby's site, and even taking into consideration the possible effects on the acoustics of the surrounding mountains and the prevailing winds, Mr. Purcell drew up a set of acoustical specifications so fantastically detailed as to stagger the imagination. Elaborate studding, for example, behind the beautiful redwood plywood stage back and sides (the part which the audience sees) is designed to create a vast number of resonating panels at various frequencies. The great outward-sloping canopy over the stage not only contains much of the lighting system, but, thrusting out over the orchestra pit, it serves to bounce sounds back onto the hard surface of a semicircular pool of clear blue water which separates pit from audience, with further acoustical advantage to everybody, including the orchestra itself and the singers on-stage. This pool, besides being a nice touch in the decorative scheme of things, has the additional function of creating a space between the front rows of seats and the orchestra, so that holders of these seats do not find themselves peering into the bells of French horns or having their teeth jarred loose by the tympani. Even the wash-room and box-office structures at the rear of the amphitheatre serve acoustical as well as more obvious functions.

Once the acoustical specifications were drawn up, they were put into the hands of the Santa Fe architectural firm of McHugh and

Hooker, who did the actual designing of the theatre around them; but even the architects' drawings were once more submitted to the acoustical engineers before any actual construction was undertaken.

The total result of all this careful planning is a theatre which is a thing of beauty—indeed, of magic: a perfect setting for the seeing and hearing of opera, and, from a practical standpoint, a perfect theatre in which every seat is a good seat, and in which, even if you look away from the stage, whatever you see is good to look at.

(Seating capacity, incidentally, is 483 at present: but the initial planning was such that the amphitheatre can be expanded by several hundred more seats without sacrificing any of the intimate charm of the place, interfering with lines of vision, or impairing acoustics.)

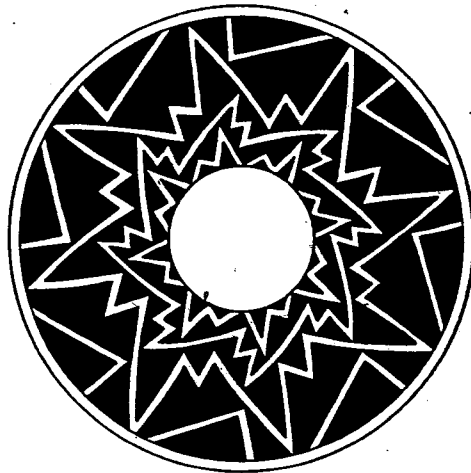
One of Crosby's articles of faith is that opera be good theatre, and in the technical equipping of his theatre he spared no expense. Of the approximately \$125,000 which it cost to build the theatre (and which does not include the initial cost of the ranch and ranch-house), very nearly \$15,000 was spent on stage lighting alone, plus an additional approximate \$5000 supplied by the Santa Fe Opera Association for the purchase of spotlights, lekos, lenses, and subsidiary equipment.

Heart of the electrical design is a Century-Izenauer electronic control system, ordinarily found only in the most elaborately equipped theatres. With this system, the main power supply is brought to a huge dimmer-bank, located in the stage basement, where it is converted to low-voltage power and then sent to an operating console at the rear of the amphitheatre, where sixty miniature dimmers with master coupling devices regulate the low-voltage current. This current is once more sent back to the dimmer-bank, where it is again boosted to proper line voltage to supply the 500-watt and 750-watt lamps in the lighting instruments. The reasons for such a complicated treatment of electricity are many, but among its several advantages are these: a tremendous saving in space and weight, great facility in operation (there is a master pre-set system by which up to thirty lighting instruments may be made to cross-fade from one pre-set setting to another by moving a single lever), and the unique benefit of having the electrician in a position to watch the stage from the same point of view as the audience. The operating electrician is, it should be said further, in constant telephonic communication with backstage technicians as well as with the production manager or one of his assistants seated in the audience.

On the other hand, there were areas in which economies were possible; and one of the most successful of these has been in the matter of

scenery. For most of the operas mounted so far, no attempt has been made at realistic scenery of the traditional Belasco-solid-oak-door type. Preference, instead, has been given to sets designed — with the greatest originality and imagination, it must be mentioned — to create a sufficient atmosphere, to establish a necessary emotional tone, to fix an adequate impression of time and place. These sets are built onto heavily-weighted, cast-iron bases which may be wheeled quickly on and off stage, or in many cases simply turned around to reveal a completely new setting. Planned with the utmost cleverness and ingenuity, they have fitted with such infallible appropriateness into the over-all stage conceptions of their respective operas that they have proved enormously successful with the audience; and their relative inexpensiveness has made heavier expenditures possible in other departments.

Costuming, for example. Production designer Patton Campbell was apparently given a free hand, and he took it. Of extraordinary beauty and elegance, each appearance of a new costume produced such an effect on the audience that the casts had to become accustomed to occasional involuntary gasps of astonishment from some of the customers out front; yet, as with all other aspects of the Santa Fe productions, costume-designing was done not for costume-designing's sake, but as a part of a whole stage-conception and with the personal physical and motor characteristics of individual artists always in mind.



During the winter preceding the early-July opening of the first summer season, Crosby spent the greater part of his time selecting and recruiting his staff and his artists. As his production manager he secured the services of Robert Ackart, a young man—and most of the Santa Fe company is young—who despite his youth had already been assistant

stage manager for the San Francisco Opera, assistant stage director at the Salzburg Festival, assistant to the resident producer at Covent Garden, production manager at the Chicago Lyric Opera, and stage manager at Central City. Production designer Patton Campbell had been associated with several notable Broadway productions, including *Twenty-seven Wagonloads of Cotton*, which eventually became *Baby Doll* of the movies, and was assistant to Donald Oenslager in last year's Central City premier of *The Ballad of Baby Doe*. Ackart and Campbell became, with Crosby, the guiding triumvirate of the Santa Fe Opera, and it is to them that the repertory owes its high standards of beauty and real originality.

Crosby himself auditioned the orchestra players, traveling back and forth across the country innumerable times until he was able to get what he wanted from a cross-section of major American orchestras. But the most exacting chore in getting together the kind of operatic repertory company he envisaged was the selection of the singing artists: for in accordance with his principle that opera must always be a good show as well as a mere traversal of good music, it was highly important that his singers be able to act as well as to sing—and to sing, moreover, in perfectly understandable English. That they also had to be versatile goes without saying, for the Santa Fe Opera is a repertory company (though the repertory will change from season to season) and it is no part of Crosby's plan to engage this or that prima donna especially for this or that French or Italian opera and let the rest of the company take care of itself, after the manner of many great opera houses. His singers would have to be perfectly at home in Mozart one night and equally at home in Stravinsky the next.

The company which he and Robert Ackart finally assembled, after weeks of auditions and re-auditions, has impressed everyone with its all-around versatility and attractiveness: with its youth, its enthusiasm, and a style of easy, spontaneous, and always stylish acting — undoubtedly the Ackart touch here. There were, during the first season, no great voices, though there were several outstandingly good ones. On the other hand, there were none as bad — give or take some weaknesses in the tenor department — as some of the really bad voices one has become accustomed to hearing in routine productions at our great metropolitan opera houses. It was apparent that the audiences at Santa Fe were readily inclined to overlook the absence of great singing in favor of beautiful productions in which the acting was always excellent and the singing usually adequate, never really bad, and often extremely good.



The emphasis, in any event, was on the production of opera as opera, and not on the production of opera as the vehicle for virtuosi. One went to see and hear a first-class production of, say, a wonderful opera of Mozart, and never as an opportunity to hear, say, a wonderful prima donna use Mozart as a means to show off her voice. The star system will never get its foot in the door as long as Crosby has anything to say about it.

During the first season, the repertory consisted of seven operas: Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, Mozart's *Così fan tutti*, Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*, Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona* on a double bill with a new opera by Marvin Levy, *The Tower*, Richard Strauss' *Ariadne auf Naxos*, and — in honor of the composer's seventy-fifth birthday, being celebrated this year throughout the musical world — Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*.

It will be noted that, with the exception of *Butterfly*, none of these operas calls for an orchestra of symphonic, or nineteenth-century, proportions. The nucleus of the Santa Fe instrumental force is, in fact, the "Mozart orchestra" (woodwinds, brass, and tympani in pairs; strings in four parts), which, with the addition of extra instruments now and again — as for example two harps, celesta, and extra percussion in *Ariadne* — is all that is ever called for by an immense repertory of operas in many styles from all periods.

Composers writing for this eighteenth-century kind of orchestra ordinarily write the double-bass part to double with the cello, and in the thirty-two piece orchestra of the Santa Fe Opera, one instrument on the double-bass line is perfectly adequate — though they will have two next year. But in *The Rake's Progress*, in which Stravinsky deliberately adopts the instrumental and stylistic lay-out of the eighteenth-century opera, there occur a few measures in which the double-bass is divided and which a single instrument could of course not negotiate; so Stravinsky, always a practical composer (as was Mozart before him), obligingly re-wrote these measures for a better distribution of parts for this orchestra. In the case of *Butterfly*, a reduced instrumentation had to be employed, but probably only the most knowledgeable of opera buffs even noticed it.

Such adjustments, if absolutely necessary, will always be easy enough to manage without doing violence to the composer's intentions. But operas calling for an immense orchestral or choral apparatus can of course not be done at Santa Fe — at least under the present set-up; and Crosby therefore can only toss aside with a sigh the many letters he

gets from patrons urging him to do such of their favorite operas as *Elektra*, *Götterdämmerung*, *Aïda*, or *Boris Godounov*, but forgetting how many staves per page a big Strauss score actually contains, or how many Wagner-tubas it takes to accomplish the downfall of a pantheon, or the amount of Egyptians, Boyars, Peasants, and Muscovites necessary to make an acceptable brew of the doings on the banks of the Moskva or the Nile. He would like well enough to mount such operas, but they call for physical and financial resources beyond those of the Santa Fe Opera.

Crosby doesn't anticipate running out of suitable operas, however, for many years to come. Repertory for the 1958 season is still a closely guarded secret — for several perfectly good reasons. His standards are high, his tastes catholic, and for the future he will say only that every opera he puts on will be worth putting on for both dramatic and musical reasons, and every opera will be a good show; that he is committed to no particular periods, composers, styles; and that all he is interested in is excellence. He will always attempt a well-balanced repertory in any season, and he will always have at least one modern work and one American work every summer — though the latter two may, in the event, turn out to be the same piece. It is not outside the realm of possibility that the Santa Fe Opera Association will commission operas from American composers if necessary to get suitable American operas to perform.

All operas will be presented in English. The old argument about opera-in-English versus opera-in-its-original-language is rapidly becoming a dead issue in America in any case. No other country in the world dreams of performing operas in languages that the native opera-going population doesn't understand, and most opera singers, especially American opera singers, have long ago begun taking it for granted that if they were to sing anywhere but in the English-speaking countries, they must learn their rôles in more than one language. And since it always helps if an audience does not have to penetrate through several layers of accent to get to the words, the Santa Fe audiences have been fortunate in Crosby's selection of American-bred and -trained singers for his company, whose words are generally comprehensible even in the last row.

As more and more American lyric theatres, university and conservatory opera workshops, and even the Metropolitan itself, have taken to doing opera in English, a surprisingly large number of good modern translations of standard operas have sprung into being. Many exist in

published or mimeographed form, though some remain in manuscript or are otherwise hard to come by. Crosby tells of several cross-country plane trips he made before the production of *Ariadne on Naxos*, his lap covered with voice parts, inking in the English words so there would be enough English parts to go around among the cast once rehearsals began. But the lack of a good English translation will not prevent him from doing any opera he wants very much to do: he will simply commission the necessary translation from some qualified translator — though “simply” may not be quite the word if it be considered what is involved in making a good translation of an opera libretto.

The American work in this first summer’s repertory was *The Tower*, by Marvin Levy. A short work, it nevertheless revealed a young composer with a real talent for the operatic stage, and Levy could hardly have asked for a better production or a more appreciative audience.

But the most startling success of the season was the elegant production given Stravinsky’s *The Rake’s Progress*. Only one — but one of the greatest — of the great contemporary’s long catalogue of authentic masterpieces, the opera was not much of a success (it has even been called a flop) at the box office when the Metropolitan mounted it for the first time in 1953. The reasons for the failure of such an enchanting opera at the Met are not hard to find. One would certainly be the character of the typical Metropolitan audience, which these days does not like to trouble itself with anything new or unfamiliar and which, taken altogether, is probably not very much interested in opera as opera in any event, much preferring opera as the arena for the rivalries of coloraturas. But a more important cause for the failure of *The Rake* in such a house as the Metropolitan — which, incidentally, did give it an all-out production — lies in the nature of the work itself, fully revealed in the Santa Fe production. The piece is a chamber opera, a real masterwork in its genre, and it needs an intimate theatre of the Santa Fe kind in order for the marvelous organization of its musical detail, especially in the orchestra, and the subtleties of the Auden-Kallman libretto to get across to an audience.

Stravinsky himself journeyed to Santa Fe to supervise the production and was present in the audience for all performances, while his protégé and pupil, young Robert Craft, who has been making an enviable career for himself as a leading conductor and literary exponent of Stravinsky’s — as well as of much other significant contemporary — music, was in charge in the pit. The production was staged by Bliss Hebert, who was also responsible for the musical preparation of the cast in New York

before stage rehearsals began in Santa Fe, and it was designed by Patton Campbell. The program bore a note to the effect that the production was made possible through the generosity of André Senutovitch, a well-known Santa Fe patron of the arts. And what the audience saw, in the end, was a production notable for wit, beauty, originality, and the power to move.

Of course, it is a ravishing opera to begin with. Laid out on Mozartean lines, with recitative introducing scenas and other set pieces—arias, duets, and the like —, it is like Mozart also in its smooth interplay of continuously fascinating musical and stage action. The orchestra is always busy, something is always happening on stage; and Stravinsky, unlike some modern composers, can write a truly musical *recitativo secco*, so that it really does what it is supposed to do: in the dramatic sphere to advance the plot while functioning harmonically to bind or contrast the set-pieces. (The magnificent card scene is only one of the most telling examples in the opera of Stravinsky's fabulous skill and originality in the manipulation of recitative.)

The opera is an endless succession of the most ravishing melodic inventions and the most masterly orchestral writing, until the listener, with greater and greater astonishment as scene follows scene, begins to ask himself—as he has no doubt often asked himself about Mozart when Mozart was at his most fertile, his most inventive — how can a composer, even a Mozart, even a Stravinsky, keep it up like this without nodding, without flagging, without padding, without resorting to mechanical or automatic writing? Inspiration is not a bad word for it.

*The Rake's Progress* was an immense success with the Santa Fe audiences; every performance was sold out; and the record shops of Santa Fe, Los Alamos, and Albuquerque were swamped with calls for the Columbia record album of the Metropolitan's 1953 performance.

For that matter, nearly all performances of nearly all the operas in the repertory have been sell-outs; and even on nights on which the storm clouds gathered ominously around the peaks of the Jémez and the Sangre de Cristo, the audience turned up in force anyway, armed with raincoats. At one performance of *Ariadne*, it began to rain within a few minutes after the opening. While a part of the audience took shelter in the roofed foyer and the tympanist shifted his drums to cover, the rest of the audience, the orchestra, and the cast carried on under increasing difficulty, until, in the end, one young member of the cast, with great presence and lots of style, interpolated a line into her part asking Mr. Ackart, that eyening playing the speaking-part of the Major-Domo, if

he wouldn't please come back on-stage and make some kind of appropriate announcement. The audience laughed, the orchestra stopped playing, it was announced that the Weather Bureau would be called immediately, and the rain-coated die-hards took the opportunity for another cigaret. In fifteen minutes it had stopped raining, the performance was resumed — from the beginning again — and, so far as it is possible to determine, no one demanded his money back and no one went home.

Weather, however, is not likely to be much of a handicap to a summer opera festival in Santa Fe. Very few performances have had to be cancelled altogether on account of rain, and in those few cases extra performances were immediately scheduled for disappointed ticket-holders. On nights that threaten rain, the management operates by analogy with baseball games: if they get through an entire first act without being rained out, no rain checks are given. Santa Fe nights being what they are, many women wore what the society pages called "summer furs," and were probably comfortable in them; and the odor of mothballs was sometimes detectable around the tweedy types. Except for the opening night, very little formal dressing seemed to be done.

For the future, much depends upon the kind of financial backing the opera gets from the town of Santa Fe. Substantial support of this kind was a part of Crosby's thinking from the beginning. To get the thing started and to show what could be accomplished with intelligent planning and management, Crosby put up a considerable sum of his own money—educated guesses make this close to \$205,000. Additional funds were placed at Crosby's disposal by friends and associates from Santa Fe and elsewhere. His hope was that Santa Feans would recognize a good thing when they saw it and would be willing to carry the ball from that point on.

To this end, the Santa Fe Opera Association has been formed, with Walter R. Barker, a former Chicago industrialist now resident in Santa Fe, as president. A non-profit corporation, of which Crosby is neither a director nor a member but merely a contracted employee, the Association will undertake the financing of the season: the payment of salaries, utilities, supplies, and other expenses; the maintenance of the theatre; the purchase of costumes; and general operations. Funds for these obligations will come from ticket sales and private donations received from the public. Crosby and his associates are employed by the Association to exercise complete artistic control.

All indications are that Santa Fe put aside in very short order its scepticism about the practical success of the venture and has taken the Opera firmly to its heart. The personal expenditures of a well-paid opera company of almost ninety (including wives and children), living for nine or ten weeks in Santa Fe, run into the thousands of dollars alone: for these people are in a sense tourists themselves, coming as they do mostly from the East, and their purchases, beyond rent and food, are the kinds of things that strangers buy in Santa Fe, ranging all the way from camera film to fiesta dresses and expensive jewelry. The opera company itself spends heavily in Santa Fe for such diverse items as labor, services, transportation and storage, dry-cleaning of costumes, materials, and so forth. Even their purchases of electric light bulbs are significantly large.

And none of these expenditures, of course, takes into consideration the outlay by the hundreds of people who are attracted to Santa Fe directly by the opera — “a better class of spenders,” as one Santa Fe businessman, reportedly rubbing his hands together with satisfaction, is said to have characterized them: people who need good hotel and motel rooms, meals in restaurants, taxis to the theatre, and who are more likely than not to decide to stick around for a few days of sight-seeing and buying.

The amount of money changing hands in Santa Fe as the result of the establishment of the opera festival is, of course, impressive. But much more impressive in the minds of Santa Feans and New Mexicans is the artistic achievement of John Crosby and those who have worked with him to realize an ideal from which all will benefit in ways not to be measured by dollar signs.