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To Opera With Love: A Daughter's Loving 'Serenade' to the Memory of Her Parents

“My parents had lived a beautiful love story. I would write a novel about the two of them. It would be a love story on the scale of “Gone With the Wind,” a period piece with descriptive settings and grand balls, and the underlying theme would be music. The reader would be able to hear it and feel it as he or she read the narrative and dialogue.”



[EDITOR'S NOTE: Carol Jean Delmar contacted OperaOnline.us a few weeks ago because like so many other opera enthusiasts she had seen our website and liked what she saw. After a brief introduction she asked if I might be able to recommend a publisher interested in taking a look at her novel "Serenade", described below. We spoke long distance for nearly an hour about opera and her background and opera and my background, and in the course of our conversation she conveyed to me a love story about her parents and her journey around the world researching her father's opera life and her parents' lives together. This was clearly more than a love story; it was an adventure, penned by someone intimately knowledgeable about singing and the opera world. While I couldn't help with a publisher, I told her I could help put her name in front of an opera audience -- and who knows? When I learned that she had written about opera in Los Angeles, I asked if she would be interested in writing for OperaOnline.us on a regular basis to give us a glimpse of opera on the West Coast. She agreed and this month marks her debut with the article below. She will soon be reviewing LA Opera's "Madama Butterfly", and provide us with an occasional article, interview and reviews as they come

due. We welcome Carol Jean (Carie to her friends) and hope our readers will enjoy her perspective and find her style as seductive as her story.]

By Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us
January 1, 2006

It was finished. I had finally completed my manuscript after more than three years, and I loved it. What's more, I believed that the opera world would thank me for it, too. Just three years before, my father told me that I didn't have faith in myself, but he knew I had it in me, and he was right. When I read him the final line, he cried. But then he grew ill, and the novel was put on the back burner. "He" was all that counted. And when he slipped away, I buried him with the manuscript by his side, and promised him that his story would be told. I am still grieving over his loss but my novel, and the memories of writing it, continue to give me sustenance, for it is a serenade to him that I have written. Alas! The title: "Serenade."

My journey began a few years after my mother died. I wanted to write a novel but couldn't think up a story line. Then it just came to me one day. My parents had lived a beautiful love story. I would write a novel about the two of them. It would be a love story on the scale of "Gone With the Wind," a period piece with descriptive settings and grand balls, and the underlying theme would be music. The reader would be able to hear it and feel it as he or she read the narrative and dialogue.

My father had been an opera singer in Vienna, Austria in the 1930's. I would have him sing the words from the operas that were part of his repertoire in the theaters where he had actually sung them. I would fictionalize his story since he had never become famous, but I would throw in confrontations between him and some of the real operatic greats of that era, like Alexander Kipnis and Jussi Björling. I would follow my parents' path from Vienna and Prague to Zürich, Milan, parts of Venezuela, Panama and Cuba, and to the United States. I would travel to all of these places, and I would describe how my father's voice had helped him escape Hitler's grasp to start a new life with my mother in America.

First my father taped the story of his life for me and I transcribed it. Then he gave me his and my mother's passports and numerous documents, many of which were tattered and worn with age, including his diploma from the renowned Neues Wiener Konservatorium, the famous Vienna Conservatory housed at that time in the Musikverein building.

He also gave me letters from his colleagues and the agents who had set up engagements for him throughout the world. There was one from André Mertins of Columbia Concerts Corporation, now CAMI, one of the top opera agencies in the world. Another was signed by Nelly Walter, who worked with Mertins and later launched the careers of many famous opera stars. There were letters from Met and New York City Opera conductor Thomas P. Martin and his wife Ruth, who had translated numerous operas into English

for G. Schirmer, Inc. Thomas Martin was the son of Arthur Fleischer, the renowned Kammersänger who had taught my father privately and at the Conservatory. And one letter was even signed by the famous baritone, Lawrence Tibbett.

But my father's career was cut short when the power and quality of his voice mysteriously began to disappear. He was in Cuba at the time, in an internment camp called Tiscornia. As I unraveled his history, I became saddened. His life would have been so different had his voice remained. He would have no doubt sung roles for bass-baritones, character baritones and basso buffos at the Met. His repertoire included Mozart's Figaro and Papageno; Rossini's Dr. Bartolo; Wagner's Beckmesser, Alberich and Klingsor; and Verdi's elder Germont. But his first love was German Lieder: Brahms' "Vier ernste Gesänge" and Schubert's "Der Erlkönig" and "An die Musik." Once in the United States, he went to numerous doctors to revive his gifted voice. But not even Dr. Mayer-Hermann, throat specialist to the stars, nor Dr. Henry Williams of Mayo Clinic could help him.



One of the many places her father sang, the neoclassical 1888 Statni Opera House, Praha in the Czech Republic.

I decided to research my story to make the settings in my manuscript accurate. But as I traveled from Prague to Vienna to Zürich and Milan, Venezuela, Panama and Cuba, I discovered my heritage as well. At each stop, I telephoned my dad, and he directed me to the places he and my mother had frequented. Many of the theaters' names had been changed, but I searched and found them anyway: the New German Theater in Prague (now the Státní Opera Praha); the Stadttheater in Aussig, the small Czech city north of Prague which was then part of the German Sudetenland (now the State Theater in Ústí Nad Labem); the Wiener Staatsoper, Volksoper and Stadttheater Baden bei Wien; and even the Cine Salom, a remote open-air theater in an even more remote Puerto Cabello in Venezuela. I felt as if I were a detective. The taxicab drivers didn't even know where Bad Vöslau was, the home of thermal spas in Vienna. But they did know where the Lobau was, a sunbathing area for lovers along the Danube River -- one of my hideaways. I even found the Café Mánes, the site of my parents' wedding party; and the area which was once Tiscornia, the internment camp in Havana where my parents had been sequestered. I visited all of the places where they'd lived, and I saw my father's name on the list of students who had studied voice at the Vienna Conservatory. I traveled and wrote and

traveled and wrote, feeling compelled to complete what I thought would become my legacy.

I believe that what makes my manuscript so special and moving is far more than the many descriptive passages within it. It is written with a voice that comes tenderly from the heart. The story accurately depicts the life of a young opera singer, and even touches on the basics of vocal technique, though I realize after much research that there is diversity of thought on the subject and that no two opera singers approach their instrument in quite the same way. My protagonist does not merely sing on various stages throughout the world. Each performance places him in a different situation influenced by the politics and happenings around him.

One might call my novel a Holocaust drama, but it is not. It uses music to create an autobiographical, historical love story that spans three-quarters of a century. There is nothing like it around, and because of that, I have been told that it may be difficult for me to find a publisher. Opera doesn't seem to be a sexy subject these days. However, I beg to disagree. I believe that my novel will no doubt expand the opera public and bring in new audiences. It will be read by those who want to read a love story, but may then discover that they have the desire to buy an opera ticket as well. Maybe some of them will be as grateful as I am to have made opera their friend. It has always been there for me and has rarely let me down; well, maybe once in awhile, but then again, there has always been another performance thereafter.

(Writer Carol Jean Delmar has recently completed her first novel, "Serenade," and is giving OperaOnline.us an exclusive preview as she seeks publication. She has worked as a freelance writer specializing in entertainment and education, and as a reporter, publicist and actress. She holds degrees in theater arts and psychology and has also studied voice, piano and ballet.)