

The Canadian Opera Volunteer Committee Celebrates 60 Years of Commitment

for the Love of Opera

By Mai Kirch

The year was 1947 – March 20th to be precise. The place was Toronto’s Royal Conservatory residence. In attendance were Dr. Ettore Mazzoleni, Dr. Arnold Walter, and Jean Chalmers with her group of resolute women, 35 in all, who had gathered for the inaugural meeting of the Opera and Concert Committee of the Royal Conservatory of Music of Toronto. Thus was born one of the longest standing volunteer organizations in Canada, the Canadian Opera Volunteer Committee.

2007 marks the 60th anniversary of this venerable committee. It also marks 57 years since the founding of the Canadian Opera Company (COC), in 1950, as the Opera Festival Association of Toronto, thus establishing its independence from the Royal Conservatory of the University of Toronto.

Did the COVC or its predecessor really predate the founding of the COC? Yes, it did. Moreover, it was instrumental in helping to launch, in 1950, an opera company which would be independent of The University of Toronto’s Royal Conservatory. The latter had started to train opera singers in 1946 with the arrival, in Toronto, of a 38-year-old in search of a new challenge, Nicholas Goldschmidt. Operatic excerpts were produced at Hart House Theatre within a few months of his arrival. By 1947, performances, in English, had moved to Eaton Auditorium. Then came a daring leap, an eight-day festival of three operas at the Royal Alexandra Theatre in February 1950. Nicholas Goldschmidt and Herman Geiger-Torel conducted and directed all three.

The women’s committee, by now in its third year, surprised all naysayers who had predicted that opera could not be sold in Toronto, by selling out the house for the festival. At the same time, they worked furiously behind the scenes, painting sets, making costumes, creating props, or fetching them from their own living rooms to the delight of friends who often recognized them and their provenance. Then, on

performance nights, when their “job descriptions” called for glamour, these pioneer promoters of opera came clad in their designer gowns, adding sparkle and wit to an opera festival that was to become the launching pad for a new company.

By October 1950, Torel and Goldschmidt, realizing that further support from the university for another festival was unlikely, submitted their plan for an independent opera company. Start-up pledges had already come in from two Toronto businessmen, J. D. Woods (\$5,000) and James Duncan (\$1,000). Neither was a passionate opera lover but both were civic minded and saw the need for a local, even a national, opera company. The university essentially viewed opera productions as being beyond its mandate and hence decreed that if an independent company were to be formed, it would have to raise \$18,000 and do so within 48 hours! The need for such haste was not apparent but Goldschmidt and a number of opera supporters, mainly women, swung into action. Within hours, they gathered at the Goldschmidt residence to frame a response. Mrs. Lorimer Massie and Mrs. Robert Dale-Harris (daughter of actor Leslie Howard) took on the immediate task of raising \$12,000 on top of the Woods and Duncan pledges. Also involved were Jean Chalmers and Sheila Fraser, wife of Nicholas Goldschmidt. Toronto lawyer John Godfrey, later senator, was enlisted to prepare the papers of incorporation. It was a very astonished Ettore Mazzoleni at the Royal Conservatory who received, the following day, both the pledges for \$18,000 and the new company’s provincial charter. The first opera company in Canada was born, although in their excitement, the various midwives had overlooked a name. In haste, then, it was christened The Opera Festival Association of Toronto, a name that was to last legally until 1960.

The first season of the new opera company was



PHOTOGRAPHY BY CAVOUK

Cavouk

Portrait of
Jean A. Chalmers
(Date unknown).

subsequently announced for February, 1951, a season consisting of three operas including *Madama Butterfly*. The now legendary Suzanne Mess well recalls the challenge of working with a rental costuming house to put on that first production. She had just completed an apprenticeship in New York and had returned to Toronto looking for work when costume designer Stewart Bagnani opened the door for her arrival at the new opera company. Mess joined the forerunner of the COVC in 1954 and was honoured in 2005 as a 50-year member.

Through the intervening years, the commitment of the committee to opera in Canada, and to the COC, never wavered, though its name changed a few times to reflect changing circumstances. In 1952, for example, the focus shifted away from the concert component and a new name was adopted –

Women's Opera Committee of the Royal Conservatory of Music. In 1959, it became the Canadian Opera Women's Committee (COWC) and in 2001 the Canadian Opera Volunteer Committee (COVC), thus reflecting the committee's desire to include both men and women in its membership. The committee's activities have, of course, varied widely over the decades, but the one constant for many years was the opera ball, first held in 1963 when performances had moved to the newly opened O'Keefe Centre. There are still committee members who recall dancing with the very dashing Prime Minister, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, at the Opera Ball of 1968. One member sheepishly admitted that she would have been ready to leave her husband if Pierre, while twirling her around on the dance floor, had asked her to do so!


1968 was considered by many to have been a "euphoric year" for the committee. In addition to the opera ball, it opened The Full Scale Shop at 608A Markham St. to handle year round sales for the benefit of the COC. It also held a three-day symposium on opera which brought together 150 delegates from across the continent and flew in the editor of the British magazine *Opera* as guest speaker. To cap off a remarkable year, it also held a series of apparently hilarious study groups on two newly commissioned Canadian operas inspired by Centennial Year, *Louis Riel* and *The Luck of Ginger Coffey*, which included participation by Harry Somers and Mavor Moore, as well as an appearance by Riel himself, Bernard Turgeon.

Although the opera ball has been the major annual fundraiser, the COVC has raised substantial funds on

performance nights through its popular art sale and opera shop, as well as special projects. A long-time COC subscriber, appearing at the art sale table a few years ago, candidly stated, "My husband comes for the opera; I come for the art sale." In addition to its very substantial annual donation to the COC, individual committee members have generously supported, for many years, an opera performance during the spring season, or even an entire production as was the case with Rossini's *Tancredi* in April 2005. A key component of the committee's work continues to be the awarding of scholarships to deserving students in opera. These were first established in 1952, and now total over 30 each year. Past winners who have or had major international careers include Russell Braun, Victor Braun, Frances Ginzer, Ben Heppner,

Ermanno Mauro, Adrienne Piczonka and Gino Quilico. The COVC also honors its founding president by giving the \$10,000 Jean A. Chalmers Award to a promising young Canadian singer chosen in open competition. Our winner this year was soprano Marianne Fiset of Quebec City.

During the capital campaign for the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, the COVC made a major donation, under a matching grants program, in support of the new house. The COC has suitably recognized this donation on plaques in the City Room. It has recognized, too, the long term cumulative donations by the COVC by including it in its honorary E. Louise Morgan Society along with other major donors and foundations contributing a total of more than \$1 million over the past 15 years. The COVC's donations to the COC now exceed \$6 million.

It is humbling for any of us on the Committee today to reflect on the vital role played by its members for 60 years in helping to launch and then to support the COC into the 21st century. Let's raise a toast to all committee members on whose shoulders we stand and resolve never to forget the role they have played. We salute, too, the entire staff of the COC as you move into a challenging second year at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, and look forward to an ever stronger partnership as the new era unfolds. May this season fulfil the late Richard Bradshaw's hope that it represent "a significant advance in our journey to becoming one of the really great opera companies of the world." 

Chronology of Names:

1947
Opera and Concert
Committee of the
Royal Conservatory of
Music of Toronto

1952
Women's Opera
Committee of the
Royal Conservatory of
Music

1959
Canadian Opera
Women's Committee

2001
Canadian Opera
Volunteer Committee