

THE IMPRESARIO-EVANGELIST

Cincinnati Opera's Evans Mirageas talks to Janelle Gelfand

On a snowy morning more than four months before the start of Cincinnati Opera's summer festival season, Evans Mirageas was trumpeting the company's 90th anniversary season to a group of senior citizens. His lecture, punctuated by his favourite musical examples, mesmerized listeners in an extended learning class at the University of Cincinnati. He would repeat the talk later in the evening for an 'Opera Rap' at the city's Music Hall, part of a series of lectures to enlighten opera-goers in the fine points of opera.

Five years into his tenure, Mirageas, who has been the artistic director of the Cincinnati Opera since 2005, is putting the finishing touches to the celebratory season this summer that will include an all-star gala concert with Christine Brewer, Angela Brown, Denyce Graves and Richard Leech heralding each of the company's nine decades, and an ambitious production of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. In a coup for Cincinnati Opera, he managed to get Cincinnati's most celebrated son, James Levine, to conduct both. 'I talk to Jimmy nearly every week,' he tells his audience. 'We're going to throw ourselves one heck of a party—for you.'

Perhaps more than any of his predecessors, Mirageas understands the importance of exciting the public about opera. He is part impresario and part evangelist: hands-on, visible and enthusiastic, whether contributing insights to an intermission panel on a Metropolitan Opera radio broadcast, or downing hot dogs with opera patrons at a Cincinnati Reds

■ *'This boy's got it!': Marco Caria with James Morris in last year's Cincinnati Opera production of 'Don Carlos'*



baseball game. And he is one of a breed of artistic directors in America, who, like Peter Gelb at the Metropolitan Opera, does not come from the world of opera.

Although his home base is Minnetrista, Minnesota, he has bought a flat in downtown Cincinnati. He loves that the locals are passionate about opera. 'I was standing at the corner of Seventh and Race, when a little blue sedan came racing by, trying to make it through the light, and a woman looked at my face, waved and yelled, "Loved *Etoile!*" and continued on her way.'

When it was announced that he would succeed Nicholas Muni, Mirageas said that he would be pursuing the impresario's model. Cincinnati is his first artistic directorship. He was uniquely positioned for the job, having had vast experience as a radio broadcast and record producer as well as artistic adviser for many of the country's opera companies and symphony orchestras. He remains an independent consultant, and in 2007 added artistic adviser to the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra to his CV. Through the 1990s, when he worked as Senior Vice-President for Artists and Repertoire of the Decca Record

Company in London, he supervised the recording activities of Pavarotti, Gheorghiu, Bartoli, Fleming, Terfel and many others. 'Even in the turmoil of the demise of the record business, we signed Renée Fleming, which was my choice, Angela Gheorghiu, Andreas Scholl, we gave Juan Diego Flórez his very first recording, Matthias Goerne ...' Mirageas ticks off the list. 'I was happy that I was able to preserve and enrich Decca's greatest legacy, its opera tradition.' A year after his first Cincinnati season, *Opera News* named him one of the '25 Most Powerful Names in US Opera'.

It is fitting that Cincinnati Opera, the second-oldest company in the United States, is celebrating its 90th season with *Die Meistersinger*. Cincinnati, a genteel city on the Ohio River, possesses a rich heritage for singing that began with waves of German immigrants in the mid-19th century. They brought with them classical music and, especially, German singing societies. Mirageas had hoped for a multimillion-dollar new production of *Meistersinger* that would be updated to 1878—the year that Music Hall was built—and set in Over-the-Rhine, an old German neighbourhood close to the city centre that once flourished with German shops and beer gardens. When stock markets crashed 18 months ago, the company had to abandon the idea. Instead, almost by serendipity, it was able to purchase a production from the Deutsche Oper am Rhein in Düsseldorf, designed by Otto Schenk and Günther Schneider-Siemssen, the same team that designed the Met's lavish 1993 production. The opera, directed by Chris Alexander, will star James Morris, who started out with Cincinnati Opera performing his signature role of Hans Sachs; Hei-Kyung



■ Evans Mirageas at Cincinnati's Music Hall



■ *At the Zoo: Cincinnati Opera in its previous home*

Hong as Eva; Richard Margison as Walther; and Thomas Allen as Beckmesser.

Mirageas hopes to present more German opera, especially Wagner. ‘I had a real epiphany at age 27, because I went to work in Chicago at WFMT (classical radio) in 1982, and one of the first things I was assigned to do was to spend three weeks at Bayreuth, because Solti was conducting his first, and sadly only, *Ring* cycle there,’ he notes with a broad grin. ‘It was a dream assignment. The trouble was, I hated Wagner. I went and I fell in love with what I felt was the true essence.’

Besides producing the national radio broadcasts of the Lyric Opera of Chicago, Mirageas got to know Levine, then the music director of the Ravinia Festival, summer home of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. In 1989, when Mirageas became artistic administrator of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, where he worked closely with Seiji Ozawa, he convinced Levine to come to Boston to guest conduct. Later, at Decca, where Levine was recording, Mirageas oversaw many of his projects. They have remained in touch.

Nevertheless, he was floored when Levine called him in the middle of the night in Vienna—where Mirageas was scouting for an Eva for *Meistersinger*—to chat about Cincinnati’s upcoming seasons. Levine mentioned that he loved *Meistersinger*, and when he offered to come and conduct it, Mirageas said he thought that someone was playing a joke on him. It’s possible that Levine knew about Mirageas’s successes from his mother, Helen Levine, who lives in Cincinnati and will be 95 in May. ‘She’s the Duracell bunny. We’re dedicating the performances to her. And opening night is Jimmy’s birthday. And the next day is Johannestag, the day on which the opera is supposed to take place,’ Mirageas beams. The stars have aligned. ‘It’s my lucky star, that’s for sure,’ he says.

Mirageas is the first to admit that he knew nothing about the nuts and bolts of mounting opera when he arrived. He is accustomed to learning by fire. For instance, when he joined Decca in 1994, he feared that, as an American, he would be viewed with suspicion. In order to ingratiate himself to his new colleagues, he decided what he had to do was make tea. ‘I went to my first recording session in San Francisco, entered the control room, and in the corner were the makings for tea. Everybody was a little bit nervous. I asked, ‘Who wants tea?’ And I made tea. I wasn’t there to produce the recording, so I made the tea.’

It was a life lesson that he learned growing up, the son of Greek-Americans in Ann Arbor, Michigan. His father gave him his first job at age 11, working in the family print shop. When Evans excitedly showed up for work, his dad handed him a mop and bucket and said he would be the janitor for the first two weeks. ‘You will do the most menial job and you’ll do it well and then maybe you’ll move up,’ he was told. ‘So I made the tea when I came to Cincinnati Opera,’ he says. Glenn Plott, the company’s director of production, gave him a crash course in production and he spent hours learning the craft with stagehands.

The general director and CEO Patricia Beggs noted that when she asked Mirageas to be artistic adviser—never thinking that he would become a candidate for artistic director—‘he seemed to really “get” us. He understood who Cincinnati Opera is. He did his homework. He read about the history, and talked to people who have performed here, including Domingo,’ she says. ‘We’ve been a presenter of grand opera, but we’re also known for innovation going back to the 1920s at the Zoo, and also in the radio broadcasts

■ Beverly Sills as *Elisabetta* in ‘*Roberto Devereux*’ at Cincinnati Music Hall, 1974



and new works we've presented over the years. We were the second company to present Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah* with Phyllis Curtin, Julius Rudel and Norman Treigle. We were the second in the country to do surtitles. Evans understood all that.'

Cincinnati's Music Hall, the company's current home, is a gracious, monumental edifice often described architecturally as 'sauerbraten Byzantine'. It was built in 1878 for the Cincinnati May Festival, a choral extravaganza that is still mounted each May and conducted by James Conlon. But when Cincinnatians first decided to form their own opera company, spurred by touring companies and the rise of the Met in New York, they chose the most unlikely of places—a pavilion at the Cincinnati Zoo.

Founded in 1920, the opera gave employment to the musicians of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra in the summertime. Beverly Sills made her debut warbling all three roles—Olympia, Giulietta and Antonia—in *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, and Martina Arroyo performed her first Aida. It was where Levine inhaled opera scores as a chubby pre-teen, where Norman Treigle, Montserrat Caballé, Jan Peerce, Italo Tajo, James Morris, Richard Tucker and Shirley Verrett regularly competed with shrieking peacocks and baboons, to the delight of the summertime crowds.

Sherrill Milnes and Roberta Peters, who met her husband in Cincinnati one summer, will no doubt reminisce about those years when they return to host the gala concert conducted by Levine, Edoardo Müller and Steven Reineke on June 19. In 1972, the company moved indoors to a newly renovated Music Hall, seating 3,417 in air-conditioned comfort, thanks to the largesse of two of Cincinnati's most devoted patrons of the arts, Patricia A. and J. Ralph Corbett. The new curtain opened to Boito's *Mefistofele* conducted by Julius Rudel, with Treigle in the title role.

James de Blasis reigned from 1968 to 1996, first as resident stage director, then general director and finally artistic director. He expanded the repertoire, tried musical theatre (which flopped), and mixed grand opera with the occasional curiosity such as Weinberger's *Schwanda the Bagpiper*. Then came Nicholas Muni, who challenged audiences with cutting-edge productions. The board doubled the budget, hoping to expand the repertoire, and the theatre was improved. Muni's *Jenufa* is still talked about as one of the most brilliant productions ever mounted in the Queen City.

A high point was the company's co-commission of *Margaret Garner*, a true local story of a fugitive slave who committed infanticide rather than have her child live in bondage, set to music by Richard Danielpour with a libretto by Nobel laureate Toni Morrison.

During Mirageas's first five years, Cincinnati has benefited from his connections, as well as a casting ability that has brought top-flight conductors as well as singers. One of the highlights of last season was a *Nozze di Figaro* conducted by Roger Norrington.

When it comes to working with singers, Mirageas highlights two things that have prepared him. The first is living with a singer, the baritone Thomas Dreeze, his partner of 29 years. The second was observing Ardis Krainik, the general director of Lyric Opera of Chicago, during his years at WFMT. 'Ardis taught me how to treat artists. She had a personal touch that was at once maternal and authoritative. Like the attribution once applied to Renata Tebaldi, she had dimples of steel,' he says.

That philosophy was put to the test while working with the Boston Symphony at Tanglewood. The diva Kathleen Battle was about to go on to sing scenes from *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, when she put her hands to her ears and discovered she had forgotten her earrings. Without them, she could not sing. 'I said, "Kathy, where are they?" "In my jewellery case on top of my dresser—the ones with pearls."' I'm very athletic. I sprinted



■ *Kelley O'Connor, Dawn Upshaw and Jessica Rivera in 'Ainadamar' at Cincinnati Opera last year*

to swoop up the earrings, sprinted back, handed them to her and she said, “You’re the best”. She was a pussycat. Why did I do it? Because I recognized that she needed at that very moment something very mundane, but something very important to her. And that’s how I treat all artists, whether it’s the youngest apprentice or Renée Fleming.’

Cincinnati audiences have been treated to young stars, such as Nicole Cabell, before they have gone on to the Met and Covent Garden. Mirageas discovered Cabell when she was the final singer he heard in Chicago during a dreary day of auditions. ‘You hear someone in an audition and think, that’s it. It’s difficult to describe. Ask any movie casting director. They can spend hours and ultimately it comes down to, you start to cry or you feel something in your gut and think, I’ll pay money to hear that.’

It happened again in his first season, when, on the recommendation of Seattle Opera’s Speight Jenkins, someone Mirageas considers a mentor, the ‘total unknown’ Antonello Palombi walked in to rehearse Cavaradossi opposite Aprile Millo’s *Tosca*. He only had to hear ‘*Dammi i colori*’ and Mirageas knew: ‘That’s the guy.’ Palombi will return this summer to sing the title role in *Otello*, directed by Bernard Uzan and conducted by Robert Spano. Singing Desdemona (and making her US debut) is the Italian soprano Maria Luigia Borsi, another talent to watch, Mirageas believes.

And last season, when the young baritone Marco Caria sang his first Rodrigo in *Don Carlos*, Mirageas’s gut feeling was again confirmed. ‘At the end of the first rehearsal, the room was totally silent. These were big dogs—James Morris, Angela Brown, Michelle DeYoung and Richard Buckley. They all went, “Wow, this boy’s got it!” ... For me, when you recognize that your faith in a talent has been justified—those are the

most significant moments.' Caria will return as Marcello in Jonathan Miller's new *Bohème*, co-production with English National Opera and set in 1930s Paris. Mimì and Rodolfo will be sung by the husband and wife, Stephen Costello and Ailyn Pérez.

It has not been easy to mount opera in the midst of the worst economy since the Great Depression. Last season, the company had to find a way to slash a quarter-of-a-million dollars from its usual four-production season. Mirageas and Beggs decided the least painless cut would be to abandon the Peter Sellars-directed, Gronk-designed production of Osvaldo Golijov's *Ainadamar* in favour of a concert staging. Bringing the colourful orchestra onstage with the cast, which included Dawn Upshaw, turned out to be a stroke of genius.

A more painful cut would have been losing the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. That possibility loomed until a recent gift made by another arts angel, the 98-year-old Louise Nippert. Her \$85-million endowment ensures that the orchestra, the nation's fifth oldest, remains in Cincinnati Opera's pit in perpetuity.

After the curtain falls on its 90th season, Cincinnati Opera will face more uncertainty, when it is forced to vacate, as Music Hall, its home since 1972, undergoes major renovations. For two seasons, the company will mount opera in a much newer Broadway house downtown. Nevertheless, Mirageas is rubbing his hands at the possibilities. He's the impresario and he's happy doing it. 'Someone asked me, "So you're the artistic director of Cincinnati Opera. Do you conduct? Do you direct? Do you sing?" No, I said, I hire. That's my job.'

This year's Cincinnati season runs from June 19 to July 25. See p. 88 for a listing.

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