



**CURTAIN UP** Cincinnati  
Opera Artistic Director  
Evans Mirageas, photo-  
graphed at Music Hall,  
May 30, 2007.

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# Remaking THE GRAND OLD OPERA

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Can Cincinnati Opera maintain its reputation for producing contemporary works and attracting top-notch talent?

Evans Mirageas thinks he knows the answer.

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By Kathleen Doane  
Photographs By Jonathan Willis

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**evans** Mirageas's mouth curls into an impish grin as he leans across the table, lightly places his hand on a lunch companion's arm, and shares behind-the-scenes stories of conductors, singers, memorable productions, and the circuitous career path that brought him to Cincinnati Opera as the company's artistic director. It's the kind of gesture that can make a new acquaintance feel like an old friend—even a confidant—after only a few minutes. While the particularly bad behavior is related without names attached, there is still enough substance to spin some entertaining tales.

Like, for instance, the singer who insisted that for outdoor summer concerts, someone walk backwards in front of her spraying Evian water. "I have the contract to prove that," Mirageas says, laughing. Or the time legendary diva Kathleen Battle was ready to go onstage at Tanglewood with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, only to realize that she had forgotten her gold earrings. "I can't go on without my earrings," she told everyone within earshot, including Mirageas, who was artistic administrator to BSO music director Seiji Ozawa at the time.

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**“I said, ‘Ms. Battle, where are your earrings?’”** After she pinpointed their location in her dressing table, Mirageas sprinted off to retrieve them. “I grabbed those earrings and got back just as the applause was beginning, and she clipped them on, smiled, and said, ‘You’re the best.’”

It’s late February and the opening of Cincinnati Opera’s 2007 season is four months away, but Mirageas is busy with production meetings, working out the technical details for four separate operas, conferring with costume and set designers, and juggling the multitude of details that he says makes opera “the most complicated form of entertainment to produce next to making a movie.” He pauses to take a bite of his salad. “Or maybe Cirque du Soleil—and basically, that’s opera without singing.”

The man would know. Short of taking on a role himself, Mirageas, who is 52, has immersed himself in the world of opera—as a radio host covering classical music, as an orchestral administrator, as a record producer to operatic superstars, and as an arts consultant, checking out singers around the world. “It’s a juggling act, balancing the temperaments of the performers onstage and the performers you don’t see, from the captain of the supers to the conductor to the guy running the flies,” he says. “We all have to be supremely confident people.” What he says next makes it clear that he’s comfortable in that world of healthy egos. “It’s the biggest thrill of my life, full stop.”

And that surprises even him. It took some serious arm-twisting by Cincinnati Opera General Director and CEO Patty Beggs to convince Mirageas to take the job. He was quite happy with the life of a consultant, hopping from continent to continent to solve some arts organization’s crisis. “I wasn’t looking for a full-time job,” he says. Lucky for us, he changed his mind.

This month CO presents James Robinson’s production of *Nixon in China*, which premiered at Opera Theatre of St. Louis in 2004. *Nixon in China* is not your normal opera. Based on Richard Nixon’s historic meeting with Chairman Mao Tse-tung in 1972, which reconnected China to the West after years of hostility and diplomatic deep freeze, it is known as a “CNN opera.” The story taps into what was going on behind the scenes during Nixon’s visit as well as what happened in front of the cameras. “Recordings of conversations that have now become public show how uncannily close to reality the action portrayed onstage is,” Mirageas says. This is especially true in the final scene, where the Nixons and the Maos are seen in their respective bedrooms, reflecting on the events of the previous days. As Mirageas puts it,

“You literally see these characters in their physical and psychological undressed states.”

The opera has been performed all over the world since its 1987 premiere; three years ago, the CO’s artistic planning committee (Beggs; Marcus Kuchle, director of artistic operations; Glenn Plott, director of production; and Chris Milligan, director of marketing and audience development) decided it was time local audiences had the chance to hear it for themselves.

It was a choice in keeping with the commitment to perform contemporary operas that departing artistic director Nic Muni had established during his tenure—a commitment CO management has pledged to continue. It was also a piece Mirageas heartily endorsed when he arrived on the scene. Having witnessed its birth—attending early rehearsals and talking at length with composer John Adams about the challenges he faced when he sat down to write it back in the early 1980s—it exemplifies a number of things Mirageas values when it comes to opera. Though contemporary in its repetitive, minimalist musical style, the score is nonetheless grounded in tradition—lush orchestral moments and ensemble singing. It’s also packed with grand gestures and big dramatic moments, and perhaps most important, shows off the kind of musical innovation that Mirageas believes defines contemporary opera at its best.

The test will come this season: Will patrons who want a steady diet of classic operas show up? During Muni’s

**THIN RED LINE** *The Red Guard on the march in a scene from the 2004 St. Louis Opera production of Nixon in China (top); Robert Orth, Nancy Allen Lundy, and Mark Duffin in the Portland Opera production of Nixon in China. Orth is considered the leading interpreter of the role of Richard Nixon.*



tenure, some longtime subscribers dropped out because they disagreed with his choices. Does Mirageas have the magic formula that will win those folks back and attract the next generation of patrons, who tend to want edgier productions? Beggs and the board believe he does. Mirageas seems to think so too.

**Mirageas' artistic** journey has been far from a direct path. It began with a combination of musical influences that pervaded his family home in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in the 1960s and early '70s. There was the Greek dance music that his grandmother introduced him to and Saturday afternoon Metropolitan Opera broadcasts. Then there were the show tunes.

"On Saturday morning, my father would open all the doors and windows and put five LPs of Broadway shows on the record changer while we were doing our chores," he says. It must have been quite a sight: Mirageas and his three siblings doing yard work to the strains of "I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Out of My Hair." The changer made for some disjointed listening, with side one of *My Fair Lady* followed by side two of *South Pacific* followed by side one of *West Side Story*. "It took a few years to sort out which song went with which show," he says.

Mirageas's middle school orchestra director, Gabriel Villaserta, introduced the young clarinetist to classical music, and when Mirageas wanted to learn more, sent him to Liberty Music Shop in downtown Ann Arbor. Mirageas started working there when he was 13. Wittingly or not, then-owner Gairt Mauerhoff set the young man on his circuitous path to a career in opera when he suggested that Mirageas listen to *The Pearl Fishers* by Georges Bizet, the composer best known for *Carmen*. "He was very clever," Mirageas says. "It had gorgeous orchestral moments he knew that I would love, as well as gorgeous melodies for the tenor and soprano." When he went off to college at the University of Michigan, another piece of the puzzle fell into place. Shortly after he arrived on campus—where his course of study merged journalism with art and music history and speech—he got a part-time job as an announcer at the university's NPR-affiliated classical radio station, WUOM-FM. It wasn't long before his love for radio matched his passion for music, and when he graduated in 1976, he went full-time at WUOM. There, he crossed paths with superstars, including conductor Eugene Ormandy.

Two years after he graduated, Mirageas saw The Metropolitan Opera's touring production of *Boris Godunov* with Jerome Hines in the lead. Nearly 30 years later, he still gets excited when he describes what he saw. "I had studied the opera before I went," he says. "When the first scene came to a close, you're in the square for the coronation but there was no Boris. Then suddenly this huge brocaded carpet on the stage stood up! It was Hines in his coronation robe. He had been lying flat on the stage praying, but you were totally unaware that he was there. The entire audience gasped, and I decided

right there, that if this is what opera is all about, I wanted to be around it."

It would take him a few years to get there. By 1982, he had caught the attention of Norman Pellegrini, program director and on-air host for Chicago's WFMT-FM, considered by many to be the country's leading classical music station at the time. The station was looking for someone to develop, produce, and host a new national radio series. Pellegrini recommended the young broadcaster for the job, and Mirageas started a new life in the Windy City.

Mirageas's description of his eight years at WFMT as the producer of *Lincoln's Music in America* is one he never tires of repeating: "It was a dream job based on the premise that if you had all the money and time in the world, and you loved classical music, where would you go and what would you see?" Every week Mirageas would travel to another performance or classical music festival, interview the key players, and create an hour-long radio documentary that was broadcast nationally. "It was an entrée to just about every major cultural institution in the country," Mirageas says. And it gave him the opportunity to meet some of the world's leading performers, conductors, and composers, including John Adams.

**In 1987, on the eve** of the first full orchestral rehearsal for *Nixon in China* at Houston Grand Opera, Adams sat down to talk with Mirageas for *Lincoln's Music in America*. The two chatted about the daunting task of writing a first opera; the challenges of working with a librettist half-a-world away (Adams was in Berkeley, California, and poet Alice Goodman worked from her home in Cambridge, England); and the role of legendary stage director Peter Sellars. "When I was in Houston doing interviews with the singers and with John, I watched most of the opera in its final rehearsals, and it really blew me away," Mirageas recalls. "I knew I was in the presence of something special."

Adams and Mirageas had talked about the opera before. In 1985, just before Adams began work on the piece, he admitted to Mirageas in another radio interview that he was feeling a little panicky. "This opera will be a major departure for me, because I've never written melodies," Adams told him. When Mirageas followed up two years later, Adams confessed that it hadn't, in fact, proved to be a problem. "My [musical] response to Alice's lines of poetry was so natural that the melodies just came about," he explained. *Nixon in China* became one of the very few late 20th-century American operas to secure a permanent spot in the broad spectrum of operatic repertoire, which, given his special connection to the piece and its composer, made Mirageas very happy when he arrived at Cincinnati Opera and learned it was slated for this season.

In early 2005, Cincinnati Opera was at a turning point. Muni had asked to be let out of his contract early to pursue directing opportunities in Europe. That left Beggs and her staff • CONTINUED ON PAGE 150

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scrambling to flesh out the next couple of seasons, but it also gave them and the board of trustees an opportunity to step back and take stock. A year earlier, Beggs had hired Mirageas, who was contentedly running his consulting business from his home in Minneapolis, to give CO a hand. (Mirageas had left WFMT in 1990 to serve as the artistic administrator for the Boston Symphony Orchestra, which he left four years later to produce operatic recordings for Decca Records in London; while there, he created Evans Mirageas Artistic and Strategic Planning for the Classical Music Industry.)

"I was brought in on several fronts: to work with Patty, Marcus, and the team to finalize the casting for 2006 and 2007 seasons," he says. "And because of my extensive orchestral background, to help in upping the quality of conductors they would engage, and to assist with the search for a new artistic director." He also served as a natural sounding board as the company plotted its future. It only took a few weeks of working with Mirageas for Beggs to ask if he would be interested in throw-

ing his hat into the ring for the AD position. "He was such a good team member from the start, and such a wonderful communicator," she says. "And he had lots of ideas." According to Beggs, it only took a few meetings before everyone at Cincinnati Opera wanted to hire him for the job. "He was very kind, but frank," she remembers. "He said, 'No.'"

And why wouldn't he? He and his partner Thomas Dreeze were happy where they were. Dreeze had a great job as the events program manager for the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum, and Mirageas's consulting business was thriving. "I was certain that the opera would want the new artistic director to live in Cincinnati full-time," he says. He was right. At first, no one could see a way around that issue. Then, in May 2005, several opera board members and Beggs took a trip to London that coincided with one of Mirageas's regular visits there to check out singers and performances. "We spent a lot of time together talking and eating and carrying on in general, and I fell in love with those people," he says. "I decided I would be

foolish not to try and work something out if I was offered the job."

Beggs agrees. "Not only does he have this international Rolodex of contacts and encyclopedic knowledge of opera, but Evans has an amazing ear and insight into who has it and who doesn't when it comes to singers," she says.

On his last morning in London, Mirageas met Beggs for coffee in Leicester Square. "She said the magic words: We are willing to make this work without a full-time residency if you can be here for the entire production season and give as much time as we both feel it would take to do the job properly." After meeting with the search committee and jumping through all the hoops, Mirageas was formally offered the job and accepted.

**BEGGS PROFESSES** to being happy with the arrangement. "So far, he has lived up to all of our expectations," she says.

"I'm a roving ambassador for the company and always on the lookout for new conductors, singers, and directors, in a way that someone who was committed

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here 24/7 could not be," Mirageas says. When asked what future seasons will look like, he is quick to answer: "More of the same in the best sense of the word." That means one well-known, beloved opera every season, such as *La Traviata* or *La Boheme*; two operas that have some recognition factor, like less familiar works by well-known composers; and a newer work. "My criteria for the contemporary works we will do, especially those works we bring to the audience for the first time, is the same one that I apply to any work I'll choose," he says. "Does it provide the kind of emotional experience for the audience that *Dead Man Walking* or *Margaret Garner* created?" Mirageas believes that *Nixon in China* does.

"I think it helps that a vast amount of the audience will have lived through the events of the opera," he says, adding that personal politics shouldn't impact a person's enjoyment of the work. "Everyone is presented in a sympathetic light because John and Alice wanted to make sure the main characters"—the Nixons, Mao and Madame Mao, Henry Kissinger,

er, and Chou En-lai—"could speak for themselves." The Robinson production packs the stage with TV monitors that play actual footage of the historic visit. "Alice and John wanted to stress Nixon's understanding of the power of the media and the fact that he is very aware that the world is watching and listening."

Robert Orth, who played the father of one of the victims in CO's 2002 production of *Dead Man Walking*, will sing the role of Richard Nixon and is considered the leading interpreter of the role. He'll be joined onstage by Maureen O'Flynn as Pat Nixon, Mark T. Panuccio—a Cincinnati Opera favorite—as Mao, Thomas Hammons as Kissinger, Georgia Jarman as Madame Mao, and Chen-Ye Yuan as Chou En-lai. When the opera premiered in 1987, four of the six main characters portrayed were alive and could have attended the premiere. None did. Nor is there any indication that any of them ever saw it. In their 1987 conversation, Adams and Mirageas talked about the power of a creative work to tackle everyday issues and lend them perspective. "The issues in

this opera—the collision of cultures, feminism, and the arrogance of one powerful culture over another—still permeate our lives," Adams said then. The same can be said nearly two decades later.

"I look at operas like *Nixon in China* as forging new paths," Mirageas says. "They connect with the audience and allow us to examine our own feelings, regardless of political beliefs. Good opera does what [storytelling] has done since the time of the ancient Greeks, which is to provide a cathartic community experience."

Operagoers can expect Mirageas to walk a fine line between pleasing the old guard and attracting the new. That means a mix—of tried-and-true and cutting-edge operas; of young singers whose stars are rising and superstars such as soprano Dawn Upshaw, who will make her CO debut during the 2009 season; of commissioning new works and reaching beyond the walls of Music Hall. With Mirageas at the helm, the nation's second oldest opera company may just be poised for a great leap forward. Chairman Mao would be so proud. **C**

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