

He Gave Us His Heart

Portland Opera's Maestro Herbert Weiskopf

1903—1970

THE FOUR SEASONS

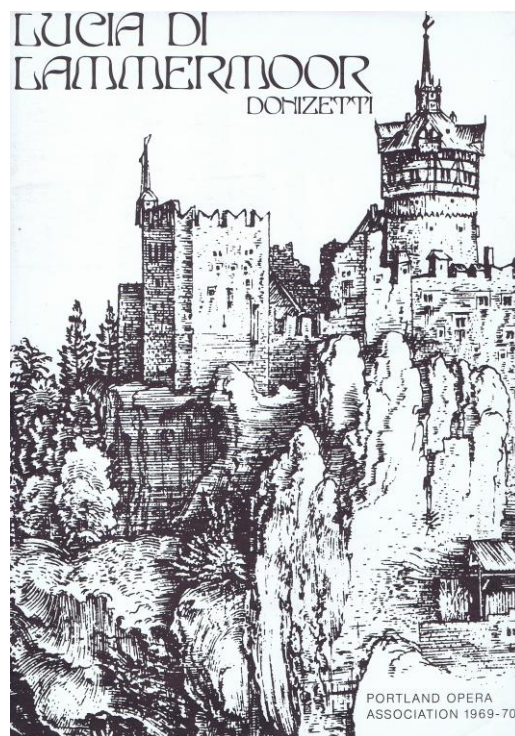
Following a triumphant performance of *Lucia di Lammermoor* with the Metropolitan Opera's Anna Moffo in the lead, the audience in Portland's Civic Theater rose to its feet. Wanda Weiskopf wrote in her memoir, *On the Wings of Song: My Life with the Maestro*, that "the stars took final curtain calls and then brought their Maestro out with them. He motioned the orchestra to stand and share the applause. Then my husband did something I cannot remember ever seeing him do before. He walked out from behind the curtain and took a solo bow, acknowledging the tremendous response with arms above his head like a victory celebration. Then he was gone again." Maestro Herbert Weiskopf retired to his dressing room and collapsed. His last words to his beloved Wanda: "Something is not right." Within a few hours, his heart stopped beating.

The Portland Opera community mourned his passing. His obituary appeared in newspapers in California, Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, Europe. In four seasons between 1966 and 1970, Maestro Weiskopf had transformed the Portland Opera from a regional stop for great stars and stellar productions to a professional community organization that attracted international stars and served as training ground for local and regional young talent.

Weiskopf's journey to Portland began in turn of the century Europe, where as a five year-old child, he studied piano under the tutelage of Heinrich Lutter, an assistant of Franz Liszt. After his father's death, he moved with his mother to what became, after the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Czechoslovakia. At eleven, Weiskopf made his concert debut. As he grew into a young man, pressured by his family to study engineering, he nevertheless found time to attend a concert or opera every day. At 21, he could no longer deny his passion for music, and during a bout with tuberculosis, found the strength to study music history, piano, and theory to fulfill his dream of becoming a conductor, a dream that had taken shape when he was still a boy.

By the time he was 25, Weiskopf was making a name for himself conducting orchestras in Germany and Czechoslovakia. In 1934, at the age of 31, after having been groomed for major conducting roles by important classical music figures of the time, he secured a post as principal conductor and managing director of the municipal theater in Teplitz-Schoenau, Czechoslovakia. He was a step away from the major circuit when World War II intervened. He fled to England, then the United States, settling in St. Louis with two suitcases and a loan of \$200. During the next seven years he directed choral groups, accepted invitations to guest conduct, taught piano and voice, and met and married his partner for life, his talented student becoming Wanda Weiskopf. What a life they created together.

In 1946, the Weiskopfs settled in Southern California, where Herbert became conductor and head of the opera and symphony departments of the Los Angeles Conservatory which had a robust opera department that trained



some 600 singers. In 1959, he accepted the post of conductor of the Beverly Hills Symphony. In Wanda's memoir, we learn how rich their professional and social lives were during these years.

Wanda, a mezzo-soprano, joined the Screen Actors Guild and sang in various movies, including *The Great Caruso* starring Mario Lanza. The Weiskopfs taught, rehearsed, attended social functions, and performed often in the evenings while raising their two children, Doug and Marta. Their home served as a studio, where the Weiskopfs trained and nurtured young singers. Under Herbert's guidance, some went on to win prestigious competitions, including the Atwater Kent competition, the Metropolitan Opera National Auditions as well as those held by the San Francisco Opera Company and the Opera Guild of Southern California. Young soprano Jean Fenn, later to sing with the Metropolitan Opera, was among Herbert's students who advanced to illustrious careers. Another was Mary Costa, who sang the character of Sleeping Beauty in Walt Disney's production, and later sang with the San Francisco and Metropolitan Opera companies.



Maestro Weiskopf conducted several symphony orchestras during that period, and in the early 1960s began flying to Seattle to be Musical Director of the Western Opera Company, which later reformed as the Seattle Opera Company. In 1966 he accepted the position of General Director and Conductor of the Portland Opera Company and moved the family to his final home. He would oversee four seasons of robust growth for the Portland Opera.

In an interview with Dan Yost, "A Maestro for Portland Opera" (*Northwest Magazine* 7 January 1968), Weiskopf said earnestly, "I don't want to sound like I invented opera here.

Professional Opera is nothing new to Portland. There has been a fine tradition since 1868. But there has never been a fully professional resident opera company, and that is our goal now. We want a permanent chorus and many local singers in training programs to go with the top stars we bring in."

Faust was the first opera Weiskopf directed in the Oriental Theatre, starring as Marguerite his former student Jean Fenn, now with the Metropolitan Opera, and Royce Reaves, who had been singing in leading German opera houses for a number of years, as Mephistopheles. Other players were recruited from the region, thereby pairing established stars with local and regional performers, a practice Weiskopf was to continue throughout his tenure.

Portlanders were delighted in 1968 when they attended in the newly remodeled Civic Auditorium a performance of *Rigoletto*, which had been the first opera staged in Portland exactly 100 years earlier. By now the opera had a first-rate permanent chorus, and a program for training local singers was firmly established. All the roles sung by local singers were coached by the Maestro, whose aim was to bring them up to the standards of any singers he brought from the East Coast, California, or Europe. All singers, including the chorus, were drilled in the different languages required by the various operas on the programs for each season.

Under Weiskopfs leadership and with Wanda's help and influence, Portland grew famous among singers for the city's hospitality and enthusiasm. The Portland Opera Guild lavished attention on visiting artists, offering delicious food backstage and closing night parties, sometimes in their own homes, to honor these performers. At the end of his first season, Martin Clark, Music Editor of the *Oregon Journal*, wrote: "Herbert Weiskopf . . . once more demonstrated . . . that Portland finally has a first rate opera company." It was agreed that the Maestro was the right man in the right place at the right time. Sadly, on March 22, 1970, wrote Wanda in her memoir, "a remarkable era of growth and adventure had ended for Portland."

THE FOUR SEASONS

1966-67

Faust (Charles Gounod)
Tosca (Puccini)
Madame Butterfly (Puccini)
Die Fledermaus (Johann Strauss)

1967-68

La Boheme (Puccini)
La Traviata (Verdi)
Carmen (Bizet)
Rigoletto (Verdi)

1968-69

Otello (Verdi)
Flying Dutchman (Wagner)
Manon (Massenet)
Il Trovatore (Verdi)

1969-70

Aida (Verdi)
Barber of Seville (Rosini)
Lucia Di Lammermoor (Donizetti)



Discovering Oregon Originals 2008-2009

Program produced by Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission

free to the public at the First Unitarian Church

produced in conjunction with Portland Opera Association

SW 12th & Salmon in Downtown Portland Sunday, November 23, 2008 – 2 pm

Speakers: Christopher Mattaliano, Doug & Marta Weiskopf, Dory Hylton and David Hedges

Featured performers: Ron Frasier, Angela Niederloh, Jeffrey Beruan, and Robert Ainsley

Essay by Dory Hylton



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