

## **Beverly Sills performances, including two rarities, among Musicarnival opera recordings soon to be available at libraries**

**Donald Rosenberg, The Plain Dealer**

DoeHeads – those die-hard fans of Douglas Moore’s opera, “The Ballad of Baby Doe” – have new reason to rejoice. Among the eight live recordings of operas performed at Musicarnival in Warrensville Heights in the 1950s and 1960s soon to be available to the public is a 1958 production of “Baby Doe” starring soprano Beverly Sills in one of her signature roles.

There’s a lot more here than Moore, who served as director of music at the Cleveland Museum of Art in the 1920s and conducted the Cleveland Orchestra in the premiere of his Four Museum Pieces in 1923.

Sills, who lived in Cleveland in the late 1950s, appears in four other productions in the Musicarnival series, including the title roles in two great potboilers – Bizet’s “Carmen” and Puccini’s “Tosca” – she performed only in John L. Price’s tent theater-in-the-round.

By the end of the year, compact discs of the opera productions are expected to begin arriving at the John L. Price Jr. Musicarnival Archives at the Cleveland Public Library, which last year started to receive recordings of more than 90 musicals and operettas that Musicarnival founder and producer Price presented in Warrensville Heights and West Palm Beach, Florida, from 1954 to 1965.

The opera performances, all in English, also will be available for listening purposes at Goodspeed Musicals’ Scherer Library of Musical Theater in East Haddam, Connecticut. Goodspeed, a collaborator in the Musicarnival project with Cleveland’s Musical Theater Project, houses one of the country’s largest collections of musical-theater audio collections.

The Musicarnival opera series includes two productions of Johann Strauss II’s “Die Fledermaus” – one from 1955 (starring Sills, months before she made her triumphant New York City Opera debut in the same work) and another from 1961 (starring Leyna Gabriele, who created the role of Baby Doe at the opera’s world premiere at Colorado’s Central City Opera in 1956).

Franz Lehar’s “The Merry Widow” also will be heard in two productions – the first from 1956 (starring Sills and Lloyd Thomas Leech, her Eisenstein in “Fledermaus” and Don Jose in “Carmen”) and the second from 1963 (starring Claire Alexander and Robert Rounseville). Rounding out the series is a 1958 production of the Gershwins’ “Porgy and Bess.”

The \$200,000, four-year project will be completed by January 2016, said Musical Theater Project artistic director Bill Rudman, who is restoring the Musicarnival musical-theater and American operetta recordings with engineer Mark Logies. Price recorded all performances of his Musicarnival productions, with virtually no one else's knowledge, on seven-inch reel-to-reel tapes.

Curator of the opera series is David Kanzeg, director of programming for ideastream – the non-profit organization that runs WVIZ Channel 25, WCPN FM/90.3 and WCLV FM/104.9 – when he isn't fulfilling his duties as DoeHead and the man behind babydoe.org, the website devoted to Moore's opera.

Kanzeg agreed to curate the series after listening to tapes of the Musicarnival opera productions, though he's only sampled the four performances of "Baby Doe" that will be distilled into one performance on compact discs.

"I was intrigued enough that my overall impression is that three of the 'Baby Does' are in pretty good shape," he said the other day. "The first one is less so."

"This is not a DoeHead project. It's a Musicarnival project. I thought it was important to get the tougher pieces done first."

Sills, who died in 2007, was on the verge of a major career in 1955 when she first performed at Musicarnival, which may have been responsible for introducing the soprano to future husband Peter Greenough. At the time, he was an editor at The Plain Dealer, which his family owned.

"I think she met Greenough at our house," said Diana Price, daughter of Musicarnival's founder. "I was in 'Fledermaus' [in 1955, at the age of 6]. My mom and brother and I were in the pantomime that opened the show."

Sill auditioned for the role of Rosalinda in the Musicarnival production of "Fledermaus" in New York in spring 1955 the same day she auditioned for the role in the New York City Opera production, said Price. The soprano, who was hired on the spot for both engagements, viewed the Musicarnival "Fledermaus" as a warm-up for the City Opera production three months later.

From what Kanzeg has heard so far on the Musicarnival tapes, the Sills magic was "there already. It's really Beverly Sills. She's got the top. She's got the colors. It's recognizable right away."

Price especially recalls a performance of Sills as Tosca in 1957 during which something went wrong when the diva murders nefarious police chief Scarpia (William Chapman) near the end of Act 2.

"I was there the night the knife exploded," said Price. "The blood bag hadn't been tied on properly. It went all over him and her. She sang the rest in hysterics."

Whether that performance makes the final recording is yet to be determined.

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