



Alfred Hubay locking the doors of the old Metropolitan Opera House for the last time.

Photo: THE NEWS

Meet the Met's Mr. Hubay

Before he started working at the old Met 30 years ago, Alfred Hubay, the Metropolitan Opera's Box Office Manager, had never seen an opera. "I didn't know how to go about getting a ticket for the opera," he recalled. "A friend of mine who had worked as an usher at the Chicago Opera suggested I write in and ask for a job as an usher. I remember that I wrote a funny kind of a letter that one of my predecessors kept." Hubay laughed heartily. "I wanted to know how much it would cost to work at the Met. After a short time period elapsed, they called me down for an interview and I began work on October 3, 1943.

"The first day I worked at the old house the Don Cossack choir was performing," says Hubay. "I was told to stand at a door in order to prevent people from sneaking up the stairs."

Hubay was an usher from 1943 to 1956. "I exclusively ushered in one place," he stated. "That was in the balcony of the old Met. I was in the same place and I never wanted to move. I loved opera and I enjoyed the kind of people who sat there. In the old house the people who sat in the balcony and the family circle were like a big family. The subscribers and the ushers were all friends. As an usher I got to know an awful lot of nice people whom I saw year after year. When the season was over I looked forward to the next season. During the day I moonlighted working for an insurance firm."

Thirteen years after he began working at the Met he was promoted to the job of Assistant to Chief Usher. "That was my first move to the orchestra," he smiled.

"What did the job of Assistant to Chief Usher consist of?" I asked.

"Well they put me in a tuxedo, that was about all," he said. Shortly after that he was made Chief Usher and joined management's ranks in 1961 in the position of House Manager.

"When I took over as House Manager," recalls Hubay, "Francis Robinson was Box Office Manager and also headed the Press Department. He later relinquished the job of Box Office Manager. The Met was trying to find someone to replace him and I said that since we were moving to Lincoln Center in a few years, they might as well combine the job of House Manager and Box Office Manager until they found someone else. I liked the job of Box Office Manager so much I stayed with it."

Hubay recalls that the transition years, 1962-1966, from the old house to the new site at Lincoln Center were difficult. "The old house wasn't as complex as the new house," he explained. "The old house was a very set operation. We all knew it very well, and were well aware of all the problems—and there were lots of problems. Moving into Lincoln Center was like moving from a four-room apartment into a ten-room house in the suburbs. It was awesome. The whole physical plant was so different. As a matter of fact, house management took up so much time that I found it difficult to operate on both levels."

Hubay chose to devote all his energies to box office management. He saw the job as an immense challenge. "Looking back, I felt that the development of Lincoln Center, the putting together of the New York State Theater, Philharmonic Hall

(now Avery Fisher Hall) and the Metropolitan Opera, eventually would lead to a problem keeping subscribers and single sale public," he said. "This happened to us faster than it should have because we had that period in 1969 when we closed for a half season because of a labor dispute."

The Met never regained the audience it lost during that prolonged period, he believes. "This is the first season, however, that we are close to regaining that audience. When we were scheduled to open for our 1969-70 season we had planned to open with one of our best advance subscriptions. When we finally opened December 29, 1969, over 10% of our subscribers had given up their subscriptions. Not knowing when we would be able to open, we allowed our subscribers the option of relinquishing the season. Ten percent of them took that option, and we have just about regained that 10% now. Our subscriptions are still not what they were before 1969—percentage-wise. We have regained it in our overall box office revenue. The first nine weeks of this season have been the best since 1969."

From his point of view, subscribing quickly becomes a habit over many years. "For example," he said, "when some of our subscribers found that after coming to the opera every Monday night regularly for many years, and for half a season they could not (1969-70), they very quickly lost the weekly habit."

A subscription rate of 75%, according to Hubay, is now ideal for the Met. "But that number is far more meaningful compared to the figures we used in the old house. In the old house when you said you had an 80% subscription rate, there were almost 800 tickets you could not offer to subscribers because they had obstructed views. So if you added that figure on you really had a 90% subscription. In this house we don't have that problem. I think 95% of our seats are subscribable. But when there are the special productions, such as *Tales of Hoffmann* with Joan Sutherland, or a *Les Troyens*, we wish we had 50% more tickets for general sale. If we only had a 29% subscription rate when an opera of this type was performed, we would sell out. We try to be adventurous when we can. I am very excited about next season's production of *Death in Venice*, the new Benjamin Britten opera. I think to do operas like

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that you almost always have to have a 70% to 75% subscription rate."

When the new house opened at Lincoln Center the subscription rate was approximately 76% to 77%. "We did not subscribe the entire house—we could have, though. We kept it close to 80% intentionally. And so many people were furious because we never had enough tickets. To subscribe every seat would have been wrong. At this point the subscription rate is about 61%."

Hubay regards the 61% subscription rate as healthy. "Over the years I have felt that many people have come to look upon the Metropolitan Opera as inaccessible," he continued. "I believe that people should be told that there are tickets available. Over the past few years there have been some important innovations made that have helped to bring opera to more people. Last spring was the first time in the history of the Met that the subscribers got the schedule of what operas were on their series for the following season. Prior to that, a subscriber would just receive a renewal right to his seat. When I took over as Box Office Manager there was no such thing as a printed season schedule. Looking back now, I would say that I took over an operation that was archaic. Then it was a perfectly valid operation, but now the situation is altogether different. At the old Met there was always a problem with space. Tickets were then sold ten days in advance only, mail orders were a hit or miss operation and a season schedule was not available to anybody. So we published the entire schedule the next season."

The formulation of the Met's assorted subscription series is a complex operation requiring meticulous advanced planning. "What we try to do is to rotate the operas," he said. "If we are doing an opera like the new production of *Italiana* this year and repeating it next season, it is then a simple operation. Everybody who gets it next season should include all the people who didn't get it this season. We try to do that as much as possible. The problem is: what do you do with the bread and butter operas, like *Tra-*



Two former divas of the Met: Bidú Sayão on Mr. Hubay's right and Zinka Milanov on his left.

viata, *Bohème* and *Rigoletto*? Here we actually keep a ten year history by each series. I know over a ten year period how many times an individual series got *Bohème*. There are 23 series and the records during the last ten year period are completely accurate and up to date."

The important factor to be considered in making up a schedule, says Hubay, is to make it attractive to the subscribers. "We don't want them to say, 'My God we are getting *Bohème* five years in a row.' If you are subscribing you want a representation of our repertoire on your subscription. This year we had five new productions. We tried to give each subscription series at least two new productions. I think that is a pretty good batting average."

"There are other things that have to be considered also. If you have two modern works, you wouldn't put them both on the same series. For instance, if there are ten operas, we would try to give each series a fairly representative blend of Italian, French and German operas. But it is certainly quite complex. These days we have so many series, and people only subscribe for ten performances throughout a six-month season. In order to give them a proper representation of the repertoire, we sometimes have difficulty spacing the operas. Some subscribers may wonder why they go twice in January and then not again until March"

Hubay has his own equation for de-

termining whether a specific production will be successful. Over his long tenure with the company, he has developed a sixth sense as to what works will make for good box office. "Sometimes it is very difficult to determine how well a new production will do," he said. "Look at *Les Troyens*, for instance. Berlioz' operas at the Met have no track record at all. I put all the pieces together—massive production and the way it was cast and placed it squarely into the 'major success category.' And of course it turned out to be totally successful. The *Italiana*, even before it opened, I put into the 'moderate success category,' based upon the fact that, in the past, comedies have generally not sold as well as tragedies. This year I think *Italiana* will be a moderately good success, better than I expected but not a major success."

Everything the Met performs is not done in terms of a sellout response. "*Italiana* had a perfectly valid reason for a new production," he went on. "It had all the right ingredients. Few people realize that some of the operas that don't do too well at the box office lose less money than the operas that do very well. The big, grand productions which our audiences have come to expect of us are terribly expensive enterprises."

Modern operas, on the other hand, have not been received with open arms by the Met's audiences. The initial reaction to many contemporary operas has been far less than enthusiastic. "I remember the audience response to Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*," says Hubay. He looked about the room searching for an adjective to describe the audience reaction. "Why they were almost violent," he exclaimed. "This was in 1951 or 1952. I was still working in the balcony as an usher at the old Met. After the first act of one performance—and this is no credit to our subscribers at the time—there were just about a half dozen people left in the balcony, including myself. Modern opera's track record in any major opera house is a losing proposition. Next season we are doing Janáček's *Jenufa*, and Britten's *Death in Venice*. I am excited about both of

these productions. However, knowing the track record of most modern works, I truly hope they are successful."

Hubay insisted that scheduling of modern works is very important. "We could not put three modern operas on one subscription. Also of importance is the fact that New York has become a weekend city. I would certainly try to put as many performances of contemporary operas on Friday and Saturday as I can, and avoid mid-week scheduling. Many people want to go to the opera on Friday and Saturday night, regardless of what is playing. Our box office percentages are much higher on the weekends compared to Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday."

Hubay said that next season should be a good indication of the box office reaction to 20th-century opera. "The crucial question that always arises when performing new works is: will we have a public above and beyond our subscribers? I personally think we will. In many ways I think the subscription balance is changing—insofar as many of our more conservative subscribers are becoming more accepting of contemporary works."

He noted that the Metropolitan Opera's image has changed somewhat over the years. Its overall approach is more attuned to the movements of the 20th century than it was in the past. "The approach is more contemporary," he went on. "This doesn't mean we can sit back and do only modern opera. We have to vary our repertoire and carefully incorporate contemporary works into our schedule."

The Box Office Manager's role in the day-to-day functioning of the opera house is essential. It lies at the very life line of the entire operation. Invaluable to the Metropolitan Opera's management is monitoring the box office reaction so that it acts as an accurate gauge in measuring the audience response to specific works. With the mathematician's regard for precision and accuracy, Alfred Hubay analyzes the public's box office habits, thereby helping to estimate, with confidence, what productions best serve public and opera house alike.

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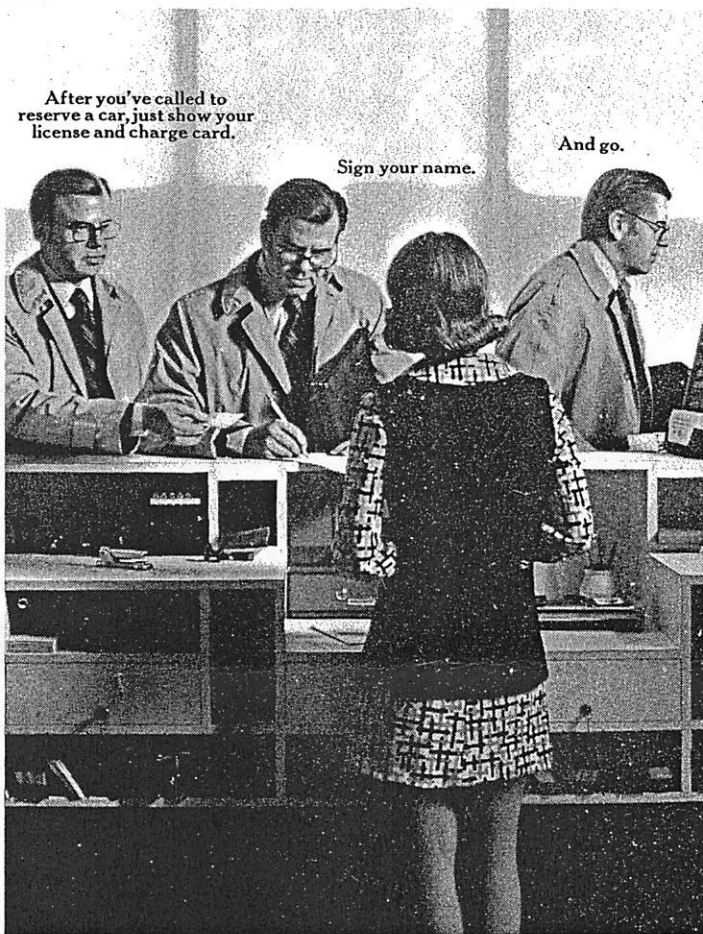
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