
THE GRADUATE

Forty years at the Met have provided box office manager Alfred Hubay with "a liberal education"

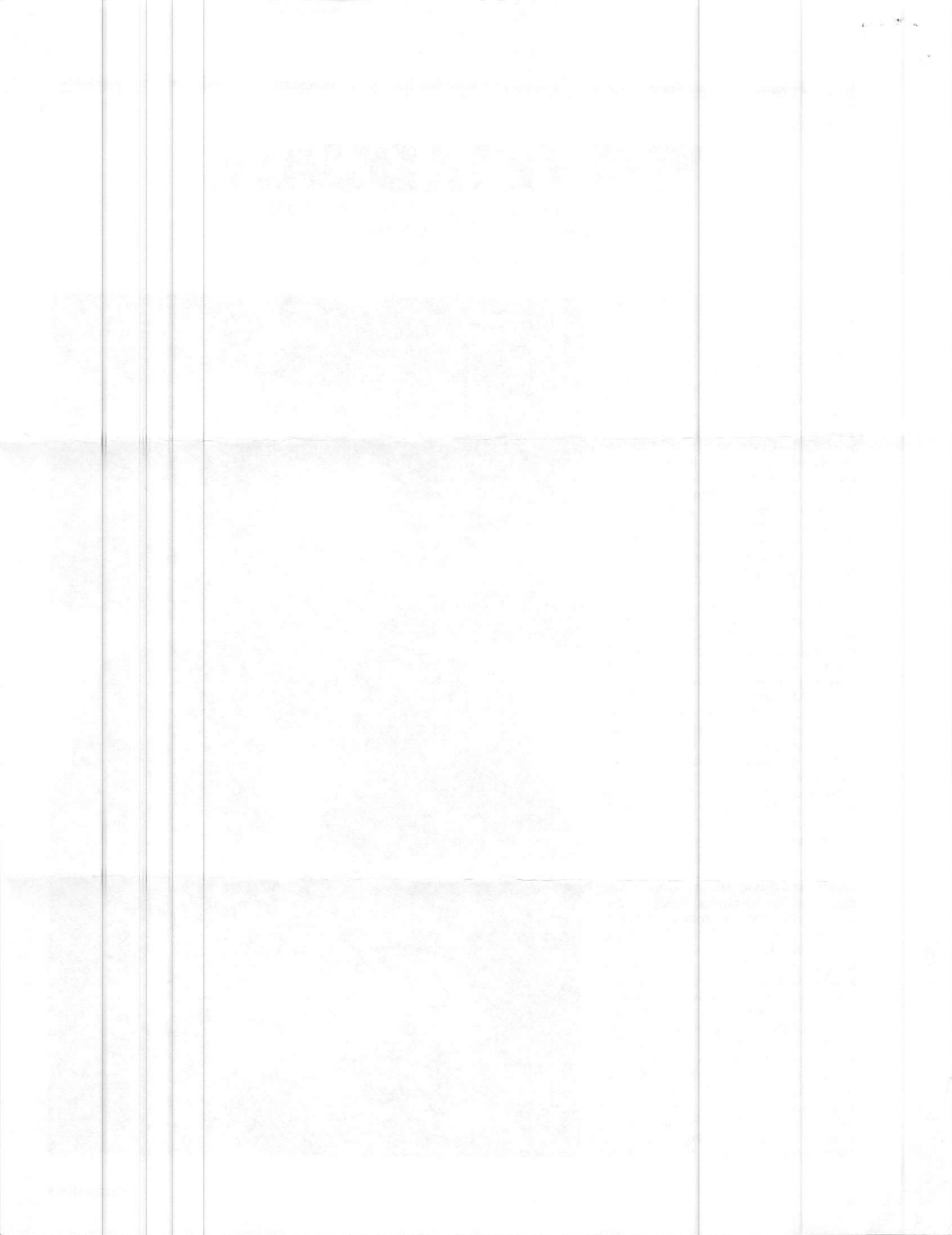
by Robert Jacobson

"The Met is my college," declares Alfred Hubay with boundless youthfulness and openness. "I got a liberal education." Hubay has spent his entire adult life with the company, having begun as an usher in October 1943, eventually moving up to box office manager—only the third in the Met's 100-year history, after Earle Lewis and Francis Robinson. Hubay spans the managements of Edward Johnson, Rudolf Bing, Goeran Gentele, Schuyler Chapin and the present Bliss-Levine team, and while he admits to enormous changes under each, there's no sense of disillusionment or ennui. "I feel the Met has always given me more than I give it. I've never considered it a job but felt I had to give the Met whatever I have to give."

One readily believes him, because his life and that of the Met have intertwined to such a degree. "The Met is my first love, and most of my closest relationships were established in the house. My whole life, emotionally, I can trace to the Met." Some of his best friends today are singers he once adored from a distance. Hubay remains high on the place: "The Met will outlive all of us, no matter what controversy arises, what happens. Individuals become a minuscule part of the overall picture of the company, whatever the regime, the era. The institution is bigger than any one person."

A shortish, compact man, full of energy and good spirits, Hubay talks rapidly as reminiscences, thoughts, gossip and observations from a forty-year vantage point spew forth. His family came from Budapest, where one relative, the great violinist Jenő Hubay, had studied with Joseph Joachim and had been Joseph Szigeti's teacher before his death in the late 1930s. Al Hubay was born in New York, went to public school until he was sixteen and then worked for an insurance company, "hating every minute of it." He liked music but not at first the voice. "That changed. Boy! Those '40s singers had distinctive timbres!" he declares. He came to the Met as a fluke, having written the house manager asking what it would





cost to work there. Three months later, he received a card from the chief usher asking him to report to work for a run of the Don Cossack Chorus on October 3, 1943. After a brief Ballet Theatre season that followed, he decided to stay for one week of opera before quitting.

The Met opened that year on November 22 with George Szell leading Ezio Pinza and Kirsten Thorborg in *Boris Godunov*—"gorgeous," he recalls. On Tuesday the Met played Philadelphia, but on Wednesday came *Tristan und Isolde* with Traubel and Melchior. "I wanted to hear it, because I had seen *A Farewell to Arms*, which used the Liebestod music at the end." Lily Pons sang Lucia on Thursday, Risë Stevens was Octavian in *Der Rosenkavalier* on Friday, Stella Roman and Lawrence Tibbett populated *La Forza del Destino* on Saturday afternoon, and Jarmila Novotna captivated as Mimi in *La Bohème* that night. "I was moonlighting a week, just to hear opera," he confesses, "and I was hooked. Everything got to me—the building, the Met, the singing. I came for a week and stayed a lifetime." He laughs at the reality of living out a fantasy. Soon after, he began collecting records, over 4,000 old 78rpm shellacs that he still has, 90 percent of them Italian opera, with Claudia Muzio a great favorite, along with Giovanni Martinelli ("The voice got to me") and singers he never heard in person: Maria Caniglia, early Gina Cigna, Aureliano Pertile and Margherita Sheridan.

Hubay became the youngest usher in the house, and like the others he kept a regular job elsewhere. He remained a Balcony usher until 1953 ("I loved it there—the people, and as a place to hear opera"), then escalated to assistant chief usher, chief usher, house manager—and in 1962 box office manager in addition. "Lo and behold," he exclaims, "because I never angled for it, it just came! I'm not the type to angle," he insists. "I thought at one time, 'If only I could be a chief usher, I'd die happy.' I learned everything on the spot here." Hubay closed the old house and opened the new one as house manager. "But after we moved, I knew I could never do the new theater justice, so I remained only as box office manager. I withdrew—I had that option with Bing." He admits that if and when he leaves the Met, there will be no more box office manager: the title has become archaic, since the box office now

comes under the vast marketing department created in recent years. As he nods, "The Met has had an elitist image for years, but now it's going toward the twenty-first century with a corporate image, as everything has to. It has to survive and cannot be supported by the few."

Hubay looks back on twenty-three years at the opera house on Broadway at Thirty-ninth. "I knew every bit of it, every inch. It was my home away from home. And the last night, at the farewell gala, I walked around to savor every piece of it. I felt it was a part of me. That was a very emotional night," he sums up. "I was forty-one, the wrong age for such a thing to happen, but we had to move on. Those last five years," he reveals, "we had fire inspection every day, because there were all kinds of violations. Firemen were moonlighting as security men to protect the audience, which is important. The old house was well built, with the Family Circle separate. The Balcony could empty quickly with its side stairs. When the house closed for demolition, and the seats were taken up, we found *straw* under the wooden risers of the Balcony!"

One thing Hubay revels in is that "All the people I worshiped have turned out to be friends. But at that time I was worried about their having clay feet, and I didn't want to meet them and have the illusion destroyed. Licia Albanese was my first great passion, and I would go backstage just to stand and look at her. I was madly in love with her. How could you miss! Mimi, Violetta—I died with her in every opera. She had an incredible communication in her voice, like Muzio, and I cried at *Manon Lescaut* with Albanese and Bjoerling. At the end of Giuseppe Di Stefano's first season, there was a *Manon* with the greatest St. Sulpice scene—so Italianate! He was young, and Licia seduced him onstage. The singers I adored had the aura of great stars. I loved Di Stefano, Mario Del Monaco and Franco Corelli for the sheer beauty of their voices—and Ferruccio Tagliavini, in his way.

"But the love of opera has a tendency to live on past performances, and sometimes the memory plays tricks," he cautions. "There is always that surprise coming along. Renata Tebaldi came like a shaft of light when it was needed. I heard her dress rehearsal of *Desdemona* in *Otello*, and I couldn't believe my ears! That was the most unusual, beau-

tiful voice of my era. I never heard Ponselle," he adds quickly. "I was never a Callas fan. I loved Tebaldi so much, and at the Met their repertory was much the same, with *Tosca* and *Traviata*. What we lack today is a Callas, though—someone to create that kind of controversy, good or bad, with people screaming 'It's lousy!' or 'It's marvelous!' Callas took a gamble that paid off, and she was clever in the use of her voice. I remember her *Norma* debut, opening night 1957. We had a new top price. Francis suggested a \$35 top, and Bing accepted it, though it was outrageous at the time."

Reflecting on his early years at the Met, Hubay offers, "When I was eighteen, Lily Pons and Grace Moore were big stars, big personalities. Now the media have changed things, because of television exposure. It didn't happen in the 1940s except if you made a Hollywood film, but today the media hype is incredible. Also in the 1940s, during the war, artists like Milanov, Bjoerling, Bruno Walter were locked in New York. They stayed here for a season and gave themselves to the Met, in the pre-jet age. So it was a close-knit family. I remember Nicolai Gedda saying in the old house that the dressing rooms were a laughingstock but that he could feel the presence of someone else there—Caruso, Gigli, a tradition lingering.

"Everyone says they were there," he continues nonstop, "but I *really* was at Ljuba Welitsch's debut as Salome, and afterward I walked home to East Seventy-second and York Avenue. It was winter, cool and clear. This woman was so sensual, so sexy, added to Strauss' music. I couldn't believe what she did with that head! I woke up the next morning and felt that certain things made sense at last, certain things in my life had come together. It was an incredible experience. Her voice was not big, but it was so penetrating to every part of the theater that you felt she was singing personally to everyone. And her first *Tosca*, with Paul Schoeffler! When she entered in that big picture hat and took it off in Act I, showing her red hair, people in the audience were shouting 'Bestia!'" Switching to another, earlier diva, Hubay recalls, "You wouldn't believe how large Grace Moore's voice was! Before she died, the voice had become uncontrollable, and she was thinking of *Aida*. It was like Eva Marton's but without that



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quality, and with what I always called 'friendly fuzz.' It was a big, blown-up lyric, and in the *Bohème* ensemble you couldn't hear anyone else."

Paolo Silveri became a favorite baritone, and Hubay recalls Virgilio Lazzari as a bass beloved of all the singers. "I remember his *L'Amore dei Tre Re* with Dorothy Kirsten. Then there was *Andrea Chénier* with Tebaldi, Del Monaco and Bastianini—an incredible evening. In my second season, Lotte Lehmann sang her last *Rosenkavalier*, with Risé, and there was a line waiting to get in, so long that it wrapped around the house twice. We could do 300 in standing room then—there were no fire department laws—and we packed them in like cattle. I loved Risé's Octavian, maybe because I associated it with being young and in love. She was a real boy onstage, with not one feminine gesture. Lehmann and Irene Jessner were comfortable older ladies as the Marschallin. Nowadays, some of the singers lack reality in it.

"The 1947 broadcast of *Roméo et Juliette* was also one of the most beautiful experiences of my young life. Sayão and Bjoerling were incandescent and had such rapport! When Bjoerling did *Bohème* under Bing, there was not one singing teacher or pupil who was not in the audience. *Pelléas et Mélisande* with Sayão and Singher was a great revival, but there was no public for it," and he shakes his head. "When Ramon Vinay sang *Otello*, every tenor was in the house to see his incredible death scene, and their jaws dropped!

"Rose Bampton's Kundry had that quality of being regal yet sexy. And Zinka Milanov's *Norma* and two Leonoras still ring in my ears. Oh, I worship Leonie Rysanek. Her Senta in *Der Fliegende Holländer* with George London had similar values to ones with Varnay and Hotter. Rysanek's first *Ariadne* was heaven. Also Birgit Nilsson's debut as *Isolde*. I had never heard of her. Both she and Rysanek came here unknown." In the new house Hubay points to two highlights: "That first *Frau ohne Schatten* with Rysanek, Ludwig, Dalis, King, Berry and Böhm was one of the highs of all time. And then, of all things, because it was such great theater and had such electrifying performances, was Marvin David Levy's *Mourning Becomes Electra* with Evelyn Lear, Marie Collier and Sherrill Milnes. As a theater piece, especially as directed by Michael Cacoyannis, it was

thrilling." Of past Met productions, he immediately cites the Eugene Berman designs for *Rigoletto*, *Don Giovanni* and *La Forza del Destino* as classics.

He sees that today the emphasis has swung more to production values, while the 1940s and '50s were the age of the singer. "Bing brought in the age of the director, though someone like Margaret Webster proved to be unobtrusive. Mankiewicz' *Bohème* was different, with Mimi dying in the chair, not in bed. I'm a traditionalist! The Zeffirelli productions of *Cav/Pag* and *Otello* have value. They go on for years and hold up, just the way his *Bohème* will always look marvelous. Unfortunately, innovative productions have a short life span."

Hubay believes, as Rudolf Bing did, that the Met is basically a repository, preserving the works of the past. Modern operas he views as novelty items, sometimes garnering interest at first viewing but hard-put to find an audience for later repetitions. "*Wozzeck* opened a new vista in the late '50s, but it is still not popular, and that is depressing," he avers. Hubay's uncanny ability to look into his imaginary crystal ball to tell the Met administration what will do well and what won't, down to the nearest percentage point, has won him an invaluable place in planning sessions. These estimates began a dozen years ago, when he was "doodling around with figures. I then started predicting a full season, by performance and then the value of the whole season. It's based on intuition, and it varies each season. If you live long enough, you develop some intuition," he insists, dispelling any trace of hubris in his boasting. "I am an audience buff. I know what brings them in and what doesn't, unfortunately. For instance, a run of *La Bohème* vs. a run of *Mahagonny*." His shrug tells all.

"Intuition is best, and I trust my own feelings. New York is a wonderful place to make a star, if the public loves you. It happened to Tebaldi, Nilsson, Flagstad, Pavarotti. The New York public knows what it wants, and audiences actually haven't changed that much over the years. The Met represents a certain value to its audience. The big blockbusters are the first—if you have a big Verdi opera with big voices, you have an instant success. Now the administration asks me about box office value of repertory, and I'm making projections up to 1988. It's crazy! It's done by performance, based

on values of the subscription base and casting. They believe what I say. I've asked Tony Bliss, 'What if I lose my touch?' He says, 'I'll take that chance.'"

When Hubay first went to the Met, opening night belonged to the Monday night subscribers, but Bing took that away when he came in 1950. "His innovations were enormous," recalls Hubay. "Before Bing we had no printed schedule, and subscribers bought blind. We would announce two weeks in advance for individual ticket sales. When I became box office manager, Bob Herman, one of Bing's assistants, asked about announcing the schedule, and it was my decision to do it. In 1960 or '61 the schedule was mailed with subscriber tickets. When Gentele came, I said the season should be announced when the subscribers' bills were sent, and we did that in 1973—the first time you got the schedule when you bought subscription tickets. And now we have the new age of marketing.

"Bing made his presence known immediately from the Balcony usher all the way up to the top. From his work in Europe, he knew the box office and could 'read' the ticket rack. Bing was the first to suspend the door list we used to have, to let people into the house. Names were put on as favors, and they got in to stand and then find empty seats. Business under Johnson and in the early Bing years was not that good, but Bing and Francis built it up in two years. First, subscriptions were split to odds and evens, so that it went from seven to fourteen series under Bing. Now there are twenty-seven. I innovated the short series, by taking the Tuesday series and making twenty of ten each and four of five each. It took a lot of manipulating. Of course, the season is longer now too."

Life at the Met has been smooth sailing, Hubay readily admits. He's worked well with those who have come and gone, including Bliss, whom he credits in the early years with being open to suggestions and progressive in terms of policies and subscriptions. For his own part, Hubay consults on subscription planning and other ticket programs, and looks after benefit evenings at the Met, deciding on ticket pricing for "maximum effect. I did the Centennial Gala, which took in \$1.5 million—my fortieth-anniversary gift to the Met." Hubay beams contentedly. His tuition for a lifelong college education has been paid. □

