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## An Interview With Conductor Joseph Rescigno

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# Joseph Resigno

*A brilliant, exacting conductor, Rescigno emerged from a family with the richest musical tradition of our time. Yet his parents often tried to discourage his musical aspirations.* **By Bob Cartland**

Most classical musicians can point to a particular family member whose interest in music had a strong influence on their lives. But on October 8, 1945, conductor Joseph Rescigno was born into a family whose musical bases were loaded. His grandfather, Giuseppe Rescigno, played trumpet at the Met for 38 years. Giuseppe's first cousin played second horn to Arturo Toscanini and, during the 1940s, was first principal horn for the St. Louis Symphony. Giuseppe's brother was Cornell MacNeil's voice teacher; another Rescigno was a violinist at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples. Giuseppe's daughter (Joe's mother) worked as à rehearsal pianist for her brother Nicola, who, along with Lawrence Kelly, was one of the founders of the Lyric Opera of Chicago and the Dallas Opera.

The only musician in his generation of Rescignos, Joe was a child prodigy who played piano on a professional basis long before he graduated from Fordham University, the Manhattan School of Music, and made his professional conducting debut with Jose Limon's dance company at the tender age of 18. In 1969 he won the Salzburg conducting competition and made his European symphonic debut leading concerts with the Vienna Symphony Orchestra. When he was 30 years old, Rescigno became Artistic Director of Artists International (a small regional opera company founded by Marguerite Ruffino in Providence, Rhode Island).

Since then, has served on the faculty of the Manhattan School of Music, as Music Director of the Stamford, Connecticut Opera, and as Associate Conductor for the Concert Orchestra of Long Island. A familiar face at the Opera Theatre of St. Louis, Washington Opera and Florentine Opera of Milwaukee (where the 43-year-old maestro serves as Artistic Advisor), Rescigno traveled to Tokyo last November to conduct the Japanese premiere of Minoru Miki's *Joruri*.

Since then, he has conducted *The Barber of Seville* at the Kennedy Center, *Faust* and *Manon Lescaut* at the Florentine Opera of Milwaukee, and *Carmen* in Detroit. This month he opens the Portland Opera's season with *Aida* before traveling to Calgary for a production of *Rigoletto*. Early in

## *"Let's just say that I did not have the* usual *childhood. When I was four years old, long before I could read a book, I was able to sight-read music."*

1990, he will be in Montreal conducting Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio* with his sister-in-law, soprano Erie Mills, singing Blondchen. In March, Rescigno returns to Milwaukee for *Un Ballo in Maschera* and then heads for Baltimore, where he will conduct *Otello* in April.

***Bob Cartland:*** *One of the most difficult challenges facing any child prodigy is to fulfill the artistic promise of his adolescence. What was the early part of your life like?*

***Joseph Rescigno:*** I don't want to say that I didn't have a normal childhood; let's just say that I did not have the *usual* childhood. Much was expected of me, but I don't find that negative because music was a family tradition and my grandfather began to teach me music by singing to me before I was even born. He became my first teacher. When I was four years old, long before I could read a book, I was able to sight-read music. By the time I was six and reading words, I could sight-read almost anything. That was my grandfather's doing.

I can remember, back when I was nine or ten years old, watching my Uncle Nicky spend a two-and-a-half to three-week rehearsal period with the likes of Maria Callas, Tito Gobbi, Giuseppe DiStefano, and Franco Zeffirelli, during which three to four days would be spent around the piano with the stage director while they meticulously prepared every tiny little phrase so that there was total agreement about the music. They would block the opera for three or four days (not two weeks) and then spend ten days on the set because all of the musical details had been worked out very carefully by talking about each piece of phrasing in its dramatic context and asking people how they felt about various things.

Between the ages of 9 and 15, I was very fortunate to see Maria Callas perform in five or six different productions. But I was always surrounded by older people like Maestro Dmitri Mitropoulus, Maestro Gaetano Merola, Harry Glantz, who was first trumpet for Toscanini and the NBC Symphony, and all the other musicians who would come over to see the kid who could sight-read. Schirmer even used me as a promotional gimmick.

I had no friends who were my age until I was about ten years old, and by that point, I had already performed concerti and recitals. I couldn't take the pressure anymore, so from 10 through 15, I just wouldn't perform. But I *never* lost my interest in music and it was during the period when, as a child, I stopped performing, that I became fascinated with my uncle.

*You're a man with an extremely intense personality and focus; someone who almost seems obsessed with his work. Your brother Tom (who is an atomic and molecular physicist at Lawrence Livermore Laboratories) is equally driven. Was he also a high achiever as a child?*

Oh, yes. Tommy was very adaptable, very gifted and had a fine life at school. He's someone who has bursts of energy and, in a brief span of time, can accomplish a great deal; someone who is so able to hone his mind into the scientific problem he's dealing with that he can become absolutely oblivious to whatever is happening around him. I saw him do that a lot in high school and, although I don't see how one person can concentrate that intensely on *anything* for more than a brief amount of time, Tom sometimes gets so focused that I don't think he'd feel it if you stuck a knife in him.

My brother is also one of the only people I know in the whole world who can literally do anything he wants. I'm not saying that he's *great* at anything, but he can *do* anything. Just for the fun of it, I once showed him how to play a little bit of piano. At that age, any other kid wouldn't have been able to do a C-major scale but, after a month of studying, my brother was playing some Mozart pieces.

Tommy is gifted in so many ways. In his last year of grammar school he became interested in scientific things and, because I was such an early success at music, chose to have nothing to do with music. He was a great student, won a poetry prize in his senior year, and became valedictorian of his high school. At Harvard, he won some awards before he turned 21. While I don't know much about his work today, I do know that the nature of it is *very* intense.

*You grew up in a family atmosphere where there were extremely high artistic standards, a lot was expected of you and you were influenced by many old world traditions. How has that affected your professional development?*

For one thing, I was shocked when a musician once asked me if, when I study a score, I practice in front of the mirror. The only time I ever did that was when I was a young kid watching my uncle! Ever since I've been out conducting professionally, I learn a piece of music and, if it is thoroughly ingrained in my head, it comes out of my hands. If you have to spend time in front of a mirror practicing your beat, then you don't know your music well enough to really have it in your blood. I've conducted several big pieces from memory and can remember one person getting really upset when he saw me rehearsing without a score. When he said he would feel much better if I used the score, I said "Fine. I don't care. I can do it either way."

What I find wrong today is that, just as television has spawned an age of illiterates, the recording industry has taken away from most people my age or younger the ability to pick up a piece of music they have not seen, look at it, and *feel* it in the sense of reading it like you would read a book. I've seen so many people who practically never rehearse, don't say "boo" to the singers when someone makes an obvious mistake, and have no suggestions to make because they haven't thought enough about it themselves. I know colleagues who learn their music from records

**Until his tenth birthday, Rescigno occasionally performed as a soloist with local symphony orchestras.**

because they can't even sit down at a piano without struggling to play their music, let alone study it *away* from the piano!

As a conductor, one must also have a very good understanding of the musical styles of each age and each composer because you sometimes have to study the architecture of a piece very carefully and then modify the tempos and dynamics to make it work. An opera by Puccini is really not that different from an opera by Richard Strauss in that a very good execution of the score (with a scrupulous rendition of the dynamic) will give you 98 percent of the results that are necessary. However, that does not hold true for Mozart and Rossini, where a certain amount of imagination is required to deal with the phrasing, articulation, and musical dynamic.

On the other hand, a plodding reading of some French music that fails to give it that extra little bit of verve and life can become miserable and, with a composer like Gounod, you sometimes have to make tiny little changes in orchestration for certain moments to work a little better. The same thing is true for Monteverdi. You can usually hear the difference between someone who truly understands the music and makes it happen as opposed to a conductor who's just beating time and playing notes without making it into a dramatic experience.

*Having a close relative as your mentor can be a wonderful and yet incredibly difficult situation. How did your uncle's fame affect your career?*

During the period from my mid-teens until the age of 30, I was under constant and perpetual pressure from my family to either do something else, or, if I was going to go on conducting, at least change my name. A number of my friends were amazed (just from observing me when I was conducting student performances in Dallas) at the amount of pressure my family put on me. But I don't think they were wrong to do that, because if my family's discouragement would have been suffi-

cient to deter me from conducting, I would have been unable to struggle in this world of music.

Most of the musicians in my family were orchestral musicians who worked with the nuts and bolts of music. The only person who persisted in backing me was my uncle, who was preparing me for a life that may have some outward glamour but is filled with struggle, difficulty and disappointment. I know he was extra rough on me because I was his nephew. But I really don't think it was my uncle putting pressure on me so much as it was the history of his generation. The pressure his father and uncle had put on him was *tremendous*.

For two years when I was between the ages of 18 and 20, my uncle acted as a surrogate father when I was studying in Rome and, during that period, I'm sure I gave him lots of grief because he's a very responsible man and I was a very irresponsible teenager. But I was able to talk to him and we had a very warm relationship which was always family. I was closest to my uncle during that period in Rome, and then, for about ten years, didn't see too much of him.

*Can you identify certain areas where you've improved as an operatic conductor?*

Oh, sure. Early on I had great difficulty in focusing (not so much from any fear of performing as from wanting it so badly and being so afraid of being in music). And I now tend to believe in musical love at first sight. Sometimes a good relationship develops instantaneously (it's not just because you've been working with the same person over and over again) and, when that special kind of rapport happens, it has nothing to do with personality. Maria Spacagna and I have a wonderful working relationship. I have a similar understanding with Fred Burchinal, and I adore working with Peter Kelen. There's a wonderful rapport with Kristian Johannsson, and I think he's performed much better in this country with me than with other conductors. But if the chemistry is not there in the first performance, it probably won't be there in five years, either.

If I'm a better conductor today, it's because I've learned when to insist on certain things and when not to. That comes from getting the ability to know what really matters when the curtain goes up, what will result in clarity, and which things the audience will actually see. I see so many stage directors who are cocooned in a rehearsal room insist on things that I know won't make a fingerful of difference during a performance and witness too many situations where a director is goofing off, having changes made on the set and, for one reason or another, the conductor just goes in and beats time. If things don't work out, a lot of times these people don't know *why* things aren't working—let alone what they could possibly do to *make* them work!

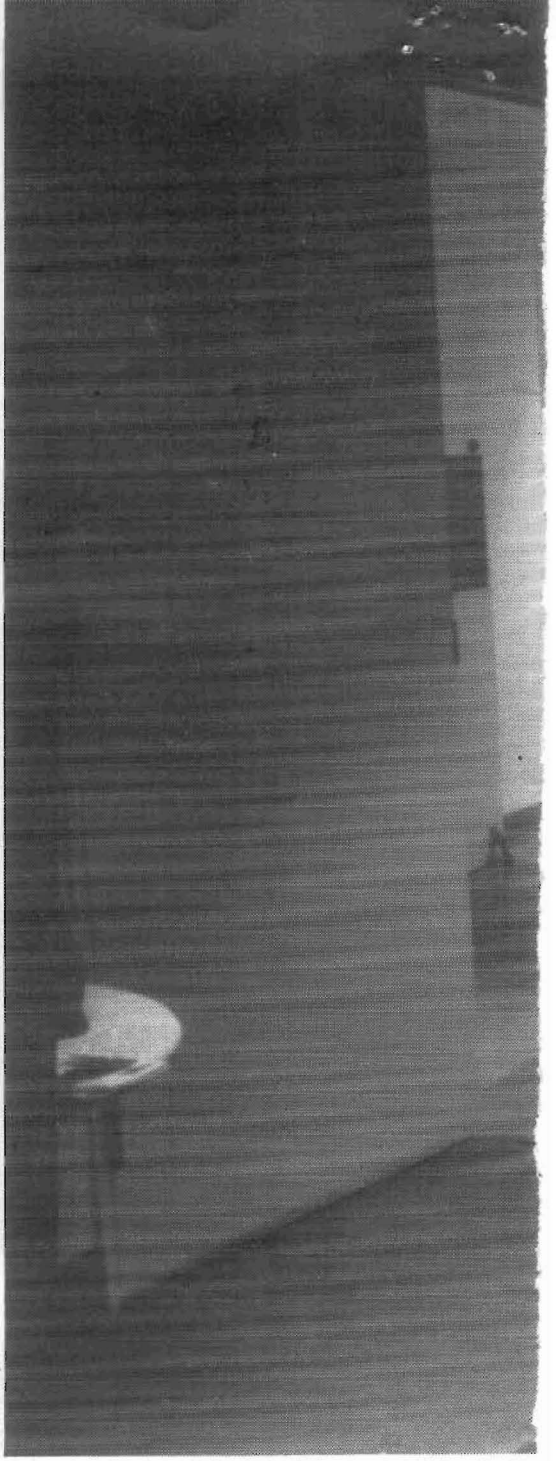
*Some musicians claim that you're a particularly difficult conductor to work with. Is that true?*

Everyone says that I'm extremely tough. It's a bit of shock whenever I hear that because I've always thought of myself as a fairly easygoing person whose main philosophy in life was to try to put one foot in front of the other without falling down. However, I've always been very thorough. I feel that I cannot give a truly fine performance without preparing 110 percent and I expect as much from the people I work with.

Some conductors like to work with singers who are very plastic or moldable but I prefer someone who has a strong, aggressive personality and an open mind. If someone can give me logical arguments about why, in the grander scheme of things, we should do something his way (as opposed to what I had in mind), then by all means, let's do it his way. If, on the other hand, I'm able to convince him that what he's doing could be done better another way, I usually find that the person with a strong personality will do it my way. It's the weaker personalities who say, "Oh, yes, whatever you want," that I have trouble dealing with because I want a soloist or principal horn player to bring something of his own to a piece.

People say that I'm a real fusspot because it's hard for me to be satisfied with performances but, as the performance gets closer and closer, I usually tend to ease up because the precision of the orchestra and the urgency of the singer is very important in opera. I can get really picky during the rehearsal process but, by the time we're into general rehearsals and performances, I've said what I have to say, the singers have to do the singing and the instrumentalists have to do the playing. I'm only there to guide and inspire them or keep things neat. If I hear something that is not being performed as rehearsed, I'll try to make it work anyway. But there are parts of the second act of *Tosca*, for instance, where you sacrifice the urgency of the moment if you have to dot every "i" and cross every "t."

The only exception is Rossini, where I become horribly grouchy because of the nature of the music and the comedy. I can become an insufferable pill when conducting such works because



Mark Avery

*"In Rossini or Mozart, there is no room for exaggeration or musical inexactitude. . . ."*

these operas are wonderful comedies which will not work unless they are timed down to the split second. In a way, it's easier to do Rossini in a place like the Met or City Opera where the acoustics are more forgiving. But in a theater like the Loretto-Hilton in St. Louis or the Terrace Theater at the Kennedy Center, which is a smaller, dryer house, it must absolutely be a situation wherein 55 people (both singers and orchestra) are breathing as one because if one person is just a tiny bit off, it shows. With the more romantic pieces you don't have to be so super-together. But in Rossini or Mozart, there is no room for exaggeration or musical inexactitude and, because of that factor, I keep dogging people about details—even during the shows.

*Why do so many singers have such terrible problems with diction?*

As a conductor, you have to make certain decisions. With some singers, you can pull the thread just so far before it might snap and the person could give a bad performance. So you have to decide how much you can urge a person to sing with clarity. Certain singers (Licia Albanese, Giuseppe DiStefano, Toti Dal Monte) had remarkable diction; you could hear

## *"If I'm a better conductor today, it's because I've learned when to insist on certain things and when not to."*

every word they sang in live performances as well as on recordings. Ebe Stignani was a great mezzo, as was Giulietta Simionato. However Simionato's diction was far superior to Stignani's. It's all a question of technique.

People think that clarity in diction is just a result of hitting consonants, but that's not true at all. If the word "love" becomes "lahhhhve" it's hard to understand it. And if you're singing a vowel that is not the right vowel for a particular word, then you can't possibly be understood not even in English!

There are certain kinds of cloudy, non-Italian vowels that some singers use in the Italian language because they need to push more on those vowels to make a little extra volume. An Italian A is an "awh" sound, which is no good at all for a high note. But voice teachers teach singers to produce these cloudy, mushy vowels which make their diction incomprehensible. Some people feel that this modification of the vowel is essential for them to sing with beauty above the stave but what I've noticed is that, with rare exceptions, it's just a crutch.

As in life, you go through a script that works for you. It may not be the best way to live your life, but you follow that script. Time after time, I've been in situations where, by the general rehearsal, people were singing every word (even at high C above the stave) with tremendous clarity. However, once we got into performance, they started to resort to their old tricks. To just dive off of a diving board without looking below you must be terrifying and what happens as a result is that the performance doesn't have the diction we had in rehearsal. Nor is it as good as the rehearsal.

*For the past few years, you've been Artistic Advisor at the Florentine Opera of Milwaukee. What is it about that company that has such a special appeal for you?*

Like New Orleans, St. Louis, San Francisco, and Chicago, Milwaukee is a city which has supported orchestras for more than 50 years. The Florentine Opera of Milwaukee is the fifth oldest continuing opera company in the nation—it's 56 years old, and outside of the Metropolitan Opera, it has the finest opera orchestra in the United States. The orchestra loves to play opera and, when they play solidly, there isn't another company whose orchestra can match them. We've had a good professional working relationship in Milwaukee and each year it gets better.

We do three productions a year there and I usually conduct two out of the three. However, because of the limited time in the theater, we have an absolutely fiendish rehearsal schedule. Depending on the opera we're doing, we sometimes have to use alternate singers for the second cast, so we try to use people in the first cast who are very experienced in their roles. That way we don't worry about their marking for five or six days because we know they'll be fine on opening night.

What happens is that the first cast does not sing the dress rehearsal. If they did that on Wednesday night, they'd be in no condition to sing on Thursday and Saturday nights. They sing the piano dress, the *sitzprobe*, and then rest during the dress rehearsal while the other cast sings. That's how Maria Spacagna got to sing her very first Butterfly in Milwaukee. And how Kristine Ciesinski sang her very first Salome.

*You channel a lot of nervous energy into working out. How did you get started? What kind of routine do you follow?*

Ten years ago I was very ill with a localized cancer in my tongue which, thankfully, was excised without any metastasis. Up until that time, I had been a very heavy smoker. I no longer smoke at all. I quit just like *that*! Until that time I had always questioned certain physical values and, before I started doing any intense physical workouts, would be drenched in perspiration at the end of any show. I was always a little bit heavy, felt weak, couldn't run more than five blocks and, if I ran for a bus, would find myself totally out of breath.

Many musicians turn to food when they're depressed and, when I stopped smoking, I really blew up. So I put myself on a diet, lost 55 pounds in three months and, in two years, gained back twenty of those pounds. Seven years ago I spent two years in analysis but, ever since I started exercising, I've had no need to see a psychiatrist. I really think that exercise is the most wonderful way of controlling all that.

Conducting is often overrated as a cardiovascular activity. Waving your arms around for five or six hours a day is a very good form of aerobic exercise when you're in your seventies (most people that age are lucky if they walk five blocks). But in your twenties and thirties, it is not sufficient. If, genetically, you're a physical freak, you might survive for a month or two if you stay up all night smoking and drinking booze. But year after year? The fact that Leonard Bernstein can still smoke as much as he does and achieve what he does is absolutely amazing!

Anyhow, the way it all started is that I was in Pittsburgh, conducting *The Abduction From The Seraglio*, when I threw my back out during the dress rehearsal. Since there was a gym in the hotel where I was staying, I went down there to get a massage and some steam to help my back. When they asked me if I wanted to join the gym, I said, "I don't even know how to exercise. How could I possibly join?"

The man on duty said "We'll do 15 minutes a day," gave me ten simple exercises and told me to do ten minutes on the stationary bicycle. I started out that way, kept increasing my workout and, after I had built up to a half hour on the stationary bicycle, started to do some running. I now exercise regularly, five to six days a week, and alternate between aerobic and anaerobic exercises. One day, I'll work half my

Mark Avery

Rescigno working with soprano Viviane Thomas on the score for *Manon Lescaut* at the Florentine Opera of Milwaukee.

*"So many people are spending time on the politics of music rather than the music itself that I see a lot of politics affect people's careers."*

body with weights; the next day I'll ride for 45 minutes to an hour on the stationary bicycle, do the other half of my body and run six miles. I usually take one or two days off to rest before starting the cycle all over again.

The good thing about this regimen is that you can exercise almost anywhere on the road. It's hardest for me to work out in Milwaukee, where we rehearse from 10 to 12 hours a day. But there is a gym located two blocks from the hotel where I stay and I have frequently gone there at 7:00 a.m. I'll rehearse until 10 at night without any eating dinner before the rehearsal—I can't eat a big meal and then rehearse for three hours—and then eat something light, have two glasses of wine, go to bed at 11:30, and sleep until 6:30 a.m.

Not only does exercise help me to handle the stress from my work, it has given me much more stamina, and although I still sweat quite a bit, I no longer change clothes between acts unless I'm someplace like Puerto Rico in the summertime. Even though I used to have difficulty getting enough rest, I've found certain techniques which now help me to sleep.

I love Sherlock Holmes, and for a period of about four or five years, would read those novels over and over, four or five times apiece. I now have eighteen different tapes of Sherlock Holmes stories on cassette. Some of them are radio broadcasts from the 1940s, some are BBC radiocasts from the 1950s, and others are more recent tapes. Every single night, for the past few years, I've been playing one of those tapes to put myself to sleep. It's a great relaxation technique which works very well for me.

*Some people claim that the arts should avoid becoming politicized. Aren't there a lot of internal politics which already jeopardize the operatic art form?*

Of course. So many people are spending time on the politics of music rather than the music itself that I see a lot of politics affect people's careers. I've only had one negative experience with an orchestra and even in retrospect, I'm not quite sure why it happened. The Pittsburgh Symphony has a reputation for being one of the hardest orchestras in the world and they played through rehearsals magnificently. Then, we had this totally disastrous general rehearsal (the problem was basically with two musicians in the orchestra) and I guess I became more upset than usual. The opening performance was fine, but the review that came out the next day was absolutely horrible for me. It described all kinds of things that happened during rehearsal but which did *not* happen during the performance. I was later informed that someone involved with the performance apparently had had lunch with the critic on the day between the rehearsal and the opening performance. Needless to say, I've never gone back to Pittsburgh.

When it comes time to make selections regarding repertoire and artists, it's nice to have some input from the operagoing community on what is popular. But none of these people are as well-informed as the company's professional staff and the person who's been hired as the general director. If he is an honest and knowledgeable person who knows what is possible for his company to produce at its best level, then it's important for the general director to assume those responsibilities. He should never just bottom-line everything in his organization because, when you do that, the product goes downhill and you lose your audience.

However, in many American opera companies, the board of directors has a real say in who works and who doesn't work. Quite often, certain things happen because the wife of the head of the board of directors likes something. Can you just *imagine* the board members of the Chicago Symphony asking Mrs. Georg Solti how they should operate their own businesses? That would be ridiculous!

*Like several other conductors your age, you've expressed deep concerns about the limited repertoire which is being presented by many American opera companies. What problems do you think today's artistic conservativism poses in terms of building new audiences for opera?*

When I was young, *Omnibus* had an incredible series and, each year, I could see five or six operas on television. I remember watching Montemezzi's *The Love Of Three Kings* on TV. And every Sunday evening we either had a filmed concert from the Chicago Symphony with Fritz Reiner conducting, or an opera from someplace else. Occasionally there was a film of Toscanini conducting. In the past, there was always a devotion to new works and operas that were less than standard repertoire. People knew what they were watching, were willing to spend a big difference for a certain perfection of product, and understood that the difference was right, that quality was a high priority.

Today, people with expense accounts will spend up to $200 apiece on a meal and in many ways, planning an opera season is like running a fine restaurant: you don't just depend on familiar staples like baked potatoes. Of course, if you can't cook a steak, you're in trouble (and if you tell people that you're serving them brains, there's no question that it might freak them out). But some variations on the basic menu are necessary because the average American who goes to a restaurant expects to be served good food. The person who goes to a good restaurant should not be afraid to order a dish like shad with quenelles and every once in a while it's important to serve your customers an exotic dish like tripe.

I don't know what the answer is but, somehow or other, we have to do something for the sake of the operatic art form. There must be *some* way that an opera company can produce a season which includes two warhorses, one repertoire piece that's not a warhorse and one out-of-the-way piece like


***Joruri* in Tokyo. Backstage (left to right) are Charles MacKay, general director of Opera Theater of St. Louis, Minoru Miki, composer, and Rescigno.**

Ken Howard

Rossini's *Otello*, Barber's *Vanessa*, or a world premiere. At present, I just see too much of the same old repertoire being programmed year in and year out. When we did *The Ballad Of Baby Doe* at the Florentine Opera of Milwaukee, we got creamed at the box office. We had 60 percent houses, whereas, for the average show, we usually sell between 82 to 90 percent of the auditorium.

Another problem is that, because of the economics involved, the very guts of the recording industry are in trouble. Right now there aren't that many new recordings coming out and, unlike the rock or pop segments of the industry, opera is not selling any new music. There was much more recording being done during the '50s, '60s—even up to the mid-1970s. After that, it really slowed down. The mid-'70s was probably the end of it.

What happens now? Every three or four years, the recording industry takes one or two people who it feels can be pumped up (sometimes prematurely) and what's really being sold are digital re-masterings of old recordings. For the most part, you can now buy re-mastered recordings of superior performances from the 1950s and '60s for half the price of a new record or compact disc.

If you really look at the dollars and cents of it, I don't know how the classical recording industry survives because, if you can buy a recording or CD by Artur Rubinstein for half the price of a recording by some new pianist with almost no personality, why would *anybody* want to buy the new person's recording? □