

Musical Treasure Chest #40

My last few weeks have been consumed with the behind-the-scenes work on our second CD. Recorded last July in Hyde Hall out near Cooperstown, the project was the perfect foil to COVID induced inactivity. Hyde Hall proved to have wonderful acoustics and the synergy between the historic house, Musicians of Ma'alwyck, the amazing repertory and the enthusiasm of the Hyde Hall staff created something truly exceptional. Working on "picking the takes" along with Sten and Norm, and our outstanding producer Andre O'Neil, has reminded me just how incredible that week was, almost magical.

Since the site was open during the day for tours, we arrived around 4pm and starting recording by 5. We set up in the simply gorgeous dining room, with a 12 foot high ceiling from which hangs two fascinating chandeliers (still functioning vapor lights—Director Jonathan Maney is an expert on this type of lighting and if you tour the site he will be delighted to give you a demonstration). The room is huge and as are the period paintings that adorn the walls. The dining room table, which could easily seat twenty, is ornately set and historic loves seats and chairs are set against the perimeter of the room. Curtains and the carpet are glorious recreations, truly a sight to behold. I give all of this detail because this beautiful room provided the backdrop for our recording. The atmosphere is inspiring and playing music that the Clarke family knew and enjoyed was transportive.

Each evening as we took our dinner break, we would go out on the lovely porch from which the entire expanse of Otsego Lake is visible. The moon was nearly full for the session and each night was a revelation of reflection on the lake's surface, trees silhouetted by the lunar shine, and the glory of the stars in a sky with no light pollution. And the quiet....going back into the house to record, each sound seemed magnified and to resonate forever. We spent nearly a week working on the CD and the courtyard concert, and I will always remember this time as being special.

The repertory was remarkable: gorgeous and brilliantly transcribed opera excerpts, some from Hyde Hall's own archives, others from the great operas of the 1830s

that the Clarke family would certainly have seen. I thought for this Musical Treasure Chest I would focus on one of those operatic gems, one that perhaps you don't already know, *Les Huguenots* written in 1836 by Giacomo Meyerbeer. This operatic giant is largely forgotten today, but he was an extremely important and popular composer. Born in Germany to a Jewish family, he was a fine pianist and pursued that musical avenue initially before transitioning to composition. He spent several years studying and working in Italy, before getting a break in France, where his opera *Robert le Diable* was staged in 1831 to phenomenal success. He became the most frequently performed opera composer of the 1800s, eclipsing Rossini, Donizetti and even Verdi for the number of performances in large opera houses.

Meyerbeer's operas were huge affairs with large casts, long plots and multiple acts. His operas define what has come to be known as *grand opera*. So popular were his works that they found their way to America, which had a nascent opera tradition, soon after their European premieres. New Orleans had two opera companies in the 1830s and 40s and with the city's French background they often presented French opera. The companies not only performed for New Orleans audiences, but during the oppressively hot summer months would tour the country, bringing their productions to Philadelphia, New York City, Boston and Baltimore, among other locations. *Les Huguenots* found its way to America by 1839, where it was performed in New Orleans in April of 1839.

The opera is a massive 5 acts, with seventeen (!) solo vocal roles, a huge chorus representing peasants, the royal court, soldiers, monks, students...there are ballet scenes as well. Meyerbeer labored on the opera for five years, but the triumphant premiere made his efforts worthwhile. Fans of the piece included Liszt and Berlioz; author George Sands called the work "an evangel of love." The plot is complicated but well-written and the characters are fully developed, but most importantly the music is stunning and memorable.

I encourage you to watch the performance below with Joan Sutherland, who made Valentine, the opera's heroine, one of her signature roles.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sK0xbDR3ckU>

