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Article Summary: The 1890s in Nebraska marked the beginning of a golden age of grand opera. Nearly all the major operatic organizations and leading artists of the time came to perform.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Henry Abbey, Maurice Grau, Lillian Nordica, Adelina Patti, Sofia Scalchi, Albert Guille, Francesco Tamagno, Clara Louise Kellogg, Max Maretzek, Mrs C C Tennant Clary, Emma Fursch-Madi, Lillian Blauvelt, Nellie Melba, Willa Cather, Clementine de Vere, Zelig de Lussan, Joanna Gadske, Emma Juch

Major Nebraska Opera Venues: Boyd's Opera House, Omaha; Coliseum, Omaha; Creighton Theatre, Omaha; Funke's Opera House, Lincoln

Opera Companies Performing in Nebraska: Adelaide Phillips Company, Emma Abbott Opera Company, Boston Ideal Opera Company, Her Majesty's Opera Company, the Milan Italian Opera Company, National Opera Company, Grand Italian Opera Company, Emma Juch Grand Opera Company, Clara Louise Kellogg Concert Company, C D Hess Grand Opera Company, Duff Opera Company, Nordica Opera and Concert Company, Marie Tavy Grand English Opera Company, Walter Damrosch Opera Company, International Grand Opera Company, Clementine de Vere Operatic Concert Company, Scalchi Concert Company, Lambardi Italian Grand Opera Company

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Photographs / Images: Boyd's Opera House in Omaha; Adelina Patti; program, Boyd's Opera House, March 31, 1890; Emma Juch; program, Funke Opera House, Lincoln, April 16, 1890; James E Boyd; Funke Opera House; Lillian Nordica about 1896; Nellie Melba, 1898

Grand Opera in Nebraska in the 1890s

By Harlan Jennings

The famous novelist and critic Willa Cather, writing in 1929 about her childhood in Red Cloud, Nebraska, reminisced:

When I go about among little Nebraska towns. . . , the thing I miss most is the opera house. No number of . . . moving picture theaters can console me for the loss of the opera house. . . . Half a dozen times during each winter . . . a traveling stock company settled down at the local hotel and thrilled and entertained us for a week. . . . If the company arrived on the night train, when we were not in school, my chums and I always walked a good half mile to the depot . . . to see that train come in. Sometimes we pulled younger brothers and sisters along on a sled. . . .

The excitement began when the advance man came to town and posted the bills on the side of a barn, on the lumber yard fence, in the "plate glass" windows of drug stores and grocery stores. My playmates and I used to stand for an hour after school, studying every word on those posters; the names of the plays and the nights on which each would be given. . . .

How good some of those old traveling companies were. . . . What good luck for a country child to hear those tuneful operas sung by people who were doing their best. . . . I am sorry that the old opera houses in the prairie towns are dark, because they really gave us a deeper thrill, at least to children.¹

Long before the establishment of such regional opera companies as Opera Omaha, grand opera formed a regular part of the cultural diet on the central Plains. One hundred years ago a coast-to-coast network of entertainment,

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Boyd's Opera House in Omaha was built in 1881 and burned in 1893.
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made possible by the advent of the railroads, brought the best New York companies and performers to every large city in the hinterlands. By 1890 no fewer than thirty-seven Nebraska towns had opera houses. However, this does not mean that grand opera was witnessed in all these locations. Then, as now, productions of grand opera were limited to large urban centers such as Omaha and Lincoln.

The first professional grand opera troupe seen in Nebraska, the Adelaide Phillips Company, visited those cities in 1874, presenting *The Barber of Seville* and *Don Pasquale* in Italian. The number of opera performances rose to twenty-four in the 1880s. The operatic visitors in this decade comprised the Emma Abbott Opera Company (which appeared in every year but two), the Boston Ideal Opera Company (1882),

Grand Opera in Nebraska

Her Majesty's Opera Company (1884), the Milan Italian Opera Company (1886), and the National Opera Company (1887). But the heyday of grand opera in Nebraska began in the 1890s, when forty-two performances of fifteen different operas were witnessed in Lincoln and Omaha.

Oddly enough, this increase in opera performances took place as both cities, which had expanded steadily since the 1860s, declined in population. Omaha, with 140,452 people, began the 1890s as the second largest city west of St. Louis, exceeded in size only by San Francisco. By 1900 it had shrunk to 102,555, while Lincoln ended the decade with a population of 40,169, down from 55,154.

The first operatic event of the decade was perhaps its most spectacular. Into Omaha in early March 1890 came the 175-member Grand Italian Opera Company, managed by Henry Abbey and Maurice Grau. The troupe was nearing the end of an extensive tour, which had included twenty-one performances in Mexico City and fourteen in San Francisco.

With this company traveled Lillian Nordica from Farmington, Maine, destined to make her reputation as the greatest Wagnerian soprano America had produced, as well as the world-renowned Adelina Patti, who had favored Abbey by lowering her fee to \$3,500 per night for the tour.²

Arguably the greatest soprano of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Patti had sung in Omaha once before. On February 24, 1887, she had appeared at the head of her own concert company, under the management of Henry Abbey. At that time her troupe was comprised of contralto Sofia Scalchi, tenor Albert Guille, baritone Antonio Galassi, and bass Franco Novara, as well as an orchestra of fifty, conducted by Luigi Arditi. The program offered by Patti's troupe was typical of those given by operatic concert companies: a potpourri of vocal and orchestral selections, performed in recital style (into which Patti managed to squeeze her signature song,

"Home, Sweet Home"); after an intermission came excerpts from the first and second acts of Rossini's *Semiramide*, sung in costume with a minimal amount of scenery. This performance attracted a huge crowd, estimated by the local press at anywhere from 4,300 to 6,000. According to the *Omaha Daily Herald*, the receipts amounted to a staggering \$12,000.



Adelina Patti. From William Armstrong, *The Romantic World of Music* (1922)

A more modest figure of \$10,450 was quoted by the *Omaha Daily Bee*, along with the statement that Abbey's share of the box office totaled over \$9,600.³

While the city eagerly awaited the arrival of Abbey's 1890 troupe, stage carpenters from the Boyd Opera House frantically began transforming the cavernous Coliseum into something resembling a theater. Erected in 1888 by a joint stock company at a cost of \$45,000, the Coliseum had been constructed to house conventions, exhibitions, concerts, and athletic events. It had a capacity of 8,000. The day before the opening the *Omaha Republican* smugly reported that "the north end of the bicycle track has been converted into an

immense stage, equipped with new and magnificent scenery. . . . Upon the sides and slightly in the rear of the stage have been erected elegant dressing rooms."⁴ In addition, twelve private boxes were constructed and chairs placed for the audience on the main floor. Converting the arena into a pseudo-opera house cost the stockholders \$2,500.

Early on the morning of the opening several hundred, dressed in their Sunday best, gathered at the Union Pacific depot to observe the arrival of the leading singers, hoping to catch a glimpse of Adelina Patti and her lavish private Pullman. However, rail officials sidetracked the diva's palace-on-wheels without anyone's noticing. The diva remained aboard until shortly before noon, when she slipped unobserved into a closed carriage, which conveyed her to a local hotel. Meanwhile, the transformation of the Coliseum continued until curtain time and afterward. Finally, at 8:40, the performance began.

Verdi's *Il trovatore*, sung in Italian and starring Lillian Nordica and world-famous tenor Francesco Tamagno, had been chosen for the March 3 opening. Despite unusually high ticket prices, ranging from \$1 to \$3.75, a crowd estimated at between three and five thousand attended. About six hundred members of the audience returned their tickets for refunds when it was announced that Tamagno was ill and would not sing. Still, as reported by the *Omaha Republican*,

by 8 o'clock the vast and brilliantly lighted auditorium was a sight of dazzling splendor. The wealth, beauty and the elite of Omaha were there, interspersed with a large sprinkling of the less imposing but far more capable and appreciative music lovers of the several grades of society. Gorgeous costumes and glittering jewels were everywhere apparent.⁵

Despite Tamagno's cancellation, both audience and critics seemed well pleased with the opera, and with the prima donna in particular:

As Leonora, Mme. Lillian Nordica has no equal. She is at once sympathetic, dramatic and beautiful. . . . Her exquisite

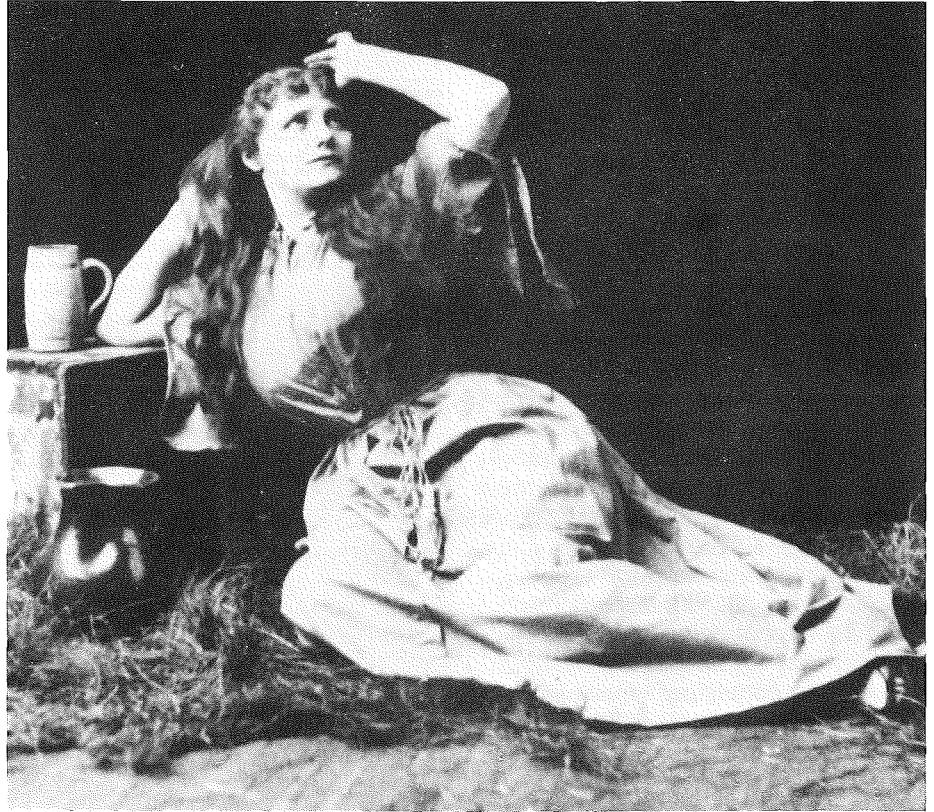
Grand Opera in Nebraska

transport its personnel, wardrobe, properties, and scenery.⁹

Omaha's operaphiles packed the Boyd Opera House on March 31 to hear *Faust* sung in their native tongue and came away thoroughly charmed by the prima donna and her charges. Juch received several floral tributes at the end of the second act, the *Republican* cooing, "While the audience . . . was fairly captivated by her singing, they were thrilled . . . by her ideal and poetic acting. . . . *Faust* was an unusual feast of the very best grand opera, made doubly enjoyable on account of the fact that it was rendered in English."¹⁰

Having conquered Omaha, the Juch company boarded its special train and rolled some fifty miles southwest to Lincoln. Here, after very little rest, they wooed the audience with *Carmen*, an opera never before presented on the Nebraska Plains. Even though most of them had sung leading roles in *Faust* the night before, the principals acquitted themselves well before a large audience.¹¹

The Lincoln press uniformly praised the performance. Though a trace of disappointment could be detected in the *Journal's* remark that *Carmen* was "for the most part much superior in orchestral to vocal treatment," the paper stated that the opera "gave general satisfaction" and noted that "it was especially gratifying to have a full orchestra." The only real point of controversy among the critics centered on Emma Juch's portrayal of the title role. The *Lincoln Evening News* felt that "Miss Juch makes of the witching girl a simple gypsy coquette, not the wanton creature we have been treated to." The *Journal* expressed a more pious view. Though it found Miss Juch's *Carmen* "strong and dramatic," it added, "If she failed in the conscientious attempt to purify the character it was only because the task was too difficult." The *Capital City Courier*, on the other hand, came down strongly on the side of righteousness, complaining that Juch's interpretation seemed vulgar, "coarse," and "suggestive."¹² Yet the matter did not end here, for the



Emma Juch, probably in her role as Marguerite in *Faust*.
Harvard Theatre Collection. The Houghton Library

Courier also printed another view of the opera, written by a local woman identified as "one of our best known singers." This lady found nothing objectionable in Juch's treatment of the role.

Barely two weeks went by before the Lincoln public was subjected to another dose of grand opera, though on a smaller scale, when the Clara Louise Kellogg Concert Company came to town. Consisting only of a quartet of vocalists and a pianist, this troupe offered the fourth act of *Il trovatore*, with scenery and costumes, as the second half of its program.

Clara Louise Kellogg had had a fabulous career. One of the first American singers to gain international recognition, she had done much to further the cause of opera in America. By 1890, however, she clearly was past her prime, and the Lincoln critics unanimously condemned her performance.

Although the *Journal* attempted to be somewhat kind by speaking favorably of Kellogg's supporting artists, the *Courier* mercilessly attacked the entire company, as well as the auditors:

Oh, the pity of it! That Clara Louise Kellogg should be dragged up and down the country to hoodwink the public by the glamour of a name once famous. . . . Like a loyal husband and a careful manager, Mr. [Karl] Strakosch has surrounded Miss Kellogg with singers who will not overshadow his wife nor make an expensive company.¹³

In October 1890 yet another opera organization invaded Nebraska. Less pretentious than the Abbey or the Juch organizations, the C. D. Hess Grand Opera Company contained only sixty-five people and charged just \$.25 to \$1.50 for tickets. Like the Juch company, it had capable artists of the second rank on its roster, including one or two who had achieved some international suc-

cess. The Hess troupe opened with *Lucia* in the Funke Opera House in Lincoln and then went on to give Omaha five different operas in four days: *Rigoletto*, *William Tell*, a second *Lucia*, *La traviata*, and *Il trovatore*. The performances of *Rigoletto* and *Tell* constituted the Nebraska premieres of these works. All the above operas except *Trovatore* were heard at the Boyd.¹⁴

The reception in Lincoln was mixed. While noting the presence of a "large audience," the *Courier* growled, "It is merely a fair concert company seeking to tender grand opera with scarcely any of the operatic accessories."¹⁵ On the other hand, neither the *Journal* nor the *Evening News* found fault with the production or the singers.

An ambivalent response awaited *Rigoletto* in Omaha. While the *Bee* criticized the work as being "at best a dreary, heavy opera," the *World-Herald* praised it for containing "some of the most dramatic music [Verdi] ever composed."¹⁶ Both critics liked the principals—William Mertens in the title role, Francesca Guthrie as Gilda, and Albert Guille as the Duke—but disagreed on the merits of the chorus.

The *World-Herald* reviewer also alluded to the problems caused by adding local players to a touring orchestra, then a common practice: "The band was very uncertain . . . but, with rehearsal, ought to play very well together in the remaining operas." Much of his column, however, consisted of an indictment of the public for not attending: "When a manager brings around a company of artists such as Mr. Hess does he ought to meet with encouragement in a city like Omaha. . . . Let it rather be hoped that it was want of familiarity with the opera that kept the so-called musical public at home."¹⁷

Joined by soprano Camille Muori, Guille and Mertens took the stage again the following night in *William Tell*. The performance prompted the critic of the *World-Herald* to try to lead two of the singers along the path of vocal righteousness:

Funke's Opera House

CRAWFORD & McREYNOLDS, MANAGERS
FRANK E. HANDY, TREASURER
WESSEL PRINTING CO., PROGRAM PRINTERS

SPECIAL NOTICE.—Parties coming to the Opera House after the Curtain is up, must not expect to be seated till the ushers can do so without annoying those seated. The Opera House will open at 7:00 o'clock. Curtain rises at 8:00. Reserved seats always on sale two days in advance at the reserved seat ticket office.

No. 95 LINCOLN, NEB., APRIL 16, 1890. Vol. 6

— THE — Clara Louise Kellogg

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— THE COMPANY CONSISTS OF —
MISS CLARA LOUISE KELLOGG,
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Mr. Ed. C. McHenry, Stage Manager.

Mr. Lewis M. F. Haase, Agent in Advance.
— Under the Management of —
MR. CARL STRAKOSCH.

PROGRAM.

PART I.

1. DUETT, "Martha," *Fletow*
Messrs. Spigaroli and Lee.
2. "O, mio FERNANDO," "La Favorita," *Donizetti*
Miss Carrie Morse.
3. SONG, "Tannhauser," *Richard Wagner*
Mr. William H. Lee.
4. ARIA, "Ernani," *Verdi*
MISS CLARA LOUISE KELLOGG.
5. TRIO, "I Nabighanti," *Randegger*
Miss Carrie Morse, Messrs. Spigaroli and Lee.
6. SONG, "Love's Old, Sweet Song," *Molloy*
MISS CLARA LOUISE KELLOGG.
7. Spanish Bolero, "Marquita," *Murzo*
Mr. Carlo Spigaroli.
8. DUETT, "A Night in Venice," *Arditi*
Miss Carrie Morse and Mr. Carlo Spigaroli.

Mr. Chas. E. Pratt, Accompanist

Program, Funke's Opera House, Lincoln,
April 16, 1890. NSHS-MS3673

Mertens . . . displayed his wonderful voice with good effect, but this gentleman has much to learn, and a couple of years would be better spent by him in study under an Italian master than in singing a number of parts continuously as he does now, and so accentuating his defects by repetition. The same remarks apply to Miss Muori.¹⁸

On what was to be the final day of a three-day season, Hess had scheduled a matinee of *Lucia*—with Guthrie as Lucy, Fred Packard as Edgar, Sylvanie Langlois as Henry (thereby giving Mertens a well-deserved rest), and William Hamilton as Raymond—and an evening performance of *Traviata*, with

Guthrie (singing twice in one day), Guille, and Mertens.

Lucia satisfied the *World-Herald* critic, though he could not resist taking the soprano to task regarding her costuming (leading singers provided their own costumes until the latter half of the twentieth century):

As Lucy Miss Guthrie sang extremely well, so well that one could almost forgive her most inappropriate costume in the first act. A Scotch lady stealthily meeting her lover in a park or garden about the time of the "Young Pretender" would hardly select a ball dress—tempore 1890—as a fitting costume.¹⁹

Though no review of *Lucia* appeared in the *Bee*, that daily took favorable notice of *Traviata*, as did the *World-Herald*. The latter noted that Guthrie showed no signs of fatigue at the evening performance, singing "Ah, fors'è lui" with outstanding "taste and expression." After again chastising Mertens about his alleged lack of vocal training, the reviewer allowed that Guille had "repeated his previous successes" and mentioned that "the band showed a further improvement."²⁰

At the conclusion of its October 5 reviews, the *World-Herald* announced that Hess's season had been extended by one night. By arrangement with the management of the Grand Opera House, Hess presented *Travatore* at "popular prices" of twenty-five and seventy-five cents. Guthrie (again!) and Packard appeared as Leonora and Manrico, respectively, and evidently acquitted themselves well. The only significant comment from the *World-Herald* review concerned the work itself: "The melancholy and almost absurd tale of the troubadour is well known. It can scarcely be called interesting, and its improbability robs it of much of its romance. Yet the opera has in it much fine music."²¹

Following the Hess Company's *Lucia* in October 1890, the city of Lincoln, though visited by a number of light opera companies, heard no more grand opera until March 1893. The pickings were nearly as slim in Omaha during

Grand Opera in Nebraska

the two years following the Hess engagement. Only two performances of *Carmen*, sung in English in January 1891 and March 1892 by a troupe that called themselves the Bostonians, dotted an otherwise sparse operatic landscape. Though the Bostonians had earned a reputation for being the strongest comic opera organization then on the road, *Carmen* seems to have been beyond the capabilities of the company, according to the critics.

By 1892 Omaha possessed a new venue for opera, Boyd's New Theater, which had opened in September 1891 at the corner of Seventeenth and Harney Streets. Larger than the old Boyd, it contained a stage measuring seventy-eight by forty feet, as well as nearly 2,100 seats, including fourteen upper and lower boxes. Unlike its predecessor, it could be entered from the ground floor, and it boasted seventeen sets of scenery, painted by a St. Louis artist.

Omaha missed an opportunity to break out of the operatic doldrums in February 1892. Adelina Patti, on one of her numerous farewell tours of North America, had scheduled an appearance at the Coliseum. However, six days before her engagement, her advance agent arrived to inspect the facility and found it wanting in scenic appointments (the Coliseum had only a drop curtain). Negotiations with the Boyd proved fruitless, and Patti canceled.²²

Omaha's operatic drought ended in the fall of 1892. On October 5, at the new Boyd Theater, the Duff Opera Company presented the unlikely double bill of Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* (the Nebraska premiere, in English), followed by Gilbert and Sullivan's *Trial by Jury*.²³ This is how the critic of the *World-Herald* reacted to Mascagni's opera:

Recognition of the genius of Mascagni as a composer is almost jeopardized by the impossibility of the plot . . . and the criminal imbecility of the libretto. . . .

The orchestration of this now world-famous opera is its greatness. . . . [In the role of Turiddu] W. [Charles] Bassett has a delicious tenor, sings with sweetness and fire and what he does not know

about acting would fill all the books written on the stage. Helen Bertram [Santuzza]—a thorough artist—was highly successful. Mr. [William] Hamilton [Alfio] had a cold.²⁴

The city then began gearing up for a so-called opera festival, to be held at the new Boyd. Max Maretzek, a veteran conductor and impresario, had organized a



James E. Boyd. NSHS-P853

company especially for the occasion and rehearsed it back east. Most of the members of this troupe had sung with the Hinrichs Opera Company in Philadelphia during the summer of 1892. Mrs. C. C. Tennant Clary, a wealthy amateur singer and a former pupil and friend of Maretzek's, spearheaded the project by raising a subscription to finance the festival. In addition, she "secured the promise from many of the leading society ladies not to give any large social entertainments during the week of the opera."²⁵ By mid-September Clary had raised most of the required \$3,000 guarantee, and things seemed well on their

way toward a successful week of grand opera. However, Mrs. Clary possessed not only wealth and influence, but also a desire to sing leading roles on the operatic stage. This unfortunate combination of money and ambition, as well as her lack of experience as an opera producer, proved to be the festival's undoing.

The projected season sounded festive. Seven performances in five days graced November's calendar: *Il trovatore*, November 7 and 8; *Faust*, November 9 and 10; *Lucia*, November 11; one act from each, November 12 (matinee); and an opera to be announced for the November 12 evening slot. Prices of admission ranged from \$.50 to \$1.50.

Opening night, a gala affair, got off to a rather slow start. As a full house, including the governor and other dignitaries, looked on, the mayor of Omaha took the stage and, in the words of the *World-Herald*, "read a long and tiresome speech and a number of equally long and tiresome letters from people who did not find it convenient to come from 750 to 1,000 miles to hear opera in Omaha."²⁶ The curtain finally rose at 8:45.

The rest of the evening proved to be a mixed bag. The opera suffered from weak singing by a small chorus and ragged playing by the orchestra. Though the principals seemed satisfactory, one of them sang in Italian, while everyone else adhered to the advertised English. The critic of the *World-Herald* registered mild disappointment, but hoped that matters would improve as the week wore on: "To say that the opera was up to a very high standard would be untrue. . . . [but] it is an encouraging beginning."²⁷

Although the repetition of *Trovatore* on Tuesday, as well as the Wednesday and Thursday *Faust* performances, proceeded as scheduled, *Lucia*, in which Mrs. Clary was to have made her debut in the title role, was dropped. On Thursday, November 10, the *Bee* informed its readers that *Faust* would be substituted for *Lucia* Friday night, because the latter had not received adequate rehearsal time. The next day, the *World-Herald*

announced that *Lucia* had been abandoned altogether, that the Saturday matinee had been canceled, and that *Faust* would hold the boards for what was left of the season. The dailies withheld any further comment on the performances until the close of the opera season. Then, on Sunday morning, the *World-Herald* printed the following letter to the editor:

Some of us who live in Omaha and saw this show have seen grand opera adequately given in Chicago, in New York and even in Omaha. . . .

Some of us, therefore, have heard grand opera and know what it should be when properly given. . . .

These great works are monuments of musical . . . genius, and it seems to me that it is almost sacrilegious to have them butchered by people who cannot sing them and an orchestra too small to effectually render their parts.²⁸

In addition, the paper blasted the management of the opera festival in an editorial:

Grand opera should be done well or not at all. . . . In the series of performances just closed the principal artists did not, except in a few instances, rise an inch above a decent mediocrity, and to imagine that a taste for the highest form of lyric drama is to be fostered here by representations no better than have been given last week is to insult the intelligence of the people of the west, who, recruited as they are, from every city and every land, are not so wild and wooly as many superior persons are pleased to imagine.

The chorus last week was an outrage; where the handful of incompetent lay figures was gathered up is a mystery. Bad as they were in "Trovatore," they were worse in "Faust." Fortunately we were spared their massacre of "Lucia."

The orchestra—a purely local one—while the choristers were imported exotics—was good as far as it went. But nineteen or twenty pieces are utterly insufficient.²⁹

Concurring that the chorus and orchestra proved unsatisfactory, the Omaha correspondent for the *Musical Courier* shed some light on the delinquency of the chorus by revealing that New York agent Henry Wolfsohn "broke the contract by sending eleven chorus

singers instead of sixteen, five females being absent."³⁰

Two weeks after the performances, an unrepentant Mrs. Clary responded to the critics. Calling the season a success, she made no reference to the bungled *Faust* and indicated that she already had plans for another season:

Some explanation is due the public concerning the chorus. It consisted of nine male voices, which were certainly good, and three female voices. . . . My contract called for sixteen picked voices of men and women, for whom Mr. Maretzek held checks covering their salaries and expenses. Five of the ladies missed the train when the company left New York. . . . By training a local chorus for next year, we expect to avoid any possibility of such an embarrassment in the future.³¹

The financial panic of 1893 and the resulting depression seem to have had little effect on grand opera or the wealthy citizens who supported it. In New York, despite labor problems, the "mentors" of the Metropolitan Opera Company "sailed through the turbulence with impunity."³² In Nebraska, low farm prices and drought persisted throughout most of the 1890s, causing much hardship and reducing immigration to a trickle. Although the state's population had more than doubled in the previous decade, in the 1890s it gained less than 8,000, increasing from 1,058,910 in 1890 only to 1,066,300 in 1900. In the state's urban centers the depression of 1893 threw many laborers out of work and reduced the wages of those employed.³³ Those who patronized the theater in Omaha and Lincoln, however, apparently remained unaffected by hard times.

From the debacle of the Omaha Opera Festival Company in November 1892 until April 1894, no fully staged, complete grand opera productions took place in Nebraska, probably because of a curious dearth of operatic touring companies. During the 1892-93 season, not a single grand opera troupe traveled across America. The following season, only the Tavary and Abbey troupes were on tour; Tavary avoided the heart-

land, while Abbey ventured no farther west than St. Louis. In the meantime, full seasons of musical and dramatic offerings continued in Omaha and Lincoln theaters. Omaha, in particular, had much to offer in the way of live, professional entertainment. A survey of the newspapers reveals visits by poet James Whitcomb Riley and actors Thomas Keene, James O'Neill, Fanny Davenport, Julia Marlowe, Frederick Warde, and Louis James. Explorer Robert E. Peary, orator Robert Ingersoll, and abolitionist Frederick Douglass gave lectures. Ignace Paderewski, Eduard Remenyi, and the Mendelssohn Quintet Club of Boston could be heard in concert. In April 1893 Anton Seidl brought his orchestra to Omaha. In the following month occurred a three-day "May Festival," featuring Sousa's Band, Walter Damrosch's New York Symphony Orchestra, and several famous vocalists: sopranos Emma Fursch-Madi and Lillian Blauvelt, contralto Sofia Scalchi, and tenor Albert Guille. Comic opera companies continued to pass through both cities with regularity, as did Ringling Brothers' Circus.

During this time, the closest the citizens of Lincoln and Omaha came to seeing a fully staged opera was during the advent of the Nordica Opera and Concert Company in March 1893. Nordica's outstanding entourage included world-class contralto Sofia Scalchi, tenor Italo Campanini, and baritone Giuseppe Del Puente. A fire that consumed the interior of the Metropolitan Opera House on August 27, 1892, had rendered these singers without their expected engagements by forcing the cancellation of the 1892-93 season. Nordica's troupe performed essentially the same program for both appearances: in Omaha on March 1 at the Boyd Theater, and in Lincoln on March 2 at the Lansing Theater.³⁴

In early April 1894, the *World-Herald* reported that Max Maretzek was in New York City, rehearsing a company that would soon invade Omaha. The second "Omaha Opera Festival," conceived by

Grand Opera in Nebraska

Mrs. Clary and given at Boyd's Theater, began April 23 with a presentation of *Il trovatore*. Spread over the next five days were performances of *Faust*, *Lucia*, and *Carmen*, the Nebraska premiere of *Ernani*, *Lucia* again, and a season finale of *Cavalleria rusticana* billed with excerpts from *Rigoletto*. All performances were sung in English.

Unlike the disastrous festival of 1892, this one kept faith with the public. Nevertheless, the week could not be called a success, either financially or artistically.

Though the chorus and orchestra seemed somewhat improved, the same complaints appeared in the press about ragged performances and apparent lack of preparation. The *Bee* advised the company to attempt fewer operas and repeat them. Fully aware of the troupe's shortcomings, and apparently determined not to be twice burned, the public failed to show any real enthusiasm. Houses averaged fifty percent of capacity, dooming to failure Mrs. Clary's second and final attempt to bring grand

opera to Omaha.

In December 1894, Lincoln, which had not witnessed a complete grand opera performance since October 1890, was the recipient of a brief visit by the Marie Tavery Grand English Opera Company. Two weeks before the company's arrival, the management of the Lansing Theater announced that the public would be invited to select the opera to be presented, adding that the troupe's repertoire consisted of *Carmen*, *The Magic Flute*, *Norma*, *Gustav III* (Verdi's



Funke's Opera House, Lincoln. NSHS-PCO864-L741-182

Masked Ball), *Don Juan* (Mozart's *Don Giovanni*), *Faust*, *The Flying Dutchman*, *Martha*, *Mignon*, *Il trovatore*, *Rigoletto*, *La traviata*, *Cavalleria rusticana*, and *I pagliacci*—an impressive list. Patrons were asked to express their preferences, in writing, to the theater's management. The public chose *Trovatore*, perhaps the opera most popular with nineteenth-century midwestern audiences.

The performance took place on December 8. Tavary and her troupe arrived about noon that day, just a few hours ahead of a special opera train chartered by over one hundred Omaha citizens. A full house packed the Lansing to hear Tavary as Leonora, Helen von Doenhoff as Azucena, Payne Clark as Manrico, and an unidentified baritone replacing an indisposed William Mertens as the Count.

Willa Cather, who, at the ripe old age of twenty-one, was in the midst of her two-year tenure as drama critic for the *Nebraska State Journal*, wrote:

One would not call Mme. Tavary a great actress. She has grace and finished technique. She has all the things which accompany and attend great feeling, but of feeling itself, of consuming passion, never a spark. For this she very largely atones by earnest endeavor and a voice which is remarkable for its power and sweetness. . . .

Mr. Clark has a good voice, but he devotes his attention entirely to it. He seems to lack all sense of poetry or sentiment. He plays the romantic troubadour and goes through all stages of love, hate, sorrow and self-sacrifice in a state of untroubled calm and unvarying good nature.³⁵

Cather found favor with only one of the principals, Helen von Doenhoff, who not only sang well, but showed "real dramatic fire." She added:

People go to the theater to be moved either to tears or laughter; the actress who does this, who for the moment gives them strong emotions, who excites and inflames the sentiment that the humdrum world tends to kill; she is the actress whom the people long remember. Vale, Doenhoff, et revenire.³⁶

In December 1895 Omaha received its first and only taste of Wagner prior to 1900. Although the composer had been

heard once before in Nebraska, an 1887 National Opera Company *Lohengrin* in Lincoln, this time no fewer than three works occupied the boards: *Tannhäuser*, *Die Walküre*, and *Lohengrin*, all courtesy of the Walter Damrosch Opera Company.

Advertisements trumpeted that the troupe contained Damrosch's famed New York Symphony Orchestra of seventy pieces, as well as a chorus of eighty voices. Crowning the brief season would be the appearance of Johanna Gadske and Max Alvery in *Lohengrin*, while an added feature was to be music-director Damrosch's afternoon lecture-recital on *Die Walküre* at the local Woman's Club. General admission, raised to appropriately immodest levels, ranged from one to four dollars, while box seats went for five dollars each.

From all accounts, the performances gave general satisfaction to those who attended. Unfortunately, those who chose to remain at home constituted a clear majority of the citizenry. No performance achieved anything close to a full house, and one newspaper reported that the engagement cost the management of the Boyd Theater (which had lured Damrosch to Omaha with a guarantee) the considerable sum of \$8,000.³⁷ The Wagnerian experiment thus proved to be an expensive gamble, a hard-earned lesson regarding the vagaries of public taste.

Marie Tavary's troupe made a second swing through Nebraska in April 1896. *Carmen* held the stage at the Funke Opera House in Lincoln, while at the Creighton Theater in Omaha, Tavary presented a double bill of *Lucia* and *Cavalleria rusticana*, followed by a matinee of *Carmen* and an evening performance of *Trovatore*.³⁸

Aside from the all-too-familiar lament about poor attendance, reviewers had only minor complaints. One of these concerned the simultaneous use of more than one language onstage. In Lincoln, the Don José and Escamillo sang in English, while the Carmen preferred Italian. This situation prompted the pun-

dit of the *Journal* to remark, "This English was of assistance to the hearers only at rare intervals, while all the time it injured the artistic completeness of the performance."³⁹ A similar blend of English and Italian prevailed during the Omaha performances.

Of particular interest is Willa Cather's assessment of the Lincoln *Carmen*:

I have seen nearly all the interpreters of this part . . . (I even saw Zélie de Lussan, who tried to convince us that Carmen was a Christian Endeavorer and member of the W.C.T.U.) the magnificent Calvé and the sinuous Nethersole—and Mme. Dorre's Carmen was a distinct variation of the type. Frankly sensual, with eyes glowing with lubricity, this Carmen was the wickedest of my acquaintance. Utterly heartless, she cares for her lover only while he is a novelty to her. . . .

Vocally Mme. Dorre was acceptable, in fact good, though apparently suffering from a cold and occasionally forcing her voice. The singer is a woman of grace and personal beauty. . . . The performance as a whole was very good, the "Micaela" of Mme. Tavary being consistent and effective in a conventional way. The other roles. . . , the minor parts also, were acceptably filled. . . . But the sensation of the production was the singing and especially the acting of . . . Thea Dorre.⁴⁰

In mid-January, the *Lincoln Courier* ran a story claiming that soprano Ellen Beach Yaw (whose claim to fame was her ability to sing higher than anyone else) had died while giving a concert in Binghamton, New York. The account stated that her jugular vein had burst as she strained for a note in alt. She came back to life in time to give concerts in Lincoln and Omaha in May 1897. The *Courier* took no notice of this miraculous occurrence and ungraciously gave her an unflattering review.⁴¹

Grand opera did not have a good year in Nebraska in 1897, possibly as a result of financial hard times. Despite the recession, Boyd's announced that it would continue to employ a regular orchestra of seven players; the Creighton pledged to do likewise. No grand opera took place in Lincoln in 1897, while Omaha had to be content with two concert appearances in February and December by Lillian

Grand Opera in Nebraska

Nordica, temporarily estranged from the Met. Both drew large audiences. The February concert also prompted an Omaha lady to send a laudatory poem entitled "Nordica" to the *Bee*.⁴²

The following year began auspiciously. Scalchi brought her concert troupe to Lincoln and Omaha for January performances featuring substantial excerpts from *Martha* and *Trovatore*, with scenery and costumes. Three months into 1898 the strongest operatic organization seen in Nebraska since 1890 rolled into Omaha for a performance of *The Barber of Seville*, in Italian, at the Boyd Theater. The Walter Damrosch and Charles A. Ellis Opera Company, en route to San Francisco from the East, had sandwiched this Omaha *Barber* between appearances in St. Louis and Kansas City. Its main drawing attraction was the world-famous Nellie Melba, available because Maurice Grau had canceled the 1897-98 Met season. Prices of admission at Boyd's Theater had been hiked accordingly, with the best seats going for an astronomical five dollars.

Most of the verbiage contained in the critiques concerned the doings of Melba. Rossini's masterpiece was regarded as little more than a showcase for the soprano's talents. Only too happy to oblige, Melba summoned the energy during the Lesson Scene to accompany herself at the piano while singing Tosti's "Mattinata" and, as an encore, "Old Folks at Home." She even found the strength to interpolate Arditi's "Se saran rose" later in the final act.

According to Willa Cather, who had witnessed the same cast in Pittsburgh three months earlier, Rosina was one of Melba's best roles. Cather called her vocalization stunning and added, "She does, after a manner, act the part, and it is the only one I ever saw her act." Cather had nothing but praise for baritone Giuseppe Campanari, but she thought Thomas Salignac's Count showed "an inclination toward an inopportune falsetto."⁴³

The financial vagaries of touring

jeopardized Omaha's second chance to hear grand opera in 1898. The International Grand Opera Company, organized around soprano Clementine de Vere, had been scheduled to open a short season with *Lucia* on November 17. The day before, however, W. H. Burgess, the manager of Boyd's Theater, received a telegram from the opera company stating that because of poor



Lillian Nordica in a publicity photo by Morrison of Chicago, about 1896. Harvard Theatre Collection. The Houghton Library

receipts in Kansas City, the troupe would be unable to come to Omaha and would have to disband in Missouri.

Encouraged by a healthy advance sale as well as a strong sense of civic pride, Burgess salvaged the opera season by guaranteeing the company's expenses and assuming the entire risk himself. He reduced the top ticket price from \$2 to \$1.50, moved the performances to the Creighton Theater, and paid actor Robert Downing \$500 to vacate a date so that the opera engagement could be extended.

Never missing an opportunity for a little civic boosterism, especially at the

expense of a rival city, the *Omaha Bee* took an editorial potshot at its downriver neighbor: "Traveling opera companies that expect to get stranded in Kansas City are advised to arrange their tours in the future so as to fix their dates in Omaha ahead of those in the city on the Kaw."⁴⁴ In addition, the paper lauded Burgess's enterprise in securing the engagement and bragged that local music stores had sold all available copies of the operas to be given.

On November 20, after a delay of three days, the season opened with a performance of *Faust* in Italian. *Lucia* followed on November 21, *Pagliacci* and *Cavalleria rusticana* at a November 22 matinee, and *Il trovatore* that same evening. After a day of rest, two operas were given on November 24: *Carmen* and *Faust*. *Lucia* was repeated on November 25, while November 26 saw a matinee of Gounod's *Romeo and Juliet* and an evening *Trovatore*. The season closed with yet a third *Trovatore* on November 27.

Burgess's sponsorship of the engagement must have been a bittersweet experience. Though praising the quality of the performances, the press bemoaned the financial results and chided the public for its lack of taste:

It was the best operatic engagement that this town had ever witnessed, with the exception of the Damrosch-Ellis Company. . . . It is a sad commentary on the tendency of the age that an excellent company . . . should work hard . . . and then be obliged to abandon the fight in favor of the lighter comedies, the farces and the vaudeville.⁴⁵

Unable to continue its tour without further guarantees, the International Grand Opera Company canceled its Denver engagement and took a special train for New York, where it disbanded. Six members of the troupe then formed the Clementine de Vere Operatic Concert Company, which surfaced in Lincoln for a concert on December 13.

As in the previous year, 1899 began with a January appearance by the Scalchi Concert Company at Boyd's. The second half of the program again consisted of operatic excerpts sung in

costume: *Martha*, second act, and first act of *Semiramide*.

Charles A. Ellis brought an opera company back to the Omaha Boyd on April 6, 1899, for *Carmen*. This time he had in tow not one but two high-profile divas: Zélie de Lussan, who sang the title role, and the great Johanna Gadski, who appeared as Micaela. M. Bonnard as Don José and Maurizio Bensaude as Escamillo rounded out the cast. Ellis also had on board fifty members of the New York Symphony Orchestra and a chorus-ballet numbering close to sixty.

Zélie de Lussan's gypsy bewitched the Omaha critics. Not so easily won over, however, was Willa Cather, who, after witnessing Lussan's interpretation on a previous occasion, made these observations:

M'lle. de Lussan is a graceful and charming little actress with a sweet and bird-like though rather light voice. It would be difficult to recall a more winning personality or a more delightful stage manner. But charm cannot make a great singer. The truth is that M'lle. de Lussan has not the first conception of the meaning of the role. No one in the world could teach her what it means to be Carmen. She is not especially cold like Mme. Eames; she is just trivial and painfully limited. She can be quite ardent in a way, but it is such a pretty Sunday-school-picnic sort of ardor, like that of a girl just from boarding school who kissed a young man on the chin and thinks she has done something awful and is quite a woman of experience. M'lle. Zelia tries to be passionate, but she is only sentimental; she simulates abandon, but it is only giddiness. When she tries to be naughty she is simply ludicrous. Some one has said that it takes a large woman to sin gracefully. M'lle. de Lussan has not sufficient width of chest. Yet for all this she is a very dear little person, the sort of woman that one would be willing to have one's younger brother marry, even if she had been "on the stage," the sort of woman who could teach the banner class of a Sabbath school admirably; but scarcely the sort of woman who could create a role in a great opera.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, Lussan et al. scored a great success in Omaha. One critic called *Carmen* "the theatrical social event of the season. . . . Seldom has such a brilliant gathering of society



Nellie Melba, 1898. From William Armstrong, *The Romantic World of Music* (1922)

people been assembled."⁴⁷

Other than the Lambardi Italian Grand Opera Company, which presented *Carmen*, *Rigoletto*, and *Trovatore* in Lincoln in November, no other grand opera organizations performed in Nebraska in 1899.

As the century came to a close, new

cultural currents that would have a profound effect on the lyric stage were already taking shape. In an assessment of the 1898-99 theatrical season, the *Omaha Bee* identified the newest challenge to established dramatic fare:

Another very important theatrical event was the permanent introduction of vaudeville in Omaha during the season. There is hardly a city of any size in the country that does not possess a first-class vaudeville theater and at the present time this city is fortunate enough to have two of them.⁴⁸

Vaudeville, with its highest priced seats going for only fifty cents, would become stiff competition for most other forms of live entertainment. A sign of the times was soprano Marie Tavy's conversion to the new wave. For a week in October 1899, she appeared at a vaudeville house in Omaha.

Despite such defections, however, grand opera proved impervious to the rise of vaudeville, at least in Nebraska. While there seems to have been a significant decline in the number of comic opera companies and performances after 1900, grand opera showed a surprising increase in popularity. Omaha and Lincoln recorded a total of fifty-four performances in the first decade of the twentieth century, compared to forty-two in the 1890s.⁴⁹ From 1910 to 1919, the two cities combined for an impressive total of 108 performances. Only after 1915, with the advent of motion pictures, did the frequency of performances begin to taper off.

The 1890s in Nebraska marked the beginning of a golden age of grand opera, which would span three decades. Far from being a cultural backwater, as is commonly believed, this area of the Midwest was touched early and often by nearly all the major operatic organizations and leading artists of the time. Viewed from a century-long perspective, the recent burgeoning of performances brought about by the development of such regional companies as Opera Omaha is not the first to occur on the prairie; it has simply returned the lyric stage in this region to the status quo ante.

Grand Opera in Nebraska

Notes

A slightly longer version of this article was published in *The Opera Quarterly*, 11 (1995): 97-118, and is reprinted with permission.

¹ *Omaha World-Herald*, Oct. 27, 1929, Magazine Section, 9. In May 1996 the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation announced plans for a renovation of the Red Cloud Opera House. *Hastings Tribune*, May 6, 1996.

² Quaintance Eaton, *Opera Caravan: Adventures of the Metropolitan on Tour: 1883-1956* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Cudahy, 1957), 40.

³ *Omaha Daily Herald*, Feb. 25, 1887, 6. *Omaha Daily Bee*, Feb. 25, 1887, 2. *Omaha Republican*, Feb. 25, 1887, 5. According to Robert Tuggle, director of the Metropolitan Opera Archives, Abbey's share was \$9,793, his largest take of the entire 1887 tour, excluding Mexico.

⁴ James Savage and John T. Bell, *History of the City of Omaha* (New York: Munsell and Co., 1894), 306. *Omaha Republican*, Mar. 2, 1890, 1; Mar. 3, 1890, 5.

⁵ *Omaha Republican*, Mar. 4, 1890, 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, Mar. 5, 1890, 5.

⁸ *New York Dramatic Mirror*, Mar. 15, 1890, 12. Through Robert Tuggle's courtesy, I learned that Abbey's profit for the two performances was \$11,815.75, which included a guarantee of \$8,500 for Patti's *Barber*, according to the daybooks of Henry Abbey in the Metropolitan Opera Archives.

⁹ Although born in Vienna, Emma Juch (1863-1939) came to the States as a child. She made her operatic debut at Her Majesty's Theatre in London (1891) as Philine. Then Mapleson brought her to the U.S., where she made her American debut in New York (1881). In the mid- and late 1880s she was the principal prima donna of the American/National Opera Company; then she formed her own touring troupe (1889-91). She was a strong advocate of opera in English.

¹⁰ *Omaha Republican*, Apr. 1, 1890, 1. The Boyd Opera House had opened Oct. 24, 1881, built by local businessman James E. Boyd. Located at Fifteenth and Farnam, the house had a seating capacity of 1,700 and a stage that measured forty by seventy-seven feet.

¹¹ In Lincoln, *Carmen* was given in the Funke Opera House, built in 1876 as the Centennial Opera

House and renovated and renamed in 1884. Having a capacity of 1,200, it was at Twelfth and O Streets.

¹² *Nebraska State Journal*, Apr. 2, 1890, 5. *Lincoln Evening News*, Apr. 2, 1890, 4. *Capital City Courier*, Apr. 5, 1890, 1.

¹³ *Capital City Courier*, Apr. 19, 1890, 1.

¹⁴ For nearly twenty years, C. D. Hess had managed touring troupes, including ensembles headed by Clara Louise Kellogg in the mid-1870s. Prior to 1890, his companies devoted themselves primarily to light opera; however, his 1890 organization, embarking on its first tour of the Missouri Valley since 1883, presented only grand opera.

¹⁵ *Capital City Courier*, Oct. 4, 1890, 5.

¹⁶ *Omaha Daily Bee*, Oct. 3, 1890, 6. *Omaha World-Herald*, Oct. 3, 1890, 2.

¹⁷ *Omaha World-Herald*, Oct. 3, 1890, 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* Oct. 4, 1890, 2. From the reviews it is not always possible to determine what language was used in these performances. Albert Guille may well have sung in Italian; the others in English.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Oct. 5, 1890, 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, Oct. 6, 1890, 5. The Grand Opera House, at Fifteenth and Capitol, had been remodeled in 1887 out of the western portion of the main Exposition Building. Operated as a popular-priced theater, it had perhaps the largest capacity (2,486 seats) of any in the Midwest at that time. It was destroyed by fire in 1895. "Omaha: A Guide to the City and Environs," *American Guide Series* (Federal Writers Project, WPA, State of Nebraska, 1935-39), 311.

²² *Omaha World-Herald*, Feb. 14, 1892, 3. *Omaha Daily Bee*, Feb. 17, 1892, 2.

²³ J. C. Duff had been sending opera troupes into the Midwest for nearly a decade. Although his organizations chiefly confined themselves to comic opera, during his first appearance in the Missouri Valley (St. Louis, 1883), he presented both *Lakmé* and *Faust*, as well as *Heart and Hand* and *Patience*. Such mixed repertory was fairly commonly found in the late nineteenth century; Emma Abbott's troupes did it for years with great success.

Duff's 1892 organization performed only comic opera, except for *Cavalleria*.

²⁴ *Omaha World-Herald*, Oct. 6, 1892, 2.

²⁵ *New York Dramatic Mirror*, Sept. 17, 1892, 11.

²⁶ *Omaha World-Herald*, Nov. 8, 1892, 2.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Nov. 8, 1892, 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Nov. 13, 1892, 4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Musical Courier* 25 (Nov. 30, 1892): 16.

³¹ *Omaha World-Herald*, Nov. 27, 1892, 4.

³² Quaintance Eaton, *The Miracle of the Met: An Informal History of the Metropolitan Opera, 1883-1967* (New York: Meredith Press, 1968), 108.

³³ James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 230-33.

³⁴ The Lansing Theater opened on Nov. 23, 1891, at Thirteenth and P, having a capacity of 1,750. It boasted ten boxes, a main floor, a balcony, and a gallery. Its management maintained a permanent orchestra of fifteen.

³⁵ *Nebraska State Journal*, Dec. 9, 1894, 4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Omaha Excelsior*, Dec. 28, 1895, 2.

³⁸ The Creighton Theater, 405 S. Fifteenth, Omaha, could seat 2,300.

³⁹ *Nebraska State Journal*, Apr. 10, 1896, 6.

⁴⁰ *The Courier* (Lincoln), Apr. 11, 1896, 9.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Jan. 16, 1897, 9; May 8, 1897, 3.

⁴² *Omaha Daily Bee*, Jan. 31, 1897, 7; Feb. 7, 1897, 7. Nordica's temporary estrangement from the Metropolitan was due to the casting of Melba as Brünnhilde in *Siegfried*, a role that she was totally unsuited for and that Nordica believed, on the strength of her successful Isolde the previous season, was rightfully hers. Nordica's injured pride caused her to renounce her Metropolitan contract for 1896-97.

⁴³ *The Courier*, Jan. 29, 1898, 2.

⁴⁴ *Omaha Daily Bee*, Nov. 18, 1898, 6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Nov. 28, 1898, 5.

⁴⁶ *Nebraska State Journal*, Apr. 7, 1895, 13.

⁴⁷ *Omaha Daily Bee*, Apr. 9, 1899, 15.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, June 4, 1899, 15.

⁴⁹ The Metropolitan first invaded Nebraska on Dec. 12, 1900, offering Lincoln a matinee *Faust*: Suzanne Adams, Thomas Salignac, Scotti, and Journet; and in the evening Melba in *Lucia*.