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Opera as It Was Meant to Be: Classic

By ROBERTA HERSHENSON

NEW ROCHELLE— In any production at the New Rochelle Opera, Bizet's *Carmen* will never be a cocaine addict, and Brünnhilde's sleep scene will never take place in a kitchen. That is because the company's founder and artistic director, Camille Coppola, does not believe in modernizing the classics.

"It's going in the wrong direction to try to update traditional operas," she said.

A musical dynamo who wears many hats for the nonprofit company, Ms. Coppola is also its producer and executive director. She was speaking during the countdown to the company's production of "*Cavalleria Rusticana*," by Pietro Mascagni, and "*The Telephone*," by Gian Carlo Menotti, a fully staged and professional double bill to be presented on Friday at 8 p.m., Saturday at 3 and 8 p.m. and Sunday at 3 p.m. at the Mooney Hancock Arts Center of the Ursuline School in New Rochelle.

Opera hurts itself, she said, by being vogueish instead of truthful to the context of a work, its setting, libretto and music. She described the liberties some operator directors take with the most beloved works as "ridiculous" and "crass."

"The young people aren't enjoying it any better than if it was traditional," she said. "And the middle-age and older people -- they don't even go anymore."

So in the company's production of "*Cavalleria*," the two lovers will not have sex against the church wall as is suggested in other productions. That wouldn't make sense, Ms. Coppola said, because the couple would know that was wrong. Instead, she said, "they're going to make out in front of the church, then realize where they are, and walk away."

Ms. Coppola's penchant for realism extends to costumes and scenery as well as language and stage direction. "*Cavalleria*" will not include a horse, which she had wanted, but will have a fountain with running water. There will be a professional orchestra, a 25-member chorus and a cast of singers who, for the most part, are at the start of their careers.

A commitment to provide opportunities for young singers was largely the motivation in forming the company 20 years ago. It started as a series of school lecture-demonstrations, evolving into programs of opera highlights and emerging as a full-blown opera company in 1984. The group now presents one major staged production and several concerts a year.

Ms. Coppola, the daughter of an opera singer who quit to raise a family, listened intently during a recent rehearsal that was held in an apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. In one room, Kevin Grace and Amelia Watkins sang scenes from "The Telephone," with Gregory Ortega conducting, while Rosa D'Imperio, Marybeth Hazel, Maria Ciccaglione and Michael Scott Harris rehearsed "Cavalleria" in another room. Nodding, frowning, smiling and often mouthing the words, Ms. Coppola followed along with the score of "The Telephone." A two-character, short opera sung in English, "The Telephone" is set in 1957, long before cellphones became ubiquitous, but similar to today's world of ringing phones and constant interruptions.

Mr. Grace, a former middle-school music teacher from Suffern, N.Y., who got his start in the New Rochelle Opera's production of "The Merry Widow" last year, called the company "a great learning tool."

"It gives a young singer a chance to get up and try out a role with an orchestra rather than a piano," he said, "to have an audience and a decent space to sing in."

Since his New Rochelle debut, he said, he has sung eight roles. Over the years some singers have gone on to sing with the Metropolitan Opera, while Met singers have come to New Rochelle to try out new roles. Other singers have come from the New York City Opera to take leading parts. The former Met star Robert Merrill, a New Rochelle resident, is a member of the New Rochelle Opera board.

Ms. Coppola is an active soprano, occasionally pinch-hitting for soloists in her own productions as well as singing as a soloist at the Sacred Heart Church in Hartsdale.

Authenticity is dear to her, and at the rehearsal she demonstrated the Italian body language she wanted to Ms. D'Imperio and Ms. Ciccaglione, who will each sing the role of Santuzza in the company's two different casts of "Cavalleria." Because "Cavalleria" is set in Sicily, and she is part Sicilian, the gestures come naturally to her, Ms. Coppola said.

Sometimes it is tough going, though, especially when a young singer thinks nothing matters but the sound of his voice, she said. "One of my actors -- he's acting too much American," she said. "He's got a gorgeous voice, but he thinks he knows it all. If you're not going to come across as an Italian Sicilian, it's not going to come across as authentic."

The company operates within a \$35,000 budget, with grants and private contributions keeping productions going, Ms. Coppola said.

Tickets to next week's performance are \$23 and \$25. The company will also present "A Grand Afternoon of Grand Opera" on Sept. 19 at 3 p.m. in the Joyce Auditorium of Iona College in New Rochelle. Tickets range from \$10 to \$18. On Oct. 17 at 3 p.m., the company will present highlights from "Pagliacci" and "Cavalleria" in the Academic Arts Theater of Westchester Community College in Valhalla. Tickets are \$15 and \$18. Information: (914) 576-0365.