



# A Night at the Opera

By **Monroe S. Miller**, Golf Course Superintendent, Blackhawk Country Club

It could only have happened in the fall. Our October meeting was a ways away from the southern Wisconsin cities, and quite a number of guys were leaving Sunday rather than in the dark early Monday morning. A night away from the golf course can be a good salve for the attitude of a golf course superintendent, especially at the end of the year when we are all worn down. It gave me the opening I needed to get Steady Eddie Middleton, Bogey Calhoun, Tom Morris and Scottie Fennimore a little culture. Heaven knows they needed it.

Our pal and colleague, Fredrick Swenson, was the course manager at Yorkshire Hills Golf Club in northwest Wisconsin, site of the meeting. It was located on a beautiful piece of property - hilly, of course - near the village of York. Players from all over Wisconsin, from the Twin Cities and even from Chicago were making the trip there for good golf and some serenity. We were lucky to have a meeting there to see the place for ourselves.

The cultural part of the trip derived from the fact that Fred was an actor in a local drama group and they had a performance planned for Sunday evening. The guys - TM, Steady Eddie, Bogey and Scottie - agreed, albeit reluctantly, to let me get them each a ticket and go watch Fred perform on stage.

I'll confess I was somewhat misleading when I talked to them about it. I failed to mention that the drama Fred had the lead in was actually an opera. The word "opera" conjured up all sorts of things in the minds of the guys. They had an opera pegged as an event with actors in weird clothes (including men in tights - never good!), music sung in a high pitch in a foreign language, an oddball story line, and a performance length such that it was nearly torturous. If I had told them up front that they were going to see Fred in an opera, they would not have gone, and poor Fred would never have heard the end of it. A little deception seemed to be in their best interest.

But the truth about opera is that the difference between it and, say, a drama is that the actors sing their lines. The singing by the actors is a more direct, intense and immediate means of communicating emotion than spoken lines in a nonmusical drama. One operatic production contains a full length play, a three hour orchestral concert, dance (maybe even a ballet), a parade or a pageant, and a choral concert. In the end, it is the music that sets an opera apart.

Operas deal with all the subjects of life itself - history, culture, tragedy, joy, love, war - you name it. Everybody can relate to opera, if they are open minded and if they

want to.

York has an active theater community and Fred thrived on it. Any course superintendent will tell you of the need to do something with free time that is removed from golf and the outdoors, and Fred took that need to an extreme. Blessed with a rich tenor voice, his singing approached that of a professional. And over the years he had finely tuned his natural acting ability. His "hobby" made him unique among us. The guys had all heard him sing at a couple of different times and thought he was "pretty good." Cheryl and I had seen the York community players production of *Guys and Dolls*. We were wowed by the show and Freddie's performance. I knew what to expect; the guys were in for a real surprise.

A good part of the pleasure of seeing an amateur production in York was the venue they were presented in - the Cadbury Opera House. It anchored Main Street, just as it did when it was built in the 1890s. It was like new;



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it had been refurbished to original condition as a centennial project, only the seats were more comfortable, the lighting better and the heating system was vastly improved. The Cadbury was not unlike thousands of other theaters built around the same time across the country. From the Old Masonic Theater in small Chautauqua, Wisconsin to the Pabst Theater in Milwaukee to Concert Hall in Cornwall, Wisconsin, they featured endless numbers of amateur productions over their history - *La Scalla to The Old Homestead*. These town halls were a uniting force in communities and the center of the social life of many.

Many of the concert halls looked about the same, much like the Cadbury. They were two or three story buildings, white brick quite often, and centrally located. The hall proper of the Cadbury was an oblong 100 feet long with a gently sloping hardwood floor. Rows of pillars supported the roof. The stage was five feet high, thirty feet wide and maybe twenty feet deep. Its proscenium arch towered majestically some fifteen feet and opened between the walls that set off a room at either

side. An apron extended seven feet (approximately) before the front curtain. The drop displayed scenes from the production at any given time.

At either side behind the proscenium arch stood a piece of scenery that masked the edge of the stage and gave cover to side entrances. There was the front drop and two curtains behind it to serve the various scenes of a production. The first two rows of seats were segregated from the rest by several feet and served as an orchestra pit.

The low stage and gently sloped floor were part of the design and plan for the hall to be all things for all occasions. Part of the restoration included a refurbished wall treatment that serious stated:

**A Few Simple Requests**

- Do not use your feet to applaud.
- Do not spit tobacco on the floor.
- Do not eat peanuts in the hall.
- Do not whistle or shout in applauding.
- Do not stand on the seats.
- Do not rush for the doors before curtain drop.

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There were a few tense moments getting the guys to the Cadbury. They were suspicious, especially Bogey Calhoun.

"Why do we have to wear a coat and tie to some amateur hour play?" he wanted to know.

Even Tom was curious. "I can't believe you don't even know the name of this show Freddie is in."

I dismissed them with a "quit whining" and hoped they'd all be with me when the curtain rose. It seemed that then they wouldn't dare bail out for fear of hurting Fredrick's feelings. The time before the curtain rose could be tense, however.

Fred had the lead role in Puccini's opera *Turandot*. Puccini wrote some of the world's best known operas - *La Boheme*, *Tosca*, and *Madame Butterfly*, for example. And he was no 17th century composer; he lived from 1858 until 1924. Although not as well known as the three operas noted above, *Turandot* is always among the 100 most frequently performed operas in the world. And the music is tremendous.

The opera is set in Peking in legendary times. Princess Turandot has agreed to marry any noble suit-or who can answer three riddles she poses. Anyone who fails in that attempt pays with his life. Many have died in the effort to win the beautiful Princess.

Enter Fred, as the Unknown Prince. He is smitten by her beauty and strikes a gong three times, indicating he wants the challenge to win her.

In Act II, the Unknown Prince answers the three riddles correctly. Princess Turandot is a poor loser and tries to beg out of the deal. The Unknown Prince is confident he can win her with his charm, so he offers a riddle to her: if she can discover his name before dawn he will forfeit his life. The crowd cheers him for his generosity.

Act III is great opera. There is a frantic effort to learn the Unknown Prince's name. There is a courageous act of love. Princess Turandot fears the prowess of the Unknown Prince and he causes her to cry. When he has clearly won (again!), he gives her the gift of his life by revealing his name - Calaf, son of Timur.

She appears before the crowd with him and he tells her to announce his name and take his life. Instead she says his name is Love! The crowd cheers and hails love as the light of the world.

One of the most beautiful pieces of music ever written was sung by Fredrick Swenson - golf course superintendent by day and this night the Unknown Prince - in Act III. His tenor voice was near perfection as he gave us *Nessum Dorma!* The York community orchestra sounded, to my ears, as good as the James Levine conducted New York Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. And the choir - breathtaking!

The verses, sung by Fredrick in Italian, brought tears to my eyes.

*None must sleep! None must sleep (Nessum dorma! Nessum dorma!)*

*And you, too Princess,  
in your cold room,*

*look at the stars*

*which tremble with love*

*and hope!*

*But my mystery is locked within me,*

*no-one shall know my name!*

*No, no, I shall say it as my mouth meets yours  
when the dawn is breaking!*

*And my kiss will dissolve the silence  
which makes you mine!*

*(No-one shall know his name,  
and we, alas, shall die!)*

*Vanish, o night!*

*Fade, stars!*

*At dawn I shall win!*

The guys, I could tell, were inspired, even stunned by the music. And the emotion of the performance had touched them, too. Even Bogey. "Wow," was the comment Calhoun could manage.

Fennimore couldn't believe the lead player in *Turandot* was cutting cups when we saw him earlier at the course.

And Middleton, almost with guilt in his voice, said his respect for Fred, already high, was through the stratosphere. Tom simply said, "he's a talented man in lots of different ways."

We met Fred after the performance and talked about the opera and other roles he had played. On Monday we attended the meeting, still finding it difficult to believe the role he had played the night before. Fred told us that God had given him his singing voice, and he greatly enjoyed entertaining others. "I guess that is why I don't play a lot of golf," he said. "I can sing better than I can hit a driver."

For that we were thankful. ♣

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