In Memoriam

Alan Aberbach  March 18, 1932–August 1, 2010

Academic research in history and university program administration may have paid the bills, but the core of Alan Aberbach’s life was his enthusiasm for opera. His passion was irresistibly infectious, and he had a unique gift for engendering a love of learning in others about opera. He knew a lot about it. While an undergraduate in New York, he had taken vocal lessons, had dreamed of becoming an operatic tenor and was proud of having attended more than 500 performances at the Metropolitan Opera, all in the $2 standing-room section. His knowledge of the repertoire was encyclopaedic and his library of operatic performances, scores and literature was one of the greatest in Canada. He served on the Board of the Vancouver Opera, where he created several initiatives for audience development.

He adored Mozart and Verdi, and grudgingly acknowledged Puccini, but Alan’s greatest love was Wagner. The German composer’s fascination with profound questions of spirituality and meaning matched Alan’s own intellectual yearnings. To explore these profundities, he immersed himself in the complexities of the Kabbalah. His research then took him to India, where he delved into the current influence of Charan Singh and that of the medieval Sufi mystic, Hafiz, the thinker who had so markedly shaken Wagner’s perspectives before his discovery of Arthur Schopenhauer’s philosophy. He further researched the influence of Meister Eckhart, the Dominican mystic, on Wagner’s thought. All of this resulted in Alan’s three books on Wagner: Richard Wagner: A Mystic in the Making (1991), Richard Wagner’s Religious Ideas (1996) and The Ideas of Richard Wagner (1988, revised 2003).

Alan was much more than an academic researcher and author: he was a brilliant, award-winning teacher. He inspired his students, young and old. His CBC series of radio programs, The Opera Buff, became a model for engendering in his listeners the desire to learn more. His meticulously researched and expertly chosen examples always resonated by illuminating an aspect of operatic literature in an intriguing light.

In 1974, Alan founded the Opera Club in Vancouver, which quickly grew to be the largest in North America, with over 1,000 members. With his colleagues—author Henry Ewert, teacher Wayne Parry and soprano Audrey Glass—his unique combination of drive, energy and vision sparked enthusiasm for opera among generations of Vancouverites. I will always be in his debt for his mentorship and guidance in those early years. More recently, his leadership of the Simon Fraser University Seniors’ Program built an extensive and loyal following throughout the Lower Mainland.

Shy and awkward in some social situations, Alan came alive when given a chance to build and when on stage. After a life-long quest for the profundities and meaning in life, he concluded: “My purpose is simple: to create a love of learning, and to make others, excited about their lives, healthier and happier as a result.” —Iain Scott