Conductor Ralph Lyford led the Zoo Opera during its first five formative seasons, from 1920 to 1924. His firm leadership and artistic ability helped build the foundation for fifty successful seasons of grand opera at the Cincinnati Zoo.
Grand Opera Comes to the Zoo

by Joseph E. Holliday

Over the centuries opera has traditionally been performed in truly elegant settings—in halls with plush-covered seats, gleaming chandeliers, and velvet hangings. But the Cincinnati Summer Opera had no such setting for its first half-century. It was in the city’s zoological garden, near elephants and monkeys, swans and tigers, lions and peacocks, that Cincinnati summer operas were staged, with the single exception of one season (1934), when the setting was the football gridiron in the University of Cincinnati stadium.

The Zoo management has always taken a broad view of the other attractions it has featured in addition to viewing animals. Since the sixty-seven acres of gardens were opened in September, 1875, orchestra and band concerts, pageants, theatricals, balloon ascensions, and summer ice-skating troupes have been part of the entertainment offered at one time or another in the Zoo’s history. A Germanic tradition of Cincinnati’s population was the use of summer gardens to which the entire family could go in the evenings and on Sundays for entertainment, to drink beer, and to enjoy a picnic. Since the 1880’s Chester Park, Coney Island, and the Zoo have vied for such patronage. Chester Park, located on Spring Grove Avenue in Winton Place, offered amusements, rides, vaudeville, and light opera. Coney Island, usually reached by boat, was chiefly a picnic ground.

The Zoological Gardens had the unique attraction of exotic animals, but it also offered entertainment of a relatively high order. During the 1880 season, “Carnival Nights,” utilizing then-new electric lights, were staged on the lagoon in the Gardens. A canvas back-drop, four hundred feet in length, painted by Matt Logan and Henry F. Farny, recreated Saint Marks Square in Venice, and “Venice, City of Song and Romance” was brought to Cincinnati.1 Probably the first production of opera in the Zoo was Gilbert and Sullivan’s light opera, Pinafore, staged on “a real ship on the Zoo lake” during August, 1885.2 Soon after 1900 the Woodland Theater was built at the Zoo. It was first used by the Ben Greet Players, a company known to all cultural enthusiasts of that era, for a season of Shakespearian plays.3

Music was always part of the attractions at the Zoo. During the 1880’s, orchestra concerts by the Cincinnati Orchestra, a forerunner of the present Symphony Orchestra, were well-established features of summer fare offered.
by the Zoo. In 1911, with the help of a three thousand dollar gift from Anna Sinton Taft, thirty-eight symphony players were engaged for a fifteen-week summer season; this arrangement continued for two decades. Thus it was possible for patrons to come to the Zoo early in the day to observe the animals, hear a symphony concert in the afternoon, enjoy a full-course dinner at the clubhouse for only $1.75, then hear an opera, and during the opera’s intermission see Norwegian or Swedish stars and comedy teams skate in the late ice show.

The Zoo was originally owned by a private non-profit stock company, but from its opening year it had financial difficulties. At one time it was necessary to sell some of its acreage for a new housing subdivision. By 1898 it was forced into receivership. In 1901 the majority of stock in the company was purchased by the Cincinnati Traction Company, which for nearly a decade and a half absorbed all operating deficits. By 1915 the company reached the decision that it could no longer continue to operate the Zoo. After wide public discussion over its civic value and the imminent danger of its dissolution, the Zoo was bought by Mary M. Emery and Anna Sinton Taft in October, 1916. Moreover, these two philanthropists agreed to underwrite its operating deficits over the next five years. In fact, they continued to do so until their deaths.

Since both ladies were vitally interested in musical matters, particularly the Symphony Orchestra, they were willing to continue the orchestra concerts during the summer in order to keep the musicians employed for a longer season. After World War I they were ready to expand the summer season by adding opera performances, using the symphony players for the opera orchestra. It was also hoped that by offering these operas at “popular prices” the clientele for the enjoyment of classical music would be expanded.

Summer classical music seasons in the United States have not had a long history; band concerts have been about the only summer fare available. The earliest outdoor festivals were held at Ravinia Park, north of Chicago. Organized by Louis Eckstein in 1911, the festivals first presented opera excerpts, alternating with concerts by the Chicago Symphony. Full-length operas, using stars from the Chicago Opera companies and the Metropolitan Opera in New York, were then produced, and a season of nine or ten weeks was finally established. Deficits occurred, but Eckstein and a small group of guarantors met these until 1931, when Ravinia Opera had to be abandoned for a time.

Several other cities ventured into the summer music field toward the end of and immediately after World War I. The popularity of the Lewisohn Stadium Concerts in New York City demonstrated the widespread interest in summer music. These concerts, organized in 1918, consisted at first of orchestra concerts by the New York Philharmonic; opera and ballet were not added until 1935.

Another post-war venture was assayed in St. Louis in 1919 with great success. The first summer season of operettas and musical comedies in the Forest Park amphitheater was a triumph. Using local talent for choruses and orchestra,
Whether they came by streetcar or by automobile, people thronged to opera at the Zoo. The opening performance in 1920 drew a standing-room-only crowd, a tradition which is carried on today.
Music, always a part of the Zoo’s attractions, first drew crowds to the gaslit bandstand. On that site today is the opera pavilion (below), where open-air opera was performed for fifty years.
the management brought in Broadway stars for the principal roles. Over the years St. Louis has stayed with operettas and musical shows, fearful of losing patronage if a move was made to grand opera.\textsuperscript{8} Because of St. Louis' similarity to Cincinnati in geography and population, the progress of the St. Louis summer season has always been closely followed by the Cincinnati management and press.

On the Pacific coast the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles produced a mixture of serious and popular music. Beginning in 1922, it has been successful for lighter summer concerts.\textsuperscript{9} Another well-known summer series is the Robin Hood Dell season at Philadelphia, but it was not organized until 1930, primarily to bridge the season between the winter concerts by the Philadelphia Symphony. For several years, however, it limited itself to orchestral concerts.\textsuperscript{10}

Thus the Zoo Opera in Cincinnati was among the pioneer experiments in summer music seasons. Nearly all such seasons began in response to the great surge of interest in the performing arts following World War I. All had the laudable motive of providing employment for the orchestra players between winter seasons. Because it featured true grand opera, the Zoo Opera in Cincinnati most closely resembled the Ravinia Festival at Chicago.

Over the years, the location of Cincinnati's grand opera in the Zoo has been the source of many good-natured jokes, provided a host of human interest stories for newspaper and magazine writers, and supplied nostalgic memories for many opera-goers, all centering around the elements and the animals. Not only did rain often drastically reduce the size of audiences, but the timing of these storms was often unfortunate. On the opening night of the fifth season (1924), Samuel T. Wilson, music critic of the Cincinnati \textit{Commercial-Tribune}, wrote in his review of \textit{Mefistofele}:

\textit{The weather was "hadesish" as well as the opera; the weather man did not time his storm effects very accurately for the opera, and with numerous squally babies helping the elements, it was an altogether tumultous affair.}\textsuperscript{11}

Giovanni Castano, who painted stage sets, recalled that

\ldots during thunder storms the lights would dim. If it rained, the make-up on the players would wash off or look streaky in going back and forth from the dressing rooms, which were tents, to the stage.\textsuperscript{12}

Robert Ringling, one of the leading baritones in the late 1920's, asserted that the temperature was 109 degrees at 8:00 P.M. when a performance of \textit{Lohengrin}, in which he was singing the role of Telramund, started:

\textit{When I stepped on the stage I weighed 230 pounds; when I returned to my hotel I weighed 213; in other words, I lost seventeen pounds in the long first act... I actually had a pool of perspiration around me.}\textsuperscript{13}
Despite their seeming tranquility, the ducks, geese, and swans on the lake at the Zoo often chimed in noisily with opera singers, creating both consternation and amusement among performers and spectators.
Anecdotes and stories regarding the animals are equally numerous. The music critic from the New York World, after hearing an excellent performance of Lohengrin, christened the Zoo Opera "A Bengal Bayreuth" and professed to having heard it sung with "faint jungle rustlings and twitterings" from the nearby animals. In 1922, forty-four new monkeys were imported from Africa, bringing the Zoo's monkey population close to one hundred. A large new monkey-house was completed, and in August the leading dramatic soprano of the Summer Opera, Elizabeth Amsden, dedicated it by breaking a bag of peanuts against the door.

E. B. Radcliffe, in an article for Theater Arts magazine, wrote a summary of the 1952 season in which he frequently alluded to the animals. One of the captions for the article read:

In Cincinnati a visiting opera star may find herself doing a duet with a lion or singing with a chorus of monkeys.... A quacking duck claque cruises on a lake in the rear of the auditorium and favors the Japanese soprano, Tomiko Kanazawa, in Madame Butterfly.

In July, 1959, readers of the Cincinnati Enquirer read with amusement yet another story of animals at the Zoo Opera, this time the story of a South American chinchilla which ran through the orchestra pit during a performance.

In the early years of the opera seasons, Saturday evenings were reserved for informal presentations, musical concerts, and ballets; they were called "divertissements" in the advertising notices. Several short musical comedies were prepared for these, and one of them, written by Clark B. Firestone, with music by Joseph Surdo, used a theme centering around the Zoo Operas. One of this musical's most applauded songs was "That's When the Lion Roared." The references to the picnic dinners enjoyed by those eating near the opera pavilion, "with crunching pickles as an accompaniment to Musette's Waltz," attest to the informality and casualness of the setting.

In 1920, with the Zoo Park owned by philanthropists friendly to classical music, ready to underwrite deficits that might be incurred, and eager to help the symphony players financially, an artistic director was needed. Ralph A. Lyford, a member of the faculty of the Conservatory of Music, was selected to head the Zoo's music program. If any one person deserves the title of founding father of Summer Opera in Cincinnati, it is Ralph Lyford. His credentials were excellent, he had wide experience in conducting opera, and he enjoyed the confidence of the musical community.

Lyford was a New England Yankee who proudly boasted of having North American Indian blood in his veins. Born in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1882, the son of the superintendent of schools, he was encouraged to study piano and violin as a child. After being graduated from the New England Conservatory of Music, where his musical interests turned to opera and conducting,
he had the privilege of studying with the prestigious conductor, Arthur Nikisch, in Leipzig, Germany. Upon returning to the United States, Lyford served as assistant conductor of the San Carlo Opera Company (1907-1908), and as conductor of the original Boston Opera Company until its dissolution in 1914. Under Felix Weingartner, he served for two seasons as assistant conductor of the Boston Opera. These posts were interrupted for brief periods of study in Europe. One of the most fruitful of these was his association with Claude Debussy at the Châtelet Theater in Paris in preparing Debussy's *Le Martyre de Saint-Sébastien* for its first performance in 1911. In 1916 Lyford was invited to become head of the Opera Department of the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. He soon became associated with the Cincinnati Symphony, conducting some Young People's and "Pop" concerts, and in 1925 he was appointed Associate Conductor by Fritz Reiner. Opera truly had become Lyford's life; a performance of *Aida* at the Zoo on August 13, 1924, marked the 500th performance of grand opera conducted by him.

In 1920 the Cincinnati Symphony had just completed its twenty-fifth season, and its backers were hopeful that the summer of 1920 would provide more performances for its players than the usual Zoo orchestra concerts. The war was then over; it was a propitious time to launch a new attraction at the Zoo. Plans were made for an opera season. They were modest plans, and it was expected that only excerpts from operas would be sung. Lyford rehearsed the chorus of local singers, found some small roles for Cincinnati singers with some operatic experience, and brought in some experienced professional artists for the principal roles.

The opening performance of the summer opera was Friedrich Flotow's *Martha*, with Melvena Passmore singing the title role and Salvatore Sciarretti as Lionel. Nina Pugh Smith, music critic for the Cincinnati *Times-Star*, wrote that it was an excellent rendition, "far and away above the usual summer opera companies." But what was even more surprising was the unprecedented size of the audience. "Not a seat was available for late-comers," wrote Mrs. Smith,

...enthusiasts climbed the rails and precariously hung to the edges of the club-house, in their eagerness to listen, even if they had no possibility of seeing.

Only four hundred unnumbered chairs, costing one dollar each, had been placed in the pavilion for reserved seats, while a large number of benches had been placed on the sides and in the back, for which no fee other than the twenty-five cents admission at the Zoo gate was charged. Later the management secured additional chairs from public school auditoriums to increase the reserved seat section. These seats were numbered so that they would not be taken by other spectators during the intermission stroll.

During that first season of seven weeks, eleven operas or excerpts from operas were sung in forty-two performances. *Hansel and Gretel* was the most
Although the weather was sometimes “hadeshish” for Mefistofele as well as other operas, the Zoo Opera singers and musicians performed valiantly in the alfresco setting.
elaborate and costly production of the 1920 season. It was, of course, directed toward children, and at its four performances, hundreds of parents brought their children to see "The Spirits of the Woods," "The Golden Angel Stairs," and "The Witch's Gingerbread House." "It scored heavily," wrote the critics.23

Because of this unexpected public response, plans for the second summer opera season (1921) included full-length operas, not excerpts, and a season of eight weeks instead of seven. The planners were not disappointed. For the first four weeks of the season there were 70,000 paid admissions to the operas.24 Forty-five performances of thirteen operas were given. Each year during the first five seasons, a few new operas were added to the repertory, so that during the Lyford era 224 performances of twenty-eight operas were sung. It is probable that Lohengrin drew the greatest crowds. For each of its nine performances given over three seasons, the house was sold out before the performance began.25

Another opera that was much heralded—"six weeks in the making"—was Saint-Saëns' Samson and Delilah. It was being sung in Cincinnati for the first time, and great preparation was taken with its mounting. The chorus and orchestra were also augmented.26 Nine performances were given over two seasons, but the critics seemed to damn with faint praise. The critic for the Cincinnati Commercial Tribune wrote,

... the demands which it makes on the company vocally and dramatically are very heavy, but in the main it was a most creditable performance....
The lead singers were excellent, but the chorus was most disappointing.27

In studying the reviews by music critics, it is clear that the choruses had not matured in the same way as the other elements of the company. To remedy this, twenty-five members of the Metropolitan Opera House chorus were brought out for the 1924 season to serve as a nucleus of seasoned singers. The ensemble was notably improved.28

While the Summer Opera was the chief musical attraction during these years, allied attractions were also sponsored by the Zoo during the opera season. The orchestra, consisting of forty-five players from the Symphony, gave afternoon concerts under the batons of Modeste Alloo, Walter Heermann, and William Kopp. Saturday evening entertainment was devoted to concerts, ballet, and dance. Not much attention was directed to the dance and ballets staged there, as ballet was a relatively new art form for many Americans. However, some classic ballets were performed, first under the direction of Ella Daganova, teacher of dance at the Conservatory of Music, and later under Paul Bachelor, instructor in dance at the Schuster-Martin School. Considering the absence of many opportunities for most Americans to see this branch of the performing arts, any performance of ballet was unusual. Adolph Schmid, one of the most experienced ballet conductors in the country at that time, was brought out for the 1923 season to conduct the orchestra on ballet nights.29
In 1972 the Summer Opera moves to a new home, beautifully refurbished Music Hall, to begin a new tradition of entertainment and to carry on the old tradition of summertime and grand opera in Cincinnati.
A corps of forty-five danced a performance of *Coppelia* on July 4, 1924, with Stasia Nydelka, Kenneth Gano, and Verne Fitzpatrick dancing the leading roles. Condensed versions of *Scheherazade*, *The Fire Bird*, *Les Sylphides*, and *The Magic Chimes* were also produced. It is difficult to know how successful these productions were since they were not generally reviewed by the local press. The most ambitious dance performance was set to the music of Edgar Stillman Kelley's *Alice in Wonderland* during the summer of 1923. Kelley, one of the most prominent American composers of his day, was composer-in-residence at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. Like the opera *Hansel and Gretel*, this ballet was designed to appeal especially to children. Elaborate scenery was constructed and painted, and according to the advertisements, “its cost was so enormous that opera prices had to be charged for it.” Yet not even standing room was available at its two performances.

It was opera, however, that was the central interest of the citizens of the Queen City during these first five seasons. Conductor Lyford always found a place for local singers. Probably the best of these was Italo Picchi, a truly seasoned opera star, who taught at the College of Music. A graduate of the Bologna [Italy] Conservatory, who had sung in European and South American opera houses, including La Scala, he had been a member of the short-lived but significant Scotti Opera Company which toured the United States. Another local singer who had experience in European opera houses was Clara Thomas Ginn. After graduating from the Conservatory of Music, she had studied in Paris, and on returning to Cincinnati joined the Zoo Opera Company, where she sang the roles of Marguerite in *Faust*, Manon in *Manon*, Michaela in *Carmen*, and Gretel in *Hansel and Gretel*. Appearing frequently in lesser roles were Louis John Johnen, later the music critic for the Cincinnati *Times-Star*, and John Jacob Niles, who today has become the “Dean of American Balladeers.”

Lyford was most fortunate in having the services of Charles G. Miller as business manager for the opera company. Miller had been appointed business manager of the Zoo when the Emery and Taft interests purchased the Gardens. This “hard-boiled and likeable manager” served also as public relations man, and he never forgot the other attractions at the Gardens. It was he who built the first open-air ice rink in the country and who insisted on a forty-minute intermission in the opera performances in order that the audiences could also see the last ice show. Miller was alert in advertising the popular prices for the operas and was quick to inform the public that, although some operas still required royalties, no increase would be made in the price of seats.

It is reasonable to assume that these popular prices did broaden the base for public interest in opera. The cause was further advanced by the radio broadcasting of live grand opera from the Zoo on Monday evenings. Radio was then making phenomenal strides as one of the mass media, and Powel Crosley, Jr., had established his WLW radio station in Cincinnati in 1922. Beginning in
1923, Fred Smith, WLW's studio director who later became the managing director of the Cincinnati College of Music, narrated the opera plots during the intermissions while seated beneath the stage. Later, during the 1930's, Zoo operas were broadcast by the National Broadcasting Company over a coast-to-coast radio network.

The Lyford era was brought to an end in 1925 by labor problems. The small Scene-shifters' Union called a strike at the Zoo after negotiations had broken down. When the Central Labor Council of Cincinnati voted to extend its support to the strike, the opera season was cancelled for that summer. Symphony orchestra concerts, held in both the afternoon and evening, replaced grand opera. The opera season was resumed in 1926, but with a new artistic director and new conductors. Financial difficulties made it necessary to transfer the operas to Nippert Stadium in 1934, but this proved to be only a temporary move. In 1935 the summer opera returned to its old home at the Zoo.

Now, in 1972, summer opera moves to a different and more elegant setting—Music Hall. Yet grand opera is not new to that hall; many brilliant operas have been staged there in the past. And, despite the elegance of the summer opera's new surroundings, old-time opera buffs will miss the lion's roar, the peacock's duet with a tenor, and the trumpet call signaling the end of an intermission of opera at the Zoo.

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(1) Cincinnati Commercial, Aug. 1, 1880.
(2) Cincinnati Commercial-Gazette, Aug. 16, 1885.
(3) Sol A. Stephan, Cincinnati Zoo Guide (Cincinnati, 1924), 108.
(4) Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra Minutes, IV, Mar. 27, 1911.
(7) Ibid., 2089.
(9) Sabin, op. cit., 996.
(10) Ibid., 1814.
(11) Commercial-Tribune, June 23, 1924.
(12) "I Remember When," Twenty-fifth Anniversary Season, Cincinnati Summer Opera Association (Cincinnati, 1946), 51.
(13) Ibid. This story is also told by "Old Faithful," Cincinnati Times-Star, July 5, 1935. Hereafter cited Times-Star.
(16) "Zoo Opera," XXXVI, No. 7, 70-71.
(18) Howard W. Hess, "Premiere Performances," Twenty-fifth Anniversary Season, 43.
(19) Brief biographical sketches of Lyford are found in Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians, Fifth ed. (New York, 1958), 996; Sabin, op. cit., 1242; Mary H. Osburn,

(20) Commercial-Tribune, Aug. 10, 1924.


(26) Ibid., July 24, 1922.

(27) Ibid., July 9, 1923.

(28) Ibid., June 22, 1924.

(29) Sabin, op. cit., 1905.

(30) Commercial-Tribune, July 5, 1924.

(31) Ibid., Aug. 5, Aug. 12, 1923.

(32) Ibid., Aug. 13, 1921; June 27, 1926; July 21, 1929; College of Music Catalogue, 1932-33; Enquirer, Jan. 4, 1937; Times-Star, Jan. 4, 1937.


(34) For reminiscences of his Zoo Opera days, see an interview in Times-Star, June 28, 1950.
